

ASCENDANCE OF A BOOKWORM


I'll do anything to
become a librarian!

Short Story Collection
« Volume 2 »

Author: **Miya Kazuki**

Illustrator: **You Shiina**





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Effa — Meeting the Attendants

Description: A previously unpublished short story from the online collection, set at the beginning of Part 2. Effa meets Fran and Gil, Myne's new temple attendants. Would someone from the lower city welcome such well-dressed strangers? How does she feel about them bringing her daughter home, especially so soon after the High Bishop threatened her with execution?

Author's Note: This was one of my ideas for the anime Blu-ray bonus short story. I went with Delia's in the end, so I posted this one online.

"I'm home, Mom."

I was drawing water from the well when Myne called out to me from behind. She must have just returned from the temple. I picked up my bucket of water and turned to see her and Lutz, entirely as expected.

"Welcome back," I said to them both. "And... who's that with you?"

Accompanying my daughter were two people I didn't recognize. One was a boy who looked to be about Lutz's age, while the other was a young man. I doubted they were from this part of the city—their clothes actually fit them, and they stood politely while anxiously looking around. They must have been from the wealthy side of town where the Gilberta Company was located.

Did something happen again...?

The last time I'd seen a leherl in the Gilberta Company's uniform, Myne had suddenly collapsed in town and needed to be carried home. It had taken me as much strength as I could muster not to faint after hearing the burden she had put on Mrs. Corinna.

"Myne, what did you do this time?" I asked.

"Nothing!" she exclaimed in response. "I can't believe you have so little trust in me! That's so mean!"

Mean or not, she must have done *something* for people this well-dressed to have come all the way to the poor side of town. I turned to Lutz instead. He told Myne it was her own fault for causing trouble all the time, then answered my unspoken question.

“It’s fine, Mrs. Effa. Myne’s telling the truth.”

“Oh, I see.”

“Mom! Why do you only trust Lutz?!”

I continued to focus on Lutz, completely ignoring Myne’s complaint. “Who are these two, then?”

“We’re here to introduce them. More often than not, they’re going to bring Myne home from now on.”

“Let’s continue this discussion inside,” Myne said, looking around as if on guard against our neighbors.

I noticed all the people giving us strange looks and nodded. For these two to have brought Myne back, they must have been from the temple; whatever we needed to talk about couldn’t be done in public.

We all went inside, where the duo from the temple once again looked around. The boy seemed more curious than anything, but the grimace on the young man’s face made his displeasure more than clear. I couldn’t blame him for his reaction; our home wasn’t anywhere near as clean as the temple.

It might be better for all of us if they stop at the well whenever they drop Myne home...

I was trying to figure out how best to host our guests when Myne started introducing them to me, speaking as if she hadn’t even noticed the air in the room. “Remember how the High Priest said that I’d get my own attendants upon becoming an apprentice? Well, here they are. Mom, meet Fran and Gil.”

“Indeed,” the older of the two said. “I am Fran, and this is Gil. It is a pleasure to meet you.”

Before I could even think of a response, the pair suddenly knelt and crossed their arms in front of their chests. I stared at them in shock and took a cautious

step back, even putting a hand on Myne's shoulder and trying to hide her behind me.



“Don’t panic, Mom. They’re just, umm... showing their respect.” Myne winced a little, then came out from behind me and patted her two attendants on their shoulders. “Fran, Gil, please don’t kneel here. My mom won’t understand what you’re doing.”

“But—”

“It’s fine,” Myne said, cutting the young man short. “When you’re in the lower city, do as we do.”

Fran had more to say, but he simply nodded and stood up. That was a relief. Though he’d acted with the best intentions, I was terribly worried about him and the younger attendant dirtying their clothes.

Just as I feared—look at those white marks on their knees!

“Um, Mom...” Myne said. “Under orders from the High Priest, Fran needs to be able to manage my health by autumn.”

“I won’t always be free to bring Myne home,” Lutz added, looking apologetic. “On days I’m too busy, Fran and Gil will take my place.”

Myne couldn’t make the journey on her own; the temple was too far, and no matter how healthy she looked on any given day, there was a chance she might fall sick before she got home. By assigning these two attendants to her, the High Priest was carrying out his promise to look after Myne as much as he could.

“I get how you must feel about them being from the temple, but they’re good people. You can trust them,” Lutz assured me. “Of course, we don’t want the neighbors to know the truth about them, so we plan to say they’re working with the Gilberta Company. We’d appreciate it if you could play along.”

“I can’t thank you enough for how much you support Myne, but shouldn’t you focus on your work? You don’t need to do all this when you already have your hands full.” Taking her to the temple, bringing her home, and inspecting her health were all duties for her family—and now, her new attendants—to take care of. Lutz was sweet to have helped us for this long, but we couldn’t keep interfering with his apprenticeship.

Lutz shook his head. “Master Benno told me to stick with her, so keeping an eye on her is part of my job. Truth be told, it’s for our benefit as well as hers.”

As it turned out, Myne’s inventions were of great value to the Gilberta Company. Benno couldn’t risk losing such an important connection.

That reminds me—there was that shocking business exchange at Mrs. Corinna’s house.

I thought back to the sums of money I’d seen, and a shiver ran down my spine. The world of merchants was too crazy for me to understand. It made me all the more grateful for Lutz’s assistance.

“If you insist,” I said. “Lutz, Fran, Gil—my daughter’s health is in your hands.”

Lutz smiled at me, then at Fran and Gil. The attendants’ tense expressions eased in response. I’d expected them to look more frustrated—or to show some other sign of having an unpleasant job forced on them—but they started patting each other on the back.

Oh...?

Only then did it hit me. Fran hadn’t grimaced at how dirty our home was; he’d just been anxious about being somewhere new and about whether or not I would accept him and Gil.

I shouldn’t have jumped to conclusions.

Lutz had asked me to trust Myne’s new attendants, and trust them I would. They spoke and carried themselves politely as they started to explain Myne’s plans for tomorrow. I could already imagine how our neighbors would react to their visits.

They’re going to bombard me with questions tomorrow, aren’t they?

Rico — Change Begins

Description: A previously unpublished short story from the online collection that takes place early in Part 2. Rico, a child stuck in the orphanage's basement, experiences the start of a great change. Though he always had a name, it never came up in the main story because he barely remembered it and nobody really spoke to him.

Author's Note: This started out as a short story for the manga but was too dark for a volume aimed at younger readers, so I posted it online instead. Please enjoy a happier story featuring Rico in Part 2 Volume 3 of the manga release.

Light shone into the basement from a window too high for anyone but an adult to reach, leaving a bright rectangle on the wall. My thoughts felt hazy as I watched it move ever so slowly toward the floor.

It's almost time, I think.

Just a little while longer—then our divine gifts would arrive. I could tell as much from the light on the wall and the ringing of the bell.

I'm hungry...

We didn't really move or speak; there was nothing for us to do but wait. Moving around made the hunger pangs worse, and it would get hotter as morning turned to noon. The only sound was the rustling of hay whenever someone readjusted themselves.

The light from the window was hurting my eyes, so I closed them and lay down. I was so sweaty from the heat that hay clung to my face and body. It felt gross enough that I wanted to wipe it away, but I didn't have the strength to move my arms.

Beneath me was the cloth we used as blankets during the winter. I squirmed against it until the hay no longer stuck to me, not even caring how dirty it was.

Where did everyone go?

They were distant memories to me now, but there had once been a time when gray shrine maidens would come to the basement to wash us, clean, and give us food. Back then, our days weren't spent lying around, too weary to move; we would actually run around and play. I vaguely remembered climbing onto the table and jumping between bales of hay. Rather than silence, the room had been full of laughter and upset voices.

As thoughts of the past ran through my mind, I stared at the door separating us from the rest of the world. There were stairs on the other side, but only those with permission could use them—the shrine maidens who brought us food or those of us who managed to survive long enough to reach baptism age and escape.

It's so far away...

The largest of us lay closest to the door, so they received more food than the rest. I was small in comparison, and the others had driven me to the opposite end of the room. It took a while for whatever food remained to reach me, and the scraps that did were usually stolen by those around me.

Is it time yet?

The gray shrine maidens who brought us our meals had once been stuck in this same basement. Each morning, they opened the window too high for us to reach, changed our chamber pot, fetched the bowls from the night before, and put down breakfast and water. Around noon, they simply swapped the bowls, and at night, they switched the bowls again and gave us more water before closing the window.

Every day was more of the same.

"My turn or not, I really loathe coming here," came a voice through the door.

"Nonetheless, this is part of our job as apprentice gray shrine maidens. You open the window, Rosina."

"I think not. I shall place the food while *you* open the window."

"Goodness, Rosina. Could you be more considerate? I carried the bowls here,

not you.”

“Let us get this over with. I wish to leave as soon as I can.”

As the voices grew louder, we all crawled toward the table. It was time. We would need to act fast if we wanted to eat.

The three apprentice shrine maidens who came into the basement split up. One put food on the table, another opened the window, and the last gathered together yesterday’s bowls that were still scattered about.

In the basement, even something as simple as eating was a struggle. The shrine maidens always lined the bowls up on the table. Moving was hard for me, as was clambering up onto a chair to reach the food, but I needed to act quickly or the other kids would eat it all. A hand shot out toward the bowl I’d managed to grab. I moved to protect it, only to have it knocked from my grasp.

“Ngh...!”

It struck the ground with a clatter, and a piece of soup-soaked bread rolled across the hay. I dove down from my chair, then lunged at the morsel and pushed it into the safety of my mouth. It was gritty with dirt, but its pleasant taste still spread across my tongue.

Oh... It’s gone...

I’d waited so long for the divine gifts to arrive, only to receive a single piece of bread. We were given so little food that my hunger never went away. I crawled over to where the bowl had landed and licked it until the taste of soup faded away completely. Maybe I could get some joy from the spoon.

No... He took it.

The boy next to me—the healthiest of us all—was sitting next to the table, lapping at my spoon as well as his own. I’d eaten so little, but my only choice was to sprawl out and wait for the next divine gifts to arrive.

How long until we’re fed again...?

I turned to the light still moving down the wall. It wouldn’t be anytime soon.

The bell rang again, and young voices reached us through the open window.

Were there commoners visiting the temple today? It was a strange time for them to be here, if so.

Out of nowhere, a dull *thump* shook the basement and made me twitch. What was going on? I was more curious than afraid, so I turned to the source of the noise just in time to see a hole appear in the wall beside me. A door I'd never even noticed—one that had always been firmly shut—opened with a loud creak, flooding the basement with summer light. A cool wind came with it, easing the heavy air.

Through the open door, I saw two people. I couldn't raise my head enough to see more than their legs, but I grunted and groaned as I tried to stumble to my feet.

No sooner had the basement lit up than something sweet fell onto the ground. I recognized the smell. Our divine gifts had come earlier than usual and through a door at the opposite end of the basement—a door I just so happened to be closest to. I desperately crawled through it before anyone else could react, seized the tasty-smelling thing that was right before my eyes, and eagerly bit into it.

Whatever I was eating reminded me of bread, only it was soft and surprisingly easy to chew. I didn't even need soup to soak it in.

Wow!

My mouth was getting dry, but it didn't matter; I couldn't drink water or someone would steal the rest of my food. Instead, I continued to shove what must have been bread in my mouth, almost in a daze. Not even a loud thumping sound and a cry of "Sister Myne!" was enough to pull me from my trance.

It's so good.

"Sister Myne! Sister Myne!" someone cried tearfully.

We were all dragged back into the basement, and the door was shut behind us. Not one of us resisted; we were too focused on eating.

Oh. It's all gone.

As that realization set in, my stomach started to ache. I wasn't sure whether the strange bread was to blame or I'd simply eaten too much, but it didn't matter—my heart was full to bursting. Who knew when I would get to eat that much again?

I took a sip of water, then rolled on the ground in delight, savoring the taste of that pleasant-smelling food. It was nicer and less dense than the bread we usually received, and it didn't even need soup to help it go down. Satisfied, I went back to watching the light on the wall.

It was late at night—well past our last meal of the day—when the same *thunk* from before shook the basement walls. The back door opened with a creak, and a child carrying something that smelled nice snuck in.

"Shh," he said. "I'm Gil, Sister Myne's apprentice attendant. Boys aren't allowed down here, so keep this a secret, okay?"

If staying quiet meant getting more food, then I wouldn't make a sound. The others must have had the same thought; they simply nodded in response.

"This is from Sister Myne," Gil said. "We won't be able to wash you all until you've eaten and regained some of your energy."

The boy handed out more bread, this time with soup. We each received the same amount, and there were far more bowls than usual.

"Your hands are dirty—don't stick them in your food. Eat with your spoons instead."

"Hey! No stealing! Everyone gets an equal share!"

Gil gave us all sorts of orders while we ate. I didn't know why he was being so bossy, but a kid much bigger and older than me smiled and muttered, "That's what Maddie used to say." It was barely a whisper—his voice was hoarse from how little we all spoke—but Gil overheard him nonetheless.

"Maddie used to look after me too," he said, eyes wide with surprise. Then a grin spread across his face. "She was real strict about how we ate, huh?"

Who's Maddie?

I didn't understand them, but that wasn't important; for the first time in forever, I was actually enjoying a meal. I couldn't remember when I'd last managed to fill my belly without someone trying to steal from me.

"I'll come back this time tomorrow," Gil said. "Sister Myne asked me to. Night."

And with that, he left as quickly and as quietly as he'd come. If what he'd said was true, then we'd receive more food every night from now on. My cheeks twitched as a rare expression of delight made it onto my face.

"He's coming back tomorrow...?"

"He said good night..."

Low murmurs carried through the basement. Maybe because we weren't hungry for once—or maybe because of Gil—people were actually speaking to each other.

I rolled on the hay, my stomach full. Even in the dead of night, the room felt so much brighter than usual. I turned to the window and saw the moon, whiter and more radiant than I could ever remember. For some strange reason, seeing it cut through the darkness made me cry.

Brunhilde — Debuting Dyes with Lady Rozemyne

Description: A previously unpublished short story from the online collection, set partway through Part 4 Volume 5. Brunhilde depicts the dyeing contest from the perspective of an apprentice archattendant. Rozemyne seems a little out of the loop, but she makes it through socializing by the skin of her teeth.

Author's Note: This was going to be part of the main story, but it seemed a little out of place, so I made it into a short story instead. Hopefully it conveys the contrast between Rozemyne's perspective and those of most other nobles.

Despite her age, Lady Rozemyne set more trends than any other member of Ehrenfest's archducal family. Her influence extended to recipes, education, fashion, music, and printing. That was why I, someone raised to be the future Giebe Groschel, wished to serve her most of all. I wanted to promote her trends at the Royal Academy and increase our duchy's sway on the national stage, no matter how marginally.

In the end, we couldn't have asked for a better reception. Lady Rozemyne's trends spread through the Royal Academy with just as much fervor as in Ehrenfest, attracting the attention of even Klassenberg and the Sovereignty. I'd wanted to capitalize on that momentum with the release of even more new products, but not one of them was ready to be revealed.

Ehrenfest had so many commoners that I'd proposed working them around the clock to get our products out on time, but Lady Rozemyne had furrowed her brow and shook her head.

"Imagine I wake up one day and, upon seeing the size of my retinue, elect to give you all an extra helping of work," she said. "Now imagine that my other retainers leave, and you suddenly find their duties thrust upon you—not as a temporary measure but as a permanent expectation. How would you feel about that?"

"I doubt I could complete the duties of an entire retinue on my own," I

replied.

“The same is true for commoners. Everyone has their role in society—farmers grow crops, craftspeople make things, soldiers keep the peace, and merchants do business. We’re setting up new workshops, but not everyone is suited to working in them. Just as nobles—even those with an abundance of mana—aren’t able to do everything themselves, there’s only so much we can expect our commoners to bear.”

To be frank, I still wasn’t sure what Lady Rozemyne had meant. Commoners always did as they were told; I’d never had cause to stop and think about their careers or other circumstances. Did we really need to concern ourselves with their burden?

We could just give the order, and they would figure it out themselves.

Lady Rozemyne, known to many as the Saint of Ehrenfest, had a temple upbringing that made her tough to follow. Her actions and stances frequently confused me—and Rihyarda, for that matter—and my attempts to bring her printing industry to my home province of Groschel had led to all manner of surprises. As it turned out, Lady Rozemyne went to the lower city and instructed the craftspeople there in person. Hartmut and Philine were both against it, for obvious reasons, but they steeled their resolve and went with her anyway.

I would never have gone to the lower city by choice, but Lady Rozemyne had insisted that I check on our workers in Groschel firsthand, and my father had instructed me to remain with her at all times. Accompanying her when she nonchalantly headed to the lower city was a nightmarish ordeal. Its streets were rank with a foul odor, and its commoners were no less unpleasant—they spoke crudely and carried themselves like beasts, all while looking the part. There was nothing to be found in that wretched place but filth.

“By beautifying Ehrenfest’s lower city, we can improve Aub Ehrenfest’s reputation in the eyes of merchants from other duchies,” Lady Rozemyne had explained, conveying the archduke’s words with a smile. Caring only about the areas meant for nobles and neglecting the lower city was apparently as foolish as fancying up one’s parlor and bedrooms only to leave the front door and

garden untouched.

Lady Rozemyne toured the lower city and did everything in her power to make the Gutenbergs' work run smoothly. She clearly trusted them, and the way they understood what she wanted from a mere few words seemed to make for an ideal working relationship. It was strange to observe, all things considered; we noble retainers hadn't even come close to forming such tight-knit connections with our lady.

"Lady Rozemyne has rather smooth relationships with her temple attendants," Hartmut said with a shrug. He had visited the temple despite his status as an archnoble. "It would seem that time and mutual understanding really are key."

Our lady's temple attendants seemed to perform the work of attendants *and* scholars. Hartmut said they had particular roles to attend to, be it managing the orphanage, overseeing her workshop, assisting with her duties as the High Bishop, or maintaining communication with the lower city.

"Matters advanced rather quickly when I spoke about scholarly work and conversed with Fran and the others about their personal duties," Hartmut continued. "Lady Rozemyne will need to learn the ways of noble society at large—that much is a given—but we must make compromises if we hope to earn her trust. I suspect that Ehrenfest will, as time goes on, develop with our lady at its center. She is known as its saint for a reason."

Hartmut beamed from ear to ear, his faith in Lady Rozemyne unwavering. His worship of her had risen to even more dangerous heights since he started visiting the temple.

Hmm... Her temple attendants, he says...

Until now, such people had been of no interest to me. They were mere orphaned gray priests and shrine maidens, but both Hartmut and Philine professed their competence, and seeing them both visit the temple had piqued my curiosity.

Soon enough, a meeting about debuting Lady Rozemyne's dyed cloth was scheduled. We would meet with the relevant merchants not at the castle but at the temple. Not too long ago, it had been reviled more than anywhere else in

Ehrenfest, yet my fellow retainers and even Lady Elvira entered without the slightest hesitation. I couldn't risk them leaving me behind.

Despite my nerves, I stepped into the temple. It was as clean as people had told me—as clean as the castle, in fact—and the furniture was pristine enough for even an archnoble to use. The tea and sweets that Lady Rozemyne's attendants served were delightful, and it soon became apparent that her days here were no worse than those she spent in the castle.

"Fran was trained by Ferdinand himself and received notably high marks," Lady Rozemyne declared with a proud smile, boasting about her temple attendants. Her genuine praise both warmed my heart and struck me with anxiety. Would she speak of me so generously?

This was our first time consulting merchants for a tea party—let alone one meant for debuting dyed goods. The very idea had shocked me, but the merchants had done a fine job of communicating Lady Rozemyne's intentions to Lady Elvira, who had continued to lead the meeting in a noble fashion. I could sense deep down that I wouldn't last as Lady Rozemyne's retainer unless I developed the same talent for socializing.

Lady Rozemyne broke from her quiet pondering to abruptly shout, "Renaissance!" thus selecting her fashion-related title. Curiously enough, though she had spoken with such certainty, she still seemed a little conflicted.

Perhaps she isn't satisfied with the name she created.

On the day of the debut, the Gilberta Company arrived at the time we had agreed upon and started setting up strange wooden frames. I exchanged a look with Lady Elvira; there hadn't been any mention of such frames during our meeting.

"Otto, what are those frames?" Lady Elvira asked.

"As this is a tea party first and a debut second, we have designed these frames to allow even those sitting farther away to see the cloth," he answered.

I'd assumed we would present the cloth as tapestries, or exhibit small parts and allow our guests to come up and touch those that interested them. Lady

Elvira seemed to have drawn the same conclusion, but those of the Gilberta Company had something else in mind. They were doing exactly what Lady Rozemyne wanted.

Though we'd gone to the trouble of setting up a meeting, our intentions still weren't completely aligned. We could remedy that by ordering the merchants to stop and put the frames away—in fact, that would certainly have been our first choice—but this event was being held at Lady Rozemyne's request, and the current approach was simply the norm for her.

Let us do as she pleases.

With a glance, I signaled my conclusion to Lady Elvira. She heaved a defeated sigh, then said, "It is true that we lack the time for each piece of cloth to be directly presented to each person."

Again, I was reminded that I wasn't fully in tune with my lady. Yet each time she said or did something that troubled me, I understood more clearly how she must have felt whenever she encountered something strange to her in the castle.

Despite a few mishaps, our preparations went smoothly. My only complaint was how the wooden frames presented the new cloth. The Gilberta Company was a nouveau-riche business that had expanded its sales to the castle with Lady Rozemyne's support. Before then, it had dealt only with laynobles and mednobles—which showed in how its merchants were displaying our product.

"They're doing our wonderful cloth a grave disservice," I muttered. I'd assisted with popularizing Lady Rozemyne's trends at the Royal Academy, but this was a much greater task: creating future trends from scratch. I started bombarding the merchants with orders; the cloth needed to be shown at its absolute best.

"It is in our best interest to trust Brunhilde's noble expertise," Lady Rozemyne said as I continued to dole out instructions. "Merchants, use this as a learning opportunity."

A pleasant warmth spread through my chest. My lady trusted my instincts.

I must do everything I can for her.

After lunch, we convened with the merchants to consider introductions and the sale of Lady Rozemyne's new cloth. As this was but a debut, no product would change hands today. Instead, attendees would state the number assigned to their favorite cloth and then be given the names of the workshop and the dyer that produced it so they could order the cloth themselves when the tea party concluded. I had assumed the Gilberta Company would refuse to share archnoble patronage with other workshops, but I was sorely mistaken.

How strange. One would expect merchants to strive for as many noble connections as they can get.

"We are ready to accept orders from our honorable patron, Lady Rozemyne."

Lady Elvira was present as we spoke with the Gilberta Company. Lady Aurelia, Lord Lamprecht's first wife from Ahrensbach, was with her.

"I apologize, but this veil is..."

No matter what Lady Rozemyne or Lady Elvira said, Lady Aurelia refused to remove the Ahrensbach cloth covering her face. It displeased me, to say the least.

Just what purpose does her obstinacy serve?

It was doing her no favors and would only make people more reluctant to accept her. Had she failed to consider Lady Elvira's position and the problems that taking a bride from Ahrensbach had caused within her faction? Seeing the concern in Lady Elvira's eyes made me seethe with silent fury.

As my emotions continued to fester, Lady Rozemyne cocked her head at Lady Aurelia and made an unexpected proposal: "If you insist on wearing a veil, perhaps you could wear one made with Ehrenfest cloth. That would at least somewhat demonstrate that you consider our duchy to be your new home."

I would never have dared to ask the niece of Aub Ahrensbach to cast aside her headdress made with greater-duchy cloth for something made here in Ehrenfest. By all rights, the very idea might be taken as an insult to Ahrensbach. Lady Elvira noted that it certainly would change Aurelia's appearance, but her intention was to provide the woman a chance to politely refuse.

I expected Lady Aurelia to respond as any noble of a greater duchy would—

with outright disapproval—but she accepted the idea almost at once. She sounded relieved, even. I could only assume that she *did* want to be welcome in our duchy but simply could not bear to uncover her face.

Lady Aurelia had an attendant—she had brought one with her when she married into Ehrenfest—but the girl was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Lady Elvira had paired Lord Lamprecht’s first wife with one of her own attendants for the day. Lady Aurelia could not speak freely in these circumstances, but she at least seemed to recognize that Lady Rozemyne wasn’t her enemy.

From there, Lady Aurelia started to follow Lady Rozemyne. She took care to match my lady’s smaller strides, barely moving at all with each step.

Together with my fellow retainers, I listened to the pair chat about the cloth being debuted. It was quite the experience. At some moments, I had to resist putting my head in my hands; at others, I almost burst into laughter.

Lady Aurelia soon revealed that her veil was embroidered with a magic circle. Under normal circumstances, one would treat such a garment with caution and investigate the threat it posed, but Lady Rozemyne wore a relaxed smile and simply celebrated the circle’s purpose—allowing its wearer to see those around them unimpeded.

That is far from the most pressing issue!

Upon hearing the nice things Lord Lamprecht had said about her, Lady Rozemyne declared that she would provide the cloth for Lady Aurelia’s new veil. I merely exchanged looks with the other retainers. How could we intervene when it was Lady Rozemyne’s intention to welcome Lady Aurelia, who responded to the proposal with timid words of appreciation?

Lady Rozemyne! It should fall to Lamprecht, her husband, to give his wife new cloth!

Lady Aurelia noted that she favored cute cloth but could not use it, for it did not suit her features. Lady Rozemyne replied that the clash was irrelevant; Lady Aurelia’s face would not be visible, in any case.

My lady’s perspective is abnormal, to say the least.

I paid close attention to the numbers by the cloth, making a mental note of

which ones Lady Aurelia examined most. I also kept an eye on the pieces that Lady Rozemyne gravitated toward. The two women had surprisingly similar tastes, at least based on the numbers I assigned to them.

This one seems most appropriate for Lady Rozemyne's winter attire.

Of all the cloth, one piece in particular stood out to me. How it had been dyed was a mystery to me—its hue changed from crimson to more vibrant shades of red—but it was more intriguing than the other frames I'd seen. I recalled the bubble skirt that Lady Rozemyne had favored in the summer; if we elected to make something of the same style, this cloth would be ideal.

After inspecting every one of the displays with Lady Aurelia, Lady Rozemyne suddenly lost all motivation. We had yet to properly debut them, but she slumped her shoulders in disappointment and expressed almost no interest in the cloth from that point on. It was a worrying reaction, considering how much she had been looking forward to today. Perhaps none of the cloth suited her.

Well, the cloth on display is subpar.

Compared to the cloth Rihyarda had arranged in the past, the pieces before me now bore glaring imperfections. I silently questioned the dyers' talents, but I would need to make do; our guests were soon to arrive, and the success of our tea party would determine the future of dyeing in Ehrenfest.

It is my duty as an attendant to ensure this debut succeeds.

No sooner had the tea party begun than Lady Rozemyne engaged in lively conversation, speaking exclusively about Ahrensbach stories and dishes. By all means, her speaking with Lady Aurelia would make a good impression...

But this is all wrong!

Our very reason for being here was to promote the new cloth, so why had my lady neglected to even mention it? Anyone else in her position would start by focusing on current Ahrensbach trends before segueing into Ehrenfest's dyes. From there, she could foray into personal tastes, extracting valuable information in the process.

Instead, Lady Rozemyne had launched into a seemingly aimless ramble about

her own interests.

Such an indulgent, one-sided conversation would achieve nothing in the way of gathering information. I could see both Lady Elvira and Lady Florencia wearing troubled smiles.

I was more concerned with the debut than the stories being shared, so I entrusted all serving work to Lieseleta and circled the dyed cloth, listening intently to what our guests were saying about it. As expected, this method of debuting our dyes had surprised the archnoble women, but they ultimately embraced it as a new form of entertainment.

“This cloth certainly is beautiful.”

“Indeed, all the shades of red make it a sight to behold.”

Lady Rozemyne had asked the lower city’s dyeing workshops for cloth she could wear for the winter debuts, so their submissions all sported a variety of reds. I saw everything from bitter oranges to the deepest, almost bluish purples. One unusual piece featured a gradient of dark to light red, while another appeared to consist of numerous small dots. The cloth on display was anything but boring.

I was accustomed to cloth dyed a single color without any adornments, so I found it hard to imagine how today’s examples would translate into clothes. That was doubly true for those decorated with floral patterns or adorned with green flora. It was rare for cloth to be multicolor, so those pieces really caught the eye.

“The colors being used are delightfully vivid—though I can see countless imperfections.”

“This style of dyeing only came into fashion this spring. The dyers’ talents might leave much to be desired, but they are bound to improve in short order,” I said, speaking in their defense without a second thought. Lady Rozemyne must have influenced me without my knowing.

“Have you seen cloth dyed in this manner before, Lady Brunhilde?”

“Indeed. Lady Rozemyne wanted her cloth to be unique, so Rihyarda brought her some of an old style.” I pointed at one of the pieces on display. “This looks

closest to what she presented.”

An elderly mednoble woman followed my finger with her eyes and smiled. “Oh, I see. That was the fashion back in my mother’s day.”

“Some dyers strive to bring back the old methods, while others hope to create new ones,” I said. “The coloring seen in this sample falls in the latter camp—so if we promote its use, we can produce a style of cloth unique to Ehrenfest.”

Only those with the wealth to support dyers—archnobles and particularly wealthy mednobles, to be precise—had received invitations to this debut. I hoped that as many of the samples as possible would attract their attention.

“If any of the cloth catches your eye, take note of the workshop and dyer to purchase it through your business of choice, or order some from scratch. It is through your support that Ehrenfest will propagate its new trends. Lady Rozemyne wishes for her entire faction to define these styles together.”

“Oh my...”

I went around the room and interacted with the guests as though Lady Rozemyne were speaking through me. They weren’t simply being told what fashions to adopt by those of a higher rank; instead, they were being asked to choose their favorites and play an active role in shaping the duchy’s future trends. Receiving such an invitation from a member of the archducal family would excite them as much as if they themselves had risen in rank.

“Lady Rozemyne has practically made it her motto that all should wear clothes that suit them,” I explained. “From this abundant selection, she hopes you will choose your favorites and those that will complement you best.”

“Has Lady Rozemyne chosen her cloth yet?” one of the noblewomen asked. I sensed that everyone around us was listening closely. Despite her desire for them to focus on their own interests, they still wanted to follow my lady’s example.

“Yes, she chose several pieces while we were preparing today’s event. Lady Aurelia expressed a desire to have a new veil made in Ehrenfest’s style, and the cloth we have here seems perfectly suited to that purpose. Lady Charlotte and Lady Florencia have chosen their favorites as well. You can expect to see them

wearing clothes made with that cloth during winter socializing.”

The dyed cloth being debuted was on the cutting edge of Ehrenfest fashion. Even members of the archducal family would end up wearing it. The fact that three of them had chosen favorites from three separate workshops reassured the other noblewomen that they wouldn’t need to mimic the choices of their superiors. They looked around the room with renewed interest.

Having more or less ensured the success of the debut, I returned to my charge. “So, Lady Rozemyne... which cloth is most deserving of a title?”

Three dyers—chosen by Lady Florencia, Lady Rozemyne, and Lady Charlotte, respectively—would each be awarded the title of Renaissance. Lady Rozemyne had several candidates in mind... but she weakly shook her head.

“I cannot decide which of these three to choose.”

“If not one of them is good enough for you, then so be it. There is no need to award a piece you think is unworthy of a title. The dyers had too little time to perfect their work—perhaps we could postpone making a choice?”

Lady Rozemyne thought for a moment, then nodded. “I would appreciate that.” She could give out her title whenever, so it made the most sense to wait until she found some cloth she truly favored.

“You need not hand out a title, but your clothes for this year still need to be made,” I said. “Of your three choices, which would you want to wear most?” I pointed out which one I preferred and mentioned that, in the right hands, it could even be made into attire appropriate for summer.

Lady Rozemyne smiled at me and nodded again. “You have a discerning eye, Brunhilde. Have my clothes made from whichever cloth you think is best.”

It seems that I really am of use to her.

Sometime later, Lady Rozemyne looked devastated. She stated that my eyes were as keen as she had thought and quietly lamented not “giving her the title.” I was unsure to whom she was referring.

I supposed, in the end, that I was still a long way from fully understanding my

lady.

Brunhilde — As the Daughter of Giebe Groschel

Description: A bonus short story for Part 4 Volume 5 set during Rozemyne's trip to Groschel. Brunhilde receives a warning that Groschel's branch of the printing industry could fail. As the daughter of the province's giebe, she feels duty bound to see it succeed, but Rozemyne's mindset is too hard to comprehend. Only through a conversation with Hartmut and Elvira does she come to better understand her lady's way of thinking.

Author's Note: Brunhilde, Hartmut, and Elvira are all purebred nobles, but the environments in which they were raised impact them in unique ways. I put a lot of thought into the defining attributes of Groschel—and many other particulars—when writing this insight into noble society.

“Lady Brunhilde, these are Lady Rozemyne's guest chambers,” an attendant informed me.

“Thank you. I shall prepare them for her while she is performing her ceremonies. Please bring the luggage as soon as you can.”

It was the latter end of autumn, and we had recently arrived in my home province of Groschel. My first task was to ensure the attendants of my family estate had not erred when preparing these chambers. Then, I would unpack Lady Rozemyne's daily necessities.

“Welcome home, Sister,” said a bright voice.

I turned to see Bertilde, my little sister, moving briskly toward me, her rose-pink hair swaying behind her with each step. She had come here in a hurry to see me—the warm smile on the attendant's face made that clear.

“Do allow me to assist you,” Bertilde said. “In the meantime, would you tell me tales of the Royal Academy? I wish to share them in the winter playroom.”

In particular, my sister wanted stories that would grant her conversational dominance in the playroom. She was rather precocious, due in part to her

constant endeavor to mimic me. It was adorable, for the most part, though I wished she would take more care; it frustrated me to see her take on even my less admirable traits.

“Though I admire your enthusiasm—one cannot overstate the importance of gathering information—you should not state your objective so clearly. Take care not to make such missteps when conversing with anyone else.”

“My apologies,” she said. “We have little time together, so I thought to speak bluntly.”

Time really was of the essence, so we got straight to work preparing the guest chambers. Meanwhile, I spoke of my experience serving as Lady Rozemyne’s apprentice attendant at the Royal Academy. I’d touched on it briefly at the end of spring, but living in the castle meant I rarely had the time to speak leisurely.

“It is when you are anxious or hurried that you must exude elegance the most,” I said. “Keep that in mind for after I graduate, when you will take over as Lady Rozemyne’s retainer and work to spread her trends. Did you ask Lady Elvira to train you?”

“Yes, and your efforts this year were rewarded. Lady Elvira welcomed the idea, stating that I should inherit your methods and serve Lady Rozemyne as an archnoble so that tea parties with top-ranking duchies and royalty continue to go smoothly.”

She must have heard that from Cornelius, though I was still glad to know my deeds had received such high praise. I thought back to my time at the Academy and giggled.

“Serving as Lady Rozemyne’s attendant is quite the task,” I confessed. “Abrupt summons from the royal family are within the realm of reason, as are meetings with top-ranking duchies one has never spoken to before.” It was unthinkable, considering our duchy’s former rank and its previously modest connections.

“Prince Anastasius, in particular, tends to make sudden demands,” I continued. “Rihyarda went pale as a sheet trying to come up with ways to survive them—though she hid those concerns from Lady Rozemyne, of course.”

Lady Rozemyne had shared in our surprise, though on a considerably smaller scale. As a first-year, she had no knowledge of how the Academy had used to be, and she seemed to have assumed that its current state was the norm. Her misunderstanding made it even more essential that we attendants hide our anxieties, lest we burden our lady with undue pressure.

Bertilde's amber eyes—a mirror of my own—sparkled as I spoke. I recounted how my heart had nearly stopped when Lady Rozemyne received an invitation from the royal family and explained that her chefs had since been instructed to have two kinds of pound cake ready at all times—a precaution in case she was summoned again.

“One of pound cake's greatest strengths is that it keeps for several days,” I said. “This saves the chefs from having to make it daily—though ensuring that everything is ready at all times is still no easy feat.”

I went on to note that pound cake had surprised even greater duchies. Bertilde was especially delighted when I repeated my lady's intention to create even more kinds of desserts; she was a great lover of all sweet-tasting foods.

“I doubt Lady Rozemyne will receive any such summons this year, as Prince Anastasius has graduated and no new royals debuted during the Archduke Conference, but still...”

As our conversation continued, I placed the tools of an apprentice scholar on the desk so that it was ready to be used. I also put together a tea cart, ensuring that Lady Rozemyne could enjoy her preferred drink at a moment's notice, and checked that its magic tools were functional. From there, I started retrieving rinsham, soap, and other such products from a nearby box.

“This blend of rinsham smells of rafels,” I said. “It was introduced just recently by the Gilberta Company. Lady Rozemyne recommended it to me, so I've taken to using it.”

I ran my fingers through my hair, hoping to spread the aroma. Bertilde brought her face closer, inhaled, and then gazed up at me with an enraptured expression.

“What a delightful scent,” she crowed. “You must be the envy of the Noble's Quarter to have such easy access to new rinsham. Which is to say... might I have

some?”

“I arranged for shipments to arrive at our winter estate when you go to the Noble’s Quarter. You will have the great fortune of attending the playroom with a delightful hairpin and while wearing the most enchanting scents.”

Lady Rozemyne had paid for hairpins to be made for all of the female students. I’d used the opportunity to order one for Bertilde, whom I rarely saw due to serving in Lady Rozemyne’s chambers in the castle. A broad smile spread across my sister’s face when I mentioned the hairpin; I was glad to see that she appreciated it.

“That aside,” I said, “has the cloth I chose during the dyeing event arrived yet?”

“Yes, it has. Due to your selection and detailed report, we succeeded in incorporating the style into our accessories. As it stands, we are making shawls, lapels, and ribbons with it. I’m told there wasn’t enough time or cloth to prepare an entire winter outfit.”

Because the dyeing event had taken place in the castle, few nobles living in the provinces had known about it. Trends frequently began in the Noble’s Quarter and spread from there, but I’d chosen this cloth personally and ordered those managing our winter estate to send it home for me.

“Father was overjoyed when the cloth and letter arrived,” Bertilde said. “Ever since you became Lady Rozemyne’s retainer, he has enjoyed a crystal clear image of the Noble’s Quarter and its trends.”

“Goodness. It was the least I could do. I mean, I *am* the next Giebe Groschel.”

“How reliable! Sister, I shall strive to support you as much as I can.”

We smiled at each other, sent word that we had finished preparing the guest chambers, and then headed to Mother’s room to ask about the dinner menu. The lady of the house had chambers on the first floor, meaning she could easily instruct the servants when we had visitors.

“Mother, Lady Rozemyne’s room has been prepared,” I said.

“Excellent work, both of you,” she replied. “Now, Brunhilde... there is

something important we must speak about. May I request a moment of your time before Lady Rozemyne returns?”

“Certainly. Run along now, Bertilde.”

Until my lady came back, there wouldn't be any more attendant work for me to complete. I sent Bertilde out of the room and turned to face my mother. Something must have happened, for she seemed a little bit weary.

“The second wife now carries a child,” she announced. “If she gives birth to a boy, then he will most likely become the next Giebe Groschel instead of you.”

The ground seemed to crumble beneath me, and my vision blurred as if someone had just spun me around. Men were at an overwhelming advantage when it came to inheriting land. Mother must have had strong opinions on the matter. Maybe that was why she came across as so exhausted.

“I wonder... what will the future hold for us if she does have a boy?” Mother asked, her tone worried.

I drew my eyebrows into a frown. If such an outcome came to pass, then the second wife would start to be prioritized, and my mother's position would grow increasingly unstable. Mother would remain in this estate no matter what happened, but her future depended on whether I became the next giebe.

“No good will come of worrying about a baby who has yet to even be born,” I said at last. “Even if the second wife does produce a son, that does not necessarily mean my claim to being successor will change.”

“Are you sure?” Mother asked, cocking her head at me. She had good reason to be skeptical, but I refused to give up so soon. Giebes held a great deal more influence than common archnobles. I'd embraced that fact during the recent dyeing event, where, for the first time, I'd assisted in creating new trends rather than merely helping to spread them.

“As you and Father both know, I brought the printing industry to Groschel as Lady Rozemyne's retainer, and I play a crucial role in propagating her trends. During my time at the Academy, I even developed the skills necessary to socialize with royalty and greater duchies. Father understands this, surely. By marrying someone powerful and obtaining the support of the future aub's first

wife, I can overcome the gender barrier with ease.”

Unless this potential rival serves Lord Wilfried and achieves equally impressive feats, that is.

I elected to hold my tongue, not wanting to exacerbate my mother’s concerns. The aub obviously had more power than the first wife. As it stood, Father would never allow a son of his to serve Lord Wilfried, but such sentiments could easily change over the span of a decade.

Mother examined me closely before letting out a small, relieved sigh. We had reached the end of our serious conversation, I thought—but then her expression took a severe turn.

“If securing Lady Rozemyne’s support is the goal, then why not marry Lord Hartmut?”

“Out of the question,” I said at once, loath to even consider such a terrifying idea. “He would surely refuse. It simply isn’t worth thinking about for the moment.”

“Oh my. But he has an excellent reputation as an apprentice scholar, and Lady Rozemyne holds him in high regard, does she not? He is a Leisegang and the third son of an archnoble—not a successor—and as you both serve the same lady, I trust you know him better than most.”

“It is because I know him so well that I am sure it will not work. Hartmut enjoys nothing more than serving Lady Rozemyne; he would rather remain in her retinue than support Giebe Groschel or even rule a province. More than that, however, I would rather take someone *normal* as my husband.”

On the surface, Hartmut was the perfect choice, but his every wonderful trait was smothered by his unbearable obsession with Lady Rozemyne. I doubted any woman in the world would want to marry someone whose eyes were set squarely on someone else. Otilie had given up hope, lamenting that his status was his only allure, and seemed to have come to terms with the fact that he might never take a wife at all.

“Hartmut’s elder brother—or any other archnoble, for that matter—would make for a vastly superior choice,” I said, “not to mention the wealth of

excellent men beyond our borders. Considering how quickly Lady Rozemyne has been securing new connections, we can expect to be increasingly involved with top-ranking duchies. I would rather find a husband from there.”

If my lady remained in Ehrenfest as its first wife, the Leisegangs wouldn’t ostracize a groom from another duchy. I suspected that, as the printing industry expanded, they would actually come to value relations with other duchies.

“Do you really consider that the best move?” Mother asked at length. “Strengthening our bloodline would put me more at ease.”

I could sympathize with her concern—she was insulated from how much the Royal Academy had changed. But as Lady Rozemyne’s retainer, I could sense the new Ehrenfest that was on the horizon.

“As long as I am alive, Mother, I will not allow you to be isolated in your own home. I shall do everything I can to ensure that you and Bertilde have bright futures. In return, I ask only that you give up on marrying Hartmut into our family.”

After dinner that evening, we were informed of two opinions about our province’s printing industry. I did not know why Lady Rozemyne prioritized the thoughts of commoners over those of noble scholars, but I was determined to find out. Unless I cleared up my confusion, everything would fall apart.

I posed my question to Lady Rozemyne while she was getting ready for bed, but her response was largely unhelpful. One thing was clear to me, though—the printing industry in Groschel was on track to fail, and Lady Rozemyne was resigned to that fact.

“Good night,” I said, then exited the room.

“All done?” asked a voice. For some strange reason, Hartmut was waiting in the corridor. “Let’s have a chat.”

My expression hardened. Mother must have had something to do with this. Now was no time for frivolous matchmaking; I needed to speak with Father about the printing industry.

“Hartmut, I—”

“It’s about Lady Rozemyne and the printing industry. You still can’t grasp her logic, I assume.”

“Are you implying that you can?”

“I gathered as much information from the temple as I could precisely for that reason,” Hartmut explained. “Let’s go to Lady Elvira’s room. She’s made time for us.” He had already made the arrangements, it seemed—a sign that he knew I would never refuse. His knowledge of both our lady and the printing industry was superior to my own.

“You are so perfect in your preparations,” I said. “In truth, I find it a tad irritating.”

“Perfect? No, far from it.” Hartmut frowned and shook his head as though remembering some past blunder. He inhaled slowly, then started toward Lady Elvira’s guest room; I went with him.

“To start with,” Hartmut said, “one cannot lump the Gutenbergs in with the rest of the commoners.”

“Excuse me?”

“They are Lady Rozemyne’s arms and legs. She values their reports as much as we value those from our family and trusted attendants.”

“Surely you jest...” I would trust a report from my family more than one from a random scholar. The thought of a noble placing that much faith in commoners was absurd to me.

“I understand your confusion better than you think. I made the same mistake at first.”

“You erred as well, Hartmut?” I asked. It was comforting to hear that even a scholar with his perfect reputation—a man whom Lady Rozemyne trusted so utterly—had struggled to wrap his head around the circumstances.

“I still remember my first time sitting in on a meeting with the lower-city merchants in the temple,” he said. Their crude speech, general rudeness, and outrageous demands had upset him to the point of chastising them.

“Is it not natural to warn commoners when they overstep?” I asked.

“That was my thought. They were using Lady Rozemyne’s compassion to speak impudently, and merely listening to them struck me with displeasure. But when I spoke out against them, Lady Rozemyne scolded me. She was so outraged that her eyes changed colors slightly, and though it shames me to admit it, I was so enraptured by her Crushing that a shiver ran down my spine.”

“Enough, Hartmut. I am not interested in your infatuation. Tell me only the objective reality of what Lady Rozemyne said to you.”

Hartmut shut his mouth, unamused, and then continued in a more level tone. “She told me not to interfere, as she had called the merchants there specifically to hear their honest opinions, and threatened to ban archscholars and retainers from all future meetings if I dared to interrupt them again. She was even more furious than during the Traugott incident, and a chill ran through me as I feared she might relieve me of duty.”

Traugott’s rudeness had known no bounds, yet Lady Rozemyne had seemed more outraged about the interruption during her meeting. Hartmut wore a wry smile as he conveyed this to me, but it was no laughing matter.

“Despite my being an archnoble, it became painfully obvious that Lady Rozemyne considered the lower-city merchants’ opinions more important than my own,” Hartmut continued. “One cannot earn her approval by serving her as one would any other member of the archducal family.”

“She prioritized the lower-city merchants over you...?” It was hard to believe, but Hartmut had attended those meetings and gone to the lower city with her; he had to be speaking the truth.

“Lady Rozemyne was raised in the temple, and she still spends more time there as the High Bishop than she does in the castle. She’s been advancing matters from her own perspective with a fairly weak grasp on noble society. In other words, she’s just proceeding in the way that makes sense to her.”

“Then we must teach her our ways.” Surely that was our duty as her retainers.

Hartmut thought for a moment, then shook his head. “Are you going to advise Lady Rozemyne to prioritize nobles over commoners? That will never work. As important as it is for her to learn our ways, her knowledge of the printing industry is unmatched. She is ahead of the curve, and we would do well to

respect her position.”

“‘Ahead of the curve’ in what sense, exactly?”

“The printing industry was founded through honest, detailed conversations between Lady Rozemyne and the Gutenbergs. No good can come from forcing them to change their ways. It would work about as well as trying to pour one’s mana into another person’s feystone.”

Having made his point—that we should stick with Lady Rozemyne’s methods if we wanted the printing industry to succeed—Hartmut knocked on the door to Lady Elvira’s room.

“I was told you wish to discuss something important about the printing industry?”

Hartmut began to explain the circumstances. I chimed in every now and again with details from my earlier conversation with Lady Rozemyne.

“My lady said that Groschel operates differently from other provinces and that this would lead to the collapse of our printing industry. Do you know what she meant by that?” I thought Lady Elvira might also have had a hard time keeping up with Lady Rozemyne, but she nodded at once as though the conclusion were obvious.

“Indeed. Groschel could not be more different from Haldenzel.”

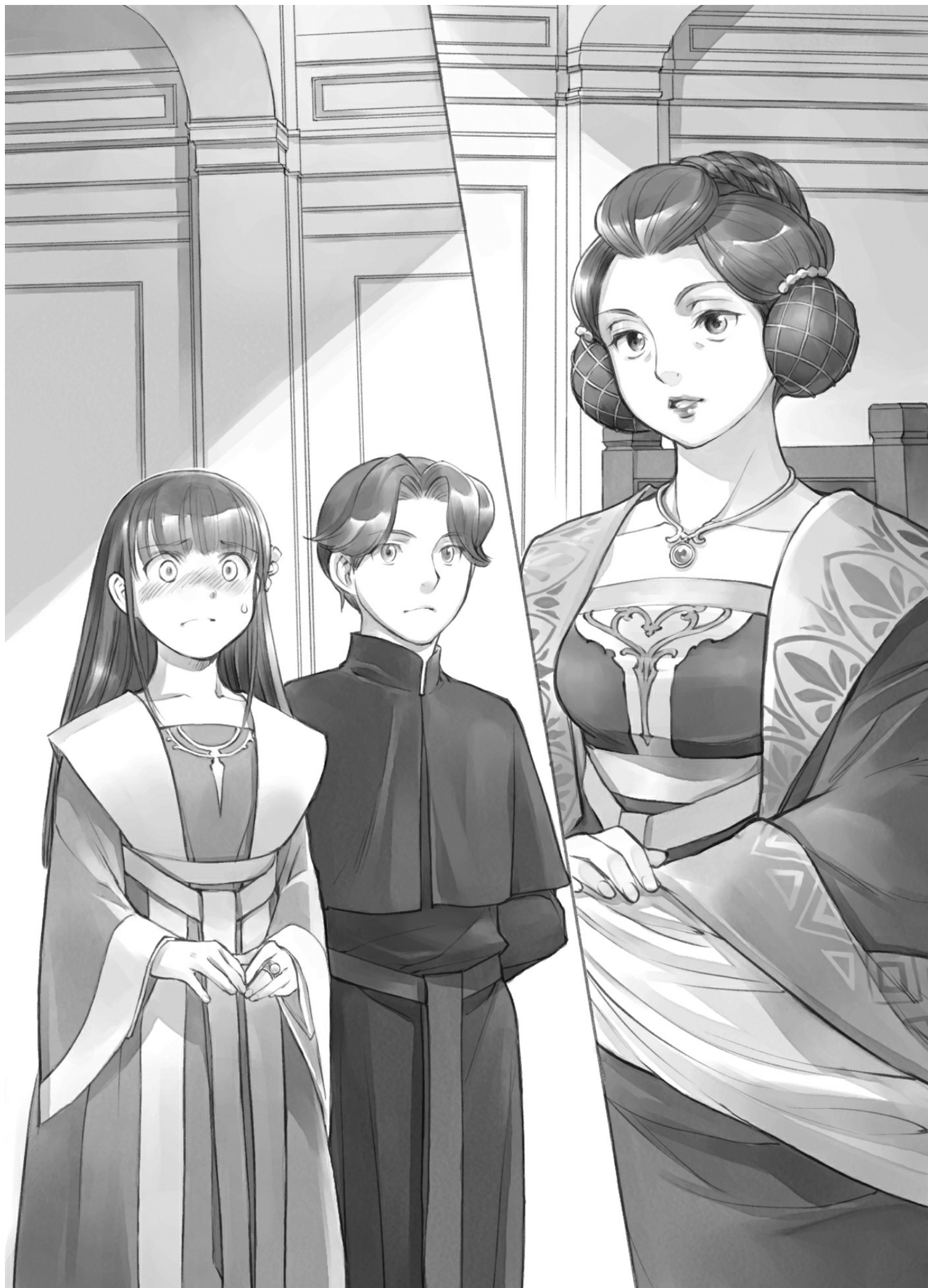
“Would you care to elaborate?”

“Consider how distant the giebe and nobles are from the commoners. Do you recall that when Lady Rozemyne arrived, she asked Giebe Groschel where the province held its religious ceremonies? I was surprised to learn that he could not answer. In Haldenzel, the giebe personally directs Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival.”

For my sake, Lady Elvira went on to explain how such ceremonies were performed in Haldenzel. Nobles and commoners would come together to sing, dance, and express their gratitude to the gods for the year’s harvest. A gathering of that kind would never happen in Groschel.

“You must reconsider how land-owning nobles should act,” Lady Elvira continued. “It is a giebe’s duty to navigate the strengths and weaknesses of their province while guiding and protecting its commoners. Is that being done here in Groschel?”

In an instant, I was overcome with shame. My entire body burned with embarrassment. The nobles of Groschel prided themselves on having a more distinct “Noble’s Quarter” than any other province in the duchy. We distanced ourselves from commoners as much as we could.



“Groschel was built for Lady Gabriele, and the customs from those days have endured ever since,” Lady Elvira explained. “It is rather ironic that despite the Leisegangs’ hatred of both her and Lady Veronica, Groschel continues to follow their wishes by striving to be as close to the Noble’s Quarter as it can. A cold air hangs over this province, and it could very well result in the death of its printing industry.”

Lady Elvira’s warning echoed in my mind. She asserted that Lady Gabriele’s philosophy had completely dyed Groschel and that the province’s capacity to change would decide the success of its printing industry. I was at a complete loss for words.

“If your people—no, if *you*, Brunhilde—wish for the printing industry to succeed, then heed the precedents of success and follow in their footsteps. How can you ever grow if you cleave stubbornly to your ways and ignore the methods that led others to triumph? You need a change of attitude. The very act of trying to grow is important.”

“Groschel will need to... change its entire perspective?” I asked, flushing with fear at the thought of what I was being asked to do. Was transforming the attitudes of my fellow nobles and encouraging them to mimic Lady Rozemyne’s relationship with commoners even achievable? It was beyond me, at the very least.

Lady Elvira must have seen me recoil; she placed a contemplative hand on her cheek and gave me a reassuring smile that reached her dark eyes.

“Embracing change is easier than you think,” she assured me. “You are a testament to that, if Cornelius’s reports are to be believed. Your common sense was largely useless when serving Rozemyne at the Royal Academy, was it not? Yet you still strove to adapt to her methods.”

I thought back to my time at the Academy. As I’d said to Bertilde, each day had come with its own surprises. In her desperation to start visiting the library, Lady Rozemyne had declared that everyone would pass each of their classes the first time around. She had then attended a library tea party, received an abrupt summons from the royal family, and passed out at a truly inopportune moment. Unprecedented events had waited around every corner, and each time one

reared its head, I agonized over how best to proceed.

“The printing industry demands the same approach,” Lady Elvira said. “You can accept change or obstinately reject it. The choice rests with Groschel.”

I could see the path ahead of me branch into two. Still, receiving such high praise for my treatment of all the incidents at the Royal Academy made my world feel so much brighter.

“It was your giebe, not the commoners, who decided to bring the printing industry to Groschel,” Lady Elvira continued. “And yet, the commoners are obeying his orders and developing the industry as per the Gutenbergs’ teachings. Nothing has failed; there is simply room for improvement.”

Hartmut nodded in agreement. “You seem to think all is lost, Brunhilde, but even Haldenzel faced problems when it started producing letter types. Its success came from how quickly it responded to them. There are plenty of solutions, be it using magic tools to clean the water, moving the workshop someplace else, or even just finding a way to make dirty water work.”

My two advisors assured me that these decisions rested with Giebe Groschel. If we had solutions to our problems and some considerate hands to guide us, then I wished to do my bit and embrace the changes we needed. I could not expect my lady to accept foreign wisdom unless I did the same.

“As the next Giebe Groschel, I wish to put my father on the right path,” I said, my eyes brimming with resolve. “Lady Elvira, Hartmut—my apologies, but can you accompany me tomorrow after breakfast?”

They both gave reassuring nods.

“But of course.”

“If your printing industry collapses, it will be to the detriment of Lady Rozemyne’s wishes. I cannot allow that to happen, so I shall devote my all to your cause.”

I appreciate Hartmut’s enthusiasm, but I wish he wouldn’t.

Speaking my mind was out of the question, so I responded with a small smile.

Lutz — Growing Healthily

Description: A previously unpublished short story from the online collection, set midway through Part 4 Volume 5. Lutz brings back souvenirs from Groschel and takes a trip around the lower city. He sees Dirk and Konrad in the orphanage; Otto and Corinna's daughter, Renate; and Gunther and Effa's son, Kamil. Everyone is growing healthily.

Author's Note: I wrote this story during the publication of the web novel. I'd spent so long writing exclusively about nobles that I suddenly found myself craving a change of pace. It was fun writing about all the kids growing up.

Myne's highbeast landed at the temple, having brought us all the way from Groschel. She wouldn't be able to unmake it while there were still things inside, so we Gutenbergs climbed out and started unloading the luggage. I would have appreciated a moment to stretch and enjoy the freedom, but with Fran and the other attendants helping us, there wasn't enough time. We were all in a big hurry.

"Everyone's belongings have been moved, Lady Rozemyne," an attendant called when we were done.

Myne put her highbeast away. Then she greeted everyone and entered the temple. She'd seemed a little tired to me, but I wasn't too concerned; Fran had noticed too, and I trusted that he would make her rest.

As soon as Myne was out of sight, we started sorting through the luggage.

"Lutz, keep the ink workshop's things with yours!"

"Only whatever's too heavy to carry!"

We Gutenbergs would put our belongings on a wagon headed for the Plantin Company while the gray priests took whatever was going to the workshop. Shouting out instructions wasn't an option when there were nobles around.

"This is for the workshop, this is for Zack, and this is for the Plantin

Company...” Ingo muttered, looking thoroughly impressed as he examined the organized stacks. “Alright. The rest should be easy.”

Myne had wanted the luggage to be properly organized, so she had ensured that each and every box was fixed with a note describing its contents. Such labels were standard practice for the Plantin Company, but these were far more detailed. Myne had told us to write them when we first traveled to Illgner, and while I’d considered it a pain at the time, I couldn’t help but recognize their worth. Lost belongings were a thing of the past, and the system still worked even when we went to other places with larger groups. The others must have shared my appreciation because the Plantin Company now used labels far more than it used to.

“Well, that should do it.”

“Alright, let’s go home. See you at the meeting.”

“I’ll send some people to fetch our things for the ink workshop. See you later!”

Once most of the luggage was organized, the Gutenbergs departed with only as much as they could carry. We had plans to reconvene at the Plantin Company for a meeting, but for now, everyone just wanted to hurry home to their families. The others went on their way at a brisk pace.

Damian climbed in next to the coachman and asked to be taken to the Plantin Company. I watched him out of the corner of my eye while reaching for the boxes meant to be taken to the workshop.

“Sure you don’t want a ride back, Lutz?” he asked.

“There isn’t even room for me. I’ll just walk home—after I get this luggage to the workshop, of course.”

Gil chuckled and slapped one of the boxes. “The young’uns need their souvenirs too.” Inside were copies of a book we’d already given to Myne—collections of stories from the craftspeople in Groschel, made to test the presses and teach the workers how to print.

Myne, who was using her book deposit system—or whatever it was called—to gather together “all of the country’s written material,” had jumped for joy when

we gave her the thin volume and immediately hugged it to her chest. Now that we'd stopped meeting in her hidden room, it was hard to catch glimpses of the true Myne; her clothes and speech always made her seem so proper. One thing that never changed, though, was the face she made upon seeing a book.

Once the luggage was safely in the workshop, the gray priests all dispersed. They had to wash themselves before dinner, apparently. Gil and I reached into one of the boxes and pulled out the books from Groschel. Myne and the other Gutenbergs had received their copies, leaving us with nine.

"This one's for the workshop, and this one's yours," I explained. Because we'd made them as part of a test run, we had no plans to sell them; we would store one in the workshop in case we ever decided to add its stories to a new book and would distribute the others for personal use.

"Alright, let's go hand them out," I said.

"Dirk and Konrad are gonna love them," Gil added, and we started making our way to the orphanage.

"Oh, Gil, won't you get yelled at if you don't act all polite again?" I asked as our destination came into view. After half a year in Groschel, he'd taken to speaking like its commoners.

He let out an annoyed sigh. "Man... It was filthy and smelly in Groschel, but I enjoyed it."

"Meanwhile, I'm going straight back to the lower city."

Gil glared at me. I shrugged. We laughed together. Then we whipped ourselves back into shape. Gutenbergs spoke with nobles on some occasions and with commoners on others; being able to swap between personas was important so that we could adapt to wherever we ended up.

"Hello, everyone," Gil intoned. "We have returned from Groschel with souvenirs for Dirk and Konrad."

"Oh my! They're sure to be delighted," Wilma replied. "Dirk, Konrad—Gil and Lutz have come with souvenirs."

The pair raced over, dragging Delia along with them. They had grown a lot in

the past six months. Konrad, in particular, had gone from being extremely malnourished to looking as plump and healthy as a child his age should. His expression was brighter, to boot.

“Welcome back, Gil,” they said. “Lutz, what did you bring?”

“We aren’t going to sell these books. Treat them well,” I explained, then handed them a volume each while they looked up at me with sparkling eyes.

Dirk turned to Gil, happily clutching his book. “Now that you’re back, we can go to the forest again!”

“Unfortunately not,” he replied. “There’s too much for me to do in the workshop.”

Gil was busy—he needed to give a detailed report on Groschel before winter socializing, check how much progress the workshop had made, and then assign winter handiwork accordingly. He didn’t have time to take anyone to the forest.

“Gil, can you really not make time?” Delia asked, concern tinting her eyes when she saw Dirk and Konrad slump over in disappointment.

The workshop had enough on its plate with the rush to print goods in time for winter socializing. On top of that, with people lost to Groschel and winter handiwork, there were especially few chances for anyone to venture to the forest. Dirk and Konrad were the only kids in the orphanage too young to be apprentices, so they were essentially being left to their own devices.

Being stuck inside must be awful...

“Gil won’t have time, but I can take you,” I said. “Let’s go tomorrow.”

“What? Are you sure, Lutz?” Delia asked, her eyes widening.

Truth be told, I had a few days off now that we’d returned from our long trip, and I knew my family would make me help out with winter preparations as soon as I got home. Going to the forest was a convenient means of escape.

“Yeah,” I said. “They can help with winter prep. It’s killing two birds with one stone.”

“Yippee! I’ll do my best!”

“Thank you, Lutz!”

Giddy with excitement, Dirk and Konrad made me promise again and again that I would go with them to the forest. Soon enough, it was time for me to leave.

“If you’ll excuse me, I need to get going so I can give Master Benno a report,” I said. “Don’t forget to be ready for the forest tomorrow.”

“I’m more worried about *you* forgetting. See you tomorrow, Lutz!”

I exited the orphanage with Gil, who walked me to the gate to the lower city. He stopped beside it and sighed.

“Sorry, Lutz. I didn’t mean to eat into your time off.”

“It’s fine. Better to visit the forest than be worked to the bone at home.”

On that note, I passed through the gate and into the lower city. It was so much cleaner than the filth-covered streets of Groschel, even seeming to glow in comparison. My shoulders relaxed, and an unconscious “I’m finally home...” escaped me.

I passed the Othmar Company—which was also the guildmaster’s home—and turned a corner to the Plantin Company. I entered through the back with five volumes in hand.

“Hi, Mr. Mark. Is Master Benno here?”

“Welcome back, Lutz,” Mark replied, turning to face me. “The master is receiving a report from Damian, who returned ahead of you. He eagerly awaits your input.”

I realized then that Mark had been speaking with a woman I didn’t recognize. Her reddish-brown hair was done up, which meant she was of age, but she was clearly still young. I was most surprised to see her wearing the uniform of a Plantin Company lehang; she must have joined while I was in Groschel.

“Do we have a new lehang?” I asked.

“Yes, allow me to introduce her. This is Karin, the daughter of a visiting merchant from Klassenberg. Due to certain circumstances, we are going to be housing her until next summer. Karin, this is Lutz, one of our leherl apprentices.

He just returned from a business trip.”

Karin and I greeted each other. What kind of circumstances would result in a Klassenberg merchant staying with the Plantin Company? Her beauty caught my attention first, then the strength of her will. She must have been pretty domineering to have come all the way to Ehrenfest. I assumed she had the training of a proper merchant from a greater duchy, but her blue eyes sparkled with curiosity.

In an instant, Karin’s focus switched to the books I was carrying. She reminded me of a cat that had just spotted its prey. Mark must have noticed too, as he smiled and stepped between us.

“Lutz, I must insist that you report to Master Benno,” he said. “Now.”

“Understood,” I replied with a nod, then immediately headed to Benno’s office. Damian was gone by the time I arrived.

“Heya, Lutz. Finally back?” Benno asked, looking up and grinning at me. “I trust everything went well.”

“It did. The nobles in Groschel were far less cooperative than in Illgner and Haldenzel, so I thought there might be problems. Lady Rozemyne kept everything in order, though.”

I’d started to worry when we found out the giebe and scholar in charge paid no attention to the lower city’s craftspeople, but Myne had used her authority as the archduke’s adopted daughter to bridge the gap between them and steer us away from disaster. Having such a strong supporter had once again proven to be a tremendous boon.

I thought back to seeing Myne perform her duties as a member of the Ehrenfest archducal family. Rather than seeming like the Myne I remembered, she’d exuded the aura of a noble with many responsibilities to bear.

“I’m giving you three days off,” Benno told me. “Go spend it with your family.”

“Thank you. But before I go... Here. We made this book in Groschel to test out its printing press.”

Benno accepted the book and started thumbing through it.

“I wish to give one to Renate of the Gilberta Company,” I said. “May I?”

“Sure. She’s going to love it. I might as well come with you.”

Benno put away some documents and stood up. He had taken to visiting the Gilberta Company whenever he could to help train Renate as its successor. Otto had tried on his own, but he was too soft on his daughter to be a reliable mentor.

“Lutz, about Karin...”

Once we were on the road, Benno explained why Karin was staying at the Plantin Company. She had come to Ehrenfest on business with her father, only for him to leave her behind. He wasn’t due to return until next year.

“Was she entrusted to us so she could learn from our store?” I asked.

“You look way too pleased right now.”

“Of course. If my hunch is correct, it means a Klassenberg merchant recognized your skills.”

A merchant from a greater duchy choosing the Plantin Company as somewhere for his daughter to study was truly special. Or so I thought, but Benno scratched his head and gave me a conflicted smile.

“More likely than not, having her join us as a lehang was just the best way for her dad to gather information. I can’t even guess how much she’s going to get from us.”

“Weren’t you aware of that when you agreed to let her stay?”

Benno heaved a heavy sigh and said, “There are extenuating circumstances at work.” He refused to elaborate, but I could tell that Karin was a pretty sharp thorn in his side.

“Lutz! Uncle Benno!” Renate exclaimed, pushing past the servant lady who had come to greet us. Her hair, done in a half-up style, closely resembled Benno’s in its color, while her facial features reminded me of Corinna.

“You sure have grown,” Benno said, picking up the girl as she squealed with joy. Side by side, they looked a lot like father and daughter.

That reminds me... Benno used to carry Myne all over the place. She was just too slow on her own two feet.

Renate was about as tall as Myne had been then. She had learned to speak before Dirk or Kamil, who were roughly her age, and didn’t shy away from putting that skill to use. Every time I came here, she was chattering about one thing or another. Benno had once said that she was only ever quiet when eating or sleeping.

“So, what’ve you learned lately?”

“Well...!”

Renate settled into Benno’s lap and twittered away. He listened to her every word, interjecting only to teach her extra details and ask questions to make sure she really understood what she was telling him. Their discussion was almost entirely about business; Renate’s education had started much earlier than my own so that she could one day serve as her family’s successor.

Today, Corinna was teaching Renate how to tell good cloth from bad. Renate’s one-year-old brother, Knut, took up most of their parents’ time, so she dearly looked forward to these lessons; they were the only chance she got at some alone time with her mother.

“Mother and Father are so obsessed with Knut that they don’t pay any attention to me! They never listen to what I want to say!”

“That’s how it is being the oldest. I went through the same thing.”

“Did you hate being the oldest too, Uncle Benno?”

“Sometimes.”

Benno turned to me and gestured me over without missing a beat, like he’d been waiting for Renate to run out of business-related things to talk about and start complaining about her little brother. He wanted me to help change the subject by showing Renate the book I’d brought her.

“Here, Renate. A new book,” I said. “It contains stories from Groschel, the

province I was staying in.”

“Thanks, Lutz. Mm... This one’s kinda thin!”

As a test project, it really was thinner than the books I’d given Renate in the past. Still, it didn’t contain any weird poems or complex noble euphemisms, so I suspected she’d enjoy it more than the others.

“It’s full of stories from Groschel’s craftspeople, so it should make for a pretty fun read,” I explained. “There’s no art, though.”

“Okay. I’ll ask Mom to read it to me,” Renate said, happily clutching the book to her chest. “I can’t wait. The stories you bring are always so fun.”

A babysitter then arrived with Knut, who had just woken up from a nap and seemed as energetic as ever. He had recently learned to walk, and the babysitter joked that she dared not let him out of her sight. I was watching Knut stumble around (and then fall on his butt) when the door suddenly opened and Tuuli came in.

“I was wondering why Mrs. Corinna suddenly asked me to come back!” she exclaimed upon seeing me. “Welcome home, Lutz!”

“Yeah, I just got back from Groschel. I got you this book as a souvenir. It was made to test a printing press, so it’s one of only about a dozen in the world. Pretty rare, huh?”

Tuuli accepted the book, leaving me with two more: one for her little brother, and one I planned to keep. “Thanks,” she said. “I’ll read it later.”

“I was gonna give one to Kamil when we finish here. Want to come with me?”

“Mm, not today,” she replied, shaking her head. “I have work tomorrow, and the workshop is swamped with Lady Rozemyne’s orders.”

As it turned out, Myne had chosen Effa’s cloth during the dyeing contest and then ordered a hairpin to match. Tuuli spoke in a bright voice that made it clear how proud she was, but I could tell she was exhausted. If the orders were meant for winter, then she was almost out of time.

“That winter socializing thing is coming up real soon, right?” I asked. “Have you not finished yet?”

“We’re done with her winter clothes, but our work’s still far from over. Last year, Lady Rozemyne brought us orders from the royal family. Something of that nature’s bound to happen again, and we won’t be equipped for it unless I get a head start and finish her spring hairpin too. Last year was a total mess.”

“Y’know... good point.”

Myne’s gonna cause trouble—that much is obvious.

Though we couldn’t predict what that trouble would involve, we knew it was lurking right around the corner. We needed to be ready to respond to whatever sudden orders came our way.

“For safety’s sake, I’m preparing for every outcome I can think of,” Tuuli said. “I still need to finish Lady Rozemyne’s spring hairpin, but I made extras of the armbands she wanted for her school friends and designed several more hairpins in case we receive another order from the royal family.” Her achievements made it clear that she was Myne’s big sister; she couldn’t have been more ready for whatever Myne was about to spring on us.

“Well, alright. Good luck.”

“Why not take it easy today? You *did* just get back from a long trip.”

“I plan to.”

“I do have some free time, but I really need to get back to working on Lady Rozemyne’s hairpin...” Tuuli muttered. She waved me farewell, then headed to her room.

Benno gave a slight shrug. He must have been listening to our conversation. “You can head home, Lutz,” he said. “I want to spend some more time with Renate.”

“Thanks. If you’ll excuse me.”

“Later, Lutz!” Renate shouted, waving to me.

I returned the gesture before going back to the Plantin Company. There, I went to my room to put away my book and change clothes. I spent so little time in Ehrenfest these days—Myne’s orders kept me far too busy—that I rarely ever wore my hand-me-downs. Now, they didn’t even fit me anymore; the trousers

were too short, and the shirts were tight around the shoulders.

On my way home, I took a detour to the central plaza to get presents for my family. Kamil was sure to love the book I was about to give him, but my brother Ralph would much rather have some sausages; he was a growing boy with an appetite as large as my own.

From the central plaza, I went to Myne's place—part of my usual routine. I knocked and said my name, and Kamil opened the door with an excited cry. If not for his eyes, which reminded me of Myne's, he would have been a spitting image of his father.

"Welcome back, Lutz! How was your trip? Did you have fun?"

"Look, Kamil. I got a book for you. It's full of stories the craftspeople of Groschel told us."

"Woo-hoo!"

Kamil had grown up playing with the books and toys Myne made for children, so he'd turned into a bookworm exactly as she'd planned.

Effa stopped cooking and turned to look at me just as I gave Kamil his present. "Thanks as always, Lutz," she said.

"You're Lady Rozemyne's dyer now, right?" I asked. "Tuuli said as much when I stopped by the Gilberta Company."

Effa smiled at me, her expression a mixture of happiness and disappointment, and shook her head. "No, not yet. Lady Rozemyne hasn't made up her mind. She wants her winter clothes to be made with my cloth, but I don't yet have her exclusive business."

The archduke's wife and their daughter had given out Renaissance titles, but Myne hadn't chosen her own Renaissance. Now, the other dyers were all ruthlessly vying for her attention.

"Still, she's going to pick new cloth next spring or summer," Effa said, her eyes full of motivation. "Now that Kamil can go to the forest, I'm going to spend even more time dyeing."

"Huh. He's going to the forest already?"

“Yeah, I’ve been going all summer,” Kamil chimed in. “Look what I got today!” Brimming with pride, he started putting his loot in a neat row on the table. He hadn’t made Myne’s mistake of bringing home poisonous mushrooms or anything of the sort, and the fact he could carry a basket on his back meant he’d come home with an actually decent haul.

Myne really was bad at everything back then.

“Impressive, huh?” Kamil said.

“Sure is,” I replied, reaching out and mussing his hair. “I’m going to the forest tomorrow. Guess I’ll need to work extra hard to keep up with you!”

Kamil grinned up at me, his eyes sparkling. “Really?! I’m going too! We’ve never been at the same time before!”

“You’re welcome to come with me, if you don’t mind me bringing Dirk and Konrad.”

Five years had passed since I’d started going to the forest with the orphans. The other kids didn’t look down on them as much anymore, but the adults’ minds were harder to change. It was no use trying to convince them from the outside, Myne had told us, which was why she’d wanted to take a more subtle approach through the Gutenbergs. It would take us some time, but we just had to show the adults that the orphans weren’t any different from the rest of us.

“Dirk and Konrad are from Lady Rozemyne’s orphanage,” I said. “They’ve been playing with the same kinds of books and toys as you, so you shouldn’t lack for things to talk about.”

Myne’s toys weren’t exactly popular here, so I was sure Kamil would appreciate the chance to hang around with other children who enjoyed them. Tuuli had told me he was having a hard time relating to the other kids in our neighborhood; he loved the picture-book bible, but there wasn’t much discussion to be had when nobody else in his social circle even knew how to read.

“Do all the kids there have picture books?” Kamil asked.

“Yeah.”

“And they won’t get mad at me for bringing up Lady Rozemyne’s toys?” He had promised his dad that he wouldn’t mention Myne or any of the toys connected to her when speaking with his neighbors. It was a vow between men, as Mr. Gunther had put it.

“They love her too, so no, they won’t get mad. They’re probably better at karuta than you.”

“Okay! I’ll go!” Kamil exclaimed, his eyes continuing to sparkle as he threw his hands up in the air.

Raimund — Duchy and Mentor Relations

Description: A sales bonus story for Part 4 Volume 6, set around when Rozemyne went to Hirschur's laboratory for the first time. This story elaborates on how Raimund's meeting with Rozemyne led to his apprenticeship with Ferdinand.

Author's Note: How does an archduke candidate surrounded by guard knights appear to a mednoble from another duchy? How do her actions become the basis for their decision-making? These are the questions I tried to answer with this story. I also made sure to sprinkle in some family circumstances and details about the Ahrensbach Dormitory.

"You. What is your name?"

"Huh...? Um, Raimund."

I met Professor Hirschur a year ago, during one of my second-year brewing classes. Professor Gundolf, the man who usually led our practicals, had ended up being too busy to attend, so Professor Hirschur had made an exception and covered the class for him. I remembered every detail of that first encounter, down to the glint in the eye behind her monocle.

It wasn't rare for classrooms to merge and professors to be replaced when socializing season began and the year's final exams drew near. I'd never taken any of Professor Hirschur's classes before then, so I wondered what business someone who usually taught other grades could possibly have with me.

"You might only be a second-year, but you've taken an interest in improving magic circles and simplifying magic tools. Is that correct?"

"Yes, um... Though it embarrasses me to admit it, I don't have as much mana as the average mednoble. My hope is to use simplification to make magic tools that require less mana."

Written lessons were easy for me, but I couldn't say the same for practicals.

During any class that required the use of mana, I seemed to run dry before we were even halfway done. The flow of my mana was poor, at best, and when we had to brew, I spent most of the lesson drinking rejuvenation potions and waiting for them to serve their purpose. It only made sense to devote that downtime to studying magic circles.

Professor Hirschur picked up my notes on simplification and read them thoroughly. She placed a contemplative hand on her chin, looked up into the air, and then grinned.

“You seem to have a talent for this. Would you like to become my disciple?”

A stir ran through everyone in earshot, and a sea of shocked eyes came to rest on Professor Hirschur and me. I couldn’t blame them for reacting that way—these kinds of opportunities were never extended to bottom-level mednobles. Even if I’d gone from professor to professor, asking them to take me as their disciple, they would all surely have turned me away in favor of students more likely to be brought into the Sovereignty.

She’s making fun of me, right? If she actually made me her disciple, everyone else would lash out at me in jealousy. What a pain.

I gazed up at Professor Hirschur, expecting the worst, but I saw not a hint of mockery in her purple eyes. It was the first time someone had ever genuinely acknowledged me; my mana was so underwhelming that not even my own family expected me to amount to anything. Unless I seized this opportunity here and now, I would spend the rest of my days completely unnoticed.

My mind screamed at me to act.

“Yes, please! I would love to!”

“Welcome to my lab,” Professor Hirschur announced. “Pass your final exams and you may use it as you please. The nationwide mana shortage has done much to increase the demand for more efficient magic tools.”

My first response to the laboratory was one of surprise—it was more cluttered than I could ever have imagined—but I quickly came to appreciate its strengths. I could write my thoughts as they came to me and set them down

without having to fear my attendant trashing them the moment I turned my back. I could study nonstop until sixth bell rang. It really was a peaceful place to work.

If only she'd give me proper answers to my questions.

Professor Hirschur wasn't one to hold my hand; she'd point to documents and tell me to find my own answers. Basic questions would earn me basic answers, and anything more complex than that would quickly turn into a lesson on how to figure things out on my own.

"I refuse to answer not out of apathy but because a researcher must know how to find what they seek," she would say. "I wish to raise you to the point that you can debate about research."

Professor Hirschur wouldn't deny that the mess in her lab was the product of her own laziness, but she refused to say the same about her teaching methods. The opposite was true, she claimed—the lessons she tried to teach me were all the result of careful consideration.

In truth, not even the professor's laboratory was as it seemed. Though it appeared to be a mountain of garbage, it was actually replete with magic tools I'd never seen or heard of before. Even the small closet of sorts to the side of the brewing room was packed with tools and documents.

"You may research the magic tools here as you please," Professor Hirschur said. "Many of them demand excessive amounts of mana to use and will therefore be perfect for your goals. These two are safe—they're meant for recording and far-sight, respectively—but take care not to touch the others without at least a basic understanding of their purpose. Many of the tools here are dangerous and meant for combat."

"Did you say one was for 'recording'?" I asked. "How does it work?"

"Do you remember the magic tool that I use during my lessons? The one that shows students their brewing instructions? It is an advanced form of that, able to record moving objects and then display them again. Hm... This was the first prototype, if memory serves."

It... records moving objects?

The tool used during Professor Hirschur's lessons recorded written text and projected it over and over again onto white cloth. It seemed pretty useful to me, but none of the other professors had one. I'd never expected a more advanced version to exist.

"If that's just a prototype, is the finished product here too?" I gazed across the mountain of magic tools. They were in such a heap that I couldn't tell what was what.

"It's bound to be somewhere, but..." Professor Hirschur gestured to the clutter around us. "I haven't touched it in years, so I doubt you'll find it anytime soon."

"You haven't? Why not, when it has so much utility?" I couldn't believe she had abandoned such a useful and original magic tool.

"Everything that boy made was an atrocious mana guzzler. I wish to advance my own research, so I do not have the mana to spare for it."

"That boy'?"

"My other disciple, Ferdinand of Ehrenfest. He had quite the mind for inventing new magic tools, and the talent to see them actually made. It was a terrible shame that I could not bring him to the Sovereignty. His being an archduke candidate meant my hands were tied."

My interest was piqued. This man, who had attended the Royal Academy over a decade ago, had apparently taken the scholar and archduke candidate courses at the same time. He had approached the development of magic tools with immense passion and devised one completely original creation after another.

"Professor, where did Lord Ferdinand put his documentation when designing this tool...?"

"An apprentice scholar put the paperwork together, but Lord Ferdinand probably kept it. I suspect all that remains here are things he wondered about but quickly lost interest in and notes simple enough for him to put together on his own."

"I really hope to read them someday... Lord Ferdinand's documents, I mean. I'd also like to speak with him, so I can ask how he comes up with his ideas."

A smile crept onto Professor Hirschur's face as she began stacking books and documents. "His papers and magic circles would all be too much for you as you are now. Strive to be able to parse and improve upon his work, but start by studying the basics."

From that point onward, I spent almost all of my time studying. I'd never read so many books before, and the volumes Professor Hirschur lent me contained an astonishing amount of knowledge. Under normal circumstances, books this rare and valuable couldn't be borrowed without some manner of collateral. For someone as poor as I was, even borrowing from the library was a challenge.

On top of that kindness, when the academic term ended and it came time for me to return home, Professor Hirschur loaded me with assignments to get through before the next winter and documents to help me understand them. I'd never been so glad to have homework in my life.

Upon returning to Ahrensbach, I devoured the documents and solved the assignments given to me in quick succession. I told my family I'd found a mentor at the Royal Academy and that I one day hoped to move to the Sovereignty, then devoted myself to my studies. They seemed to be at a loss for words, but the documents I showed them were clear enough evidence that I was speaking the truth.

I continued to learn from the resources my mentor had given me, examined the magic tools that apprentices used and the magic circles engraved on them, and contemplated ways to simplify them as much as I could. My entire world had changed in what felt like the blink of an eye. It didn't even bother me when my family said that I didn't have enough mana to move to the Sovereignty—I was devoting my all to what I truly loved to do.

Soon enough, I came to resent the passage of time. I was so absorbed in my work that meals and sleep became inconveniences more than anything else. For the first time in my life, I truly understood what it meant to be fulfilled.

At the start of the next academic term, I returned to the Academy as a third-year and gave back the texts Professor Hirschur had allowed me to borrow. I

completed my written lessons as quickly as I could to maximize my time in the laboratory and then got straight to experimenting. My aim was to produce more efficient magic tools, and to that end, I dissected complex circles and simplified them by organizing them into separate processes. The knowledge I'd absorbed from countless books served me well, and the time seemed to fly with how much fun I was having.

I wanted these days to carry on forever. And yet, change came in the form of Lady Rozemyne, an archduke candidate from Ehrenfest.

"Now then, if you will excuse me," she said, leaving the laboratory with her retinue once our meeting about improving magic circles had concluded. I waited until their footsteps faded, then slouched over and heaved a heavy sigh.

"So?" Professor Hirschur asked me with a slight smile. "What do you think of Lady Rozemyne?"

"She seems nice enough, but I couldn't bear the way her knights glared at me during my explanations. I'm relieved she left so soon." As much as I enjoyed getting tasty leftovers from Professor Hirschur, my entire meeting with Lady Rozemyne had felt like a near-death experience.

I'd rather archduke candidates waited on by knights not bully us lower-ranked nobles without anyone to protect us. Ehrenfest might not have been high enough in the duchy rankings to speak out against Ahrensbach archduke candidates, but that didn't mean she should use her status to antagonize mednobles.

"I'm just a lowly mednoble," I said. "I don't want to deal with an archduke candidate from another duchy. I'm not sure what her reasons are, but I would rather nobles of her high status resolve their problems among themselves."

"Laynobles and mednobles need only think about their own duchies," my mentor replied. "Archduke candidates, on the other hand, must also consider interduchy diplomacy."

I'd thought that life got harder as one's status decreased, but Professor Hirschur assured me that even highly ranked nobles had their own problems to deal with. I found that hard to imagine, considering what I'd seen of Lady Detlinde in our dormitory.

“Professor Hirschur, Lady Rozemyne plans to visit us here on a regular basis, does she not? Must I spend my days being stared down by her guard knights? Or... will my being from Ahrensbach mean I can't be your disciple anymore?”

My time with Professor Fraularm had made one thing clear: dormitory supervisors allowed their home duchies to sway them more than any other Sovereign noble. If, in his hatred for Ahrensbach, Aub Ehrenfest ordered my mentor to cut ties with me, she would surely have no choice but to obey.

Were I closer to my archduke, I could ask him to force Ehrenfest to take the order back. Given its lower rank, Ehrenfest would need to comply. But alas, I was a mednoble far from current trends. I wasn't even known as an excellent student.

I'll just have everything stolen from me, as usual.

“Worry not—no matter what Aub Ehrenfest says, I owe no debts to his duchy and will refuse to follow any orders I do not agree with,” Professor Hirschur said, waving a dismissive hand without the slightest change in her expression. Her research had apparently been done with support not from Ehrenfest but from her disciple, Lord Ferdinand.

“He understood my teaching philosophy well,” she declared.

Professor Hirschur's composure brought me comfort even a day later, when I was trying to decipher a circle on one of Lord Ferdinand's magic tools. I was hoping to create a tool of my own that could produce the same result with less mana.

The display component functions like a water mirror, but to make it display the same thing over and over again...

“Professor Hirschur, this is Brunhilde of Ehrenfest,” came a voice from outside the room.

I turned to look, then returned my attention to the magic circle in front of me; Professor Hirschur seemed intent on ignoring the call, so I thought it best to follow her example. We always prioritized our own research, creating an atmosphere where the first person to acknowledge a distraction was the loser.

“You have a visitor, Professor,” I said at last, trying to emphasize that this was no guest of mine.

Professor Hirschur was unmoved. “You are closer. Open the door for me.”

In terms of power, I was at an unfortunate disadvantage, leaving me with no choice but to give up and open the door. Lady Brunhilde, one of Lady Rozemyne’s attendants whom I presumed to be an archnoble, was waiting on the other side. She scanned the laboratory with a grimace, then straightened up and presented us with a board.

“Professor Hirschur,” she said, “we humbly request that you have dinner with us tonight in the dormitory. Lord Ferdinand wishes to speak with you in person. Here is the invitation.”

My mentor accepted the board and skeptically examined it. Then she cast her purple eyes down. “For what reason has Lord Ferdinand come here? Does an adult plan to influence the Royal Academy?”

“Many of his magic tools are being kept here, are they not?” Lady Brunhilde asked, scanning the room until her eyes fell on my current project. “As their creator, he is duty bound to dispose of them.”

She was right—Lord Ferdinand could do as he pleased with the tools he’d made, and the one I was currently attempting to decipher counted among them. How had she known it was his? Was it common in Ehrenfest? A chill ran down my spine.



“Lord Ferdinand would surely find it problematic for his tools and research to leak to another duchy...” Lady Brunhilde remarked. “In any case, Professor Hirschur—we shall await you at sixth bell.”

And with that, Lady Brunhilde took her leave, as if she’d wanted to spend as little time in the laboratory as was necessary. She acted with zero respect for Professor Hirschur. It suddenly made more sense why my mentor never wanted to be in her dormitory despite being its supervisor.

“Are you planning to go?” I asked.

“I am. Ehrenfest came up with the perfect reason to dispatch Lord Ferdinand to the Royal Academy. As for what message he brings from Aub Ehrenfest... I will need to wait and see.”

Professor Hirschur’s voice lacked the confidence that had soothed my nerves the day before. It seemed to me that she was attempting to hide her shock.

“This is all because of me...” I said.

“Fret not, Raimund. You’re my disciple, and that won’t change no matter what anyone says to me. Now, let us continue our research until fifth bell.”

Professor Hirschur picked up her pen and returned to what she was doing before. I tried to go back to my magic circle, but I couldn’t ignore the voice in my head.

Are they going to make her give up on teaching me?

Dread made me sick to my stomach. I read over my notes while doing my best not to show how uneasy I felt.

Er, what was I thinking about...?

My research had been going so well before. Now I was stuck. The magic circle seemed to distort in front of my eyes and move on its own.

The element necessary for the display is... is... Um, what was it again?

Before, it had come to me in an instant, but now my mind was blank. I needed to continue my research... yet the harder I tried, the harder it became to concentrate. By the time fifth bell chimed, I was no closer to figuring out the

tool than when Lady Brunhilde had interrupted us.

“That’s enough for today. This is a formal invitation, so I need time to make myself presentable.”

On that note, Professor Hirschur shooed me out of the lab so she could summon her attendant.

I made my way through the scholar building and toward the library, where I would read until sixth bell. My steps hastened as I drew near, but then I suddenly stopped in my tracks. Lady Rozemyne had spoken so passionately about the library during our meeting the day before. She had claimed to go there frequently, which meant she might have been there today.

I don’t want to see her or her retainers right now... I thought, so I strode back to the Ahrensbach Dormitory.

“Goodness, Raimund. This might be the first time this year that you’ve come back before sixth bell,” my attendant said upon my return, surprised to see me.

I explained that Professor Hirschur had told me to leave since she had important business to attend to, then went straight to my study desk, spread out several documents, and pretended to study them. I didn’t want to be in the common room, where Lady Detlinde and her lapdogs had erupted in shrill laughter.

Sixth bell rang. Professor Hirschur must have gone to the Ehrenfest Dormitory. Maybe she had finished preparing early—in which case, she had probably returned to her research and received a few choice complaints from her attendant. I gazed outside my window but saw only a dark forest covered in snow.

She told me not to worry... but I can’t help it.

Could anyone blame me? Lady Rozemyne’s guard knights had taken issue with me, and my mentor had been summoned to the Ehrenfest Dormitory the very next day.

What will I do if they make me resign?

It was hard to imagine anyone else would take me as their disciple. As my father constantly reminded me, my mana capacity was so low that, had the civil war's purge not decimated the noble population, I would absolutely have been sent to the temple.

To think I was so close to getting my family's recognition...

As we all gathered in the dining hall for dinner, I thought back to the food Lady Rozemyne had brought to the laboratory. The leftovers Professor Hirschur had given me had tasted shockingly delicious. Here in the Ahrensbach Dormitory, the meals we received depended on our status. Archduke candidates ate better than the rest of us—a fact I sorely envied them for.

Still, why is Ehrenfest so hostile to Ahrensbach?

Lady Georgine of Ehrenfest was Ahrensbach's first wife, and we had just married two brides into their duchy. I was used to hearing complaints about how much support Lady Georgine sent home, especially when Ehrenfest placed so low on the duchy rankings, but nobody ever mentioned anything that would explain Ehrenfest being on guard against us.

Is this a battle between archduke candidates being framed as an interduchy conflict?

I turned my attention to Lady Detlinde's group and watched them from afar while I ate. She was arrogant to her fellow students even within the dormitory. Had she made use of her higher status to force unreasonable demands on Lady Rozemyne?

It's plausible.

Higher-ranked members of lower-ranked duchies were known to target lower-ranked members of higher-ranking duchies, but still. I wished their squabble wouldn't interfere with my apprenticeship.

I was so desperate to know how Professor Hirschur's meeting had gone that I spent the night in agony, then rushed to the laboratory as soon as my lessons finished the next day. I opened the door to find the room shockingly empty. There were fewer documents on the tables and shelves, and the mountain of

magic tools that had once kept us from closing the storage room had vanished. Lord Ferdinand really had taken back his things.

I'm being completely rejected.

I couldn't help but despair. At a glance, it was clear how strongly Lord Ferdinand opposed an Ahrensbach student seeing even one of his creations. My hopes of seeing his organized notes and speaking with him about his magic tools shattered into tiny pieces.

"Professor Hirschur..." I said.

She was drawing a magic circle on a piece of parchment, acting as if everything were fine. Was it still okay for me to visit the laboratory as her disciple? Would my being here cost her access to the documents she needed or put her in financial trouble?

I gazed all around the room, at a complete loss for words. I could see the documents Professor Hirschur had allowed me to borrow outside of term time—documents I'd read in their entirety—and crumpled-up notes scrawled with my observations. My half-drawn magic circle was still spread out on the table.

The thought of my work made me want to cry. I didn't want to leave; I wanted to stay here, in this lab, and continue my research.

"I don't want to quit..." I said.

"Excuse me? I said you were my disciple, did I not?" Professor Hirschur asked, pausing her own drawing to set aside her pen and gaze up at me. Her monocle glinted. "Incidentally, how would you feel about having Ferdinand as your mentor?"

"Come again...?" My ears must have deceived me. Not even in my wildest dreams would Lord Ferdinand agree to such an arrangement.

Professor Hirschur sighed. "Yesterday, he and I spoke at length about magic tools and the threat of valuable information being leaked."

From there, my mentor elaborated on her conversation. Because my specialty was modifying magic tools, not handling weaponry, the dangerous tools had needed to be cleared away. I was also told—though not in any real detail—that

there *was* animosity between Ehrenfest and Ahrensbach, hence the former's concern that its secrets might be stolen.

"On the topic of such leaks, we will need to have a serious conversation," Professor Hirschur continued. "Still, when I conveyed your fascination with his tools and your talent for improving them, Ferdinand took an interest in you. It would seem that, as part of a recent report, Lady Rozemyne requested that he show you his documentation."

Lady Rozemyne had spoken passionately about my achievements so far and recommended me without question. Thanks to her, I would start taking long-distance lessons from Lord Ferdinand.

"Of course, this all rests on you agreeing and passing the test Ferdinand intends to set you. If you can recall the task he gave Lady Rozemyne, his current disciple, then you know this decision is not to be taken lightly. His judgment is harsh and quick."

My fortune had taken such a wonderful turn that I was lost for words. I remembered the sensation from when Professor Hirschur had asked to be my mentor. Still, this was no time to waver; I would sorely regret letting a chance this rare slip through my fingers.

I was the one who had asked to speak with Lord Ferdinand about magic tools. The past year had taught me the joys of studying something I was passionate about; I already knew how fun it was to be fully absorbed in my research.

A test? I must put my all into passing it!

The anxiety of such a trial was nothing compared to the dread of being forced to leave Professor Hirschur's laboratory. In the latter case, my duchy and status were out of my control, but the result of my test was entirely in my hands.

"Please!" I cried. "Please, let me take the test!"

Otto — Winter Preparations and a Traveling Merchant's Request

Description: A sales bonus story for Part 4 Volume 7. On the cusp of winter, Otto meets with an old friend from his days as a traveling merchant.

Author's Note: It was fun having Otto return to the bar he used to frequent as a soldier, and the fact that Tuuli was able to bargain with him shows how much she's grown as a leherl. I tried to touch on how traveling merchants feel about the changes to Ehrenfest's lower city as well as Benno's and Otto's thoughts on Karin, which Rozemyne never had a chance to hear about.

After taking out and changing into my old clothes, I called out to my beloved wife. "Corinna, I'm goin' out to meet someone. I'll see you later."

"Oh, Otto... Should you not change into something more presentable?"

"It's an old friend."

To me, that meant someone from my days as a traveling merchant. I said goodbye to the kids, then stepped out into the cold. A bitter wind blew down my neck.

"Whew. Sure has gotten chilly."

I turned up the collar of my coat and got a move on. Thinking back, I'd been so busy over the summer that I'd barely had a chance to enjoy the heat. Now that the merchants from other duchies had gone home and the women of the archducal family had finished their dyeing contest, my store finally had time to breathe. Too bad it was almost time to start preparing for winter. The busy times would continue.

"Now, let's see what Dhorme wants..."

Dhorme, the reason I was braving the cold, had done plenty to help me during my days on the road. He was a traveling merchant known to wander between

Ehrenfest and Frenbeltag—a man I owed dearly for telling my parents how I’d come to marry Corinna and what I was doing with the money I’d earned. As I reached Ebbo’s bar, I thought it was the perfect opportunity to pay him back.

During my days as a soldier, I’d come here all the time with Gunther. Now, I spent so much time at the Italian restaurant, hosting the owners of other large stores, that I could never find a chance to go to any bars at all.

It was busy at Ebbo’s, but it didn’t take me long to spot Dhorme waving at me from a corner. I waved back and headed over to him.

“Ebbo,” I called. “One behelle and a sausage.”

“Well, well, well. If it ain’t the owner of that big ol’ store!” Ebbo said. “Never thought I’d see your face ’ere again.”

“Gotta admit, it’s nice to be out of those fancy clothes. Can’t stand the damn things.”

“You got that right!”

Ebbo cackled as he took the large copper from my hand and replaced it with a wooden tankard full of behelle beer. I took it straight over to Dhorme’s table.

“Heya, Dhorme. Been a while.”

“Otto! Thanks for coming. The city’s changed so damn much; doesn’t surprise me that you’ve changed too. One moment you’re a soldier, the next, someone tells me you’re running a huge store!” He let out a heavy sigh and offered me a seat.

I shot him a slight smile, sat down, and then took a hearty swig of my beer. Traveling merchants didn’t pray to Vantole when drinking together; the gods didn’t approve of our existence here.

“Still, the heck’s going on?” Dhorme complained. I could tell that he was well in his cups. “Didn’t know a city could change so much in a year. Thought I’d come to the wrong one at first. And it ain’t just how clean things are—when I tried to dump some trash, one of the soldiers came over and started roarin’ at me about it bein’ against the rules. The heck was that all about? Sheesh.”

Dhorme’s shock didn’t surprise me. I’d seen plenty of traveling merchants

react the same way to Ehrenfest's changes.

"Sure wasn't easy to get used to," I said. "And if we don't keep it clean, the archduke'll use magic to destroy the lower city."

"You can't be serious..."

"Why d'you think the guards were on your back? They weren't too hard on you, since you're an outsider, but be careful. If someone who lives here keeps breaking the rules, they can get banned from the city for good."

Dhorme grimaced. "What a pain in the neck."

There were plenty of downsides to the archduke paying so much attention to the lower city. A lot of older people were pretty upset about all the sudden changes, but me? I thought they made things way more exciting.

"Otto, weren't you sayin' this time last year that you had purveyor merchants on the way? And what's with there being nothin' interesting for sale? I thought there'd be *somethin'*, what with all the new well pumps and such."

Purveyor merchants were big-name merchants who did their business based on decisions made during the Archduke Conference. They were the opposite of traveling merchants, who just wandered around without being registered to any duchy in particular.

"The Saint of Ehrenfest woke up and got to work. That got us some attention from other duchies, hence the purveyors. But why'd you really call me here, Dhorme? Can't have just been for a bit of gossip."

Dhorme didn't need my help to sell the goods he got from other duchies; he had plenty of stores to choose from. He must have wanted to make a request that only a former traveling merchant would understand and sympathize with.

"Still quick on the uptake, eh? Glad to see it. I want a hairpin for the daughter of a town chief who looked after me last winter. She loved the hairpins I was carryin' last year, so I promised to get 'er a red one. Problem is, haven't seen a single one since I got here."

This time last year, our shelves had been stocked with hairpins of all colors in preparation for the autumn coming-of-age ceremony and the winter baptisms.

Now, we didn't have a single one for sale.

"That's because the purveyors from Klassenberg and the Sovereignty snapped 'em all up over the summer. Bought as many as they could get their hands on. Now we're busy trying to make them all in the order they were purchased. We're packed so tight that we might not even have time to get the girls of the city everything they wanted."

"Welp, that ain't good..."

"Then there's winter handiwork. Can't expect too much overtime when there's prep around the corner."

Skimping on winter preparations wasn't an option. Well, not unless you had a death wish. It went without saying that the hairpins would need to be put on hold; we could take our time making them when the snow picked up and trapped everyone indoors.

"Still—haven't forgotten my days as a traveling merchant," I said. "I get the importance of having somewhere to stay for the winter and making sure everyone there's satisfied."

For traveling merchants, who had nothing but their wagons to their names, securing a place to stay for the winter was a matter of life and death. They also had to make their lodgings comfortable for everyone, though that fact wasn't quite as obvious. Being holed up for a long time made it easy for tensions to rise, and people sure loved to vent their frustrations on the merchants they were hosting. Dhorme's winters would depend on whether he could win over the town chief's daughter.

"Knew you'd understand, Otto."

"The problem is, our hands are full, and there aren't many outside our employ who know how to make a high-quality hairpin."

The lady Dhorme was trying to impress wouldn't be satisfied with a practice hairpin made by a beginner. She was the chief's daughter, one of the most important people in her town; whatever she received would need to be good enough for a rich girl. Getting a hairpin of that quality was easier said than done when our experienced craftspeople were all too busy to help.

In my head, I went through every rich girl who'd ordered from us. My involvement in the store meant I clearly remembered each sale, but our workers who had made the hairpins had too much on their plates.

Has anyone who can make those hairpins not been formally registered...? Myne and Tuuli were behind the first ones, so... Ah!

Out of the blue, I remembered the girls' mother, Effa. Not only had she been involved with Myne's hairpins from the start, but she'd also helped Tuuli to make hairpins for Freida of the Othmar Company's and Lady Rozemyne's baptisms. She was exactly who Dhorme needed... but would she really have the time? Lady Rozemyne had ordered some of Effa's cloth after the dyeing contest, and the needs of the archduke's daughter surely took priority over those of this other woman.

"One—and only one—person comes to mind," I said. "But don't get your hopes up. She might be too busy."

"I'll take what I can get. Please."

"There's gonna be a huge urgency fee, mind you. Especially with winter prep right around the corner."

"Got it."

I accepted the fee from Dhorme, then returned to the Gilberta Company. I would contact Effa through her daughter Tuuli, an apprentice leherl at our store.

"So yeah, that's the situation," I said. "Would be a big help if you could ask your mom for me."

Tuuli looked up at me in thought—I'd just brought her to my office—then smiled. "Sure, I don't mind. She finished dyeing the cloth and delivered it to the workshop, so I don't imagine she's too busy at the moment. And the extra-large urgency fee is sure to win her round. In return, however, I need more maximal-quality thread to be added to our next order."

"Er, Tuuli... I don't quite get it. Why the extra thread...?"

Tuuli had never tried to bargain with me before. I chewed over her request, feeling a little taken aback. We already had thread to match Lady Rozemyne's divine colors; was that not enough? To be honest, I wasn't sure I could get behind ordering maximal-quality thread we didn't have immediate plans to use.

"Well, this is just my instinct, but I think we're going to receive another major order out of nowhere this year. We should get the thread now, when it's easiest to acquire, so we aren't caught short later. Sure, we have enough colors that suit Lady Rozemyne's hair, but what if an order comes in for someone else?"

"We prepared thread for every female member of the archducal family. Are you telling me you want more in case some unknown person places an order we have no reason to expect?"

Tuuli nodded, her eyes completely serious. "It sounds unreasonable, but that's why I'm proposing it as part of an exchange. I really do have a bad feeling about this, which is why I'm working so hard to finish Lady Rozemyne's hairpin as soon as I can."

As crazy as her request sounded, Tuuli really had put a lot of thought into it. I couldn't deny how much she'd grown. It was hard to believe that just a year ago, she'd trembled in fear when that order from the royal family came through.

Seeing this young woman debut her merchant side was funny enough that I agreed to her deal. There was nobody else I could turn to, in any case.

"Alright," I said. "I'll start looking for the thread you want."

"Thank you."

A day later, Tuuli returned with the good news, so I took her out to look for the thread she'd requested. I could have ordered it without her, but her knowledge of the luster, thickness, and whatnot that appealed to royals most couldn't be beat.

"We have barely any colors outside of those that suit Lady Rozemyne and Lady Florencia," Tuuli said. "That's what we're here to remedy."

For obvious reasons, we'd only invested in thread we were guaranteed to

make money from. Lady Rozemyne purchased hairpins every season, so there were no problems there, and the thread we used to make accessories for Lady Florencia could also be used for Lady Charlotte, who had almost the same hair color. We wouldn't have that same security when ordering for customers who were, for all intents and purposes, imaginary.

"Hmm..." I muttered. "In an ideal world, we'd get a wide enough variety to make hairpins for anyone who might ask, but we don't want to waste too much money on materials we can't repurpose for Lady Rozemyne. Get five colors at most, okay? We can't go too crazy here."

Tuuli hummed as she looked over the shop's wares. The thread nobles could use depended on their status; no matter how rich they were, there were boundaries they simply couldn't cross.

"Worse comes to worst, what if Lady Rozemyne shows the hairpins to her friends from other duchies and markets them as having been sold to the royal family?" Tuuli mused aloud.

"It's a shame, but I doubt the members of top-ranking archducal families would ever buy ready-made accessories. Lady Rozemyne's the only one who'd purchase a hairpin just because you made it."

I really couldn't imagine nobles of such high status touching hairpins that weren't made specially for them, especially when people would compare them to royalty. Even when Lady Rozemyne had given hair ornaments to her fellow students to make an impression at the Royal Academy, she had ordered each one with the recipient's hair color and status in mind. Anyone buying hairpins made with maximal-quality thread would want the color and design to be to their exact preference.

"Still, not having enough would cause us just as much trouble as having too much. Remember how hard it was last winter when— Ah! Over there!" Tuuli rushed to pick up a pot of tiny beads, her eyes sparkling all the while. I'd seen the store owner nudge them into her peripheral vision.

"The owner of a button store came and sold 'em to me," he said. "He figured you could use 'em for those hairpins of yours."

"That's a great idea!" Tuuli exclaimed. "They'd look just like morning dew if

we stuck them on our leaves and petals. Can we buy them, Master Otto?”

The store owner grinned and said that he’d even give us a small discount. He was a damn good businessman; how was I meant to refuse?

“We’ll get them this time, but I don’t wanna keep paying the intermediary fee,” I said. “Once we’re done here, we can go make a deal with the button store.”

“That’s fine with me,” the store owner chimed in. “Beads aren’t my thing. I don’t want ’em on my shelves all the time.”

Once we’d purchased our thread, we went straight to the button store to buy all sorts of beads. The owner was extra pleased to have our business.

“There were so many cute things in there. Maybe I could make even better hairpins by matching little buttons and metal accessories...?” Tuuli murmured, clearly in a great mood. I didn’t know enough about designing hairpins to add to the conversation, so I just looked around instead.

“Huh? Is that... Benno and Karin?”

We’d just entered the north side of town from the central plaza when I saw them head down a side road. My eyes couldn’t have deceived me; those brownish-red tresses must have belonged to Karin. Not wanting to miss my chance to see something I could tease Benno about, I quickly followed them down the street.

As I got a closer look at the two people ahead of us, I made a silent note that they really were Benno and Karin. I couldn’t tell what they were up to—maybe preparing for the winter or just taking a tour of the city—but they were pointing all over and chatting about something. Time must have brought them together because they looked much closer than when they’d first met at the Merchant’s Guild.

“Hmm... You know, those two make a surprisingly good match,” I said. “Benno should quit grumbling about interduchy relations and start thinking about marrying her. Don’t you think?”

“She’s way too young for him. I mean, she isn’t that much older than me. I don’t think Mr. Benno would pick her.”

I seemed to remember Karin saying she was sixteen. She was a distinctive beauty with blue eyes and auburn hair. Tuuli was three years younger at thirteen, but she'd grown so much and acted so maturely that anyone would assume the two girls were the same age. Even so, I could tell at a glance that Benno was far more comfortable speaking with Karin.

Is that because she's technically of age? Maybe knowing Tuuli from a young age made Benno feel more like her guardian than anything else.

"Well, I agree that Benno won't choose her," I said. "He's still in love with another woman—though I really do think he should marry someone else."

"Wait, what? Mr. Benno loves someone?" Tuuli asked with widening eyes.

"You didn't know? Well, I guess I only heard it from Corinna."

It was an old story—not one I'd been around to witness—but I told Tuuli all about Benno's late girlfriend, Liz. We arrived back at the Gilberta Company before either of us knew it.

Effa finished Dhorme's hairpin much sooner than I'd expected. It didn't have any tiny flowers hanging from it, but the large petals resembled those worn by Lady Rozemyne. I wrote on a small piece of card that the ornament had come from one of the women working for the archduke's daughter, then gave it and the hairpin to my old friend. He wouldn't need to worry about his winter plans any longer.

I was glad to have done a good deed, but Benno must've felt otherwise; he stormed toward me with a grimace, ready to launch into a truly fierce lecture. He asked my kids to give us some space—for a work-related discussion, he said—and urged them out of the room. I would need to thank him for letting me save some face as their father.

Corinna came and poured me some tea, though the air was too tense for me to enjoy it.

"I don't mind you keeping friends from your days on the road, but be more careful with what you do for them," Benno said sharply. "We told some of our other customers that we're too busy to take their orders; what would they

think about all this? People are paying close attention to your store, so start putting our customers in the city first.”

Benno was right, but my heart just didn’t agree. “Is it not more important to help someone avoid disaster? Our customers here might want hairpins, but their lives don’t hinge on them getting one. I guess, deep down, I’ve still got the mind of a traveling merchant...”

“That’s of no concern to me or anyone. People see actions, not thoughts, so shape up and stop being conspicuous. And while we’re here, stop using Tuuli to reach her family. I doubt anyone will say anything, but it’s better to be safe than sorry.”

Effa had a lot of eyes on her now that she’d won the dyeing contest and become Lady Rozemyne’s personal dyer. Benno didn’t want any bad rumors to come from her helping me out, not to mention the risk that someone might question her connection to Lady Rozemyne.

“Alright. I’ll take more care going forward,” I said. “Now, if you’re done with your lecture... I saw you two.”

Benno’s eyes narrowed in response.

“You and Karin, I mean. You two seem pretty close now. Imagine how good it’d be for business if you went ahead and got married already.”

“Excuse me? We were shopping. Mark shooed us out so he could finish all the work we can’t have her knowing about.”

On a previous occasion, Karin had apparently been sent out with an apprentice. The two had gotten separated, so Karin had returned to the shop earlier than expected, causing quite a stir. Benno didn’t know if she’d genuinely lost her guide or if she’d run away from them on purpose, but he’d taken to accompanying her ever since.

“I get that we need to prevent leaks, but it’s still a real pain in the neck,” Benno grouched, crossing his arms in frustration. “Mark’s better than me at directing all the apprentices, so I’ve been stuck babysitting.”

“Look,” I said, my eyebrows drawn into a frown, “I get that you don’t wanna look too favorably on Karin when this whole thing’s a plot to get you married,

but I still feel bad for her. She's in a real tough spot here. Can't you be a little nicer to her?"

Karin had grown up in a major store in the highest-ranking duchy in the country. Yet here she was, stuck in a backwater duchy with a man nearly old enough to be her father just because Ehrenfest had gotten a bit of attention recently. To make matters worse, the merchant she was stuck with had turned her down to her face.

"Sure, Karin's father sounds real pushy and arrogant, but that's not his daughter's fault. She hasn't done anything to the Plantin Company. In fact, she *tried* to go home, but you told her not to, since you were worried about her dying on the road. I think she's done pretty well here for a girl everyone's on guard against. Have you ever thought about how she feels?"

A rich daughter of a major store was being forced to spend an entire year as a live-in lechange. If she went back to Klassenberg next summer, she'd surely be mocked for getting turned down and treated as used goods for having stayed in Ehrenfest. I could easily envision her father shouting at her for not being useful.

On top of everything else, I was well aware of Karin's financial circumstances. I'd dealt with her personally when she'd tried to sell all the spare clothes and accessories she had to get enough money to catch up to her father's boat. I doubted she'd make it through winter without being in debt to Ehrenfest's merchants.

"It might not seem like a big deal, but that's only because Karin's so stronghearted," I said. "Someone less hardy might have taken her own life to escape what she's going through here."

"Yeah, I get that..."

"Then—"

"But I don't intend to make compromises. Karin's and my store's situations are entirely different; I won't marry her just out of sympathy."

The Plantin Company had risen up to working for the archducal family through Lady Rozemyne's support, whereas Karin's store was old money from a top-ranking duchy. Benno thought he was at an overwhelming disadvantage

when it came to keeping information secure.

“I think you could manage, Benno. You have Lady Rozemyne to—”

“Think before you speak, Otto,” Benno snapped, glaring at me. “Do you really think I can rely on Lady Rozemyne for everything? She’s fighting a tough battle to make things easier for us commoners, but her place in noble society is tenuous at best. She’s not a full-blooded member of the archducal family, remember—we have no idea how or when her position might change.”

I didn’t quite follow. It seemed to me that Lady Rozemyne was doing amazingly in the archducal family. She was engaged to the archduke’s son and seemed pretty stable to me...

“Lady Rozemyne’s situation is precarious enough already. I don’t intend to add to her burden. Not to mention, I made the decision to support her when I was still making my way in the world; I don’t have the leeway to take anyone else under my wing. My top priorities are the Plantin Company, the Gilberta Company, and my promise to Liz.”

Why’s he bringing up his promise to Liz all of a sudden? Talk about clinging to the past.

I swallowed those words before they could escape me. Benno’s dark-red eyes were too sharp for me to risk joking around.

“Otto, I won’t do anything that might put Lady Rozemyne or the archduke at a disadvantage against Klassenberg. I’ll even *get rid of* Karin, if necessary.”



Benno's resolve was painfully clear, and the look in his eyes reminded me of how he'd used to be. He was radiating irritation that made it impossible to get close. I needed to calm him down, or else he'd end up losing his temper with Corinna or Renate.

"Sorry. I spoke out of turn. I thought you were being too harsh with Karin, but I see now that I've just made things worse."

On that note, I finally reached for the tea Corinna had poured me. It was stone-cold, but I sipped at it nonetheless.

Benno exhaled, then picked up his own drink. "Forget it. Maybe I *should* ease up a little. As you said, she hasn't done anything wrong." The cold tea must have cooled his head.

Relieved, I set my cup down. "Alright, let's talk about winter. Tuuli told me she predicts that..."

I went on to explain her premonition. Benno grimaced, instructed me to prepare as much as I could, and then started thinking about the Plantin Company's response. He was back to normal.

Florencia — Completing *The Story of Fernestine*

Description: An unpublished short story from the online collection, set after Ferdinand's engagement is announced in Part 4 Volume 8. Elvira wails and curses the royal decree, prompting Rozemyne to advise her to channel her emotions into something creative. Florencia watches over the newly founded Make Ferdinand Happy Squad to ensure their enthusiasm doesn't go overboard.

Author's Note: It was late at night when the idea for this story struck me, but I couldn't resist the urge to start writing it. Looking back, the intensity of my enthusiasm was almost a little concerning. I wanted to support Florencia in her endeavors to restrain Elvira's own passionate writing.

"No way. I will *not* take a second wife," Sylvester declared. "You don't want me to either, right, Florencia?"

"This is not a decision to be made based on personal preferences. An aub needs multiple partners, so I shall respond to yours as any duchy's first wife should."

I consoled my husband as he threw yet another tantrum over his wish not to take a second wife. In our current situation, it was crucial to think carefully about which duchy Ehrenfest needed to strengthen its bond with most.

Under normal circumstances, I would have turned to Elvira for her valuable input, but the unfortunate situation with Lord Ferdinand had thrown her into a rare state of emotional disarray. The same went for all of her close friends. They spent their tea parties in tears and continued to weep as they bemoaned what hardships Lord Ferdinand must be going through. I thought it best not to ask for their advice until they calmed down.

As for what that "unfortunate situation" was, a royal decree had demanded that Lord Ferdinand marry Lady Detlinde, who bore the features of the woman who had tortured him. It was tragic, of course, but he could have avoided it by

speaking with Sylvester first. Instead, he had accepted the order thrust upon him and declared that his moving to Ahrensbach was the best outcome for Ehrenfest. Fussing and complaining would neither change things nor serve him to any degree.

“Do you have any ideas, Rozemyne?” I asked. I thought she might attest that this was what Lord Ferdinand wanted, but she seemed to interpret my question in another fashion.

“Forcing down one’s intense, raging emotions will only lead to trouble. Instead, why not channel them—your anger, sorrow, and regrets—into the act of creation?”

“Um... My apologies, but... what do you mean by that, exactly?”

“We could write a story based on Lord Ferdinand. There, if nowhere else, we could give him the happiness he deserves.”

I was stunned, unable to think of a response, but Elvira immediately spun around. “Give him happiness... within a story?”

“That is correct,” Rozemyne said. “Use pen and paper to guide him to a better future, Mother. Having an outlet for your emotions should soothe you well.”

Elvira blinked her dark eyes and looked over her gathered friends. They returned resolute nods of approval, begetting what Rozemyne would dub the Make Ferdinand Happy Squad.

Once our meeting was over, Rozemyne returned to the temple with her retainers. Lord Ferdinand was resigning as the High Priest, and the sudden handover had given her plenty to take care of.

In truth, Rozemyne wasn’t the only one with a lot on her plate; we needed to prepare farewell presents for Lord Ferdinand, inform each giebe of the upcoming change, and delegate his work to those who would remain in Ehrenfest. In the meantime, I’d taken to sitting in on tea parties to keep a keen eye on the Make Ferdinand Happy Squad.

Her eyes sparkling with enthusiasm, Elvira wrote out tragedy after tragedy. “By our hands, the world shall understand Lord Ferdinand’s misfortune!”

I could not help but sigh. A story too openly critical of the newest royal decree would only land our duchy in hot water—not that anyone here was in the right mind to care.

How can I encourage them to make the story more discreet?

I paused in thought before airing my solution: “As much as I support conveying his misfortunes to others, consider what might happen if people learn the truth. The story could be confiscated.”

“Very true,” Elvira said. “We cannot allow a repeat of the tragedy of the harspiel concert to occur!”

“Quite,” her entourage agreed. “I could not bear to taste such bitter despair again. Nobody must know that we are writing about Lord Ferdinand.”

Upon learning that we had sold artwork depicting him during his harspiel concert, Lord Ferdinand had banned us from ever making art of him again. Elvira’s and the others’ cries still rang in my ears. I sensed the entire squad unite in their mutual goal to never let such a thing happen again.

“But how can we keep the true identity of our protagonist hidden?”

“Changing the name will do nothing if we still write about a tragic archduke candidate from Ehrenfest being forced by royal decree into an engagement with a greater duchy.”

A relieved sigh escaped me as everyone focused on obscuring the inspiration for their story.

“A man being made by royal decree to marry into another duchy *is* rather rare, now that I think about it.”

Indeed, it was more common for women to marry into other duchies than men. A groom being ordered about in such a manner was rare enough that anyone in the current climate would put two and two together. Determining which parts of the story to change to complete our trickery was no simple matter.

“What if the decree came from an aub, not the king?” I asked.

“Lady Florencia, that would do nothing to convey the heartless cruelty of a

royal decree.”

“Indeed, I must object. It might also paint Aub Ehrenfest in a poor light.”

“Certainly...”

I conceded rather quickly. As the others had said, we could not risk our work impacting Sylvester’s reputation.

“If our aim is to be discreet, then why not have a woman marry into the duchy...?” somebody whispered. I did not catch who, but Elvira immediately looked up with a start.

“That’s it!”

“What is, Lady Elvira?”

“We shall write as though Lord Ferdinand were a woman! Nobody should piece together the truth then!”

A fresh wave of confusion rendered me speechless. If we changed the sex of our protagonist, I thought, our story would cease to be about Lord Ferdinand. I thought the others might agree with me, but a quick look around revealed that I was alone in my opinion; everyone else seemed quite taken with the idea.

“How wondrous! Not a soul would make the connection!”

“Not to mention, we are sure to win our readers’ empathy. Many of our country’s nobles were moved into other families before being baptized and endured great hardships growing up as a result.”

“Granting her happiness at the end will inspire those in unfortunate circumstances to have hope.”

I suspected that Elvira and the others turning Lord Ferdinand into a woman would only bring him greater misfortune, though I elected not to say anything.

Our most important goals are masking his identity and concealing anything that might be seen as critical of the royal family. I should welcome any alterations that turn this into a completely separate story.

“And we absolutely *must* include romance at the Royal Academy!” one of the women cried. “Such tender moments are precisely what the young

noblewomen who read Lady Elvira's stories want!"

"That reminds me—does anyone else remember the rumors of Lord Ferdinand getting close with a princess at the Academy? Perhaps we could include a love story with a prince."

"Excellent! We shall make her a woman so bright, beautiful, and bold that a prince would naturally fall in love with her! But because she lacks a mother, the prince's family shall reject the pairing!"

Amid giddy cries of glee, the protagonist's relationship with the prince was settled. It was good to see everyone smiling again—and with such a major change to the plot, no one would assume it was actually about Lord Ferdinand.

"The prince will plead with the king for the royal decree to be taken back until, at long last, he succeeds. He and our protagonist shall win the romance they so desire."

"Wait... I feel as though I've heard this tale before."

"Yes, because it mirrors the situation with Prince Anastasius and Lady Eglantine. Let us use them as our inspiration. That will make readers even less likely to think about Lord Ferdinand."

Elvira's group seemed satisfied with their general outline of the plot and the pleasant conclusion they had devised for its main character. From there, they considered the details, wondering whether their gender swap should also apply to Sylvester's equivalent and the protagonist's retainers.

"Now, what should we name our main character?" Elvira asked. "We've changed enough of the story that we can preserve the connection here, no? I fear that I won't be emotionally invested otherwise, which would completely forestall my writing."

Everyone fell into deep thought. Several ideas were put forward until they finally settled on "Ferneistine," an oh-so-clever mix of "Ferdinand" and "Eglantine." Sylvester's equivalent would remain the protagonist's paternal half-brother and protect Fernestine from his mother, both out of consideration for me and to add excitement to the opening acts, which were otherwise lacking in romance.

It speaks to Elvira's dedication that she changed even her own son into a female knight for the sake of this story. I shall accept her consideration with gusto.

"Now, let us consider which of Lord Ferdinand's many legends to work into our tale."

The resulting manuscript was passed to Bertilde, an apprentice attendant currently training under Elvira, and printed in Groschel. Haldenzel printed only in the winter, and Lord Ferdinand had too many eyes in the temple.

Elvira's story ended up being so long that, much like Dunkelfelger's history books, it had to be divided into volumes. The first covered the protagonist's baptism as an archduke candidate, her abuse at the hand of her stepmother, her going to the Royal Academy with her half-brother's protection, and her falling in love with the prince.

Rozemyne saw the completed book before going to the Academy and stared at it, stunned. "Mother, the protagonist might be a woman, but isn't this a story about Ferdinand...?"

She and Sylvester had noticed at once, but only because they were so close with Lord Ferdinand. As only those in his inner circle could see the connection, it ended up being a rather well-made tale that was harmless to most but poignant to those in the know.

"Oh my... This is but a work of fiction, Rozemyne. Names, characters, businesses, and events are all the products of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental."

I can only hope Lord Ferdinand finds that convincing.

Tuuli — Self-Awareness amid Everything

Description: A sales bonus story for Part 4 Volume 8 set during the run-up to Karin's return to Klassenberg. It explores how marriage is seen by lower-city merchants and how Tuuli felt about Benno and Karin's relationship.

Author's Note: The bonus short story for the second drama CD depicted the blossoming of this first love, though Tuuli had yet to recognize it. I wrote this installment to pave the way for what comes next for her. Benno's quite a catch, so he's sure to have opened many women's eyes to the world of romance.

We were seated around the fireplace, listening to the wood crackle and pop as we made a hairpin for the royal family. I glanced up from my hands and the complexly woven threads I was working with, decided that the fire needed more fuel, and then returned to my work.

"Tuuli, I'm done," one of the leherls said. "How's your work coming along? Think you'll finish in time?"

"Probably. The order came earlier this year, and we already had the thread we needed, so we have more wiggle room than before."

"Your prediction was spot-on."

Before, we'd made these hairpins in a panicked rush, feeling as though the walls were closing in around us. This time, however, I'd expected us to receive an order from the royal family, and the atmosphere was far more relaxed as a result. We even had the leeway to chat as we worked.

"Things have been quite calm this time around, but what about next year?" one of the leherls asked, looking worried. "Aren't you going to spend the winter with your family? Since you haven't come of age, I mean. Is that not bound to cause problems?"

Yes, I planned to hole up at home next year to make my coming-of-age dress. My birth season was summer, so I would wear the same clothes when I

eventually married. I wanted to put my all into them as a leherl of the Gilberta Company—every stitch needed to be perfect.

“You’re all going to be fine,” I said with a chuckle. “You have Gunilla.”

In terms of making hairpins, Gunilla was one of our better leherls. She was improving by the day and, as an adult, usually accompanied Mr. Benno or Mrs. Corinna when they went to the Noble’s Quarter to take hairpin orders. There wouldn’t be any issues next winter with her around. It was a relief, of course, but it also made me envious.

I need to hurry up and come of age too.

Each time she attended a meeting with nobles, Gunilla’s mastery of etiquette reached even greater heights. As it stood, she could take orders directly from members of the nobility without even batting an eye. I couldn’t shake the feeling that my position as Lady Rozemyne’s personal hairpin craftsperson was at risk.

“Given how much she relies on you, Gunilla, you might not want to get married until after Tuuli comes of age,” one of the other leherls said. “It’d be a nightmare if you both left at once!”

“As if,” another chimed in. “We’d manage just fine without them. If anything, we should all be telling Luki to quit sweating the small stuff. Like, c’mon, pop the question already! Right, Tuuli?”

Gunilla gave a slight smile. Luki was her boyfriend, but he’d said that he didn’t want to propose before his income was larger than hers. Even when two people were in love, there were plenty of obstacles on the road to marriage, it seemed.

“Speaking of marriage, I wonder what Mr. Benno plans to do. He ran this store before switching to the Plantin Company. If, as we all suspect, he’s going to get married this summer, then we should do something to celebrate. It won’t be that long before purveyors from other duchies arrive, so the sooner we start preparing ourselves, the better.”

“Married...? Oh, you mean to that girl from Klassenberg? I saw them wandering between stores this one time. They seemed real close. They’re bound to end up together—especially with how much it’d benefit Mr. Benno’s

store.”

Every store in Ehrenfest knew about the Klassenberg merchant who had gone home without his daughter. And as connections to greater duchies were such a valuable source of income—so valuable that even the guildmaster clamored for them—everyone agreed that Mr. Benno would marry her for sure.

Mr. Benno, getting married...?

I’d seen him and the girl from Klassenberg—Karin—together at the end of autumn when I’d gone out to buy thread. Gunilla was right when she said they seemed close, and they certainly were a good match. Still, hearing the others go on about their potential marriage made me annoyed and a little bit anxious, for some reason.

“Lutz said otherwise,” I noted. “Mr. Benno’s looking after her for complex reasons and doesn’t intend to marry her.”

“Really? But she’s the daughter of a greater duchy’s purveyor. There’s no good reason for Mr. Benno to turn her down!”

Lutz’s word as a leherl apprentice of the Plantin Company should have carried more weight, but nobody seemed to pay it any mind. The truth didn’t matter to them—they only wanted to gossip while we worked—so they carried on as though the marriage were set in stone.

“Her name’s Karin, right? She’s a beauty—and a talented merchant too, apparently.”

“A girl from a greater duchy and the head of the Plantin Company... They’ve got so much money between them! I can’t even imagine how fancy their ceremony’s going to be.”

“If that were me, I’d order new furniture from the Ingo Workshop. He’s a Gutenberg, no?”

From there, the others started sharing which stores they’d order from when they married, which turned into excited chatter about the best stores and carpenters, which then led to them gossiping about their partners. I gave half-hearted replies while repeating Lutz’s words in my head over and over again.

Mr. Benno won't marry a random girl from Klassenberg. No matter how attractive she might be, he'd never risk her getting access to sensitive information and putting Myne in a worse position.

Lutz had given me that reassurance when he saw how anxious I was about the rumors of Mr. Benno getting married. It really had helped to put me at ease.

I trust Lutz and Mr. Benno more than I do irresponsible gossip.

Once the royal family's order was complete, it was time to make products for summer. We got straight to producing hairpins of all price ranges for the purveyor merchants due to arrive from other duchies. Master Otto and Mrs. Corinna had said that our hairpins were popular now, since they were new and reasonably hard to come across, but that other duchies would eventually learn to make their own. We had to sell as many as we could before then.

I was still making hairpins when winter came to an end.

"A summons for the Gutenbergs came from the temple," Lutz said. "The High Priest is going to attend, so Master Benno wants to limit participation to select members of the Plantin and Gilberta Companies. Is there anything you want Lady Rozemyne to know? Beyond what we've already covered, I mean."

This meeting would mainly be about the Gutenbergs' long-term trip and their wishes for the upcoming Archduke Conference. Lutz said there had been a similar discussion during the sales gathering in the castle, when most of the agreements had been worked out.

"Nope, and we appreciate the Plantin Company taking the lead to protect us," Master Otto said. "We're in your care."

Lutz nodded and went to leave. I moved to stop him.

"Lutz... Can you tell me what comes up during the meeting?" I asked.

"Is everything okay?"

"I mostly remember the High Priest from the you-know-what contract. The thought of any meeting that involves him makes me nervous."

Hearing that he would be there made my breath catch in my throat. I couldn't

help but recall his quiet demand that we give up Myne and let her be reborn as a noble. I was desperate to know what he might say this time.

“I’ll need to drop by home before I go on my trip, so I’ll tell you then,” Lutz said. “As much as I can, at least.”

“Thanks.”

Relieved, I saw him off.

“Blessed be the melting of the snow. May the Goddess of Spring’s boundless magnanimity grace you all.”

Lutz arrived at the Gilberta Company with the usual seasonal greeting. Today was the day we were both going home; he wanted to see his parents before leaving for his trip, and I wanted to hear about his meeting with the High Priest.

I changed into simpler clothes than usual, at which point my colleagues all shot me bantering smiles.

“Well, aren’t you lucky having a *boyfriend* to walk you home!”

“Bye-bye. Make the most of your time together before he has to leave.”

Lutz and I shared a look, shrugged, and went on our way. Trying to correct them would only lead to more teasing.

No sooner had we stepped outside than the cold wind pricked my cheeks. We’d passed into spring—at least according to the calendar—but snow still covered the city’s roads. A few people were scattering ash to help it melt, and rattling wagons kicked up the resulting slush as they drove by.

“Hey, Lutz... Let’s take this alley to keep off the main street.”

“Sure. We’ll catch colds at this rate, and the fewer wagons we have to deal with, the better.”

At this time of year, continuing south from the central plaza meant having to cross any number of wagon-pullers calling out for help. Lutz wanted to avoid them as much as I did, so we turned a corner and continued on our way...

Until we spotted someone we both recognized.

“Wait, isn’t that Mr. Benno?” I exclaimed, my voice brightening.

It was rare to see him in this part of the city. I went to approach him but froze when I noticed the red-haired woman beside him. She was just tall enough to reach Mr. Benno’s shoulders and trudged along as if she’d never had to traverse a snowy road before. Mr. Benno was doing what he could to assist her.

The young woman ahead of us had to be Karin. From where we were watching them, she and Mr. Benno really did appear to be lovers. Anyone who saw them now would absolutely assume they were destined to get married.

Karin’s slow, awkward lumbering through the snow meant we quickly started catching up to them. I slowed down, trying to keep my distance, but Lutz sped up and called out.

“Master Benno! Are you going to the Merchant’s Guild?”

“Oh, Lutz. You two headed home?” Mr. Benno asked, turning to us with a grin. He stopped so suddenly that Karin almost stumbled.

“Um, Benno! That was dangerous!” she snapped. I’d guessed from the moment I’d seen her that she was as strong-willed as she was beautiful, and it seemed that I was right. She narrowed her blue eyes at him.

Um, isn’t that strange? Why is she addressing Mr. Benno so casually? She might only have a temporary employment contract, but she still works at the Plantin Company.

To add to my surprise, Mr. Benno didn’t even call her out for it. He simply said, “Whoops. My bad,” treating her reaction as though it were the most normal thing in the world. Stranger still, he didn’t seem bothered that we’d caught him out and about with Karin. I suddenly found it hard to breathe.

“So, Lutz, who’s the girl with you?” Karin asked, eyeing me curiously once she was steady on her feet. “Won’t you introduce me?”

Wasn’t she acting far too comfortable around Lutz as well...? Or maybe my anger was just getting the better of me; they *were* both employees of the same store.

Lutz exchanged a look with Mr. Benno, then frowned. “This is Tuuli,” he said

plainly. “We’ve been friends since we were kids.”

That mustn’t have been the answer Karin wanted, as she knit her eyebrows at him. “Friends, hmm? Surely that can’t be all.” She shot me a glance, and her lips curled into the same knowing smile my coworkers always gave me. Even she thought we were a couple.

Blood rushed to my head. I’d come to terms with the others teasing Lutz and me—there was no stopping them, after all—but I didn’t want Karin yapping about us in front of Mr. Benno.

“Yes, friends,” I said. “That’s all we are.”

“Hmm, I see... Childhood friends. How nice!” Karin giggled, completely unfazed by the sharpness of my response. I couldn’t help but feel that she was treating me like a kid.

“Tuuli, this is Karin,” Mr. Benno noted, introducing her at last. “She’s the daughter of a Klassenberg merchant—and right now, she’s a Plantin Company lechange.”

“Nice to meet you,” I said. “You, um... don’t seem used to being out in the snow. Don’t you get any in Klassenberg?” Lutz had told me tales of the weather in Haldenzel, and Klassenberg was said to be even colder. I couldn’t be the only one who thought Karin’s trouble with the snow was a little suspicious.

“I don’t have my snowshoes,” she explained. “We get plenty of snow back home, of course, but we don’t see it much in our subterranean cities.”

Karin pointed at the ground, prompting me to stare down at my feet. The snow in Klassenberg was apparently so bad that its people had moved underground, largely circumventing the need to traipse through it. I couldn’t even picture such a place. Some of the bugs here in Ehrenfest made their nests in the dirt—maybe these “subterranean cities” were a massive version of that.

“So, Master Benno... You’re headed to the Merchant’s Guild, aren’t you?” Lutz asked, purposefully moving the conversation along.

I waited to hear Mr. Benno’s response, barely able to contain my nerves. If he was trying to keep Karin out of the loop, then it didn’t make sense for him to take her to an important meeting.

Mr. Benno waved dismissively and pointed to a used-clothing store. “Karin doesn’t have any clothes for spring. She’s going to buy some while I take care of business with the guild.”

As it turned out, Mr. Benno had only come along to get Karin a discount. I was glad to hear they weren’t going to the same place.

“Be careful on your way home,” Mr. Benno said to us—and with that, we went our separate ways. Lutz and I proceeded down a road where the snow lay thicker than usual, maybe because so few people came here. All was quiet except for the crunching of our footsteps.

“Whew...” Lutz exhaled. “You had me worried for a moment there, Tuuli. I thought you might let slip that you work for the Gilberta Company.”

“Huh? Would that have been a problem?”

“Hairpins are a majorly big deal to those purveyors. Once they learn to make their own, they can dominate the market for them back home. That’s why you were told not to wander around carelessly last summer, remember?”

Lutz was right. Before winter, when the purveyors had still roamed the streets, we’d been told to have someone—preferably a boy—escort us wherever we went. It had completely slipped my mind now that the visiting merchants were gone and we weren’t always being told to be careful. Karin was the daughter of a purveyor; I really should have been more cautious around her.

Instead, I was busy being mad about her treating Lutz and me as a couple in front of Mr. Benno. I need to pay more attention in the future.

“The entire Plantin Company must be on guard against Karin, huh?” I said.

“Yeah. It was always the plan for someone to escort Karin out of the store today, since we had to prepare some documents for Klassenberg. I just didn’t think Mr. Benno would do it, since he had business with the Merchant’s Guild.” There was nothing wrong with Karin seeing clothes or other such belongings, but he wanted to keep documents related to the Printing and Plant Paper Guilds well away from her.

Ooh, I see.

The moment I understood why Karin was with Mr. Benno and that the whole store was working to hide sensitive information from her, my stress vanished. I could feel my footsteps lighten with my mood.

“So, Lutz... what did the Gutenbergs discuss in the temple?”

“Well, we’re going to Leisegang next,” he said, sharing as much as he thought he could. To start with, they had apparently requested a new workshop in Leisegang’s lower city. Lady Rozemyne’s mattress had also been delivered to the temple, and the High Priest had found it so impressive that he’d ordered another. “Zack was raving about how the Verde Workshop was gonna do business with the entire archducal family.”

“Hmm... Was there a reason the High Priest had to be there?”

“He wanted to know about the feystone store and what happens when we mess up butchering feybeasts. It was stressful as heck. I was the only one who had any answers...”

Mr. Benno normally answered questions, since he was used to doing business with nobles, but neither he nor Mark ever hunted in the forest, butchered feybeasts, or patronized the feystone store. Very few craftspeople were educated on how to speak to nobles without seeming rude, so Lutz had been understandably tense when responding to the High Priest.

“You didn’t mess up or get yelled at, did you?” I asked.

“Nah, it was fine. The High Priest has been looking after Lady Rozemyne since her days as a blue shrine maiden, and he never took issue with how my mom and dad speak. He’s not the sort of person to mind if a commoner doesn’t behave exactly as nobles would expect.”

My core memories of the High Priest came from when he’d taken Myne away. Lutz, on the other hand, saw him as someone who’d generously listened to everything his family had to say and helped them stay together.

“Look...” I said. “I get how much he’s doing for Lady Rozemyne’s sake.”

It’s just hard to keep these emotions in check.

I decided to drop the matter and simply continued down the road. The lull in

our conversation made the crunching of the snow all the louder. Lutz eyed me from the side, then let his mind wander.

“What did we talk about next...? Oh, right. Lady Rozemyne asked about Karin and Master Benno.”

“Really? What did Mr. Benno say?”

“He declared then and there that he won’t marry her or do anything else to disadvantage Lady Rozemyne or the archduke. At the castle, he even advised them to push for Karin’s father to be punished, both to give Ehrenfest an edge against Klassenberg and to prevent something like this from happening again.”

“Really? That’s wonderful news! Thank goodness for Mr. Benno.”

I was so glad that Lady Rozemyne had broached the subject. Thanks to her, I now had an answer to the question that was preying on my mind. Had she still been Myne, I would have given her a big hug and as many head pats as she could ever want.

I started to hum, but Lutz stayed silent. This time, *I* shot *him* a glance. He was watching me closely.

“Er, Tuuli... Do you *like-like* Master Benno?”

“What?”

Lutz’s question took me completely by surprise. I stared at him, dumbstruck, then burst into laughter.

“Where did *that* come from? I’m just worried about Lady Rozemyne and the store.”

“Really?”

“Really. Mr. Benno runs a huge store, is way older than me, and would never take an interest in someone who hasn’t even come of age. I think he’s amazing—I really do—but that’s all. Don’t be weird.”

Lutz cocked his head at me, unconvinced.

“Mr. Benno would laugh if he heard you say that out of nowhere. Don’t let anyone know you asked me, okay?”

Not that he ever would. I already knew he wasn't the kind of boy to gossip.

The snow had finally melted when Lutz and his fellow Gutenbergs departed for Leisegang. The sun grew brighter with each passing day until, on a morning that felt distinctly like the coming of summer, the Archduke Conference began. We commoners couldn't attend, but it had an enormous impact on our lives.

So important was the conference that a meeting was held to discuss it. I was surprised to hear that the High Priest was marrying into Ahrensbach and that Lady Rozemyne might be in danger again, but what shocked me most was a piece of news about Mr. Benno and the guildmaster. The former's decision not to marry Karin had apparently been made without the latter's approval, which had resulted in a fierce argument between the two. The guildmaster had wanted to force their union to strengthen Ehrenfest's connections to a greater duchy, but Mr. Benno had borrowed the power of nobles to refuse him.

In the end, the guildmaster had turned bright red and said in no uncertain terms that Mr. Benno's stubbornness had "cost Ehrenfest the best result for the merchantry."

But, well, there's no helping that. It just goes to show how little Mr. Benno wanted to marry Karin.

Once the Archduke Conference was behind us, it quickly came time for the purveyors of other duchies to arrive. Karin's family had since been demoted, so Mr. Benno would entrust her to another purveyor from Klassenberg. Master Otto claimed the negotiations had concluded with Ehrenfest demonstrating it wasn't at fault, securing Karin's safe passage home, and leaving Klassenberg to settle its own problems.

And the entire time, our representatives had wielded Lady Rozemyne's authority like a great club.

"Gotta use everything we can," apparently.

Under normal circumstances, Master Otto was too focused on Mrs. Corinna to think about much else. But as a former traveling merchant, he knew just how dangerous it would be for a young lady like Karin to attempt the long trip back

to Klassenberg alone. His concern for her seeped through his every word.

Summer ended, the wind grew colder, and the purveyors began returning to their homes. Klassenberg's merchants had prepared to leave earlier than most, as winters in their duchy were particularly rough.

On the day that Klassenberg's merchants gathered to depart, I got together with the others to see them go. I was a little worried that Karin wouldn't actually leave and that she'd simply be left behind again. We were joined not only by the employees of the inns where the purveyors had stayed, members of the Merchant's Guild, and merchants from major stores, but also by a bunch of curious onlookers.

Amid the crowd headed to the west gate, I focused my attention on Karin and Mr. Benno.

"Benno," she said, "thank you for everything. I'm grateful to have come to Ehrenfest and glad to have spent time with the Plantin Company—not that I've forgiven my father for leaving me here in the first place."

For someone who had been abandoned by her dad, turned down for marriage, and then told to return home, Karin seemed to be doing surprisingly well. Her time in Ehrenfest couldn't have been easy on her, and she was bound to face plenty of hardships back in Klassenberg, but she still wore an unbeatable smile. Though my opinion of her hadn't been too positive, I couldn't deny that she was a strong and incredible woman.

"And don't ever forgive him," Mr. Benno said, the kindness in his dark-red eyes a silent declaration that he didn't want her to leave. "Fight back as much as you can." The compassion in his gaze was unlike anything I'd seen before, and it hurt so much that it felt like someone had grabbed my heart and squeezed.

Why? Why is he looking at her like that?

The answer was obvious; I just didn't want to admit it. Mr. Benno had special feelings for her.

"So, what are you gonna do now?" he asked.

“Mm... Your dreams surpassed mine, so perhaps I’ll try to surpass yours.” Karin gave Mr. Benno a teasing smile and kissed him on the cheek, then turned and waved as she went to join the Klassenberg merchants. Mr. Benno placed a hand on his cheek and grimaced, but he never looked away from Karin as she slowly shrank into the distance.

Pain and anxiety swirled in my chest as I watched them grow farther and farther apart.

Once the merchants had departed through the west gate, the crowd returned to their normal routines. A cold autumn wind blew as Mr. Benno lowered his eyes, then finally turned around. That was when he saw me.

“Heya, Tuuli. Didn’t know you were here too.”

He was wearing his usual smile—the kind he reserved for those close to him—but it was completely devoid of the passion he’d just shown Karin. He gave me a casual pat on the head, as he’d done so many times before, only this time it did nothing to excite or embarrass me. It just made me feel pathetic.

“Don’t treat me like a kid...” I managed to say.

“Ah, right. My bad,” he said, grinning as though it were nothing. Then he went on his way.

As I watched Mr. Benno leave, I was overcome with the urge to cry. This was all wrong. I didn’t want him to treat me as his niece or whatever; I wanted the same passionate look he’d given Karin.

But it was only normal for Mr. Benno to treat me like a kid. It had never even occurred to me that he was locking away his emotions to prioritize his duties as the head of the Plantin Company. I hadn’t noticed him pushing down his love so that he wouldn’t inconvenience Lady Rozemyne or the archduke. How cruel must I have seemed for celebrating her return home and her family’s punishment?

I started to follow Mr. Benno, my eyes glued to his back. It wasn’t long before I accidentally bumped into someone—maybe because the central plaza was so crowded, or maybe because I wasn’t looking where I was going. I wobbled and barely managed to stay on my feet, but that brief distraction was enough for

me to lose sight of Mr. Benno.

I sat by the fountain, somehow feeling like a lost child. There weren't even any kids playing in the water.

"I wish I were an adult already..." I muttered. It was a senseless desire—I already knew that growing older wouldn't change how Mr. Benno saw me. He'd met plenty of women, but he hadn't looked at any of them in the same way that he looked at Karin. There must have been something special about her.

Still, I didn't want to be a child anymore.

"I can't believe I feel this way. I wish I'd never noticed." I couldn't stand the thought that I'd been comparing myself to Karin, envying her, seething with jealousy, and jumping for joy over her return home.

Suddenly, I remembered Lutz asking me whether I'd fallen for Mr. Benno. I probably had even back then. I must have come up with reasons to explain it away so that I wouldn't have to face these doomed feelings of mine.

I feel so stupid. Lutz noticed so long ago.

My cheeks grew hot as I cast my eyes down. Tears fell onto my lap.

"Lutz was right," I murmured too quietly for anyone to hear. "I do love Mr. Benno."

As the busy crowd thronged around me, I experienced love—and heartbreak—for the very first time in my life.

Gunther — Soldiers and Knights Gathering Intel

Description: A sales bonus story for Part 4 Volume 9 that takes place around the time Ehrenfest's bible was stolen. It shows the incident in the temple from the perspective of Gunther, the commander of the north gate. Damuel and Angelica arrive at Rozemyne's order, and the three gather what information they can in a bid to save the four kidnapped gray priests.

Author's Note: Gunther's attitude and enthusiasm make him a fun character to write. He has a growing relationship of trust with Damuel, who just keeps getting stronger, and works closely with him to protect his daughter. What a good dad.

"Hey. Gunther."

I turned to look at Olis, my assistant. He was a competent guy who, for the price of five small silvers, kept things running at the gate when I escorted the temple's priests to Hasse. I really did owe him a lot; if not for his hard work, there was a chance I wouldn't have been able to reunite with Myne.

"Don't tell me we've got another noble's carriage at the north gate," I said.

"That's exactly it."

"Gimme a break. The last one hasn't even passed through!"

I groaned and, together with Olis, started making my way to the top of the gate, which would give us a good view of the entire city. The carriage houses between us and the temple's front gate were especially helpful.

"The noble on board said there wasn't anyone at the temple's gate to let them through," Olis grouched. "No clue what's going on. Shouldn't there be guards stationed there at this time of year?"

I was just as confused. It was the time of year when nobles started showing up for winter socializing. They came from all over Ehrenfest, and many of them were weary and irritable by the time they reached our city. For that reason, the

gate guards needed to be careful now more than ever. It was no time to just randomly disappear.

Had only one carriage not been able to pass through the gate, I might have assumed the noble was at fault, but this was our sixth complaint so far.

“So *this* is where you lot’ve been...” I said.

“We don’t wanna be anywhere near the knights or nobles.”

Two guards normally stood at the top of the gate, but right now, it was packed. Everyone had decided to evacuate here, it seemed.

I peeked out over the carriage houses below and spied two carriages being cleaned and mended. In cases where someone’s vehicle was in need of serious repairs, they could always switch it out or borrow a new one.

Under normal circumstances, noble carriages that entered the city would go straight to the carriage houses to be cleaned, then enter the Noble’s Quarter through the gate for nobles located past the temple’s front gate. The carriage houses were at their busiest in the height of summer and the end of autumn, when the most nobles were moving about. During other seasons, their patrons mostly comprised rich commoners.

“I see another carriage coming toward us,” I said. “Olis, should we tell the knights about it?”

“Yeah. If we wait too long and they start getting bombarded with questions, they’re bound to lash out at us in turn.”

Most of the carriages that passed through the north gate contained commoners with business in the Noble’s Quarter. As it stood, though, we were also having to deal with noble carriages that found themselves blocked at the temple’s front gate. The problem had persisted all afternoon.

“The heck is going on at the temple?”

When the first carriage had come to our gate, insisting that no guards were stationed at the temple, we soldiers had tried to go there to see for ourselves. The knights had stopped us, though; they had thought it might be a trick and

assured us that we should stick to our posts.

The north gate was unique in that it had several knights among those overseeing it. Mere soldiers couldn't act against their orders, so we'd elected to leave all this noble business to them. It can't have helped that the nobles were in the worst mood—they'd traveled all this way to be denied entry at the temple, then treated with suspicion and subjected to an extra inspection upon coming to the north gate instead. We'd considered it wise to distance ourselves from both parties.

Meanwhile, I wanna run straight to the temple and make sure Myne's alright!

"Commander, I think it's about time we go check on the temple," Leckle said.

"D'you think it's safe?"

"Only a fool would assume there isn't something strange going on there."

Spurred into action by Leckle, I went downstairs to report that another carriage was headed toward us and to request permission to investigate the temple. Uncooperative nobles were explosively outraged with the knights.

"I did not come here by choice," the most furious of the nobles said. "The temple gate being closed meant this was my only option. If you oppose my being here, then allow me to pass already!"

"A check is necessary for you to pass through the north gate," one of the knights replied. "The four carriages before yours all agreed to our inspection. Even a giebe must cooperate."

Truth be told, I thought there were plenty of reasonable solutions to the whole predicament: the frustrated nobles could always enter the temple from the lower city to ask about the absent gatekeepers, wait in the lower city until the guards returned, or simply comply with the knights' inspections. But of course, nobles would never use a gate meant for commoners, they viewed questioning the gray priests as beneath them, they refused to wait somewhere as "disgusting" as the lower city, and they sincerely thought the knights' precautions were an act of unthinkable insolence.

I get that using the gate for commoners is embarrassing and all, but c'mon... This is such a pain.

“Sir Knight,” I called.

“What now?” He turned and shot me an irritated glare, but I wasn’t about to back down.

“There’s another carriage on the way. May I receive permission to go to the temple and investigate the cause of this disturbance?”

The knight shouted at me to drop the subject at the same time that the noble told me to quit slacking and go already. The latter glared at the former, and an awkward silence hung over the pair. I assumed the noble had the higher status because the knight soon apologized.

“I would not have come to this commoner gate if my usual means of entry were available to me,” the noble said. “You. Soldier. Go to the temple and drag out the guards. I shall prepare to return to its gate.”

“Understood,” I said. “I will go to the temple, inform them of the problem, and request that replacement guards be stationed at the gate.”

Having at last secured the excuse I needed, I darted past the bitter knights and nobles and sprinted toward the temple. I ran past the carriages and checked that the temple’s front gate really was closed. Then I rushed to the gate on the lower city’s side.

“Ah! There you are!”

I spotted gray priests right by the temple’s gate. They must have stepped away for a moment on some unexpected business. It probably had something to do with unreasonable nobles—I was well aware of how they treated commoners and priests.

“Hey!” I called. “We’ve been told there weren’t guards stationed at the gate. What happened?”

I recognized almost everyone from the orphanage thanks to my time spent helping them visit the forest and prepare for winter, not to mention my trips to Hasse. They weren’t used to loud voices or violence, so I did my best to speak calmly.

“Ah, Master Gunther,” one of the gray priests said. “The previous guards were

absent when we came to relieve them of their post. That's all we know..."

The priests had just arrived, and they seemed just as confused as we were; asking them more questions would only be a waste of time. I decided to get right outta there.

"I don't blame you, but we've got some angry nobles stuck at the north gate because of all this," I explained. "Get ready for two of their carriages to arrive back-to-back."

"We apologize for the trouble..."

I turned on my heel and ran to the north gate, where I told the driver of the frontmost noble carriage that the temple's guards were back. He must have been pretty worn down by all the arguing at the gate because he headed straight to the temple, looking relieved.

Whew. Glad that's all settled.

I took a breather in the north gate's break room, thankful that nothing major had gone wrong. The temple was Myne's home, in a way. I didn't want any trouble there; something out of the ordinary could easily have snowballed.

We had just resumed our usual business when Olis burst into the room. "Gunther, knights that came by highbeast are calling for you!" I raced up the stairs without a second thought; it must have been urgent for them to have asked for me instead of the other knights.

"Lord Damuel, Lady Angelica."

I recognized the knights who had summoned me: they were Myne's guards. Lord Damuel had been with Myne since she was an apprentice blue shrine maiden; he'd walked her home from the temple and even fought a noble from another duchy to keep her safe. He was still protecting her now that she was Lady Rozemyne, and we'd spoken during our trip to Hasse. As for Lady Angelica, though I'd seen her at Hasse's monastery and at Myne's side, I'd never actually interacted with her. I only knew her name because Myne had used it.

In truth, I was a little relieved to recognize the pair. They weren't the kind of people to give unreasonable demands. At the same time, though, I straightened my back—Lady Rozemyne's guard knights had come here for a reason.



“Has something happened with Lady Rozemyne?” I asked.

“Good insight,” Lord Damuel replied. “Angelica, activate Stenluke.”

“Right!”

Lady Angelica placed a hand on her sword, and a bolt of tension shot through me. As a soldier, I wouldn’t stand a chance against her. I put my hands together to resist the impulse to draw my own weapon, but to my surprise, her blade remained at her waist; she kept her hand on its hilt and declared that she was ready. I didn’t know what for, but Lord Damuel nodded and began his explanation.

“Earlier today, when Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand were both absent, four guards were kidnapped from the temple’s gate. The perpetrators’ objective seems to have been to infiltrate the High Bishop’s quarters. We found traces of their presence. Lord Ferdinand predicts it was the work of nobles convinced that nobody would notice the disappearance of a few gray priests.”

I clenched my fists and swallowed a shout. It never ended. Nobles were putting Myne in danger again. Lord Damuel must have noticed my grimace because an extremely slight smile reached his gray eyes.

“Worry not,” he said. “Nothing happened to Lady Rozemyne.”

I was deeply relieved to hear that Myne wasn’t hurt.

“We request your aid in rescuing the four priests and locating those who disturbed the High Bishop’s chambers,” Lord Damuel continued. “Your orders are to mobilize the lower city’s forces, gather eyewitness accounts, and bring us any information you can find on suspicious carriages or wagons.”

Lord Damuel then made a cutting motion with his hand, which prompted Lady Angelica to release her sword. I thought that was strange, but he spoke again before I could think much about it.

“Gunther, Lady Rozemyne said that you would act quickly upon learning of our situation. I trust you will do her proud.”

Myne had so many high-status nobles in her guard, but still, she was counting on me. She thought we soldiers were better suited to the task of gathering this

intel.

And what kinda father would I be if I didn't prove her right?!

"Noble carriages started coming to the north gate after fourth bell, each reporting the lack of guards at the temple's gate," I said. "We allowed four through the north gate, and two returned to the temple's gate when the change of guards arrived. There were no suspicious elements within said carriages."

"And the carriages that entered the city in general...?"

"We would need to contact the other gates."

I didn't want to repeat our mistake of letting a noble from another duchy into the city. It was my duty as Myne's father to get rid of any criminals who might pose a threat to her. At the very least, I needed to live up to my daughter's expectations, so I turned from Lord Damuel to Olis.

"Olis! You heard all that, right? Split everyone into teams and gather any eyewitness reports you can on suspicious carriages that might have been carrying four gray priests. Leckle! We need to narrow down when the priests were taken. Speak with those who worked the morning shift. Check with the carriage houses and ask about the last carriage they saw going to the temple's front gate. Come to the central meeting room when you're done!"

"Yes, sir!"

I watched the soldiers speedily disperse before turning back to Lord Damuel. "I shall circle the gates and use my authority as commander to order those stationed there to assist us."

"Let us take care of that; our highbeasts travel much faster than you can run. Angelica, is using Stenluke an option?"

"I'll try."

Again, Lady Angelica touched the hilt of her sword. I almost grabbed my own weapon in response, but then her blade began to speak. It repeated Lord Damuel's explanation word for word.

What in the...?

Had that sword really spoken? And in the High Priest's voice, of all things? Lord Damuel said it would do a fine job of bringing the other gates up to speed, and Lady Angelica nodded in agreement, declaring that she would leave the explaining to Stenluke. I wasn't so sure about their plan; I was better accustomed to magic tools than most soldiers, but even I couldn't believe what was happening.

Does he really wanna let her loose like that?! The others are gonna fall over themselves!

"Alright, Angelica—you take the west gate. I'll go to the east one. We can reunite at the south."

"Wait a moment!" I cried. "Please bring me with you. If an unfamiliar knight shows up and suddenly moves to draw her sword, the soldiers will be too shocked to listen."

Lord Damuel paused as if contemplating something. "Would they not know us from Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival?"

"Only a small portion of the soldiers accompany Lady Rozemyne to Hasse. Not every commander will recognize you as I do."

I only knew Lord Damuel because he'd once kept Myne safe on her way home from the temple and because we'd fought together against a noble from another duchy. He and Lady Angelica weren't known widely enough for an average soldier to see them and think, "Ah, they're Lady Rozemyne's guard knights."

"In that case, let us use this opportunity to introduce ourselves. Gunther, if you would."

"Understood."

I was allowed to ride with Lord Damuel on his highbeast. He took us from the north gate to the top of the east gate, which was closer to us than the others. I wished Effa could have seen me, or maybe that Lord Damuel had brought Myne with him—never in my life had I looked more like a genuine knight. Still, I pushed those feelings down and gave stern instructions to the first guard we

came across.

“I am Gunther, commander of the north gate. I’m here with orders from the High Bishop. Assemble the east gate’s commander and captains.”

“Yes, sir!”

The guard was shocked to see the knights’ highbeasts but ran off without another word. He was going to call for his commander in exactly the same way that Olis had called for me. I soon heard footsteps racing up the stairs.

“Please meet Lord Damuel and Lady Angelica, knights serving as High Bishop Lady Rozemyne’s personal guards,” I said. “They might visit again in cases when the High Bishop needs the soldiers’ aid.”

“Thank you for introducing them,” the east gate’s commander told me. He must’ve guessed that I was here purely for that reason. I nodded in response, at which point he knelt before the two nobles.

Lord Damuel explained the situation and conveyed Lady Rozemyne’s orders. I waited for him to finish, then reiterated the importance of speaking to the soldiers who’d worked the morning shift.

Six carriages marked with noble crests have passed through the east gate today—and none were suspicious, huh?

“Once you’ve learned what you can,” I said, “come to the central meeting room for a briefing between commanders.”

Our next destination was the south gate. As soon as we explained ourselves, the commander told us about a suspicious horse-drawn wagon.

“The guards on duty heard bumping coming from the back. They ordered the driver to show them his cargo, but he flashed a noble ring and continued on his way.”

The commander then turned to one of the captains, who nodded in support. “I was there,” he said. “The wagon was crestless, and though the noble’s ring wasn’t large enough for us to make out any details, it was real without a doubt. Rather than a bead, it bore a vivid gemstone that swayed with color. Some of us

wondered whether it was stolen.”

That really was suspicious. I exchanged a look with Lord Damuel.

“Do you know where that wagon came from?” he asked.

“Not exactly, but it came to the gate from Craftsman’s Alley.”

“Can you tell us when you saw it?”

“Hmm... It’s been about as long as an apprentice’s study session.”

Lord Damuel furrowed his brow, unsure what the commander meant. I couldn’t expect a knight to understand a soldier’s way of speaking.

“He means as long as a child could study without getting bored,” I noted. “In other words, he saw the wagon very recently.”

“What?!”

“Damuel, should we go?” Lady Angelica asked, stepping forward without missing a beat and uttering her first words since we’d arrived. She looked ready to leave in an instant, but Lord Damuel quickly intervened.

“No, Angelica!” he barked. “We were ordered to gather intelligence! We should start our pursuit only once we’ve followed Lady Rozemyne’s instructions.”

“Understood,” Lady Angelica replied. She lowered her shoulders in disappointment but kept her blue eyes sharply focused on the land past the south gate. I’d never expected a noblewoman to exude the air of a deadly fighter. Still, her devotion to rescuing the gray priests at Myne’s orders meant a lot to me.

Normally, a noble wouldn’t even think about saving people from the temple.

I wanted to do everything I could to help Lord Damuel and Lady Angelica. Myne’s orders played a huge part in that, of course, but it was also true that the two knights in front of me were far better equipped to rescue the kidnapped priests. We soldiers couldn’t soar through the air, for one thing. The pair also refused to look down on commoners or gray priests, which was something I respected them for.

If my aim was to be useful, then the best thing I could do was ensure the information we'd gathered got to Myne as quickly as possible.

"Hmm... No noble carriages came through the south gate. Check for more eyewitness reports of them or of any suspicious wagons. We're to gather in the central meeting room once we're done. For now... let's leave the rest to the soldiers here and make for the west gate."

We repeated our explanation at the west gate. One of the captains looked up with a start and raised a hand.

"The soldiers on the morning shift saw a suspicious carriage."

"Really?"

"Yes, before third bell. It was the sort of plain carriage a rich commoner would use, but it was being driven by the kind of arrogant attendants who usually serve nobles."

In short, the carriage had contained nobles acting as commoners. There were telltale signs, no matter how much they might have looked the part.

"That must be the carriage we're looking for," Lord Damuel said. "It aligns with the intel we gathered from the south gate."

"Bring the soldiers who worked the morning shift when you come to the central meeting room," I said. "For good measure, check to see if anyone else saw our target. Can I ask how many other noble carriages came through here?"

"Four today. None were suspicious."

Once I'd given out a few instructions and performed the bare minimum of my checks, I returned my attention to the knights. "Lord Damuel, Lady Angelica, I would ask that you consider going back to the temple while we continue the investigation. It might be best to consult Lady Rozemyne, then chase the wagon from the south gate."

"Indeed, that might be wise," Lord Damuel said, "but we gathered more information than expected with a single sweep. We might learn even more valuable intel if we stay a bit longer."

Lord Damuel was a cautious man, it seemed—he wanted as much information as he could get before returning to his charge. He was a noble, but I still remembered seeing him when he was only a youngster; the look on his face had told me he was a devoted knight dedicated to protecting Myne. That was why I felt comfortable voicing my thoughts.

“I must stress that the suspicious wagon is getting farther away as we speak. The longer we wait, the greater the risk that we won’t find it. I will deliver our intelligence to the temple myself, if necessary. I ask only that the gray priests are rescued as soon as possible. Lady Rozemyne will be devastated if we lose them.”

“Well put,” Lord Damuel said, then leapt onto his highbeast without questioning me in the slightest. As always, he took even a commoner’s warning with the utmost seriousness. He might have grown older, but his personality and mindset had stayed the same.

“Gunther, I entrust the work here to you,” he declared. “Angelica, let us depart.”

“Understood!”

I ran around town, coordinated with merchants who were also gathering information, and learned what I could about the suspicious carriage. Then I took my findings to the temple as the soldiers’ representative. I wasn’t fortunate enough to see Myne, but Gil informed me that the priests had been rescued without incident.

“As I understand it, the High Priest was shocked that commoners could gather so much intel,” Gil told me, mentioning some of what he’d heard from the equally surprised noble retainers speaking in the High Bishop’s chambers.

One of the rescued priests stepped forward. “We were told that we were only able to be saved because of the information gathered from the gates. It was your support, Master Gunther, that spurred the soldiers to provide their aid. Please allow us to express our gratitude.”

“We did not think anyone would go to such lengths to rescue gray priests such as ourselves,” said another. He and the others wore expressions of

cheerful reassurance. Their smiles made me proud to have helped them.

Aah... Myne really is doing a fine job.

Her voice and our promise suddenly rang through my mind: *"I'll always be your daughter. I'll protect this city, and you, and everyone."* The sight before me was proof that Myne was keeping her promise and working hard as both the High Bishop and the orphanage director. My little girl who had once trembled in fear at the thought of spending winter in the temple had grown enough to lead her retainers in a charge to rescue the kidnapped gray priests.

That's my daughter for you.

For some reason, seeing the priests so elated brought a tear to my eye.

Justus — An Aged Board and a New Letter

Description: An unpublished short story from the online collection that takes place between Part 4 Volume 9 and Part 5 Volume 1. Eckhart and Justus are managing luggage in Ahrensbach. They dispose of an old message in Justus's hand—though he doesn't remember writing it—and start their new lives in a new duchy. A response is written to Rozemyne's letter.

Author's Note: I was told that if I wanted to write some kind of follow-up to the series, I would need to start the foreshadowing sooner rather than later. I spent a lot of time debating whether or not I should write this before lumping it in with the other short stories posted online. Its contents might stand out for not being resolved in the main series.

Because guest chambers didn't have their own hidden rooms, important items had to be stored inside magic lockboxes instead. I took out one such box and moved to put away what Lord Ferdinand had given me.

"Eckhart, take this," I said, tossing him an old board as I tried to make room. "It's in the way."

Eckhart caught it and sighed. "Can't believe its prediction came true." The wood had aged and darkened to the point that the ink was hard to read, but I could still just barely make it out.

"Lord Ferdinand seems destined to get engaged to the next Aub Ahrensbach and leave Ehrenfest. What a relief!"

I recognized the handwriting as my own. The problem was, I couldn't remember writing it.

From what I could piece together, I must have penned the note during a certain three-day endeavor when my lord attended the Royal Academy—not that I remembered much about it. Lord Ferdinand, Eckhart, and even Dunkelfelger's apprentice knights could scarcely recall the details.

We had only remembered the three days in question when we'd compared the date we'd departed on an ingredient hunt to the day we'd returned, and the information we knew about them had come from stories others had told us. We had apparently collected all the ingredients we needed over those three days and made sure they were perfectly organized when we came to.

Dunkelfelger's apprentices had gotten over things almost at once, content that they'd acquired the ingredients they wanted, but Lord Ferdinand had a compulsion to investigate anything he found curious. He had started to search for any clues that could guide him to the truth but eventually reached a dead end; all we found were the ingredients, and some boards written in his hand and mine.

"We really were relieved to find this board, but..."

"Yeah," Eckhart said, having understood what I was getting at. "Heidemarie was beyond excited. She kept going on about how Lord Ferdinand would be able to escape Ehrenfest." He wore a dry smile as he gazed off into the distance.

As our lord had grown older, the previous archduke had been bedridden on a more regular basis, which had led to Lady Veronica's abuse becoming more severe each time Lord Ferdinand came first-in-class.

"That was why she proposed to me in the first place," Eckhart continued. "She wanted to come with us when we went."

It was rare for single retainers who weren't the same sex as their lord or lady to move with their charge when the latter moved away for marriage. Among knights and attendants, those of the same sex would inevitably be chosen, while scholars generally weren't allowed to go at all due to their knowledge and mastery of magic tools. Eckhart and I would probably have been selected to move with Lord Ferdinand, but Heidemarie wouldn't have, so she had planned to marry Eckhart and go with him as his wife. I still remembered Lord Ferdinand putting on a wry smile when he found out and saying that he wasn't surprised.

"She put Lord Ferdinand above absolutely everything else," Eckhart said.

"You had that in common, didn't you?"

I'd always seen Eckhart and Heidemarie as two peas in a pod. They both put

Lord Ferdinand above everything else and regularly competed to see who was more impressive and more useful to him. On such occasions, they'd gotten me to serve as the judge. It was a pain.

We really were glad to find this board.

Lord Ferdinand had enjoyed relative freedom in the Royal Academy, but the Dunkelfelger archduke candidate he had thought about marrying was instead engaged to a member of the royal family. He hadn't had a choice but to return to Ehrenfest.

As much as Lord Ferdinand managed to raise Ehrenfest's rank, at least to a certain degree, the aub was still on his deathbed, and our neutral position in the civil war kept us invariably low compared to other duchies. Anyone could see that an archduke candidate without a mother wouldn't have a support base to depend upon once the aub was out of the picture, and that made our lord an undesirable candidate for marriage. Despite his talents, no duchy had wished to accept him as a groom, and no woman had wanted to marry into Ehrenfest when he seemed destined to lose his status.

It was for those reasons that my written message had given us so much hope, though it hadn't made much sense at the time. For that future to come to pass, Aub Ahrensbach would need to bestow power upon a woman for Lord Ferdinand to marry. Even if the aub climbed the towering stairway in short order, there were two male archduke candidates primed to take his place.

The youngest daughter of Ahrensbach's first wife—Lady Letizia's mother—had attended the Royal Academy at the same time as Lord Ferdinand, but she had graduated without ever meeting him.

The time had eventually come for Lord Ferdinand to graduate. During his stay in the temple, we had clung to this board as our last hope, but Ahrensbach had made no moves in our direction, so we had needed to conclude that the information was false.

"If only it hadn't come true now, of all times..." I said.

"There was no helping it," Eckhart replied. "Rozemyne has brought Ehrenfest much higher than it used to be."

Rozemyne was an unusual child, possessing as much beauty as Lord Ferdinand and enough mana to enter his workshop. She was also a very rare case of someone Lord Ferdinand trusted despite not having her name stone.

“Even I needed to give him my name to earn his trust,” Eckhart grumbled. I couldn’t help but laugh in response; Rozemyne was too strange to warrant such a comparison.

“Commoners don’t have facades as we nobles do. They wouldn’t be able to hide something even if they tried. Lord Ferdinand probably trusts her precisely because it’s always obvious what she’s thinking. Not to mention, I’ve heard that he synchronized with her. That must have been when he concluded that he could trust her.”

On that occasion, Lord Ferdinand had connected with Lady Rozemyne’s emotions and searched through her memories. I couldn’t think of any other time he might have made up his mind about her, though I remembered he had looked completely exhausted afterward.

Eckhart contemplated my response, then gave me a slight smirk. “That reminds me—at first, Lord Ferdinand asked me what I would think about taking an apprentice blue shrine maiden as a concubine. He said that I could care for a commoner if my intention was still not to take another wife. That was before the synchronization, mind you. After, he went to Father about adopting her. I remember being surprised by how suddenly his intentions changed.”

“Hah! He said that if not for my divorce, he would have told *me* to adopt her.”

“Yeah, it’s because you’re unmarried that he went to Father instead. Though before I knew it, she was baptized as their actual daughter instead, making her my little sister.”

Even in retrospect, it was hard to believe how things had turned out. I would never have predicted that a commoner girl would be baptized as a noble, adopted by the archduke, and then made the new High Bishop before returning Lord Ferdinand to noble society.

Still, it was thanks to Lady Rozemyne stirring up the temple that we’d managed to rid ourselves of Lady Veronica and rescue Lord Ferdinand. We had thought our lord would never be free for as long as Lady Veronica drew breath,

so our shock had exceeded even our joy at his return.

From there, Lady Rozemyne had used her authority in the temple and as the aub's adopted daughter to continue protecting Lord Ferdinand. She had stated that scholars who had questions for him could simply visit the temple, reducing how frequently he was summoned, and decreased his workload as the High Priest by saying that he needed to train successors.

"In any case, it wasn't something that you or I could ever have done," I said.

"Yeah. We can advise him as much as we want, but Lord Ferdinand always has the final say with us. Rozemyne can use her authority to force the issue. You'd consider it more foolish than brave, but it was exactly what Lord Ferdinand needed."

Rozemyne had even argued with the aub in her bout to protect our lord. There were few things I wouldn't do for Lord Ferdinand, but she went to lengths that would make *me* hesitate.

"I wonder where her bold personality comes from..."

"Must be in her nature. Lord Ferdinand said she forced her way into the temple by Crushing the former High Bishop, remember?"

A regular commoner would almost certainly have been too scared to go to such extreme lengths. They would succumb to the burden of living as a noble and find it even harder to act as one. Rozemyne, though, was far from normal. After her pre-baptism training, she'd changed the way she acted and her manner of speaking in the blink of an eye, and now she fully looked the part. Her behavior was perfect for a young lady of her status, and she hadn't thought twice about negotiating with the aub.

"She still thinks like a commoner and acts in incomprehensible ways, but I think Lord Ferdinand appreciates those parts of her too. After all... there's little else that can surprise or even challenge him."

Lord Ferdinand had described Rozemyne as a constant source of trouble despite her being so sickly that she could die if not properly attended to. Still, he always looked content when he heard that she had carried out a task without her health getting the better of her, and seeing them interact in the

temple made it clear that she added some much-needed variety to his life.

“I doubted my ears the first time Lord Ferdinand said they were close,” Eckhart began. “Then I saw her fussing over his move to Ahrensbach and realized it was true.”

“Commoners attach far more value to family than we nobles do. She must have treated him the same way that her lower-city family treated her back in the day.”

Never had Lord Ferdinand been cherished by a complete stranger whose name he didn’t possess. He also found it nearly impossible to accept acts of kindness without reading into them. As someone who had stood by him for years, I could see just how much he cherished Rozemyne in turn, but he was still completely unaware of those emotions.

“He always acted for the duchy or the aub—never for his own benefit,” Eckhart mused. “If only he had stayed in Ehrenfest and spent his days in peace.”

“But now we’re here. And we’ll never go back to Ehrenfest.”

I took out a knife and started scraping the letters from the front of the board. My writing fell away with the shavings. I readied the board to be written on again, then gathered together and incinerated the leavings.

“Hopefully nothing happens to Rozemyne,” Eckhart continued. “She has her charms, but if she encounters a problem she cannot solve alone, something tells me Lord Ferdinand will rush to her rescue.”

“She has Hartmut. He found out she was a commoner through his own investigation and still managed to keep it a secret. I don’t think she has much to worry about.”

Rozemyne had a retainer who used conversations in the orphanage and with merchants to learn truly sensitive information, then had the common sense to approach Lord Ferdinand about what to do next. On top of that, her noble family was on excellent terms—perhaps not compared to her commoner family, but it was close by noble standards, for sure. Lord Wilfried, although unreliable, was far more mature than other children his age.

“I’m more worried about Lord Ferdinand,” I said. “From this point forward,

he's going to start noticing the loss of the girl he unconsciously depended on. It might have eased the pain if Lady Letizia served as her replacement, but that won't happen; she's a purebred noble through and through. At most, she might earn some surface-level trust. She won't be another Lady Rozemyne."

"And it isn't even worth mentioning Lady Detlinde," Eckhart said, his expression hardening.

Lady Detlinde looked down on Lord Ferdinand because he was from a low-ranked duchy and the child of an unknown mistress. The look on her face when she'd told him to be useful to her had reminded me of Lady Veronica when she'd declared that he needed to repay the aub for taking him in. It had made me more disgusted than I could put into words.

Lord Ferdinand had at least found some peace when Lady Detlinde departed for the Royal Academy. It seemed to me that having someone so similar to Lady Veronica around had placed a heavy burden on his heart. We would make it through winter, but Lady Detlinde was due to graduate this year; I wasn't sure how he would manage when she was with him at all times.

I couldn't help but worry about the future.

"Justus, a letter from Raimund has arrived," Sergius said, having approached us with a slim tube. "It would seem that a letter from Lady Rozemyne of Ehrenfest has been included."

Lord Ferdinand glanced up from his work and said, "I doubt they contain anything urgent." Then he returned his attention to his desk. "Sergius, read them first and draft a response. You may ask Justus for how to reply to Rozemyne."

"Understood."

The fact that the tube was unsealed told us it had already been inspected. I joined Sergius in scanning the letter from Raimund—a dissection of a magic tool currently in production and several questions about it. Rozemyne's letter comprised uninteresting chitchat and a list of worries about Lord Ferdinand.

"I've arrived at the Royal Academy. Thanks to your cramming lessons, I once

again passed my classes the first time around. Aren't I something?"

This really was deserving of high praise. Rozemyne was on another level for being able to keep up with the study schedule Lord Ferdinand had thrust upon her. She had complained about it the entire time, but succeeded nonetheless.

"We should include praise from Lord Ferdinand in response to this section," Sergius said. "Justus, how would Lord Ferdinand praise her?"

"Well, she passed every class, so a 'very good' should suffice."

"And...? Do not tell me that is all."

"That *is* all. At times, he expresses his approval by saying 'well done,' 'not bad,' or 'as I expected,' but as this is quite the accomplishment, Lady Rozemyne should receive his highest praise. He will take the same approach with Lady Letizia, so please inform her retainers not to misinterpret his meaning."

"Is that really all the praise he gives?" Sergius muttered, dazed.

One could never expect fervent praise from Lord Ferdinand. Asking for anything else would only prompt him to repeat what the previous aub had said to him. I continued reading the letter.

"A new librarian was assigned to the library, so I think I can finally spend this year in Professor Hirschur's laboratory without any reservations. The lab was so dirty and cluttered that I ended up cleaning it with my retainers. I kind of enjoyed it, since it felt as though I'd become its personal librarian. Professor Hirschur told me you used to do the same thing and that we're very much alike."

Lord Ferdinand had only organized Professor Hirschur's documents so he wouldn't lose his own in the mess. Rozemyne, on the other hand, seemed to enjoy the actual process of cleaning.

"Justus, how should we respond to this section?"

"Hmm... Lord Ferdinand would probably instruct her not to obstruct Professor Hirschur's research with her antics."

"So now she's being rebuked...?" Sergius asked, no less taken aback. Lord Ferdinand always made such remarks to her, so I considered it safe to continue that trend.

Rozemyne's letter went on to voice words of concern for Lord Ferdinand.

"Are you sleeping enough? Eating enough? Are you working so hard that you're surviving on potions again? Seeing the laboratory has made me uneasy. Remember—your health comes first!"

That was Rozemyne for you. She was digging in enough that Lord Ferdinand would surely grimace.

Sergius gave me a troubled look. "How should we respond to this, Justus? We cannot simply state the truth, can we?"

"Lord Ferdinand might put more thought into resolving the situation if we show him the letter ourselves and state our intention to write our own responses if he does not start eating and sleeping on a more regular basis," I said. "We can leave this section to him."

I couldn't wait to see how Lord Ferdinand would try to deceive Rozemyne—she was surprisingly sharp when it came to these matters. It seemed that today, at least, he would need to eat and sleep as a regular person would.

I continued the letter, grinning.

"That reminds me—you held a harspiel concert in Ahrensbach, didn't you? Lady Detlinde bragged during the fellowship gathering that you gifted her a rather passionate love song dedicated to Geduldh. I am interested to hear your side of the story. Please send me a detailed report when you can."

A... passionate love song dedicated to Geduldh?

"She must mean the newest song he played," Sergius said. "As one would expect, women love to be serenaded. Lady Detlinde was overjoyed, and all the other ladies in the audience were enraptured. Lord Ferdinand's wonderful harspiel playing has not diminished in the least."

It was only then that I realized what had happened: the song of hometown nostalgia Rozemyne had given Lord Ferdinand had been misinterpreted as a passionate love song.

Barthold — Hidden Wrath

Description: A short story that takes place during the Ehrenfest purge in Part 5 Volume 1. Barthold, whose parents were both name-sworn to Georgine, was the only student who knew the full extent of what the adults were planning. How did he feel about Matthias reporting them, and what transpired when he gave his own name?

Author's Note: This particular story was written as a sales bonus, so I wasn't able to develop it as much as I wanted. I would have liked to write more about how Barthold interacted with Oswald after giving his name, and it hurt not being able to include his future machinations in Part 5 Volume 2.

Matthias's self-report meant that we of the former Veronica faction had a far more unusual start to the Royal Academy than we'd expected. We had all gathered in a room when Cassandra, my little sister, immediately strode toward me. Her light-green hair, which marked us as siblings at a glance, swayed with each step she took.

"Brother! Oh, how horrible things have become! Are Mother and Father okay? They were close to Lady Georgine, were they not? And then there's Tibertha in the playroom..."

I took Cassandra's hands in mine and tried to calm her down. She looked tense, and fear swirled in her dark-green eyes. I, too, was worried about Tibertha, but easing my sister's worries came first.

"We just need to pray she won't get wrapped up in all this," I said. "The children in the playroom should be spared without question. Matthias bargained for our lives, after all."

"Indeed. I must express my thanks to him for going to such great lengths to ensure we were not deemed guilty by association..."

I nodded in response, though my anger toward Matthias raged beneath the

surface. If his father, Giebe Gerlach, was getting arrested for his connection to Lady Georgine, then our parents would doubtless be charged with similar crimes.

“No matter what happens, Cassandra, I will make sure you are safe, at least. Just don’t lose your head and do anything that could put you at risk.”

“Thank you, Brother,” she replied with a smile. “Speaking with you has helped to ease my nerves. You are right that we must stay in control of ourselves. I must choose to believe in our parents.”

I smiled back at Cassandra and gave another nod.

She’s my sister. I need to protect her, at least.

“Welcome back, Lord Barthold,” my attendant Liewes said when I returned to my room. He handed me a sound-blocking magic tool. “Is something the matter? You seem quite dour.”

“Matthias betrayed us,” I said at once. “He revealed Lady Georgine’s visit and a portion of the winter plan as soon as the archduke candidates arrived.”

“He couldn’t have...!” Liewes exclaimed, understandably shocked. Giebe Gerlach had stood at the very center of Lady Georgine’s plan to acquire Ehrenfest’s foundation; he must never have expected his own son to betray his house.

“He could and did. I’m in awe that he managed to hide his intentions from that paranoid father of his. Suppose I should expect nothing less from Uncle’s spawn.”

I couldn’t contain the anger bubbling up inside of me. The house Lady Georgine favored above all others belonged to Giebe Gerlach, to whom I was related on my mother’s side. Matthias had apparently been allowed to greet Lady Georgine at the end of summer, owing to a combination of several reasons: he was the youngest son, he had achieved excellent grades, almost everyone else in his family had given their name to her, and he had sworn to give his own name upon coming of age.

Though I’d envied my cousin for the great opportunity he’d received, I’d also

been immensely proud of him. I'd seen him as something of a role model and striven to use Lady Georgine's mana compression method to increase my mana and become an honor student as he had.

That bastard...

"Matthias learned Lady Georgine's compression method and even swore to give her his name," I grumbled. "How dare he leak our plans to the archducal family and then play the victim?! Trying to 'protect us,' was he? Well, he's a fool. An ungrateful fool!"

Liewes gritted his teeth, sharing my fury. "For what it's worth, his betrayal might have come too late. It will take time to assemble the Knight's Order, and we have allies among its ranks. There is still a chance that Lady Georgine will complete her plan, or that everyone will escape safely..."

"Perhaps."

As I understood it, there was no better time for us to enact our plan. Students were still teleporting to the Royal Academy, which meant Aub Ehrenfest couldn't leave the castle, and Lady Rozemyne's adult retainers were bound to be too occupied with the start of winter socializing. As we spoke, Father and the others were gathering for Lady Georgine.

"As long as they aren't found, we should be able to feign innocence," I said. "But..."

"Did it have to be today, of all days?!"

"He must have been determined to completely wipe us out. Gah! Curse him!"

Matthias's words echoed through my mind—his declaration that the archducal family knew about our plot and his sophistic remark that he had only acted to save us. Laurenz was supporting him, though I couldn't pinpoint why. He might have bought into Matthias's deception, or maybe he'd been involved from the start.

"I can't see why Laurenz would get involved..." Liewes said. "The archduke candidates' reactions should have made it clear that Matthias was spouting nonsense."

I, too, found it extremely hard to believe that the archducal family knew about Lady Georgine's scheme. The surprise on those two archduke candidates' faces had aroused enough suspicion, and their retainers had even said they would need to send word back to Ehrenfest at once. I would admit, the existence of their plan to save our lives meant the archducal family had probably known *something* was amiss, but I saw no reason to assume they had figured out the details.

"From what you've said, Lord Barthold, I would assume the archducal family knew only that something was happening. Nothing more."

"If only that moron hadn't said anything. Lady Georgine would have obtained the foundation while the aub was investigating us, sparing us all this trouble!"

In such a case, our lives would never have been in danger to begin with. The Leisegangs would have been the ones looking over their shoulders. Matthias might have fooled the others, but he had caused this entire mess in the first place. *He* was the reason we would need to give our names.

"He put everyone in danger yet claims he wants to save us?" I groused. "How shameless can one man be?!"

"He must have spoken knowing that we cannot openly declare him a traitor. Lord Barthold, I admire your restraint."

I balled my hands into tight fists. Liewes was right—there was no way for us to call out Matthias. My mother and father had told me the details of the plan because I was the oldest of all the apprentice scholars whose parents were involved, and they would need me to lead our students at the Academy when Lady Georgine obtained the foundation. Not even Cassandra, my full sister, knew anything.

"If we reveal that we know more of the plan than Lord Matthias, we will simply be imprisoned as traitors," Liewes said plainly. "Until we can learn more about the state of things back in Ehrenfest, we should rely on Lady Cassandra's reactions and carry ourselves as if we, too, know nothing."

We would need to play dumb and publicly thank Matthias and the archducal family for saving us. The very idea made my blood boil.

“The archduke candidates were especially quick to contact Ehrenfest,” I said. “Can we still reach Father to warn him of the danger?”

“Not via the teleportation circle.” It was unlikely that the knights stationed there would pass on our letters and even more unlikely that our correspondence would ever reach Father. It might even be used as an excuse to search our estate.

“Liewes, could you exit the dormitory and contact someone from Ahrensbach?” I asked. “You should be able to leave through the back and travel by highbeast.”

The brooches that allowed passage between the dormitory and the central building were given to students and the attendants of archduke candidates. Regular students’ attendants weren’t permitted to have brooches, as they seldom had reason to step outside their dorm, but they could always leave through the back door if they wished.

“Would an ordonnanz not be faster and more reliable...?” Liewes asked.

“No. Lord Oswald gave me some advice—or perhaps a warning. He said that Lord Ferdinand did something to the dormitory before leaving.”

Though a sudden change of plans had driven Lord Ferdinand out of Ehrenfest sooner than expected, he had started tampering with things well in advance. Members of our faction had always said that he was the greatest threat to Lady Georgine’s schemes, and they certainly hadn’t been exaggerating.

“How much can we trust Lord Oswald?” Liewes asked.

“He’s name-sworn to Lady Veronica—or so my father said. If nothing else, he has reasons not to want the eradication of our faction.”

To put it simply, one could say the former Veronica faction was in reality the anti-Leisegang faction. It comprised those who had devoted themselves to Lady Georgine, such as ourselves; those who had given their names to Lady Veronica, such as Lord Oswald; and more neutral nobles who wanted to leave the faction but couldn’t due to family relations. Though we didn’t always share opinions or desires for the future, we could exploit others as we needed.

“It seems wise to trust him, then. But if our ordonnanzes are being

intercepted, then it stands to reason that we are being watched as well.”

“Certainly. And those watching us would not be so thick-witted as to let one of our attendants wander the Academy alone. We could use a servant, or... No. Commoners are useless here.”

“Indeed; they lack highbeasts and would never be able to find their way from one dormitory to the next.”

As I pondered how else we might get the word out, Liewes muttered, “It might be wise to give up on leaving the dormitory at all. There was a meeting for which all attendants going to the Royal Academy came together. There, Lord Oswald said that no matter what happened this winter, we were not to leave the dormitory and should instead devote ourselves to serving our charge in the dormitory. Considering what he said to you in private, that must have been another warning.”

The archducal family had, in fact, planned something against the nobles of the former Veronica faction. Lord Oswald knew the circumstances, which was why he’d done everything he could to caution us.

“It won’t be easy to warn our faction without leaving the dormitory or sending an ordonanz. Still... they can’t keep us locked in here forever. Could we not use the fellowship gathering to contact Ahrensbach?”

Our archduke candidates would strive to hide this incident from the other duchies, cautious that rumors of the aub’s incompetence would spread. For that reason, I doubted they would prevent all students of the former Veronica faction from attending the advancement ceremony or the fellowship gatherings; it would only be a matter of time before the rest of the Academy started to suspect something.

“As an elder student, I would attract far too much attention and risk an especially harsh punishment,” I muttered. “A first-year, on the other hand...” One particularly nervous student had arrived at the Academy for the very first time, only to be told that he might never see his family again. Nobody would consider it strange for him to act on his fear.

“Would that first-year not still receive a harsh punishment?” Liewes asked.

“I doubt it,” I said, waving a hand to dispel his concerns. “That oh-so-compassionate Saint of Ehrenfest would intervene before anything serious happened. It would seem that she has already asked the archduke not to punish us by association. ’Twas a foolish move, to be sure—she acts only on emotion without considering why such systems exist in the first place—but who am I to complain when it saved us? The other archduke candidates might call for the first-year to be punished, but Lady Rozemyne would go to any length to oppose them.”

Lady Rozemyne’s new industry and success with creating trends meant she had more than enough of a sway over the Ehrenfest archducal family. If she stuck her neck out for the student, the other archduke candidates would need to back down. Our plan was to gauge the perceived value of the first-years and just how much we could push our luck.

In the end, the first-year I manipulated into writing a letter home was caught by Laurenz before he could even leave the dormitory. All students of the former Veronica faction were subsequently forbidden from going to the advancement ceremony or the fellowship gatherings.

Our letter might have been intercepted, but maybe the other duchies will notice that something’s wrong.

Even without the letter, at least a single student of Ahrensbach would realize that the Ehrenfest students they normally associated with were mysteriously absent. I would rather not depend on something so uncertain, but I could not act carelessly and allow our foes to extinguish the last embers of our faction.

There is still a chance that my father and mother escaped.

“Stop this foolishness!” Matthias shouted. He and Laurenz weren’t mincing their words; in fact, they were being harsher with the first-year than the archduke candidates. “The words and deeds of a single person decide our fates!”

The other students stared at him in silence, their eyes tinged with frustration. I couldn’t help but feel the same way.

Matthias put us all in this predicament to begin with. How does he, of all

people, have the nerve to be so arrogant?

If only everyone knew the truth—then, their appreciation of Matthias would vanish in an instant.

“Matthias, Laurenz,” I said, “there’s no need to be so harsh with him.”

“Oh, but there is, Barthold. He put all of our lives in danger. If we do not make the severity of the situation clear, then—”

I stood protectively in front of the first-year, not a hint of warmth in my eyes as I glared at Matthias. “It is normal to respect one’s family and to lose one’s calm when their lives are in danger. Not that I expect someone who betrayed his family to understand that.”

“Barthold!”

Matthias went rigid as Laurenz barked my name. It did nothing to ease my intense hatred of the former; Matthias’s report had doomed my entire family.



“I understand,” I said, sympathizing with the first-year. “You only wanted to warn your loved ones. I consider that a virtuous trait—not one deserving of such scorn... but it certainly *was* dangerous. Do you understand me?”

“Yes. I’m sorry... I won’t do anything like that again.”

The first-year sat in the corner of the room, eyes downcast and shoulders slumped. We had all been brought here to be kept under close inspection; we couldn’t return to our chambers or hide away in our hidden rooms. The boy being scolded wasn’t even allowed to cry.

Matthias watched on with sorrow, seeming to have realized to at least some degree the cruelty of his words and actions.

The first report of the purge had arrived. I didn’t know the details, but information leaking was no longer seen as a problem, and the students of our faction were allowed to return to their usual routines. My father and mother must have been captured.

“Those associated with criminals may wish to start considering whether they will give their names.”

Lord Oswald was here to represent Lord Wilfried, Roderick to represent Lady Rozemyne, and Natalie to represent Lady Charlotte. Each of the three retainers stated the virtues of the person they served.

In truth, I couldn’t stand to see Roderick acting so high and mighty. He had once been at the very bottom of our faction. He was lecturing us about how wonderful it was to serve Lady Rozemyne, but the very thought of putting my life in the hands of a Leisegang turned my stomach.

“Barthold, who will you give your name to?” Cassandra asked. I could see my face in her worried green eyes.

“Lord Wilfried,” I said. “Who else?”

He was the only archduke candidate of our faction; there was nobody else for me to choose. I would never give my name to a Leisegang—especially not one rumored to have been a commoner—so Lady Rozemyne was out of the

question. As for Lord Sylvester, he was Lady Georgine's enemy. I could never trust someone who imprisoned his own mother and cut apart his faction from within. Lady Florencia was another poor choice; she had been aligned with the Leisegangs from the moment she married into the duchy. Lady Charlotte and Lord Melchior would surely lean toward the Leisegangs under her.

Though, Lady Charlotte wouldn't be a bad choice for a girl. In the long term, she's destined to leave Ehrenfest for another duchy.

"You can't serve Lord Wilfried as an attendant of the opposite sex," I said. "It would make more sense for you to give your name to Lady Charlotte."

"Oh, but why? Lady Rozemyne might be a Leisegang, but she seems trustworthy—at least based on her treatment of Lord Roderick."

Lady Rozemyne's naive idealism didn't suit me, but nothing about her made me think she was a bad person. I could easily imagine her treating us as equal to her other retainers if we gave her our names, and as she was promised to the future archduke, she would make for a safe choice in the long term. The only issues were her being a Leisegang and potentially a commoner. I didn't want to lose more of the former Veronica faction to the opposition.

"You aren't wrong. In many ways, she's the ideal lady to serve. However, she is of poor health, and as your elder brother, I would not feel comfortable with your life being bound to hers."

"Ah..." Cassandra blinked at me, having not considered that point. The others nearby shot us looks that made it clear they were listening.

I raised my voice and explained the concerning elements of being Lady Rozemyne's retainer. To begin with, attendants who served someone with poor health had a much harder time securing good grades. There was also a chance that, upon her return to Ehrenfest, the adults would prevent my sister from living as she was able to here. Lady Charlotte, on the other hand, would probably marry into another duchy and prompt the women in her service to search for partners there as well.

"I am in awe, Brother," Cassandra said when I was done. "I was not thinking that deeply."

I'd only spoken the truth, but that was enough; barely anyone wanted to give their name to Lady Rozemyne now.

"Lord Barthold, may I have a moment?"

"Lord Oswald."

Lord Oswald was a man with Lady Veronica's trust. He had survived the Ivory Tower incident and to this day remained the head attendant of a member of the archducal family. It must have taken an immense amount of skill.

"I am pleased that you resolved to give your name to Lord Wilfried and that you spoke the truth about Lady Rozemyne," Lord Oswald said. "Because of the purge, Lady Veronica's former faction has been reduced to but a shadow of what it once was. Your choices saved most of our remnants from being absorbed into the Leisegangs."

I gave a curt nod in response.

"Your main objectives under your new lord shall be to secure a foothold in the very heart of Ehrenfest's administration and to obtain as high a status as you can. Lord Wilfried is slated to become the next aub—not Lady Rozemyne, as the Leisegangs so desperately desire. We shall aim to eventually rebuild our faction around him, though we have many concerns about doing so."

Lord Oswald elaborated, sharing information with me that was far too sensitive to discuss in the castle with the archducal couple around. Lady Florencia had been ostracized by Lady Veronica for refusing to adopt the duchy's ways of doing things. That was why she had sided with the Leisegangs. Now that Lady Veronica was out of the picture, Lady Florencia was apparently doing whatever she could to bolster her authority.

In particular, Lady Florencia had started to criticize the quality of education Lord Wilfried was receiving. Many thought that was strange of her, even if she was his mother, as it was Lady Veronica who held and attended his baptism.

"She does not seem to understand why archduke candidates are moved away from their parents and into the northern building upon being baptized," Lord Oswald said. "Lord Wilfried is recognized as an honor student here at the Royal

Academy and no longer needs his mother to guide him. That is why I am trying to keep them apart. My lord is honest to a fault and therefore very easy to manipulate.”

Indeed, it would be problematic for the next Aub Ehrenfest to get any closer to the Leisegangs when he was already engaged to Lady Rozemyne.

“Furthermore,” Lord Oswald continued, “I am aware that both Lady Charlotte and Lady Rozemyne have reservations about Lord Wilfried being treated as the next archduke. They try to steal the credit he deserves and refuse to give him his due. It really is deplorable—especially now, when the archducal family should be rallying behind the future aub.”

As I recalled, Lady Veronica had done the same thing to make Lord Sylvester the archduke. Such practices must have been the norm in Ehrenfest. Lady Georgine had been pushed aside and eventually relocated purely for being a woman. I sympathized with her now more than ever.

“It gets worse,” Lord Oswald said. “A wedge is being driven between Lord Wilfried and the former Veronica faction. The archducal couple wishes to cast our faction aside and side fully with the Leisegangs.”

I gritted my teeth. The same archduke who had cut ties with his own faction had executed my parents. My father’s voice arose in my mind: *“Lady Georgine would make for a much better Aub Ehrenfest than Lord Sylvester.”*

Father was absolutely correct.

If not for Matthias’s report, Lady Georgine might have made it in time. She might have obtained the foundation. The longer I dwelled on that thought, the angrier I became.

In its current state, Ehrenfest deserves to be destroyed.

I had nothing against our duchy’s three archduke candidates. The maelstrom that swirled in my chest was driven by the ambitions of my father and mother, my sympathy for Lady Georgine, my rage toward Matthias, and a desire for revenge against the aub.

“I was a tad uneasy about giving my name to Lord Wilfried, but I see now that I will find good company among his retainers.” I knelt before Lord Oswald,

lowering my head to keep my emotions hidden. “I ask for your guidance going forward.”

Loyalitat — Sneaking Suspicion

Description: A sales bonus short story for Part 5 Volume 2 written from the perspective of Loyalitat, the vice commander of the Sovereign Knight's Order. The events of the Royal Academy's Dedication Ritual have made the Order particularly suspicious of Rozemyne. A curious conversation follows but is cut short when a request for aid arrives from Hildebrand, the third prince.

Author's Note: How do those of the Sovereign Knight's Order view Raublut's past, Ehrenfest, and Rozemyne? It was pretty tense bouncing between Loyalitat's deductions and Raublut's trickeries to hide the truth from him.

"Still doing today's paperwork, Lord Loyalitat?" one of the knights asked me as his squad returned to their resting spot in the royal palace's training area. "I do not envy that workload."

"I doubt your patrol was any less arduous," I said. "How was the Royal Academy? Did you come across anything interesting?"

The knights before me had just completed their routine patrol of the Academy's grounds. They lined up in front of my document-covered desk, which we'd moved to the resting spot so that I could more easily receive their reports, and started on their summaries.

"We checked the dormitory of each abolished duchy and found nothing of particular note."

"There were as many feybeasts as expected, and no single species seemed unusually dominant. On top of that, we found no traces of ternisbefallens in the area."

Winters in the Sovereignty were normally quite relaxed, as most nobles returned to their home duchies. This year, however, the knights hadn't been allowed to leave. Someone had unleashed ternisbefallens during last year's awards ceremony, putting the royal family's lives at risk, so security around the

Royal Academy had needed to be increased. Patrols regularly checked the unused dormitories of abolished duchies to make sure they weren't being misused and inspected the area for suspicious feybeasts or intruders. We couldn't allow another incident to undermine the Zent's authority.

"Any word from the Royal Academy?" I asked.

"As of fourth bell, neither Dunkelfelger nor Ehrenfest has contacted the royal family."

"I see. That is a relief."

The third prince was still only a child, and as the Sovereignty was on such high alert, any messages between students and members of royalty had to pass through the Sovereign Knight's Order. Prince Hildebrand, Lady Eglantine, Prince Anastasius—we received frequent reports from the royals associated with the Royal Academy, and most of them had at least something to do with Ehrenfest or Dunkelfelger. No other duchies were being summoned to the royal villas on such a regular basis.

"They went out of their way to acquire permission to hold religious ceremonies at the Royal Academy," one knight said, his voice tinged with irritation. "I expect both duchies to be busy with their joint research for quite some time."

"Given that they involved even the Zent, I am sure it will produce splendid results," another added, no less annoyed.

Lady Rozemyne of Ehrenfest had acquired the royal family's permission to perform religious ceremonies at the Academy. Then she had invited the royals themselves to participate, advising them to bring empty feystones to fill with mana and to actually take part so that they could experience a true ceremony and potentially even obtain more divine protections. The Zent and several other royals had agreed.

Had that been all there was to it, Lady Rozemyne would not have been the target of so much criticism. I sighed at the knights' exchange.

"Do not speak ill of Lady Rozemyne," I said. "She helped to gather an impressive amount of mana for the royal family, and the Zent later declared

that he found the ceremony a valuable experience. You know that.”

“But that shield of hers... Do you not consider it dangerous? Lord Raublut suspects that Lord Ferdinand is pulling her strings as part of some plot to steal the Grutrissheit.”

Lady Rozemyne had not allowed knights to attend the ceremony and used Schutzaria’s shield to weed out those with bad intentions. The spectacle had made us aware not only of her shield that not even the Sovereign Knight’s Order could break but also of several archduke candidates from neutral duchies who could turn against us at any moment. It used to be the case that Lord Raublut was the only member of our Order who viewed Ehrenfest with suspicion, but his concerns had since spread to many of our knights.

Still, Lady Rozemyne’s behavior during the Dedication Ritual had made it clear she was a good-willed cooperator. The keys to the underground archive, the translations of ancient texts, the importance of religious ceremonies—it was no tall tale to say that the most vital information now at the royal family’s fingertips had come from that one girl. We couldn’t allow our nerves to lead us astray. Even the Zent was nothing but grateful to her.

“I understand why one might be wary of an individual immune to physical threats,” I said. “That fear only comes from her having an advantage. We can do away with it by acquiring her power ourselves.”

“Hmm? Do you have the means to do that?” a knight asked, surprised.

I responded with a brisk nod. I frequently attended royal dinner meetings as a guard knight, which had granted me the good fortune of hearing Prince Anastasius’s reports.

“Lady Rozemyne’s joint research was set in motion when she obtained more divine protections than most during one of her classes. You understand that much, correct? Well, that research enabled the students of Dunkelfelger to create their own pillars of light, earn the gods’ blessings for themselves, and even form Leidenschaft’s spear. They also acquired Schutzaria’s shield.”

Acquiring the shield ourselves wouldn’t be easy—it would mean going to the temple, first of all—but I thought it best not to mention that here and now.

“At the very least, Lady Rozemyne isn’t the only one able to make the shield, and she intends to share how others can make it too. I was at a complete loss upon hearing the report, but it seems she can also give blessings by whirling and playing music. As it stands, we would only harm ourselves if we tried to push Ehrenfest away. We have everything to gain by learning what we can from them. You know of the temple’s crazed obsession with her, do you not?”

It was a well-known fact that during last year’s bible inspection, the Sovereign temple had resolved to make Lady Rozemyne theirs. They claimed that someone who was loved so deeply by the gods and could wield their divine instruments belonged in the Sovereign temple more than a bottom-ranking duchy such as Ehrenfest. Seeing her in action had slowly changed my stance from thinking they were fools to agreeing with them, but bringing an archduke candidate to the Sovereignty was no simple matter.

“On that note, it would seem that Lady Rozemyne agreed to perform the next Archduke Conference’s Starbind Ceremony as its High Bishop. Prince Anastasius approached her about it, did he not?”

“Yes, the second prince is determined to let Prince Sigiswald rise above him. My sympathies to Lady Rozemyne for getting caught up in that.”

He should simply have agreed to become the Zent after marrying Lady Eglantine.

The prince’s problems had only arisen because he’d taken the half measure of marrying Lady Eglantine despite not wanting the throne. He spoke colorfully of having seen his love through and wanting to grant the wish of the woman who meant so much to him, but the truth of the matter was that he had wanted to avoid the strenuous duties of a king. His father, who had endured so much for his lack of a Grutrissheit, had wanted the country to be ruled by whoever had the most mana. Prince Anastasius had done nothing to respect that.

“You are correct, Lord Loyalitat,” one of the knights said. “We were simply ignorant of Lady Rozemyne’s shield. Lord Raublut was the only one who knew about it.”

“Is that so? Do you know where he learned about it?”

“From his former lord, as I understand it.”

“And who would that be...? Could it have been a common spell before the civil war?”

I grimaced at the thought. So much had been lost with the disappearance of the Grutrissheit that I couldn't blame others for thinking our current Zent was powerless. That sentiment might have been why so many among the younger generations always pinned their hopes on the people and systems from before the civil war.

“I was in the Sovereign Knight's Order before the civil war,” I said, “yet I never once encountered Schutzaria's shield.”

“Lord Raublut must have learned about it elsewhere, then. I wonder where...?”

“And under whom? I thought he was a regular knight before he started serving King Trauerqual.”

Before the civil war, Lord Raublut had most certainly been a knight of the Sovereign Order. The king's first wife had brought him—and the others in her service—with her from Gilessenmeyer. Barely anyone had known about Lord Raublut before then, largely owing to how much documentation was lost during the war.

“I remember hearing that he served a princess in some branch family...” a knight said.

“Ah. Perhaps she married down to become an archnoble or some such, and that was when he returned to a normal station.” It was a reasonable assumption to make; a Sovereign knight serving a princess who married down in status would serve someone else or return to being a regular knight.

“No, I think he was relieved of duty when the princess passed away.”

“Maybe he fell in love with the princess and was made to resign as a result. Lord Raublut refused to marry for a very long time because of some mystery woman he wasn't able to forget.”

“A knight relieved of duty for something like that would never have been made the knight commander. Not to mention, do you really think a princess would fall for a face as hard and scarred as his?”

The knights were all gossiping with reckless abandon when an ordonnanz shot into the room. It landed on my arm, opened its beak, and spoke in a gravelly but authoritative voice.

“This is Raublut. Loyalitat, come to my office at once.”

“You wished to speak with me?”

“Yes, yes. Sit down,” the commander said, gesturing me to a seat.

Once I was seated, Lord Raublut explained that he had received an ordonnanz from Prince Hildebrand. Lady Rozemyne of Ehrenfest, Lady Hannelore of Dunkelfelger, and the eager third prince apparently had plans to go to the library’s underground archive tomorrow morning.

Prince Hildebrand certainly is dedicated to his royal duties despite his young age.

His dedication to maturing and carrying out his duties as a royal warmed my heart. The commander, however, seemed anything but pleased.

“Loyalitat—do you not find it strange that Lady Rozemyne sent an ordonnanz to the third prince?”

“Not when he’s stationed at the Royal Academy as its overseer.”

“Lady Rozemyne normally sends her ordonnanzes to Prince Anastasius and Lady Eglantine. She must be changing her contacts in accordance with her needs. One cannot enter the underground archive without royal authority, and so she works in the shadows...”

Though our jobs did require us to be on guard against potential threats, Lord Raublut’s suspicions seemed closer to outright paranoia. “Her contacting Prince Hildebrand means she *isn’t* working in the shadows,” I said. “She’s openly requesting the royal family’s permission. I understand your fears that Ehrenfest is up to something, but those suspicions have clouded your judgment.”

“Perhaps I am overthinking it,” Lord Raublut muttered.

I could only hope he meant it. He had an unreasonably low opinion of Lady Rozemyne—or at least of Ehrenfest and Lord Ferdinand.

“That said,” he continued, “Lady Rozemyne is once again attempting to spend time with royalty. Be on your guard. Something might happen again tomorrow.”

“Understood.”

Lady Rozemyne had once asked to use the Farthest Hall for her joint research and proposed that the royal family take part as well; I completely agreed that something was bound to happen. The more cautious we remained, the better.

As it turned out, staying on our guard was the right move. The knight commander received an ordonnanz from Prince Hildebrand requesting the assistance of the Sovereign Knight’s Order.

“He wants our help?” one of the knights asked. “He must have encountered a problem that not even his own knights can deal with.”

“But we can’t enter the Academy unless the Zent summons us personally. What could possibly be happening?!”

An anxious air hung over us all. The third prince’s ordonnanz had said nothing about *why* he was in need of our aid. It wasn’t long before another bird arrived—this time from Lord Arthur, the prince’s head attendant.

“My sincerest apologies. Please pay no mind to the summons Prince Hildebrand sent you—this is not something the Sovereign Knight’s Order needs to be concerned with. Furthermore, the prince needs to learn that he has no say in when the Order moves.”

Apparently, the third prince had simply overreacted to an otherwise innocuous battle. I sighed, relieved, and released the feystone that would have turned into full plate armor.

“Indeed, we must make this a valuable learning experience for him,” I said. The Sovereign Knight’s Order acted only on the king’s orders; not even a prince could put us to use. Royals needed to be cautious of that fact, as status still made it hard for us to refuse them.

“You and I can handle this, Loyalitat,” Lord Raublut said. “We will need to tell the prince why we are refusing his royal orders.”

“Understood.”

In situations such as this, it was customary to bring at least two knights to ensure that any information given to the royal family was fully accurate. In our case, though, we were about to lecture a prince—an underage prince, but one nonetheless. Bringing some bottom-ranking knight with us was out of the question. I could only hope that the presence of both the commander and vice commander of the Sovereign Knight’s Order would make Prince Hildebrand realize the severity of his actions.

We wasted no time in leaving the knight commander’s office. Lord Raublut tightly knit his brow as we strode toward the palace’s teleportation hall.

“I knew I should have looked into what Lady Rozemyne was researching. In truth, I had intended to ask you to accompany them.”

“Me?” I asked. “Would it not have made more sense for you to go?” He was both close to Prince Hildebrand and persistently wary of Lady Rozemyne; I saw no reason he would want to send someone else in his place.

“Lady Rozemyne seems to be on guard against me now that Lord Ferdinand was sent to Ahrensbach.”

The royal decree behind said move, brought about by the combined pleas of several duchies, had freed Lord Ferdinand from the temple that Ehrenfest’s tyrannical archduke had trapped him in by setting in motion his engagement to the next aub of Ahrensbach. Aub Ehrenfest had opposed the idea, of course, but Lord Ferdinand had apparently been on board.

Lady Rozemyne’s mentor owes his freedom to that decree. If she thinks Lord Raublut was behind it, should she not be grateful to him?

I furrowed my brow. Only a select few people had attended the meeting held to confirm how Lord Ferdinand wanted to proceed. I hadn’t been present, but Lord Raublut had apparently explained that the proposed marriage was advantageous for both parties, as Ahrensbach lacked a successor and Lord Ferdinand needed to escape his dire circumstances. Still, he seemed to speak as though the decree hadn’t been a good thing for everyone. Was I just imagining it?

“If she is on guard against you, then I suspect she’s just as wary of me,” I said. “I was the first to doubt the power of her shield and attack it.”

“I see... I thought you would be ideal for controlling their numbers.”

“‘Their numbers’?” I repeated, unsure what Lord Raublut meant. He clearly knew a lot more about the situation than I did. I turned to look at him, wondering what was going through his head as he stroked the prominent scar above his cheek.

“Just what is Ehrenfest looking for in that archive?” Lord Raublut pondered aloud. “I want to know why Prince Hildebrand agreed without consulting the other princes and why Dunkelfelger seems to be playing along. Perhaps the third prince seeks to take the throne, and his blood relatives in Dunkelfelger are supporting him. Yurgenschmidt needs no further disturbances.”

The need to prevent such an incident was precisely why Lady Magdalena had become the king’s third wife despite her birthplace and why she continued to treat both Prince Sigiswald and Prince Anastasius with respect. Such a clash would never come to pass unless the third prince had someone trying to lead him astray.

Once again, you are overthinking things...

Still, I elected not to say anything. Maybe the commander knew more than I did—who was I to object without evidence? Instead, I resolved to follow his lead. If nothing else, he was right that Yurgenschmidt could endure no further chaos.

“Prince Hildebrand, we have arrived at your summons,” Lord Raublut said as we both knelt. “Pray tell, what circumstances demand the aid of not just your guards but the entire Sovereign Knight’s Order?”

“Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger intend to play ditto to decide who will receive Rozemyne’s hand in marriage,” the third prince explained with great enthusiasm. “An engagement with my father’s approval could never be overturned through such means, could it? Rozemyne has no desire to change her fiancé, so we simply must rescue her. Is it not the Sovereign Order’s duty to assist in protecting the weak?”

“Did you consult Arthur before contacting us...?” the commander asked, shooting a quick glance at the man in question.

“I did. He insisted that we shouldn’t get involved, but I disagreed. For as long as I can remember, he’s told me that only the royal family can stop the tyranny of greater duchies. Was it not absurd, then, that he wouldn’t let me save Rozemyne?!”

The prince’s stance was nearsighted and immature. He was far too obsessed with his desire to mete out justice. Were he my son, I would praise him for his strong moral values and assure him that protecting the weak was the right thing to do. A prince, however, needed to be taught the consequences of his actions. His every move had to be weighed on the scales of interduchy relations.

Under normal circumstances, a prince would come to that realization when he started attending the Academy. In this case, however...

No sooner had the third prince been baptized than he had been tasked with overseeing the Royal Academy. It must have been a heavy burden for a boy his age, but if he continued to be so careless when interacting with other duchies, a serious incident would surely be on the horizon.

Prince Hildebrand gazed up at the commander, his purple eyes brimming with hope. “Arthur opposes the idea no matter how many times I ask, but could you save Rozemyne for me, Raublut? Knights are duty bound to help those in need.”

“I cannot.”

“But why?!”

“There is no royal decree for us to take action, and neither Aub Ehrenfest nor Aub Dunkelfelger has requested our assistance. We cannot involve ourselves in a matter that has nothing to do with us—it would risk us being accused of malicious interference.”

Neither of the involved duchies had requested the king’s arbitration, which meant their aubs were vocally or silently approving the ditler match. As someone from Hauchletzte, I didn’t know too much about ditler, but the Sovereign Order was full of knights from Dunkelfelger, and I’d at least heard of the kinds of matches that took place at the Academy.

“If an engagement is at stake, then perhaps this is bride-taking ditto,” I said. “Though my knowledge on the subject leaves much to be desired, I am told that Dunkelfelgerians play it when one side’s parents refuse to give their blessing. Lady Magdalena might be able to provide a better explanation.”

For this match to have come about in the first place, could it be that Lord Lestilaut and Lady Rozemyne are in love? Lady Rozemyne did not seem old enough to decide on an engagement based on romance, so perhaps there are other factors at play.

Based on her appearance, I doubted she was mature enough to think of romance. As it stood, she was unlikely to have even developed mana-sensing.

“I would assume they intend to announce the result of their match during the Archduke Conference, then approach your father about undoing the current engagement,” the commander said. “Neither the king nor the Sovereign Knight’s Order can act without a formal request from the aubs of both duchies.”

The prince pursed his lips—a poor attempt to mask his displeasure.

“Even at your young age, you are determined to carry out your duties as a prince,” I said. “It is wonderful to behold. I am also touched to see you on such good terms with Ehrenfest’s and Dunkelfelger’s archduke candidates, owing to your work with the Royal Academy’s library committee.”

He stared at me in surprise. By no means was he entirely in the wrong—his work ethic and desire for justice were both things I wished to praise and encourage.

“However,” I continued, “you must not show them favoritism on the basis of that personal connection. Learn what you must about your role—what you can and cannot do as a royal.”

“Right...” Though his shoulders were slumped, the prince gave a small nod of acceptance. Once he calmed down, he would surely return to listening to his head attendant.

A sigh escaped me. Our work here was done, I thought, but then I noticed Arthur looking equally relieved. Prince Hildebrand wasn’t the only one in need of a few stern words, it seemed.

“You erred as well, Arthur,” I said. “Your own youth might have been partially to blame, but it is not enough to simply refuse your charge. Strive to better understand his position and speak with him on more equal terms.”

“My apologies. I thank you both for your consideration.”

Once we had scolded the prince—and his head attendant, for good measure—Lord Raublut and I returned to the palace. As exhausting as our task had been, we could at least rest assured that we wouldn’t hear of the matter again.

“This is Rauffen of the Royal Academy! Three Sovereign knights have intruded upon a ditter match between students! Lord Raublut, I request a prompt response on whether they are following a royal decree!”

An unexpected ordonnanz had arrived in the office of Zent Trauerqual. It had perched on the arm of the knight commander, currently acting as a guard knight, before making an announcement that stunned everyone in earshot. I clapped a hand over my mouth to keep any extraneous remarks at bay.

Is the third prince behind this?! I thought we made ourselves clear when we went to see him!

“This is Raublut. They are not there by royal decree.”

I was frozen in place, but the knight commander responded without missing a beat, his expression unchanged. Then he knelt before the Zent.

“I wish to capture and interrogate these rogue knights,” Lord Raublut declared.

At once, I snapped out of my stupor and dropped to one knee beside him. It seemed unwise to mention our conversation with Prince Hildebrand, but there was a very real chance the knights had moved on his order. We would need to question them to determine whether they really had acted independently.

“I also support an interrogation,” I said. “I find it hard to believe that any of our knights would resort to insubordination. Something must have happened to cause this behavior. Please permit us to travel to the Royal Academy.”

It was then that another ordonnanz arrived, this one from Prince Anastasius.

He had received a report from Hirschur that Sovereign knights were inciting students from lesser and middle duchies to cause some kind of chaos.

Not only are they interfering in the dinner match, but they're also rallying students of lower-ranking duchies?!

The situation was abnormal, to say the least. Few people at the Royal Academy would have the mana capacity necessary to stop a Sovereign knight. Higher-ups from the Order would need to intervene and contain them posthaste.

"Should we contact Prince Hildebrand?!"

Zent Trauerqual shook his head. "It would take far too long to explain the situation to him. Go with Anastasius at once."

And so, with barely any information to guide us, we headed to the teleporter. Going straight from the palace to the Academy took far longer than one might expect; it was much faster to travel through Prince Anastasius's villa.

We arrived to find the second prince waiting for us with his guard knights. He led the way and opened the door to the Royal Academy.

"Let us go," he declared.

We arrived at the training area to find three Sovereign knights engaged in combat. The students they had gathered were nowhere to be seen—they must have scattered when Rauffen explained that the Zent hadn't sanctioned their intervention. I was well and truly relieved that we wouldn't need to imprison any children.

Once we'd questioned those from Ehrenfest and Dunkelfelger, we returned to the Sovereignty with the three unruly knights of our Order. There was something especially strange about them.

"By whose command did you come here?! Are you truly acting without orders from the Zent?!"

"The royal family was concerned about Dunkelfelger potentially taking the Saint of Ehrenfest. Dealing with such concerns is the duty of the Sovereign

Knight's Order."

"A purposefully defiant knight cannot be trusted. If a trespass of this nature happens again, the Sovereign Order will risk losing the trust of the Zent and all of Yurgenschmidt!"

"This is what the royal family wants."

Our interrogation had reached a standstill; no matter what they were asked, the knights just kept repeating that they had moved to rescue Lady Rozemyne and that they were acting for the royal family's sake. My unease grew as our attempt at questioning continued. Prince Hildebrand was the only royal I knew who would care so deeply about Lady Rozemyne marrying into Dunkelfelger.

"Dunkelfelger will sit in on our next interrogation," Lord Raublut explained to all those present. "Give these three time to return to their senses, but do not under any circumstances allow them to escape. Loyaltat, we are going to the third prince's villa."

As far as the others were concerned, the purpose of our visit was to report to the Royal Academy's overseer. In truth, however, we intended to question Prince Hildebrand about whether he was behind the knights' apparent insubordination. Only the commander and I knew that he had asked the Sovereign Order to save Lady Rozemyne.

But when we arrived at the third prince's villa...

"Has something happened within the Sovereign Knight's Order?"

Prince Hildebrand received our news with a look of surprise. Then, when we asked whether he had ordered the knights to take action, he shook his head.

"I neither gave the command nor contacted the Order," he replied. "In fact, I wasn't even aware that their match was scheduled for today. Isn't that right, Arthur?"

I turned to the head attendant, barely able to contain my surprise. Had the third prince requested our assistance without even knowing when the dinner match was expected to take place?

"Prince Hildebrand speaks true," Arthur said. "The date had yet to be decided

when Lady Hannelore first mentioned the match to him at the library. And as the two of you convinced him to drop the matter, he refrained from even trying to gather information about it. The professors of the knight course will confirm that we did not ask them a single question about the ditler game.”

Though the prince seemed none the wiser, Arthur understood that they were both under suspicion of causing the knights’ disloyalty. He also understood the danger that put them in. The blood drained from his face as he stoutly and scrupulously expressed the innocence of his lord.

“As his head attendant, I can guarantee that Prince Hildebrand did not contact the Sovereign Knight’s Order. The fact that he has yet to attend the Royal Academy means he does not have a schtappe or the means to brew. As he cannot use ordonnances on his own, there is no way he could have sent word without our knowing.”

Every letter and document that ended up in the prince’s hands passed through his retainers, who also stayed with him whenever he left his villa. Arthur was right in saying that Prince Hildebrand didn’t have the means or freedom to act independently.

“Furthermore,” he continued, “the only Sovereign knights invited to this villa were the two of you. He has refrained from even speaking to any other knights outside his retinue, as any investigation will prove.”

Indeed, even the prince’s sword practice with the knight commander took place here at his villa. He would start training at the royal palace upon becoming a student, but as it stood, there was barely any reason to think he was associated with the three rogue knights.

“I would never have made such a request,” Prince Hildebrand insisted. “Not after you both came here and warned me of the dangers. Even my mother told me not to interfere with a game of ditler that was already set in stone.” He frowned at us, wearing a slight pout.

“I suppose it really wasn’t Prince Hildebrand who instigated the knights,” I muttered while writing my report. That much seemed clear to me—I’d seen not a trace of guilt in his eyes—but the knight commander was unconvinced.

“Oh? And why do you think that?” Lord Raublut asked, glaring at me. “Those two might be lying. Ehrenfest’s victory means that Lady Rozemyne won’t need to move to Dunkelfelger. The prince’s wish has been granted.”

“Yes, but they could never have acted without knowing when the match was due to take place. I consulted the professors of the knight course, and not one of them informed Prince Hildebrand. Rather, it was Prince Anastasius who knew.”

Perhaps due to the frequency with which they caused issues—or the tendency for those issues to develop into major events—Ehrenfest’s and Dunkelfelger’s antics at the Academy were reported to the second prince, not the third. The duchies’ request to play ditler had gone straight to Prince Anastasius.

“Let us assume Prince Hildebrand *was* behind this, and that his retainers were involved as well,” I said. “For what reason would they have summoned us there to scold them? It was only then that we learned of the third prince’s wish to rescue Lady Rozemyne—a wish that he would surely have wanted to keep close to his chest. As for Prince Anastasius, not even he knew it was bride-taking ditler from the documentation. I suspect a third party is involved and that they wish to frame Prince Hildebrand for the crime.”

“Hmm... You are smarter than I thought,” the knight commander said, a smirk arising on his lips. “I shall consider this third party.”

Lord Raublut was a stubborn man; if my words had done anything to sway his ever-suspicious mind, then I considered that a reason to celebrate. A tense air would surely hang over his training sessions with the young third prince if the commander continued to suspect his involvement in the situation with Ehrenfest and Lady Rozemyne.

Still, even if a third party is to blame, what could their objective have been?

If they had used Lady Rozemyne’s situation as an opportunity to incriminate Prince Hildebrand, then their objective must have lain elsewhere. Perhaps we could use the consequences of the three knights being instigated to deduce what our criminals had wanted to achieve.

Did they wish to drive a wedge between the Zent and the Sovereign Knight’s

Order? Or was this plan meant to bring shame upon the former? Why involve the apprentices? Who knew the date of the dinner match? Where did our third party acquire that information, and how did they contact the Sovereign knights?

Questions darted through my mind until, at last, something caught my attention. I could feel the dots slowly connecting when the commander suddenly called out to me and said, “Are you done with your report?” My train of thought crumbled, and the connecting thread vanished with it.

Wait, what was I thinking?

I responded to the knight commander and tried to put my thoughts back in order, but it was no use. Crackles and pops rang out from behind me as the wood in the fireplace continued to burn.

Anastasius — Various Goals

Description: A sales bonus short story for Part 5 Volume 3, set during the aftermath of Detlinde's dedication whirl. How do the royals feel about the circle that appeared onstage? What do those of the Sovereign temple have to say about it? These are the events that precede Eglantine's attempt to gather information from Rozemyne.

Author's Note: I always have a hard time writing stories from the royal family's perspective, as I need to think extremely carefully about how much information to reveal. The balance of power between royals is also surprisingly complex.

"That whirling was unlike anything I have ever experienced," Mother said. "For that young lady to have repelled the God of Darkness so, she must have been the Goddess of Chaos in disguise."

"Yes, truly..." agreed Lady Magdalena, Father's third wife. "Did their whirling teacher truly consider her a fitting Goddess of Light? I found her style a tad too novel and eccentric."

Our lunchtime meeting between the Royal Academy's coming-of-age and graduation ceremonies began with sighs and exasperated critiques of the recent dedication whirl. Detlinde, an archduke candidate of Ahrensbach, was intensely unpopular with the Zent's wives. I agreed with their opinions completely.

That said, I imagine she might have whirled at least a bit better if not for her dress and those hair ornaments...

My dear wife, Eglantine, had been asked to attend a practice session to demonstrate the proper technique. Detlinde's performance had paled in comparison, of course, but it hadn't been bad enough for a professor to deem it necessary to remove her from being the Goddess of Light.

I continued to eat, considering it best to leave such thoughts unsaid.

“I find it positively baffling that nobody thought to stop her. What must Ahrensbach’s first wife have thought? Or the young lady’s fiancé, even?”

“Were her Ehrenfest hairpins not a present from her partner-to-be?” Sigiswald asked. “I gave Adolphine hers personally. It might just be the case that her fiancé has strange tastes.”

In an instant, my brother’s words changed the flow of the conversation. Those who had mocked Detlinde’s attire now rounded on Ferdinand, who had given her those hair ornaments in the first place.

“Goodness, how unfortunate... If only he had put more thought into those hairpins. A woman has no choice but to wear the accessories she receives from her betrothed.”

“My sympathies to her, then, that she had to conclude her time at the Academy with such a horrendous hairdo.”

Lady Adolphine had cocked her head at my brother’s words, then furrowed her brow when my father’s wives both briskly changed their stances. “Oh my. But it might not be the case that her fiancé designed or even ordered the hairpins,” she said, putting forward a light protest.

My brother had given Lady Adolphine a hairpin to celebrate her graduation, though he hadn’t placed the order personally. As I understood it, he had gotten her to do everything in his place. It was one thing to place the order together or to ask the woman about her tastes in advance, but what had driven him to act in a way that would invariably displease her? I thought his approach was outright disrespectful.

Lady Nahelache pondered the remark. “In the case of Prince Sigiswald, maybe—no one would expect him to travel all the way to Ehrenfest for a hairpin—but Lord Ferdinand is a member of the duchy’s archducal family. Furthermore, I would not expect an Ahrensbach archduke candidate to go to that much trouble for accessories. Am I wrong?”

“As you might remember, Lady Nahelache, their engagement was made by royal decree. I am certain that Lady Detlinde visited Ehrenfest for the purpose

of her engagement ceremony.”

I could feel the tension between Lady Adolphine and my brother’s wife Lady Nahelache; one continued to criticize Sigiswald while the other spoke in defense of her husband. Mother and the others held their tongues, but it was clear from their troubled smiles that it wouldn’t be ideal for their relationship to get even worse.

“As I understand it, Lady Detlinde wore her hair ornaments as she saw fit,” Eglantine intervened. “She refused to trust Ehrenfest’s sense of style or even heed its advice—Lady Rozemyne told me as much when she gave me this latest hairpin of mine. A bizarre choice, when they are so beautiful... Don’t you agree, Anastasius?”

She gave me a smile while touching her newest hairpin. It suited her perfectly. If she wanted me to help defend Ehrenfest, then it was my duty to accept.

Rozemyne has done plenty to help us. I should return the favor.

“Indeed,” I said, “Ehrenfest prepared five schentis hairpins that varied in size and color. The intention was to give Lady Detlinde more choice—to let her pick and choose accessories to suit the occasion. I found it rather interesting.”

“Is that so?” Lady Magdalena asked. “That would make her decision rather...” She fell silent, though I could tell she had wanted to say “foolish.”

“As a fellow man, I must express my sympathy for Ferdinand, who is bound to that woman by a royal decree. She might only be an interim aub, but her behavior is shameful for the next ruler of a greater duchy.”

“That is enough, Anastasius,” my mother began. She was going to lecture me about criticizing the royal decree, so I masterfully changed the subject.

“I am less interested in the Goddess of Chaos’s attire and more curious about the magic circle that appeared when she fell. It wasn’t something I’d ever seen before. Mother, Father, do you know what it might have meant?” The circle had caused quite a commotion in the auditorium, but nobody had gone to the trouble of researching it.

Father, who had remained silent until this point, shook his head. “No, I was not aware of such a circle lying dormant on the whirling stage. It must have

been important, though—its size alone made that clear.”

If not even my father, the Zent, had recognized the magic circle, then I doubted anyone else here would. He looked to the scholars, but none of them had any answers—not one of them requested permission to speak.

“Zent Trauerqual,” came a sudden announcement, “the Sovereign temple has requested a meeting. They claim to have valuable information about the magic circle that arose today and wish to speak with you before the public is informed.”

A stir ran through the dining hall. The royal family was on poor terms with the Sovereign temple—its members asserted that one could not be the Zent without the Grutrissheit and so refused to acknowledge my father as the king. They begrudgingly cooperated with us on budgetary and other concerns but took every opportunity to remind us we weren’t qualified to rule.

Incidentally, it had come to light during last year’s bible inspection with Rozemyne that Relichion, the Sovereign High Bishop, couldn’t read even half of the text they valued so dearly. He had interpreted that exposure as a slight against his pitiful mana, and our relationship with him had continued to deteriorate from there.

To make matters worse, Immanuel, the Sovereign High Priest, had taken a keen interest in Rozemyne and her ability to form divine instruments at will. He wished to pluck her from Ehrenfest’s temple and instate her as the new Sovereign High Bishop—which was why Relichion, vehemently against losing his post, now saw her as a troublesome pest. When we had asked to use the shrine for the Royal Academy’s Dedication Ritual, he had immediately refused with more than a few harsh words. Immanuel, in contrast, had agreed to lend us not only the shrine but also the temple’s divine instruments as a means of currying favor with Rozemyne.

The Sovereign priests had interrupted a gathering of royalty—during lunch, no less—and requested entry to our dining hall. This did not bode well.

Father thought for a moment, then gave a resigned nod. “Very well... I shall meet with them. It seems unnecessary to invite them here, however; / shall go to *them*.”

“Father,” Sigiswald said with a grimace, “I see no reason to interrupt your lunch for the sake of the Sovereign priests.”

Father’s wives and retainers voiced their agreement.

“Prince Sigiswald is correct—they have not scheduled a meeting with you, so there is no need to go to such trouble.”

“Their request is far too inconsiderate. No matter how urgent their business might be, could it not wait until *after* lunch?”

“Sovereign priests or not, the matter at hand is far too important to ignore,” Father said. “Sigiswald, if you are so strongly opposed to missing the end of lunch, then you need not come with me. Anastasius, let us go.”

Father stood, and the entire room went quiet. I’d risen to my feet as soon as he called my name, and a moment later, Sigiswald rose as well.

“I would much rather come with you,” he said. Then, in a voice that oozed frustration, “I simply considered it rude of the priests to request a meeting during lunch.”

“Hmm...” Father nodded to himself as he led the way. “You must learn to be more adaptable. In times of urgency, one cannot be mired in etiquette.”

With our retainers in tow, we proceeded down the deathly silent corridors of the central building. They were empty apart from the occasional Sovereign knight; everyone else had returned to their dormitory for lunch.

“Father, not one of your wives seemed too pleased about this...” Sigiswald remarked.

“They cannot attend a meeting with those of the Sovereign temple,” he retorted. “It would put the priests in too much danger.”

Father never allowed his wives to attend meetings with the Sovereign temple. From what I understood, they had trembled in outrage when they last witnessed the priests belittle him for not having the Grutrissheit. He seemed most concerned about Lady Magdalena of Dunkelfelger; though I’d only ever seen her wearing fancy clothes and ornaments, she was said to be an especially lethal warrior.

“One must make thorough preparations with the Knight’s Order before angering them. Remember that well.”

We soon reached the waiting room that our visitors from the Sovereign temple were using. Sovereign knights were stationed outside as if wary of what they might do. We stepped inside to find both Relichion and Immanuel, sitting tall with proud expressions.

“We appreciate your quickness to cooperate,” Relichion said. “Though we recognize how rude it was to request a meeting during lunch, we thought it best to inform you at once.” He made no attempt to hide his condescension—it was more obvious than ever.

I took the seat offered to me, on guard against what he might say next.

“You all saw today’s miracle, I assume,” Relichion began, gesturing dramatically with a victorious look on his face. “All witnessed the magic circle that arose on the whirling stage, and—”

“It was a circle for choosing the next Zent,” Immanuel said, interrupting the High Bishop’s ostentatious speech to state the facts as they knew them. “In short, one could say that Lady Detlinde is closer than anyone else to becoming the next Zent.”

Relichion glared at him and, with renewed vigor, attempted to resume his speech. Father cut him short this time.

“Apologies, but I seek only the relevant details. Immanuel, if you would continue.”

“But of course,” Immanuel replied. “Your ignorance of the circle’s existence—and the fact you cannot make it appear—further proves you are not suited to rule. We predict that Lady Detlinde of Ahrensbach will soon obtain the Grutrissheit and formally succeed you as a true Zent.”

“How dare you?!” Father’s retainers boomed, outraged that priests, of all people, would dare to insult their lord. “We could have your heads!”

Immanuel and Relichion both curled their mouths into grins, unfazed. “We mean no disrespect,” said the former. “We speak only the truth.”

“Lacking the Grutrissheit as he does, Lord Trauerqual will not be able to keep his throne for much longer,” added the latter. “After all...”

“You cretins...” Loyalitat spat, stepping forward with his schtappe drawn.

“Halt,” Father said. “Your seething is unsightly. We should celebrate the chance of the Grutrissheit returning to Yurgenschmidt.”

“Oh...?” Relichion gave him a look of surprise. “Does that mean you will relinquish the throne if Lady Detlinde acquires the Grutrissheit?”

Father’s retainers inhaled, awaiting his response. He sighed, and stared directly at the two Sovereign priests.

“Yes, I will.”

Everyone else focused on Father, but I turned my attention to Sigiswald. Though one might not guess it from his enduring calm, he was obsessed with taking the throne—hence his previous determination to court Eglantine. If not for my agreeing to become a vassal, he would never have given up on her.

“I have no attachment to the throne,” Father continued. “If she does acquire the true Grutrissheit, then I shall step down so that she can take over as Zent.”

Sigiswald squinted ever so slightly. Anger and objection stirred in his dark-green eyes, too ferocious to remain hidden.

“However,” Father said, “speak not a word of the magic circle’s purpose before then. Releasing such information to the public would cause nothing but chaos.”

Indeed, if word spread that Detlinde could obtain the Grutrissheit, any number of people could try to harm or obstruct her. Even those who pinned their hopes on her could turn violent if she ultimately let them down. Yurgenschmidt would risk entering another age of war, this time over a Grutrissheit that did not even exist. Father conveyed the dangers to the Sovereign priests to emphasize his point, then stood up and took his leave.

“It is inconceivable that Ahrensbach’s archduke candidate could obtain the Grutrissheit and become the next Zent,” came voices of complaint as soon as we were outside the room.

Indeed, this wasn't a claim we could take at face value. Not one of us wanted to believe that someone as embarrassing as Detlinde was actually on track to become the Zent. Still, we could not ignore the magic circle that had appeared. It was bound to be important for Yurgenschmidt.

"For years, we have devoted our all to keeping Yurgenschmidt alive," Sigiswald said. "If anyone, the Grutrissheit should go to us. Can you imagine what dark future would await our country if Lady Detlinde took charge?"

Father's older retainers, who understood exactly how much their charge had endured, agreed without a moment's hesitation.

"Could this, too, be part of Lord Ferdinand's scheme?" Raublut interjected. It was such a brazen leap of logic that I furrowed my brow on instinct, but Sigiswald wished to know more.

"Raublut, elaborate," he said.

"Since his expulsion from Ehrenfest, Lord Ferdinand has found it much harder to puppeteer Lady Rozemyne. Perhaps he has pivoted to Lady Detlinde instead."

"I see... That sounds consistent with the facts."

I wasn't sure what Sigiswald meant, but several of Father's retainers responded with nods. The knights weren't the only ones agreeing with Raublut, as sycophants might—the scholars and attendants were too.

"He might have originally intended for Lady Rozemyne to activate the circle. I remember Lady Eglantine reporting that Lady Rozemyne was able to make feystones shine during their whirling practice."

"Then he might have resorted to using Lady Detlinde instead. She collapsed, but only because she had so little time to practice. Lady Rozemyne has at least three years of experience to her name, so she would almost certainly have been better suited to the task."

"Hmm... Lady Detlinde is graduating this year. Perhaps this was the only chance Lord Ferdinand had to reach the stage."

I couldn't fathom why everyone had so quickly accepted the proposal that

Ferdinand was to blame for all this. Was that simply how it appeared to those who knew nothing but the reports from the Royal Academy? They all seemed convinced, but I couldn't shake the unease that had come over me.

"The moment Lord Ferdinand moved to Ahrensbach, Lady Rozemyne ceased visiting the library almost entirely. Then his new fiancée activated that bizarre magic circle. It cannot be merely a coincidence."

"Lady Rozemyne stopped visiting the library because Sigiswald forbade her from going to the underground archive," I said, unable to hold my tongue any longer. "She was also instructed not to supply its magic tools with mana while the new archlibrarian works to become their master, and that isn't even taking into account how busy she must be overseeing her joint research with greater duchies."

My words must have fallen on deaf ears, for Father's retainers continued to assure each other that Ferdinand was devising some grand scheme. Seeing even my brother nod along with them made me wonder whether I was in the wrong for thinking none of this made sense.

"That he would continue to plot even from Ahrensbach proves how dangerous Lord Ferdinand must be," one of the scholars concluded. "We should investigate him further."

"Calm yourselves," Father said, exasperated. "As I made clear, the return of the Grutrissheit would be a joyous day for Yurgenschmidt. The country cannot be ruled properly in its absence. As long as it comes back, it does not matter who obtains it."

A shudder ran down my spine. What in the world was he saying? Father had sent Ferdinand to Ahrensbach on the grounds that if someone from Ehrenfest obtained the Grutrissheit, the losing duchies would come together and attempt to overturn the status quo, making a peaceful exchange of power impossible.

Does he now intend to bring civil war back to Yurgenschmidt?!

I wanted to protest, but Sigiswald spoke before I could.

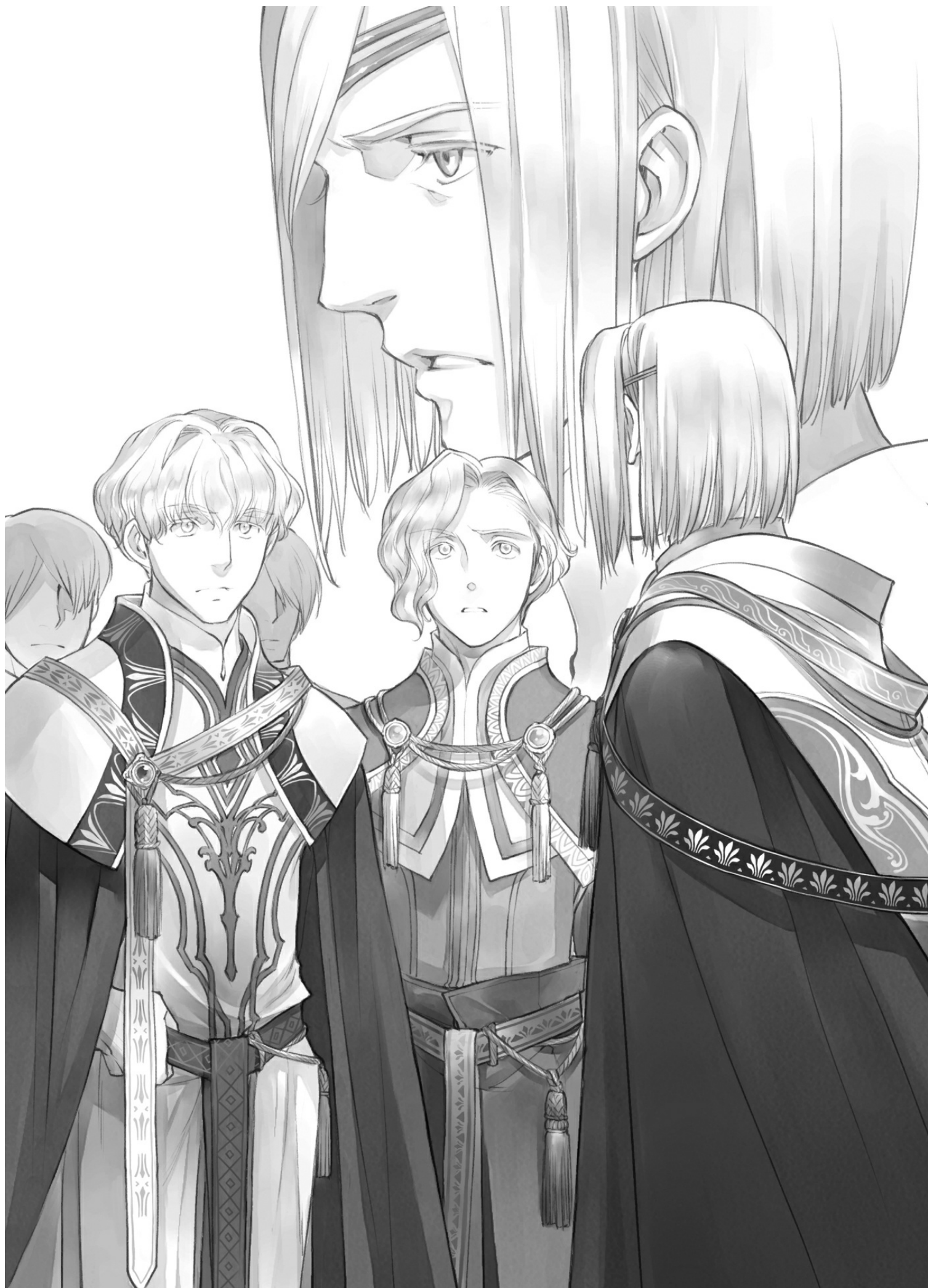
"In that case, when Raublut insisted that Lord Ferdinand was a branch royal targeting the Grutrissheit, why was your response to relocate the latter to

Ahrensbach? Was it not because you considered him a threat?”

“Yes, that was my logic. I thought it best to avoid chaos in the transition of power,” Father said. “Now that he has moved, however, the entire situation has changed. Ahrensbach is a greater duchy that supported me during the civil war; in contrast to Ehrenfest, we will not lack support there, and the transition of power should occur with relative ease. Though I do hope he acquires the Grutrissheit while Aub Ahrensbach is healthy. Lady Detlinde might only be an interim aub, but Lord Ferdinand will cease being able to become the Zent once she takes charge.”

Father hoped the pair would marry while the aub was in good health and that either Ferdinand or Detlinde would then obtain the Grutrissheit. They would establish themselves as the new royal couple and rule Yurgenschmidt, leaving Letizia and Hildebrand to run Ahrensbach as its archducal couple once they came of age. It was a plan that none of us had anticipated—presumably not even Ferdinand, on whom it all depended.

As desirable as that outcome must have been to Father, nobody else would wish for such a future. His retainers looked troubled, and Sigiswald was completely unconvinced.



“Do not look so grim,” Father told them. “This all depends on them actually obtaining the Grutrissheit. The odds are surely stacked against them; my elder brothers spilled blood in their frenzied search, and not even they were able to find it.”

So he said, but an unknown circle had appeared, and the Sovereign temple now claimed that Detlinde was a Zent candidate. As things stood, it would not be strange for someone unexpected to obtain the Grutrissheit under equally unexpected circumstances.

“If you do not consider it so simple, then I would advise not repeating that you intend to cede the throne when reporting the details of our meeting to your wives,” Sigiswald cautioned. “They would go berserk over the Sovereign temple’s rudeness.”

Father raised an eyebrow. “Hmm... A terrifying thought, indeed. To all of you here now: speak not a word of this to anyone. That is an order.” He gazed upon his retainers, grinning slyly. Then he stopped and turned, looking in the direction of the waiting room. “There is no guarantee that what the priests told us was correct. You should save your speculation for after you have investigated the truth of their claims.”

“Certainly. This testimony came from a High Bishop who cannot read even half of his own bible. The magic circle may serve another purpose entirely.”

“Though we cannot determine that ourselves...”

“Perhaps we could ask Rozemyne,” I said. “As we saw during the Royal Academy’s Dedication Ritual, Ehrenfest’s High Bishop knows a great deal about religious ceremonies. She seems able to read most—if not all—of the bible, unlike those of the Sovereign temple. She also cooperates with the royal family... with the exception of some occasional impudence.”

Rozemyne provided only somewhat attentive answers when faced with books or the library, and the advice she gave to royals could at times be openly impertinent. Still, she held no malice for our family.

Father crossed his arms in thought. “I would rather not involve a student of another duchy in our problems, but we need information as promptly as we can

get it. Hmm... My apologies, but could you ask Eglantine to summon her? I must go to the auditorium.”

“The auditorium?”

“I wish to see the stage with my own eyes. We should rule out foul play, should we not? Sigiswald, Anastasius, I must borrow your scholars.”

Before we could get a word in edgewise, Father took our scholars and sped toward the auditorium.

“And so, he leaves the task of reporting to his wives to us,” I said. “They must already be on edge, waiting to be told of the Sovereign temple’s rudeness.”

Our hands tied, we started our unenthusiastic trip back to the dining hall.

“Eglantine will need an explanation as well,” Sigiswald noted. “I entrust that duty to you, Anastasius.”

“It should fall to you to speak with Father’s wives. I must escort Eglantine back to our villa.”

“Your retainers can do that.”

“I refuse to have anyone else escort her. Not to mention, if we do not act soon, those of Ehrenfest will start preparing for the graduation ceremony.”

As we fought over who would explain the situation to Father’s wives, Sigiswald took out a sound-blocker. “Anastasius, what do you think about the theory that Ferdinand is behind all this?” he asked.

There was little I could say about Ferdinand as a person—the two of us had never really spoken—but I sincerely doubted the claim that Ehrenfest was trying to produce the next Zent. Their behavior during the Interduchy Tournament yesterday told me their hands were full enough from internal politics. They did not even have a good relationship with the losing duchies. I saw no reason they would attempt to bring them together to seize Yurgenschmidt.

“What do *you* think, Brother?” I asked in turn.

“He seems very suspicious to me. I thought that marrying him into Ahrensbach would erase his chances of starting another civil war to obtain the

throne... but Father is ready to step down, and Ferdinand surely schemed to activate that circle. I wonder if there is more to this situation than we know.”

Only a select few people had been present when Ferdinand was given his royal decree. Sigiswald and I were both excluded.

“Raublut attended as a guard knight,” my brother continued. “I suspect he knows far more than we do and that he has good cause to be so suspicious of Ferdinand.”

“So it seems abrupt to me but not the others because Father’s retainers know more than we do?” I crossed my arms in thought. As busy as Ehrenfest seemed, I could not guess what Ferdinand was thinking now that he was in Ahrensbach.

“Father insists that everything will change once Ferdinand formally becomes a citizen of Ahrensbach. And yet, the man’s marriage has yet to happen, and we now have reason to assume he was behind the activation of the stage’s magic circle. There might be more to this than we understand, and it could cause further incidents before his Starbind Ceremony. Should we not consider eliminating him before then?”

As much as I still thought my brother was overthinking the matter, I did not have any critical evidence that would warrant brushing aside his concerns. Still, “eliminating” Ferdinand sounded far too extreme to me.

“On what grounds? Detlinde activated the magic circle, and she is the one whom the Sovereign priests proclaim to be the next Zent. For now, would it not make more sense to investigate him?”

How were things faring in Ahrensbach? How strong was his relationship with Detlinde? How was he seen by the people of Ehrenfest? How did he think? What were his priorities? Did he truly wish to become the Zent? There were plenty of questions we still needed answers to.

“Ah, that reminds me,” Sigiswald said, “Raublut asked for the key to some villa or another as part of his investigation into Ferdinand. Father refused, insisting that the matter was concluded, but... perhaps I shall give it to him.”

A sigh of relief escaped me. If nothing else, I had redirected my brother’s focus from eliminating Ferdinand to simply looking into him.

Lutz — Tuuli's Worries

Description: A short story set during Part 5 Volume 4. Spring has arrived and the snow has just started to melt when Lutz is sent to the Gilberta Company. Ralph's coming-of-age ceremony is on the horizon, and Tuuli fears he might recognize Myne.

Author's Note: The idea for this story came to me when several readers asked whether those of the lower city were worried about Ralph's coming-of-age ceremony. Rozemyne managed to avoid Zasha's and Sieg's ceremonies but couldn't escape them all.

"Lutz, Master Benno wants to speak with you," an apprentice told me. "Meet him in his office after lunch."

"Right."

Now that the snow had started to melt, I could once again travel between the temple and the store.

I'd spent the winter looking after Kamil, who seemed to have steeled his resolve to join the Plantin Company. He had visited a short while ago to study for becoming an apprentice merchant and was excited to potentially tour the workshop come spring. Master Benno appreciated his enthusiasm and had even muttered that he was glad not to have to worry about the Gilberta Company or the Merchant's Guild nabbing him.

I rushed my lunch and went straight to Master Benno's office. He must have returned to his work as soon as he'd finished eating. We would be intensely busy next season, so the more we prepared now, the better.

"Master Benno, it's Lutz," I called, knocking on his door. "You wanted to see me?"

Mark opened the door for me. I passed through and saw Master Benno, who was jotting the results of various calculations on his ledgers.

“Sorry to ask at such short notice, but could you go to the Gilberta Company?” Master Benno asked me. “Tuuli approached Corinna and Otto about something that was worrying her, and it seems they want your help. I’d go with you, but I’m far too busy. I’ll only head over if they absolutely need me.”

“Understood,” I said.

I grabbed a few things and set out, moving briskly down the snow-speckled streets. The Plantin and Gilberta Companies weren’t too far apart. It was warmer today than the day before, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t cold.

Still, spring is right around the corner.

The Gutenbergs’ trip, now a yearly occurrence, would come with the changing of the seasons. A lot had happened among us this past year: Heidi was pregnant with her second child, which meant she couldn’t come with us to Kirnberger, and Zack was getting married, so he wanted to send his disciple instead. There was plenty to worry about, such as whether Zack’s disciple was talented enough to accompany us and whether the other nobles would even agree to let him come, no matter what Myne thought.

That reminds me—won’t Myne be returning to the temple soon?

According to Gil, she was scheduled to come back after the feast held to celebrate spring. He hadn’t been in particularly high spirits when he’d told me, so I assumed we wouldn’t see her anytime soon. It was always obvious when Myne was around; Gil ended up in a great mood, and the better food passed down to the orphanage caused the gray priests to start looking forward to meals.

I wonder what Tuuli’s concerned about.

The Gilberta Company’s staff were also on their lunch break, and there was only one employee in front of the store. I went over to greet him.

“Oh, Leon. On lunch duty again? Master Benno asked me to stop by.”

“Long time no see, Lutz. I was told you were coming. Take the outside stairs.”

Leon was on watch today. He had taught me with the others way back when I

was working for the Gilberta Company. I nodded and made my way up to the store's second floor.

I used to rent the attic room here.

It certainly was nostalgic. Since my move to the second floor of the Plantin Company—where I now lived as an apprentice leherl—I'd thought I would never use these stairs again. I might have gotten a little *too* used to my current living arrangement, as I dreaded having to carry water all the way up to the sixth floor whenever I returned home.

I knocked on Mrs. Corinna's door and relayed my business to the servingwoman who answered. She let me inside right away. The Gilberta Company's leherls, who were relaxing on their break, all watched me as I removed my thick winter coat. Seeing their uniforms brought on another wave of nostalgia and reminded me just how far I'd come in my career.

"Master Benno asked me to visit you," I explained once I was inside. "I was told you wanted to speak with me?"

"Is he not with you?" Mr. Otto asked.

"He told me he was too busy to come."

"I see... I was hoping to hear his thoughts as well, but fair enough." He got up out of his seat, and Tuuli did the same, though she looked strangely disappointed. "I don't think it's anything to worry about, but Tuuli was losing her head a little. Let's move to the other room; this isn't something we should discuss too openly."

In other words, it had something to do with Myne. I suspected it was not about her noble persona but rather something from when she was in the lower city. That much should have been obvious from the moment I was chosen for this task instead of someone else from the Plantin Company.

Once we'd moved to another room, Mr. Otto urged me to take a seat. I sat down as a guest, and Tuuli poured tea for the three of us. She placed my cup with feminine grace, and it was then that I realized my hands had grown larger than hers.

I still sometimes went to the forest with the orphans, but Tuuli only ever

worked inside, so her skin looked a lot paler than mine. She also had servants to do her chores, so her hands were largely unblemished—though the same was true for me. The scent of rinsham seemed to follow her around such that I doubted anyone who met her would assume she'd come from a poor family.

I'd never noticed all these things about her, since I usually saw her when we were both back home, and she tried not to stand out by wearing old clothes and speaking as she'd used to. Seeing her now, though, I realized she wasn't anywhere near as clumsy as before. She fit right in as a member of the Gilberta Company—which explained why Mr. Otto had agreed to her visiting the castle when she came of age.

I wanna come of age too.

Age was the only area in which I couldn't compete, which sucked. I continued to watch Tuuli, my head swimming with thoughts, until she eventually frowned at me.

"Um, Lutz... Is something the matter? Your staring is making me self-conscious..."

"Oh, it's nothing. I was just thinking that you're so fancy and elegant now."

"R-Really?"

Tuuli sat next to me, looking a little embarrassed. Mr. Otto watched us with a slight grin on his face, though I couldn't imagine why.

"So, Tuuli, what're you worried about?" I asked. "It has something to do with Myne, I assume."

"Mm-hmm. That's right. Remember how I went home for winter this year? I made my dress with Mom—though I was making my hairpin on my own—and we started chatting about the coming-of-age ceremony. We were trying to decide whether I should go from home or from the Gilberta Company..."

Tuuli would come of age at the end of summer. Mrs. Effa had spent the winter making her the perfect dress, and Tuuli had come up with a design to suit it. They'd apparently had a lot of spare time on their hands this year, as they hadn't received any urgent orders for the royal family.

Most people would count their blessings, but Tuuli said she actually felt bored not having Myne's wacky shenanigans to deal with.

"And that was when it hit me— isn't Ralph coming of age at the end of spring? I started wondering whether he'll recognize Myne when she performs the ceremony. Now I can't stop thinking about it."

Myne had rarely ever gone outside, so even her neighbors had a hard time remembering her face. Ralph was different, though; he had spent a lot more time with her, owing to his closeness with Tuuli, and played a hand in making her recipes with the rest of us.

"I told her not to worry, but..." Mr. Otto shot Tuuli a look.

She pressed her lips together. "I mean... won't it be *really* bad if he does recognize her?"

"It wouldn't be great, but I doubt it's even gonna come to that," Mr. Otto said nonchalantly. "Nobody would remember the face of a kid they met maybe a few times a month around the time of their baptism. Aren't you two the same way?"

I pondered the question.

Actually... I think I remember everyone.

As kids, we'd never had much reason to venture far from home. We'd spent most of our time with our neighbors and grown up alongside them. Only after our baptisms had we split up for apprentice work—and even then, it was rare to meet anyone from outside the city. We Gutenbergs were the odd ones for going from province to province.

And that's why Johann still doesn't have a single new patron.

Most customers came from spring till autumn, which was precisely when Johann was away for work. By this point, most people saw "Gutenberg" as a title for those who worked exclusively for Lady Rozemyne. She paid well, and working with the aub's adopted daughter was great publicity for any workshop, but their repeated absences on long trips were inevitably bad for business.

"I remember everyone," Tuuli said, snapping me out of my thoughts. "I

wouldn't forget a single person I grew up with—or anyone from the workshop I joined after my baptism.”

I voiced my agreement. It was common practice in the lower city to get work through your parents, and most people married within the same social circle, so you basically ended up knowing everyone around you. Growing up wouldn't be enough to forget them.

“Mr. Otto, I think you only feel that way because you were a traveling merchant,” I said. “We've lived here our entire lives, and we remember almost everyone we've met.”

“Well, that's interesting...” he mused aloud. “Was there anyone who passed away before your baptisms? If so, do you remember them?”

I thought back to everyone in our neighborhood who had passed away. Though some of their faces were fuzzy to me, not one of them had vanished from my mind. “Most of them were old, but I remember them all—even the kids who died when I was young.”

“But you remember them as they were at that age, don't you? If you saw someone who looked like an older version of someone you knew had passed on, would you assume it was the same person? Surely not. Nobody in their right mind would immediately assume their death was a hoax.”

Myne was tiny to begin with, and she'd spent two years asleep, so she didn't even look ten years old. Her appearance had changed considerably since her days as a commoner, and anyone who thought she might have faked her death would expect her to look on the cusp of coming of age. Her youth wasn't strange to us, as we'd stayed in touch with her the entire time, but Ralph would find it much harder to piece everything together.

“Not to mention,” Otto continued, “the way Lady Rozemyne acts and dresses is completely distinct from anything we might have expected from little ol' Myne back in the day. Would he really assume that some girl he once knew was behind all the blessings everyone in the city keeps raving about?”

I'd seen Myne give blessings in Haldenzel and Groschel, and yeah, she was barely even recognizable. But of course, the smug little grin she gave right after shattered the mystical, almost dreamlike feel of the moment.

“Not to mention, kicking up a fuss about the archduke’s adopted daughter being a commoner could easily be seen as sedition. Heck, if you think he might run his mouth, warn him in advance that they look pretty similar and that he shouldn’t say anything he might regret.”

“Lutz, would you do that for me?” Tuuli asked, genuinely worried.

I understood why she was so sensitive about Myne, though the thought of going home gave me pause. Our parents had more or less decided that Tuuli and I would get married, and Ralph gave me hell about it every chance he got. I would really much rather avoid him.

“I just really, *really* don’t want this to turn into a problem for Lady Rozemyne,” Tuuli continued, staring at me intently. She looked stunning, and that was coming from someone used to seeing noblewomen and rich merchant girls. I couldn’t blame Ralph for gasping and goggling when she returned home for winter.

Ralph might have dated a bunch of girls—in fact, he’s dating another as we speak—but Tuuli still means a lot to him.

Even though everything had changed, and they never met up or even spoke anymore, she had a special place in Ralph’s heart. It reminded me of the way that Myne still mattered to me, and the resemblance made me a little uncomfortable. Sieg told me it was normal for men whenever he saw Ralph on my case, which might have meant that he’d experienced the same thing.

“Okay,” I relented, “I’ll speak with Ralph the next time I go home. I’m going to be in Kirnberger during his ceremony. I don’t want anything to happen while I’m gone, so I’ll do what I can before then.”

“Thanks, Lutz. I appreciate it!”

Not much else I can do when Myne might be facing a problem.

I stood up with a sigh, which prompted Mr. Otto to shoot us both a wry smile. “You two really are alike, huh?” he said.

“How?”

“You both love Lady Rozemyne way too much.”

Myne *was* a frequent topic of conversation whenever we came together—the hairpins she ordered, the books she enjoyed, what we were printing... I wasn't sure that I agreed with us loving her "way too much," though.

I exchanged a glance with Tuuli. She looked as unconvinced as I felt, which told me we were on the same wavelength. I shrugged, she nodded, and we both rounded on Mr. Otto.

"Not nearly as much as you love Mrs. Corinna," we said at exactly the same time.

Rozemyne — Speaking to Lasfam

Description: A previously unpublished short story from the online collection, set right after “She Arrived Immediately” in Part 5 Volume 4. This is one of Rozemyne’s conversations with the layattendant Lasfam, who looks after her new library. He seeks information about his lord, who was relocated to Ahrensbach.

Author’s Note: I elected not to include this conversation in the light novels, as it didn’t have much to do with the plot, and stuck it online instead.

“My apologies, Lady Rozemyne, but may I request a moment of your time? There is something I wish to ask you.”

I had just finished speaking with Clarissa and was about to return to the temple when Lasfam called out to me. “But of course,” I said, turning to him. “Ask away.”

Lasfam had dark-green hair, wavy but swept back, and green eyes. He wore a peaceful smile as he looked at me. The sharp fashion he had worn when serving Ferdinand reminded me of a younger Mark. How they spoke and carried themselves seemed mostly the same, so I’d arbitrarily ended up liking him more.

“I was told that Lord Ferdinand is involved with Ahrensbach’s religious ceremonies and wish to know the details,” Lasfam explained.

“Then why are you so...?” I paused. “Excuse me. It isn’t that I don’t want to answer; rather, your expression seems far too tense for someone simply curious about his former lord.”

Lasfam stopped to think, then handed me a sound-blocker. He covered his mouth, concerned that someone might try to read his lips, and said, “I, too, have given my name to Lord Ferdinand.”

As it turned out, Lasfam had needed to stay in Ehrenfest because he lacked

the combat training to stand his ground in a fight. Ahrensbach would have been too dangerous for him as a result. Instead, despite being equally as important as Eckhart and Justus, he had been entrusted with overseeing the estate and other belongings his lord had needed to leave behind.

Well, that explains that.

“Lord Ferdinand promised to relocate me to Ahrensbach when the situation there settled down, but I am told almost nothing of his situation,” Lasfam noted. “If you have any information, I would appreciate the opportunity to hear it.”

I explained that Ferdinand would be performing Ahrensbach’s Spring Prayer, that he was growing more and more frustrated about being stuck in a guest room with no way to do any research, and that he was once again skipping meals and sleep to focus on work.

“He’s being made to perform Spring Prayer?!” Lasfam exclaimed. “Even though he hasn’t been Starbound yet?!”

“Indeed. Cruel, is it not? Aub Ehrenfest intends to protest the decision during the next Archduke Conference... though I would assume that Ferdinand *appreciates* the workload.”

Even in Ehrenfest, he had used Spring Prayer and the Harvest Festival to circle the duchy and acquire ingredients that took his fancy. I assumed that performing such ceremonies in Ahrensbach would also give him some much-needed respite from being stuck in the castle.

“I consider it a given that Ferdinand will enjoy circling the duchy—especially with Justus—but we would not want his treatment to be considered the norm in Ehrenfest or the same fate to befall anyone else.”

“It warms my heart to hear that Lord Ferdinand was able to confide in you,” Lasfam said, though he wore a terribly conflicted smile. “As I understand it, his demeanor hardened when he first entered the temple, and it remained that way until you joined him there.”

I thought back to the days when he had needed to perform the duties of the High Priest *and* the High Bishop almost entirely on his own and to all the

potions he had depended on just to get by. “There was a time when we were lacking both mana and people to help with the temple’s administrative work. I still remember his relief when we first performed the Dedication Ritual together.”

“Though I do not know how Ahrensbach performs its ceremonies, I doubt Lord Ferdinand has as much control over theirs as he did ours. I worry he will try to bottle up the stress of the burden thrust upon him.”

I could see why Lasfam was concerned. Ferdinand had gained control of Ehrenfest’s ceremonies only after getting rid of the previous High Bishop; he was bound to be more restricted in Ahrensbach’s temple. As for his stress levels, though I was prone to wearing my heart on my sleeve, he was a pure-blooded noble and would never let his true emotions show in front of his Ahrensbach retainers.

“If only I could meet him face-to-face,” I said. “I would know just by looking at him whether he was stretched too thin. Even the letters he writes me are monitored, so he cannot tell me anything of substance.”

Mere moments ago, I had assumed that Ferdinand would appreciate his tour of the duchy. Now I wasn’t so sure. “I hope he writes to me while he’s performing Spring Prayer, but... I doubt he will.” He was so busy that he replied to only one of every three letters I sent him—and in one of his responses, he had explained that he would be educating Letizia alongside the trip. Using my own education as a benchmark, I could guess that he wouldn’t have time for correspondence.

“Still,” I said, “we need only wait for him to marry. Then he should receive a hidden room and stop being treated as a guest. I pray that he will summon you soon.”

“Indeed,” Lasfam replied. “I eagerly await the day he calls for me.” Seeing his small, bright smile, I somehow envied the fact that Ferdinand had promised to reunite with him.

Not that I want him to summon me.

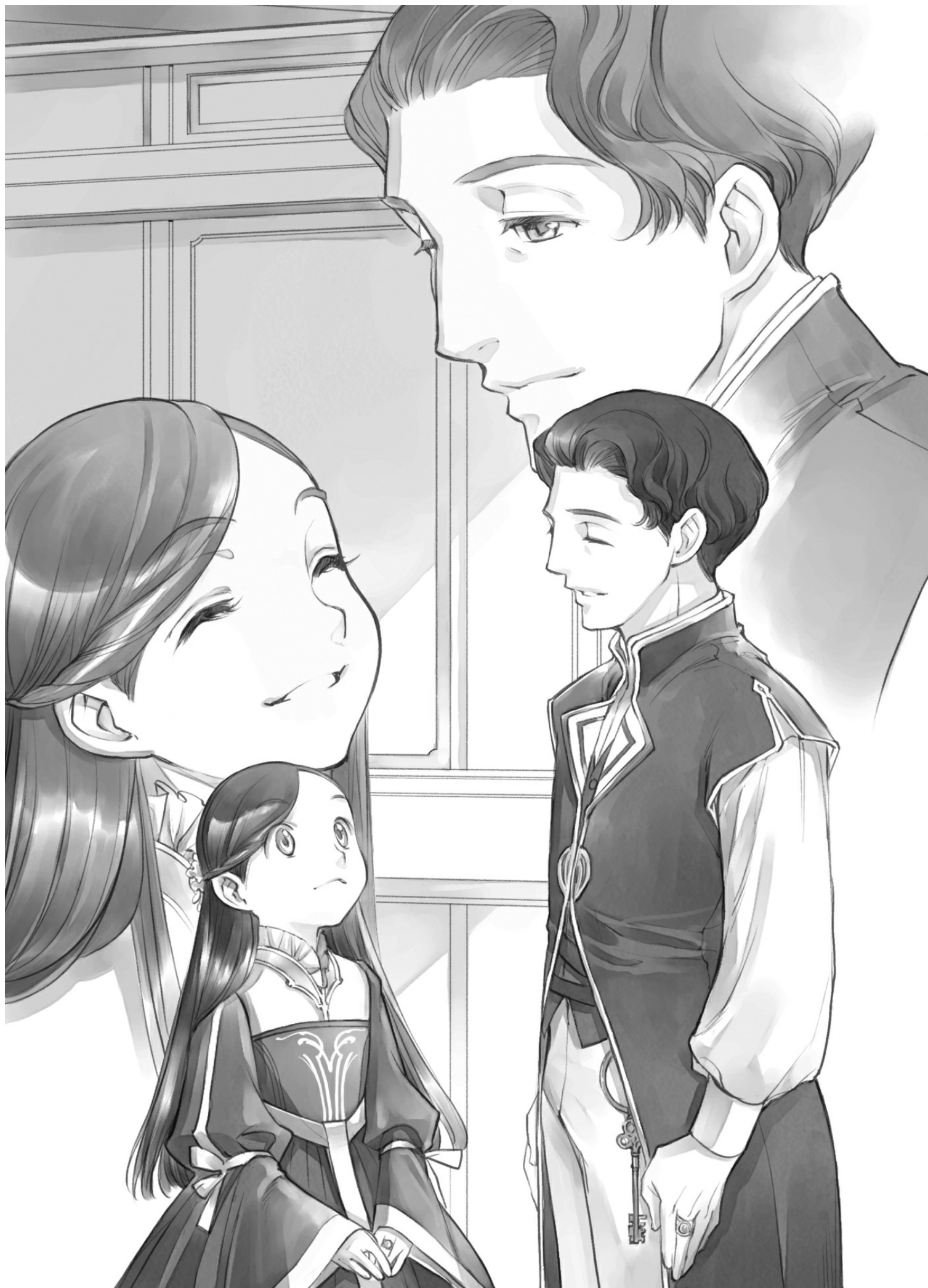
I wouldn’t leave Ehrenfest for as long as my family called it home.

“The next time Ferdinand sends me a letter or notice, I would not mind relaying the contents to you,” I said. “In return, I ask that you tell me what you know about him. For example... did he ever blunder at the Royal Academy? Please tell me now while we have the chance.”

Lasfam looked nostalgic as he thought back to the past. “Lord Ferdinand did not blunder during the school year—I took great care to ensure as much. As for when the other students were at home, however... There might be a few such incidents that would interest you.”

“I look forward to hearing about them.”

And with that, I continued on my way.



Effa — How They've Grown

Description: A previously unpublished short story from the online collection that takes place around the time of Part 5 Volume 4. Lutz and Tuuli come home out of nowhere with news about Effa's job. They explain that she received permission to visit the temple, though Kamil wasn't quite so lucky. He sure has grown up fast!

Author's Note: This short story takes place at almost the same time as the one that follows it. Both focus on when Effa was permitted to visit the temple.

"Mom, Kamil, I'm home!"

"And I'm here too."

One afternoon, when spring's baptism ceremony was drawing near, Tuuli arrived at our door with Lutz in tow. Kamil and I were preparing food when we saw them, and our eyes widened in surprise.

"Can Lutz join us for dinner?" Tuuli asked.

"Yes, of course," I said. "But didn't the two of you tell me you were too busy to come home?"

Because of all the visiting merchants, both the Plantin and Gilberta Companies were always overrun with orders around this time of year. Their workload started picking up toward the end of winter, and unless they had something major to report, it usually wasn't until midway through autumn that Lutz and Tuuli came home.

"We need to speak about your job," Tuuli explained to me. "Do you know how long Dad is gonna be?"

"He was working the morning shift, so he shouldn't be long."

"Okay. I'll wait for him to get back, then. Should save me from having to explain the whole situation twice. Is that okay with you, Lutz?" Tuuli turned to

him with a smile as she threw on an apron. She was going to help us prepare dinner.

“Yeah,” Lutz replied with a nod. “Not to mention, Mr. Gunther’s bound to ask the same questions. Better to wait and tell them both together.”

We had some time on our hands before Gunther was due to arrive, so Lutz stepped out to tell Karla he was going to spend the night at home.

I smiled. “It’s always a relief when you come home with your fiancé.” Tuuli was the most successful girl in our side of the city, so there was a chance she might get kidnapped if she wandered about on her own.

“Is that your way of saying the engagement’s set in stone?” Tuuli asked, washing the vegetables. She sounded a little worried to me.

“Yep. Lutz is a year younger than you, but he can pay the bride price, knows a lot about our family, and even walks you home. We couldn’t ask for more.”

Tuuli would come of age this summer. It was about time for her to start seriously looking for a partner, but she was exceptionally busy with her work as a leherl of the Gilberta Company. She was in a tough spot where she couldn’t really look for a partner among her colleagues or here in our poor neighborhood. Lutz was her only option.

Not too long ago, Gunther and I had gone over the engagement with Lutz’s parents. They thought Lutz was in the same predicament as Tuuli—too busy to find anyone on his own—and agreed that the pair should get married.

“We can schedule your marriage for right after Lutz comes of age,” I said. “Or we can wait until you’re both ready. We want to work around your jobs, of course.”

Tuuli was busy when all the merchants came to Ehrenfest, and Lutz went on long-distance trips every spring. Coming of age would probably change their workloads to some degree, so we saw nothing wrong with waiting for them both to settle into things.

“Marriage, coming of age... It just doesn’t feel real to me,” Tuuli muttered.

“Give it time. Once you start doing up your hair, get used to how your job

changes, and prepare your new place with Lutz, it won't feel as strange anymore."

"I guess..."

Seeing her expression, realization washed over me. "Tuuli... is there someone else you like?"

"Well, um... There *was* someone. But I wasn't nearly enough for them."

She claimed that such emotions were behind her, but the heart wasn't so simple. Her melancholic smile made me feel awful. She served the archduke's adopted daughter, which was enough for anyone in the city. If anything hadn't been "enough," then it had to have been us, her family...

"That wasn't your fault, Tuuli. I'm so proud of all you've accomplished. If anything brought you down, it was us."

"No, that's not what I meant. The person in question was interested in someone else, so... Yeah. We could never have been together. We didn't suit each other at all. I can't even imagine what it would have been like to be married to him." Tuuli met my eye with a look of renewed determination. "Engagements are for parents to decide, and I know Lutz really well, so... I'm fine with this."

Tuuli had put all of her focus into making Myne's hairpins, so she hadn't given marriage much thought at all. She had the appearance of a young woman who had already come of age but the concerns of a girl who hadn't.

How was it for me, again?

I thought back to my own coming-of-age. Gunther had shown up and proposed to me every chance he got. He had shown up so much, in fact, that my dad said it was up to me to deal with him.

Back then, I was completely overwhelmed.

My lips curled into a smile, and that was when Gunther came back. Lutz was with him. As a girl, the very thought of marrying Gunther had seemed so strange to me, but now one of our daughters was about to come of age.

"You know, Tuuli..." I said in a hushed voice, "marriage seemed just as strange

when Gunther first started proposing to me. I didn't think we would ever end up together."

"Dad would cry if he found out you said that."

"Then let's make it our little secret."

"So, what's all this about Effa's job?" Gunther asked as we sat down to eat.

Tuuli exchanged a look with Lutz, then giggled. "Just the other day, there was a meeting in the temple. The Gilberta Company had to take orders for Lady Rozemyne's new hairpin and clothes."

As part of that process, Tuuli had gotten a chance to see her sister again. Myne looked more mature than ever, apparently—she had grown taller out of nowhere and seemed so much more like an adult.

"If that was what you wanted to tell me, then I already knew," I said. "Gunther gave me an update after that incident at the west gate. He said she looked as though she was about to come of age!"

"Um, no she didn't... Not even close. She barely looked ten years old."

"Yeah," Lutz chimed in. "She didn't look out of place in her shin-length skirt, but that's about the most I can say."

In other words, Gunther had embroidered the truth.

"Sure, she looked young enough to have been newly baptized—she has for ages—but those skirts actually suit her now," he protested. "Anyone would think she's come of age!"

So he said, but I thought it better to trust Lutz and Tuuli. Gunther was always biased when it came to Myne.

"Well, enough of that," Tuuli said. "To cut a long story short, Lady Rozemyne has grown a decent amount, and Mrs. Corinna thinks we should use more mature cloth for her clothes to reflect that. To that end, she wants Mom to come along as a Renaissance. We have the temple's permission, so we want you to head there the day after tomorrow."

"What?!"

I was so surprised that I didn't even know what to say. I'd already known about the title, but it wasn't every day that a commoner got to meet with the archduke's adopted daughter. Gunther saw her twice a year at Hasse, and Tuuli took her hairpin orders, but I hadn't seen my other daughter for a very long time.

I'm going to see Myne...?

"Meeting in the castle was out of the question, since you need to speak and act properly there, but they can overlook those things in the temple," Tuuli explained. "The Gilberta Company intends to mediate, though, so you won't be able to speak with her directly."

I would need to settle for seeing Myne from a short distance away so that her noble guards wouldn't get upset with me. Still, I was excited to see how much she had grown with my own eyes.

"Good for you, Effa," Gunther said with a beaming smile, no less pleased than if this news were for him. I knew he felt guilty about having so many more chances to speak with Myne than I did.

"Would you thank Mrs. Corinna for me?" I asked Tuuli.

"Of course. Dress your best when the day comes. Oh, and here's some rinsham."

Tomorrow, I would go to my workshop and tell the foreman that I needed a day off. I wouldn't need to worry about my request being refused as long as I explained that I was going to the temple as a Renaissance. Preparing for the temple was no small ask; I would need to fix up my best dress and wash my hair with rinsham.

Lutz beckoned to Kamil and said, "Kamil, there's something I've gotta tell you."

"Oh?"

Kamil rushed over to Lutz, his golden-brown eyes ablaze with excitement. He was the spitting image of Myne, which both warmed my heart and put a lump in my throat.

“You wanted to tour the workshop, right? I’m sorry to say, the temple won’t let you.”

“Aww! But I was *reeeally* looking forward to it!”

“They can’t allow unbaptized kids into the temple,” Lutz explained, shaking his head. “And as more nobles are going to be visiting the temple from this spring onward, a tour would put the Plantin Company in danger.”

As much as it pained me to see Kamil so disappointed, I was honestly relieved. Hearing that nobles would start frequenting the temple reminded me of when a noble from another duchy had shown up out of the blue, which had resulted in Myne being taken away from us. I wouldn’t crush my son’s dreams when he’d just resolved to follow in Myne’s footsteps and make books of his own, but as a mother, I wanted to keep him as far away from nobles as I could.

“This can’t be...” Kamil whined. “Dirk and Konrad said they couldn’t wait to show me around.”

“That’s enough, Kamil,” Tuuli said. “It isn’t Lutz’s fault. He did as much as he could to get you a tour. Not to mention, if you can’t accept the nobles’ decision even when they’ve gone out of their way to explain it, then you should give up on joining the Plantin Company at all.”

Kamil pursed his lips and fell silent.

Lutz patted his head and apologized. “I thought the temple wouldn’t mind, since we’re doing so much for the orphanage, and the people there seemed open to the idea when I first put it forward. It was the High Bishop who turned it down, which goes to show how real the danger must be. Don’t forget the charms she gave us.”

Myne was the High Bishop, but some of the temple’s priests knew she was a commoner, and she was only a figurehead for the archducal family. She couldn’t just do whatever she wanted.

Gunther nodded. “Lady Rozemyne’s devoted to protecting commoners from nobles. Back when a noble from another duchy was kicking up a fuss at the west gate, she sent her personal guards to help us without a second thought. If she thinks this is too dangerous for you, then we should believe her.”

He went on to recount what Myne had said when they'd reunited at the west gate. Kamil and I had heard the story more times than we could count, but Tuuli and Lutz were excited to hear it. They had been in a meeting at the temple when it all happened, so they had seen nobles rush out at her command.

"By that point, she was giving orders as naturally as a proper noble," Lutz recalled.

"Her voice was so sharp!" Tuuli added. "I couldn't believe it!"

Gunther nodded. "She sends Lord Damuel to the gate whenever we have noble trouble, so the men are always glad to see him."

Kamil pursed his lips, bored, and trudged back to his seat. Then he glared at me, his cheeks puffed out in protest. "How come *you're* allowed to go to the temple, Mom? It isn't fair... I hate the High Bishop."

I understood why he was throwing a tantrum, but I was so incredibly excited to see Myne up close again. "If you keep saying things like that, then you might stop getting all those new books. She's the reason we get them, you know."

The day had finally arrived. I went to the temple with the Gilberta Company and stood where I was told to, watching Myne from a respectful distance. She really had grown. Even her countenance had changed. Any traces of immaturity were gone, and she now wore the expression of an adult.

Back when she had lived with us, Myne had spent most of her time stuck in bed. I still remembered her sunken cheeks and pale skin, but her face looked much healthier now, and she had a considerably warmer complexion. Her glossy hair was well maintained, she wore fancy clothes, and a beautiful stone-decorated hair ornament sat beside the best hairpin Tuuli had made to date.

On top of everything else, the way Myne acted like a proper noble meant that nobody would ever suspect she was my daughter.

That said, she's still the same in certain ways.

"Lady Rozemyne," Tuuli said, "I see that your facial features have matured as well. Do you have anything in mind for your summer hairpin? Are there any particular flowers you would like me to use?"

“My tastes are largely the same, so you may choose whichever flowers will suit me as I am now. If possible, I would like them to match the dyed cloth.”

Tuuli had come a long way with her hairpins—they were so much fancier than when she had first started making them—but Myne’s smile and the way they spoke about her next order brought me straight back to old times. It helped that Myne’s voice was almost entirely unchanged. Next to Tuuli, she looked five—maybe six—years younger. Their age gap seemed much larger than before, but in my eyes, they were as close as they’d always been.

Feeling tickled that Myne was paying extra attention to me, I met her gaze and thought about what patterns and colors would suit her most. Preparing the best cloth I could was the one thing I could do for her right now.

I’ll need to knuckle down to make sure her summer clothes are finished in time.

Tuuli — Engagement Circumstances

Description: A sales bonus story for Part 5 Volume 4, set before the Gutenbergs' trip to Kirnberger. It depicts Tuuli and Lutz's view on marriage from their unusual position as once poor commoners now working for rich merchants. Enjoy their rushed engagement and a look into how such arrangements are made in the lower city. It's a big family gathering!

Author's Note: I wrote this story in response to the countless requests for more information about how Tuuli and Lutz ended up together and because so many readers wanted to know more about lower-city engagements.

"Break time," Gunilla said. "Everyone, hands off your work."

"Ngh... But I was so close to being done!"

"Nuh-uh." Gunilla shook her head and smiled. "Not once have you said that and actually meant it."

I carefully set down my hairpin—which was only halfway done—and went to the break room with the others. Our store contained a lot of expensive tools and cloth, so we weren't allowed to eat at or even bring food to our workstations.

"I wanted to finish it all in one go..." I grumbled.

"The lehangs can't take breaks until the leherls do, remember? You're about to come of age; it would do you well to consider not just your hairpin orders but the future of the workshop as a whole."

Gunilla was my senior, so my only option was to concede. She was right, anyway—prioritizing my work for Lady Rozemyne meant I usually neglected other things that needed my attention. I waited as she opened the door, and at once, we were met with complaining.

"He won't talk about anything else. It's the worst!"

I turned to the source of the noise—Leonie, another leherl. She had participated in the winter coming-of-age ceremony before taking three days off to spend with her family.

“You seem anxious, Leonie,” I said. “Did something happen?”

“I keep telling my dad that I don’t wanna think about marriage yet, but that hasn’t stopped him from bringing man after man to see me! Every day I was at home, he brought me somebody’s son to deal with. Made me wish I’d never gone back at all!”

“Wasn’t it kind of him to give you a choice?” one of the others chimed in. “My dad picked my fiancé for me. I didn’t even know the first thing about the guy!”

“But I was already seeing someone,” Leonie countered. “If my dad were as kind as you think, he wouldn’t have put pressure on my boyfriend’s family and forced him to get engaged to another woman!”

“Well, that’s what all dads do when they don’t approve of the guy their daughter’s seeing. Mine did the same thing.”

The engaged among us began sharing their experiences. They all seemed to have remarkable stories to tell.

“Oh, Tuuli—you’re coming of age this summer, right? Your parents must be on your back about engagements by now.”

“Yeah, this is around when it starts to dominate every conversation...” Leonie said. “My mom and dad sure had a lot to say to me.”

I nodded. Leonie and I were both considered “old enough” for talks of engagement. If you wanted to get married two or three years after coming of age, then you had to find a partner before your ceremony.

“Come on, Tuuli—which business is your suitor from? He’s a leherl, right? Is your dad listening to your preferences, or are you having someone forced on you?”

These questions aren’t exactly relevant to me.

Conversations of this sort reminded me that I lived in a completely different world from my colleagues. The only men my dad and mom could introduce me

to were soldiers or people involved with the clothing industry. I would never be introduced to the son of a rich merchant, and strengthening family alliances wasn't exactly a priority for us.

I put on a smile and gave the vaguest response I could: "My dad is okay with hearing me out, but I don't know how much he's going to listen. To be honest... marriage is still totally beyond me."

"Right?" Leonie said. "My dad is aaall about his store. Though... this is kinda strange. I always assumed you were one of those girls who do everything their parents tell them to. I never thought you'd fight back!" Her eyes sparkled with excitement that she'd found an ally... but I doubted we were on the same page.

"I understand not wanting to think about marriage, but isn't it important that you find someone?" Gunilla asked, eyeing me with worry as Leonie gleefully took my hands. "You had another weird guy approach you just recently, didn't you? Master Otto was worried sick."

Again, she was right. One man had approached me because I made Lady Rozemyne's hairpins, though my being from the poor side of town meant he'd proposed with the most patronizing expression imaginable. I'd consulted Master Otto and asked him to shoo the guy away, but more were showing up the closer I got to coming of age.

"You're dating that Lutz guy anyway, right? Why not get engaged to him?"

"Whaaat? Isn't she older than him? That's, like, out of the question."

"Besides, her parents have the final say. Tuuli could be obsessed with him and it wouldn't change a thing."

I wore an evasive smile as everyone fought to say their piece. Lutz and I weren't actually together, but our parents were pretty much guaranteed to set us up with each other. My heart really belonged to Mr. Benno, though my hopes of dating him had been dashed as soon as they'd revealed themselves.

Acknowledging or denying anything the others said would only lead to weird misinterpretations; the best thing I could do was wait for our lunch break to end.

Over the winter, despite my reluctance to even think about marriage, my engagement to Lutz was set in stone. Mom told me the news when I returned home to inform her she was allowed to go to the temple for the measuring.

Lutz had also been told about our engagement; he shot me a concerned glance as we made our way back to our respective stores. “Tuuli... I get that our parents have already made up their minds, but are you sure about this? My mom said we come home so rarely that the next time we see them, they’re gonna gather our families together and make the whole thing official.” He was probably asking me now so we could speak without any interference from our parents.

In truth, Lutz had noticed my crush on Mr. Benno before it had even crossed my mind. He already knew about my heartbreak and gave me advice whenever I asked for it. As it stood, he was worried how I might feel about getting married to someone else.

This can’t be easy for him. He’s fully aware that I love someone else—someone he knows.

“I knew this would happen,” I said. “I mean, I went home this winter instead of staying at the store, right?”

I’d heard that Lady Rozemyne wouldn’t be returning to the temple, and I’d needed to prepare for my own coming-of-age ceremony. My dress had to be good enough for a leherl of the Gilberta Company to wear with pride.

Nobody at the workshop can match my hairpin-making skills, but my sewing is average at best.

Of course, I meant “average” by Mrs. Corinna’s standards, which put me above the vast majority of the girls in my area. I wanted to devote more time to my sewing—there was enough competition that it wouldn’t be easy for me to be trusted with Lady Rozemyne’s clothes—but I always ended up focusing on hairpins. They were the one thing keeping me in contact with my sister; I wouldn’t let anyone take that luxury away from me.

“During my time at home, Mom told me what the other girls my age have been up to,” I said. “I still don’t want to think about marriage, but many of them are already engaged or at least dating someone.”

“Yeah, things at home are pretty different from how they are at the store.”

No other leherls or lehanges at the Gilberta Company were from the poor south of the city. Everyone at work was kind to me, but it always stung a little when something drew attention to my upbringing and education. At the same time, I’d spent enough years immersed in the world of merchants that I sometimes found it hard to relate to how things were done back home. Lutz was just about the only one who understood what I was going through.

“Well, the one thing I made clear was that I didn’t want to marry a soldier,” I noted. “That led to a discussion about who would understand my situation and support my career... and the only option we could think of was you.”

“You’re older than me, though. Does that not bother you?”

The ideal time for a woman to marry was between her coming-of-age and when she turned twenty. Men, on the other hand, usually waited until they were older than twenty and earning a stable income. Most women married men who were three to ten years older than them as a result; it was rare to see a wife who was older than her husband.

“You can pay the bride price, right?” I asked. “That was the decisive factor.”

“Oh, that... Because of all the trips I make, I get paid a traveling fee on top of my usual salary. Then there’s my income from the Plant Paper Guild and whatnot. I don’t even spend much on those trips, so I end up saving most of what I earn anyway.”

It was easy for leherls to build up savings because their stores covered most of their living costs. Lutz’s trips meant he got paid extra on top of that and wouldn’t need to buy clothes for visiting stores on the rich side of the city. As for me, I spent a fair amount of money on necessities and clothes to match my coworkers.

“So you won’t mind going ahead with this?” Lutz asked.

“It sounds better than marrying a soldier. You understand my circumstances, and our families get along well; I can’t think of anyone who would suit me better.”

I wasn’t jumping for joy at the idea, but Lutz wasn’t to blame for that—I

wasn't too keen on the thought of becoming a wife in general. On the bright side, because he was younger than me, moving things forward wouldn't mean rushing straight into marriage. I was glad to have a little more time to think things through.

"I also wanted to ask about Master Benno," Lutz ventured. Just hearing that man's name soured my mood and made my heart ache. I didn't want to speak about him—not that I had much of a choice.

"He won't ever see me that way. I mean, think about it—we don't suit each other at all. I can't even imagine what our married life would be like. Do you really think I could succeed as the Plantin Company's matriarch?"

"Dunno... I think you'd find it tough to begin with, and you'd make all sorts of small, unexpected mistakes. Not to mention, you'd need to help him run the store. You'd have to give up on a lot of the jobs you do now."

Being the owner of the Plantin Company's wife would make me its matriarch, not a seamstress as I was now. I would end up in the same situation as when I first joined the store—completely unsure how to act. Everyone would expect me to work for the Plantin Company's sake, think about its future, and support my husband. I would also need to quit making hairpins; even if Mr. Benno told me I could continue, others would surely object.

"Just wanting to marry someone isn't enough," I said. "I admire Mr. Benno—love him, even—but I won't let those emotions control me. I understand all too clearly that he and I don't belong together. No matter how deeply I care for him, he won't ever look at me the same way."

It wasn't like Mr. Benno reciprocated my feelings. And even if he had, the problems destined to follow our marriage would completely overshadow our romance. They weren't the sort of problems our love would be able to conquer.

"But with you, Lutz... there's nothing for me to complain about. I already know our families work well together, and you know as much about being a merchant as I do. It makes me wonder if *you're* okay with this arrangement. Are your parents sure they want to go through with it?"

Lutz waved away the question. "My mom and dad were celebrating. 'You're lucky to have found someone who matches your salary *and* understands your

situation,’ they told me. ‘Don’t let her get away.’”

“Mine said more or less the same thing. It’s hard to marry up or down in status. The dowries and such would probably bankrupt one family or the other.”

And the problems wouldn’t end with the ceremony—both sides would need to get involved when the couple had children, during baptisms, and so on. Neither my nor Lutz’s family had the capital to meet the expectations of anyone working for the Plantin or Gilberta Companies.

“But that wasn’t what I meant,” I said. “I want to know if you’re okay with marrying me despite knowing who I’m in love with.”

“I gave it a lot of thought, and... it doesn’t bother me.”

“Have you not considered marrying into a merchant family? For obvious reasons, a merchant girl wouldn’t want to marry into your family... but you could always marry into hers, right? You have years until you’re expected to take a wife. Marrying me will deprive you of so many better opportunities.”

Any decent merchants would care too much about familial ties to entrust their daughter to such a poor household, but absorbing Lutz into their family was another story entirely.

“Out of the question,” Lutz said, shaking his head without even pausing to think. “I would need to join their store, right? If not for Lady Rozemyne, I wouldn’t even have made it this far. I’ll never work for any store but the Plantin Company.”

Lutz had made paper with Myne, sold the techniques to Mr. Benno, made more paper in the temple’s workshop, and then spread printing and paper-making technologies to other provinces. They were great accomplishments, but working in the temple and taking orphans to the forest weren’t important to other merchant households—and as Lutz would refuse to reveal anything about Lady Rozemyne or the printing industry in general, he wouldn’t hold much value to them.

“So you don’t mind marrying me, then?” I asked.

“I mean, we’re in the same boat—what other choice do we have?”

“Right.”

We weren't in love; we just happened to be the most convenient partners for each other.

Still, it's so easy to imagine a life with him.

We wouldn't need to push ourselves or try to act more important than we really were. Instead, we could both continue to live normally.

“Mom said we can wait until you come of age or until we feel the time is right,” I said.

Lutz was away each year from spring till autumn, and my own workload shot up as merchants from other duchies came to browse our city's wares. We were also both underage. It seemed wise to wait for when we were of age and more comfortable with our new roles at work.

“Tuuli, what are you hoping for? Would you rather we get married soon? If not, we have enough money to wait.”

Gunilla's advice echoed through my mind. “Hmm... Our marriage can wait, but I want us to get engaged sooner rather than later.”

“Really? How come?”

“Well, um...” My next words were hard to utter—I couldn't shake the fear that Lutz might tell my dad—but I steeled my resolve and said them anyway. “Being from the poor part of the city and all... men see me as their plaything. Some of them are a little forceful with me; others pursue me even when their parents aren't interested... That kind of thing.”

“Huh?! Are you serious?!”

“I went to Master Otto, who promised to speak to them for me, so I didn't think much more about it. But I work for Lady Rozemyne, and my coming-of-age is drawing near, so I worry what merchants from other duchies might say and what might happen if more men show up to bother me. The sooner we get engaged, the better, I think.”

To merchants, engagements and marriages were akin to contracts between families. If a merchant started making moves on a woman who was already

engaged, then the Merchant's Guild would get involved. It was a problematic situation to end up in, which was why few men bothered to risk it. I could see why Gunilla and Master Otto wanted me to hurry things along.

"Couldn't you have told me that sooner?!" Lutz exclaimed. "You haven't mentioned this to your dad, I assume. If you had, he'd already be rushing us to get engaged."

"He'd go crazy and start picking fights with everyone. No thanks."

Dad was really strong and quick to act—exactly what you'd expect of a soldier. I could always rely on him when things got tough, but I needed to be careful of what I said to him; one careless remark could make him go berserk. Lutz must have understood that too because he seemed to be at a loss for words.

"I get how you feel, but isn't Lady Rozemyne way scarier?" he asked when he eventually recovered. "I don't even wanna imagine what she'd do if she found out some weirdo got involved with you. Knowing her, she wouldn't hesitate to use her authority to Crush the life outta them."

Lutz explained that he had seen Lady Rozemyne Crush several nobles when they tried to act against her Gutenbergs—and those were just the instances he'd witnessed. It was my turn to fall silent. My sister was just as passionate as Dad—and just as prone to going on rampages. She didn't have his strength, but that didn't matter when she had all the political power of a member of the archducal family.

"Ahaha... I sure am loved, huh?" I said, averting my eyes and scratching my cheek. It warmed my heart to know that Lady Rozemyne would protect me no matter what, though I wasn't sure what might happen if she grew angry or impulsive. She was as much of a handful as always.

"Eesh, now I'm nervous. Wanna get all this engagement business over and done with before my trip?"

"I appreciate the thought, but isn't that kind of rushing things?"

"Yeah, but we'd only be sharing some wine together. It's not like we'd need to start preparing to get married right away. We're gonna be hard-pressed to

find a time we're both free otherwise."

Lutz was preparing for his trip to Kirnberger, while I was about to have my hands full with Lady Rozemyne's measuring. Not to mention, my schedule was packed with hairpins to be made for the merchants arriving in the summer.

"True, true," I said. "Mom was pretty relaxed about our engagement for the same reason."

"If you wanna get those creeps out of your hair, then we should sort this out before I head to Kirnberger. I'll go speak with Mr. Otto and the others."

Lutz spoke with Master Otto and Mr. Benno, which led to a family discussion with Dad, which culminated in the decision to accelerate our engagement. We waited until the Earthday before Lutz was due to leave, then made our way home together, chatting about Lady Rozemyne all the while. She was currently away for Spring Prayer.

"I think this goes without saying, but we need to keep our engagement under wraps," Lutz began. "We don't want a repeat of the Johann situation, when she got so excited that she gave a blessing and passed out. There are bound to be scholars wherever she goes, and we'd end up doubly screwed if she started pestering us for answers."

"We sure would. She'd make it so much harder for us to do our jobs. If we're going to tell her, we should do so in advance of the Star Festival. How about three days before? If we break the news on the day of, she might go wild and cause a scene during the ceremony. Three days should give her enough time to calm down."

"Yeah, makes sense. Even if she gets a fever, that should give her enough time to recover—and she won't have enough time to do anything crazy."

Our engagement would stretch on longer than most, so we decided to tell Lady Rozemyne either right before we got married or whenever she outright asked about it. We said as much to our respective bosses and asked them not to let her find out sooner. I trusted them to hold their tongues—they would feel it most if she went on another rampage, be it through an increased workload or the ruin of existing sales.

“Speaking of Lady Rozemyne, where are you keeping that charm she gave us?” Lutz asked, indicating his on his wrist.

I took a deep breath. “Um... Inside a box. Mom went to the orphanage director’s chambers shortly after we received them. I thought Dad would get jealous if he saw me wearing mine, so I stashed it in my room.” I’d assumed that Dad would get a charm for Spring Prayer and that I could take mine out then. Only... it had completely slipped my mind.

“You really should wear it. Lady Rozemyne made our charms to keep us safe.”

“You’re right. I’ll put it on as soon as I get home.”

The city was peaceful. I doubted I would need one of Lady Rozemyne’s charms, but as she’d gone out of her way to make them, there might have been trouble brewing between nobles that we didn’t know about.

“Welcome back, both of you!” Karla exclaimed with a broad smile as soon as we opened the door. “We’ve been waiting. Let’s get this show on the road, shall we?!”

The rest of Lutz’s family had gathered as well. Mr. Deid, Zasha with his family, Sieg with his fiancée, and Ralph were all right behind Karla.

“We have a whole feast ready for you,” Mom said, turning from in front of the hearth. She insisted that I “come quick,” but the circumstances made me tense up. I’d spent ages gathering my resolve for today—we would only be sharing fruit wine—but I could feel my heart racing.

“Does this mean Lutz is gonna be my older brother?” Kamil asked, happier about the engagement than anyone. Lutz brought him all sorts of picture books and toys, and having a brother-in-law in the Plantin Company would do wonders for Kamil when he joined as an apprentice.

Ralph tussled my little brother’s hair. “How about having me as your brother instead, hmm? I won’t be gone half the year, *and* I can take you to the forest whenever you want.”

“Huh? No thanks. Lutz is way better. If I went with you, I wouldn’t be able to play with Konrad, Dirk, and the others.” Nobody else in our little part of the city

had access to karuta or any of Lady Rozemyne's other toys, so Kamil was only able to enjoy them with others when he met with the temple kids in the forest.

"Besides, ain't you moving to Ingo's workshop when you come of age this spring?" Sieg asked, clapping Ralph on the shoulder and cackling. "You won't have time to go to the forest with Kamil. How long are you gonna keep acting like a kid, eh? This is why Nanna keeps getting on your case."

Nanna? Is she Ralph's girlfriend?

It seemed to me that pretty much everyone was focused on relationships, marriage, and moving to a workshop once they came of age. Lutz and I were technically in the same boat, but the others seemed so much more mature for some reason.

"Can you guys work out the dowry?" Lutz asked Mr. Deid. "Tuuli and I can take care of the other payments."

"What other payments?"

"As leherls, we have some merchant customs we need to follow for our stores. But you don't need to worry about all that."

From there, the conversation turned to our future living arrangements: "You better act quick. If you don't sort your accommodation out soon, then you're gonna run out of options!" Zasha and his wife had apparently found it a nightmare trying to secure a new home after their engagement. Sieg, on the other hand, had experienced no trouble at all.

"Well, uh, we're leherls..." Lutz shot back. "If we ask, we can get ourselves a place above one of our stores."

"Seriously? You leherl merchants are the worst!" Zasha groaned. He tried to grind a fist against Lutz's head, but Lutz had grown so much that it wasn't easy. I couldn't help but chuckle as I watched them.

"In any case, we're just getting engaged for now," I said. "Marriage won't be in the cards for a long while yet, so sorting out our accommodation can wait."

"If you're not in a hurry to get married, then why rush your engagement?" Ralph asked, taking a sharp tone. It must have hurt his pride that Lutz, his

younger brother, was beating him to the punch. “Lutz is way too young for this. He’s even younger than Sieg was, and people said *he* got engaged too soon.”

“We’re rushing it because I want to,” I retorted. “Lutz agreed for my sake.”

“Does that mean—?”

“That’s enough chitchat,” Karla interjected, cutting her son short. “C’mere, Tuuli. The wine’s ready.”

I nodded and went over to them, leaving Ralph with his mouth hanging open. Dad and Mr. Deid were facing each other across the table.

“Right. This is where things get serious,” Karla said. “Tuuli, stand next to your dad. Lutz, come stand here.”

A great big smile on her face, Karla plunked a wooden cup down on the center of the table. She handed a jug of fruit wine to her husband, who accepted it and turned to Dad.

“To the start of Tuuli and Lutz’s new bond,” he said.

Mr. Deid poured some wine into the cup. Then he waited as Dad picked up his own wine and did the same. It didn’t escape my notice that Dad was frowning at Lutz the whole time.



Lutz was next. He took the jug and added to the cup. The wine represented a promise between the two families involved in the engagement. It was pretty much a vow between men, so even as one of the people getting married, the most I could do was watch.

Once the cup was full, Dad picked it up and took a hearty swig. Then he held it out to Lutz. “If you break my daughter’s heart, I’ll make you regret it.”

“C’mon, Dad,” I said. “Was that really necessary?”

“This is meant to be serious!” Karla exclaimed.

Our solemn mood vanished in an instant. Dad was unfazed and refused to change his tone; he put the cup down with a clatter before pushing it in Lutz’s direction.

Lutz accepted the wine, not at all surprised. I was so grateful to be marrying someone already used to my Dad acting out. Anyone else would probably have taken his words to heart.

“I won’t let you down,” Lutz said, then drank the rest of the wine.

And with that, our engagement was official. Food was put on the table, cups were filled with wine, and plates were handed out as everyone started to clap and congratulate us. It was time to feast.

“Lutz!” Karla said. “Oh, I’m so glad we settled all this before you married a merchant girl or moved who-knows-where and never came back.”

“At last, I can relax,” Mom added. “Tuuli, Lutz—keep an eye on your jobs and figure out when you want to get married.”

The pair knocked their cups together with huge smiles. Dad was slouched in the corner, nursing his drink.

“I still don’t agree with this!” he grumbled. “It’s way too soon...”

“Stop being ridiculous,” Karla snapped. “How can you say that when you *just* approved the engagement?”

“If you weren’t on board, Mr. Gunther, then you shouldn’t have mixed wine,” Zasha said. “I thought you came to an agreement over the winter.”

“It’s way too late to complain,” Sieg sighed. Then he turned to Lutz. “Man, are you gonna have that guy breathing down your neck for the rest of your life? Are you gonna be alright?”

The three of them looked totally exasperated. Meanwhile, Zasha’s and Sieg’s respective partners watched with smiles. Ralph was the only one who agreed with Dad.

“I know how you feel, Mr. Gunther. Lutz isn’t good enough for her.”

“Lutz ain’t the problem. Tuuli’s too young to be engaged!” Dad slammed his cup down. “I know it had to happen, but I’m not happy about it!”

“Gunther...” Mr. Deid said, his frustration clear on his face. “How old was Effa when you started pursuing her? How old was she when you got engaged? And when you *were* engaged, all you ever spoke about was marrying her right away. I shouldn’t need to say what happened next, but you—”

“That’s enough!” Dad cried. “Gah... I won’t say another word.”

Dad and Mr. Deid went way back, so the protests stopped then and there. I didn’t hear a single complaint from Dad in the days and weeks that followed.

Back at the workshop, I waited until our next break to share the news. Now that I was engaged to Lutz, other men would finally leave me alone.

“Morning, Leonie,” I said.

“Oh! You got engaged?”

“Huh? I mean, yes, but how did you know?” She hadn’t even given me a chance to say it. I must have looked more surprised than she did.

“He gave you that wristband, right?” Leonie pointed at Lady Rozemyne’s charm. Lutz had reminded me about it, but that was all. “A lot of guys have been giving their girls jewelry lately. It all started with that apprentice of the Merchant’s Guild who got engaged to a minor noble. You know about her, right? The girl from the Othmar Company.”

As it turned out, this trend among merchants had started with Freida wearing a necklace given to her by her noble fiancé.

“Nobles make gems to match their partners’ mana, but as commoners don’t *have* mana, guys have been matching their partners’ hair or eye color instead. Necklaces, rings, bracelets, and even brooches—all accessories are fair game as long as they don’t get in the way of the recipient’s work.”

That was all news to me. If the trend had started after Freida got engaged, then it had to be pretty recent.

“Great work, Tuuli,” Leonie said with a smile. “That should keep those creeps away!”

I tried to smile back, but I was too focused on the charm. Would it seriously stop merchant boys from bothering me?

Lutz! We didn’t even need to rush into our engagement!

I screamed on the inside. If my dad found out, he would cackle and shout, “Great! Let’s cancel the engagement, then!” Not wanting to put the others through another of his rampages, I concluded that it was probably best not to tell anyone.

Letizia — My First Spring Prayer

Description: A previously unpublished story from the online collection that takes place during Spring Prayer in Part 5 Volume 4. How does Letizia, an Ahrensbach archduke candidate not at all associated with the temple, respond to being asked to participate in religious ceremonies? Ferdinand, Eckhart, and Justus are excited to have a chance to leave Ahrensbach's castle.

Author's Note: This story shows what Ahrensbach's nobles think about the temple. The ingredients Ferdinand gathers are later given to Rozemyne in Part 5 Volume 6.

"Lady Letizia has been instructed to participate in Spring Prayer," Sergius explained.

"Come again?!" roared my head attendant, Roswitha, making her fury known. "What on earth is Lord Ferdinand thinking?! Has he lost his wits?!"

Roswitha's outrage did not surprise me. Performing religious ceremonies was the duty of those in the temple, who bore noble blood without being nobles themselves. Asking an archduke candidate to participate was inconceivable. Lord Ferdinand might have been accustomed to such duties from his time as Ehrenfest's High Priest, but that wasn't how we did things in Ahrensbach.

Sergius cast his eyes down and pressed his lips together; as both Roswitha's son and an attendant of Lord Ferdinand, he was frequently tasked with liaising between them. "Lord Ferdinand said she would be safer there than in the castle. Lady Detlinde seemingly intends to have her take part in replenishing the foundational magic."

As I understood it, Mana Replenishment was meant to be done by archduke candidates who had learned to control their mana, not by those too young to have even enrolled at the Royal Academy.

Sergius recognized our confusion and tried to elaborate. To better supply

their duchy with mana, Ehrenfest's archduke candidates took part in Mana Replenishment and religious ceremonies from the moment they were baptized. Lady Detlinde had apparently heard as much at the Academy, which was why she wanted me to participate as well.

"Lord Ferdinand informed me that, in Ehrenfest, newly baptized candidates rely on feystones full of mana and support from their guardians. He seemed unsure that Lady Detlinde or Lady Georgine would—or even could—provide such aid."

Lady Detlinde had grown much harsher since becoming Ahrensbach's interim aub and learning more of her duchy's circumstances. She would never give me gentle guidance.

"Most of all," Sergius continued, "only registered members of the archducal family can enter the Replenishment hall. That means Lady Detlinde, Lady Georgine, and Lady Letizia, to be more precise. Lord Ferdinand worries that Lady Letizia might be forced to provide more mana than she can endure and collapse—in which case, nobody will be able to rescue her."

The thought of being alone with Lady Detlinde—or in any room where my retainers could not reach me—was terrifying enough to make bumps arise on my skin.

"Lord Ferdinand is still waiting to be Starbound, meaning he is not yet a proper citizen of Ahrensbach, but Lady Detlinde forced this religious ceremony on him nonetheless. He says that he cannot predict what Lady Letizia might be driven to do in his absence."

"Lady Detlinde forced the ceremony upon him...?" I asked. She had told us he had volunteered to help because of Ahrensbach's mana concerns in the wake of the aub's passing.

"Lord Ferdinand was exceptionally surprised to receive her instruction and asked whether it was customary in Ahrensbach to force guests to perform religious ceremonies. He was also upset to learn that Ehrenfest's reformed temple was considered no better than our reviled one. It is regrettable, but because of Lady Detlinde, he has come to see our duchy as unfortunately backward."

Most of Lady Detlinde's duties were being thrust upon Lord Ferdinand. They were tasks meant for an aub, interim or otherwise, not for a man who was both a guest and a groom.

"For her own sake, he maintains that Lady Letizia should participate in Spring Prayer despite any reservations she might have and that she should use the opportunity to start learning to control her mana. That is not an order, though; the final decision is up to the two of you."

It seemed that Lord Ferdinand had already begun his own preparations. Roswitha frowned, most likely torn between wanting me to avoid religious ceremonies and wanting to keep me safe.

I glanced at my white plush shumil, which provided me comfort whenever I needed it. Because of Lady Rozemyne and Lord Ferdinand, it contained recorded messages from my mother and father in Drewanchel. Lady Rozemyne had also given me a shumil that spoke in her voice and instructed Lord Ferdinand to praise me when appropriate. It had revolutionized my study sessions and served as a constant reminder of how much they both cared about me.

"Roswitha, let us take part in Spring Prayer," I said. "I trust that Lord Ferdinand has my best interests at heart."

Together with my retainers, I started preparing for my very first Spring Prayer. Lady Detlinde had told us to wear formal attire, not blue robes, so that our generosity would be attributed to the archducal family and not the temple.

Roswitha was glad that I wouldn't need to wear the same clothes as the blue priests, but Lord Ferdinand thought it was merely an excuse on Lady Detlinde's part to protect her from being accused of relegating us to the temple. Sergius had passed along his message and informed us that, as we were going to farming towns, we should wear clothes that we wouldn't mind getting dirty.

"Does he want us to wear lower-quality clothing in front of our citizens?" I asked.

"That sounds far too improper," Roswitha mused. "Especially when, as Lady Detlinde said, we are acting as members of the archducal family."

That sounded reasonable enough, so I elected to dress formally for the first day.

And what a blunder that was! I see now why Lord Ferdinand advised against it.

There were no ivory roads in the farming towns, meaning we had to tread upon bare earth. It was my first time setting foot on ground so completely devoid of grass. Some parts were too squishy to hold my weight and made a mess of my shoes, while others were so rocky and uneven that I found it hard to get anywhere. It had even rained at one point, soaking my attire and covering the hem of my skirt with mud.

Roswitha cleaned my clothes, lamenting how dirty they were.

Tomorrow, I shall do as Lord Ferdinand advised and wear clothes that I do not mind dirtying.

In each town we went to, Lord Ferdinand gave the farmers mana from the temple's large chalice. Both the divine instrument and the ceremony were beautiful and new to me. None of the nobles in our company had seen the religious ceremonies performed in our duchy before, so they could not help but let out sighs of awe.

Once we'd visited our fourth town, we headed to its winter mansion to settle in for the night. Ahrensbach was large enough that we had needed to send our chefs and attendants ahead of us; as they were moving by carriage, they would never have arrived on time otherwise.

"I noticed that nobles and commoners have very distinct manners of dress," I mused that evening as I ate with Lord Ferdinand and the others. "I was shocked to see the dirty and—quite frankly—miserable attire that so many wore. Do they never bathe?" As it was my first time leaving the castle, near enough everything was new to me.

"I would assume they wore their cleanest clothes for our visit, and even those were of a much worse quality than the clothes worn by Ehrenfest's farmers," Lord Ferdinand replied. "Ahrensbach's farmers are in dire straits indeed."

Lord Ferdinand spent the rest of our meal answering my questions. Then,

when we were done, he looked around the table and said, “I would appreciate the assistance of everyone but the knights so that we might finish replenishing Ahrensbach’s Central District tomorrow.”

“Excuse me?”

“Do you expect us to participate in the ceremony as well...?”

Lord Ferdinand raised an eyebrow at the surprised nobles. “Do not tell me you all shared Lady Detlinde’s belief that I, an Ehrenfest noble, would supply all of Ahrensbach on my own.”

The retainers gathered around the table had all criticized Lady Detlinde for making Lord Ferdinand—a guest—perform Spring Prayer. They had said that her actions were ignorant and tyrannical, so it was beyond them to refuse to participate themselves.

From the next day onward, the scholars and attendants were made to help out. Lord Ferdinand and six others placed their hands on the rim of the large chalice set atop the table. Lord Ferdinand was the only one to chant the prayer, but everyone could contribute their mana.

“Are you well, Roswitha?”

“Worry not, milady. I simply used too much of my mana.”

Although the scholars and attendants took turns to participate, Roswitha had emerged from performing two ceremonies in one day with a look of complete and utter exhaustion. I thought she had done well, but Lord Ferdinand seemed unfazed even after performing the ceremony four times. As much as he insisted that it became less tiring the more one became used to the process, I doubted it was that simple. My future adoptive father was far more fantastic than I had ever imagined.

As of tomorrow, I would be helping out as well, though I would need to use feystones to keep up with everyone. Lord Ferdinand assured me I would be fine, as even Ehrenfest’s blue priests could manage it, but I was terribly worried nonetheless.

It was my first religious ceremony. Lord Ferdinand told me to press a small feystone containing his mana against the rim of the chalice, then covered my hand with his as if to prevent my escape. As he instructed me to “push the mana out of the stone,” I couldn’t help but notice the coldness of his touch.

“O Goddess of Water Flutrane, bringer of healing and change. O twelve goddesses who serve by her side. The Goddess of Earth Geduldh has been freed from the God of Life Ewigeliebe. I pray that you grant your younger sister the power to birth new life.”

Lord Ferdinand prayed, and mana started moving from the feystone to the chalice. I also felt mana other than my own and pushed against the feystone to keep it away from me.

“That will do,” Lord Ferdinand said, taking the feystone from me. I gazed up at him with a start and realized the ceremony was complete. My head spun, and sparks darted across my vision. I put my head in my hands, too dazed to even move.

“Pardon me, Lady Letizia,” said one of my knights before picking me up and placing me atop a highbeast. It was not unusual to be rendered immobile by one’s first Mana Replenishment, it seemed.

My retainers had also expended an enormous amount of mana, so we postponed tomorrow’s ceremony to drink potions and recover ourselves. I was glad to hear that we would not need to take after Lord Ferdinand and perform ceremony after ceremony without a break.

Doing this every day sounds outright impossible.

I drank the rejuvenation potion Roswitha gave me and took some time to rest. Sergius came to check on me in the meantime.

“Lady Letizia, how are you faring? Your first Mana Replenishment must have been tiring.”

“Indeed,” I said. “I can barely move at all.”

“Lady Detlinde would have forced you to participate without the aid of a feystone.”

Now that I understood the burden Mana Replenishment placed on one's body, I recognized just how much my life had been at risk. If Lord Ferdinand had not stopped Lady Detlinde... If I had refused to participate in Spring Prayer... The thought alone sent a shiver down my spine.

"Should you feel that your mana is not recovering fast enough, I would recommend these," Sergius said, drawing my attention to several vials. "They are special rejuvenation potions made by Lord Ferdinand. I cannot vouch for the taste—they truly are wretched—but their effectiveness cannot be beat."

Sergius went on to explain that the potions had come from Ehrenfest before our departure. "Lady Rozemyne sent them with a letter stressing that although they taste so horrid that you might mistake them for being a prank or malicious trick, they really do work. Their sharpness is a small price to pay for their potency. I tried one last night and can verify her claims. It would also seem that these potions are an improved version of the recipe; in the past, they tasted even worse."

As it turned out, Lady Rozemyne had once survived on those extra-repulsive potions while performing Ehrenfest's Spring Prayer.

Could these religious ceremonies be the reason she is always so unwell...?

I tried one of the potions, mostly out of curiosity. It truly was awful. A foul stench hit the back of my throat, and my tongue tingled from the bitterness.

"Could anything taste worse than this...?"

Did the Ehrenfest archducal family really drink potions so vile while performing their ceremonies? I could not even begin to imagine how bizarre their duchy must be.

"What is Lord Ferdinand doing today?"

"Our three guests from Ehrenfest show no signs of exhaustion whatsoever, likely due to their experience with these ceremonies. They have gone to gather ingredients with the knights told not to participate, as they cannot go anywhere without Ahrensbach nobles."

"They are gathering... ingredients?" I stared at Sergius, taken aback by his answer. That was normally a task for knights who specialized in hunting

feybeasts and harvesting feyplants. I understood that scholars with a particularly strong interest in rare ingredients sometimes participated, but an archduke candidate who was performing religious ceremonies?

“It would seem he wishes to make the most of this opportunity. I was invited to go with them, but as we will resume the ceremonies tomorrow, I could not muster the motivation. Justus, his attendant, was more excited for this trip than anyone.” Sergius got a distant look in his eyes. “I consider it a blessing that I was not expected to be an attendant in Ehrenfest.”

It was unbelievable to me that an attendant, of all people, was taking the lead in their ingredient gathering. Perhaps being involved in religious ceremonies each year allowed retainers of all professions to develop rather durable physiques.

On every single day of rest, the Ehrenfest trio went out to gather ingredients. News of their outings reached us through the knights accompanying them, who spoke about them at length over breakfast and dinner.

“I never thought we would find verinurs.”

“Me neither. They bloom only on the Night of Flutrane.”

The knights all seemed pleased about the rare, valuable ingredients they had stumbled upon.

“Verinurs?” I asked. “What are those?”

Justus leapt at the opportunity to answer, in an exceptionally bright mood. Lord Ferdinand added to his explanation and even went through the kinds of potions and magic tools in which they were used. Seeing everyone listen with rapt attention, I assumed it had not been the knights’ idea to gather this particular ingredient. It struck me as odd that the Ehrenfest trio knew more about Ahrensbach’s flora than we did.

“Um, Lord Ferdinand... Was the purpose of your excursion to gather these verinurs?” I asked.

He gave me a thin smile and shook his head. “No, Lady Letizia. We merely happened upon them. Our objective was to find an eitze feystone.”

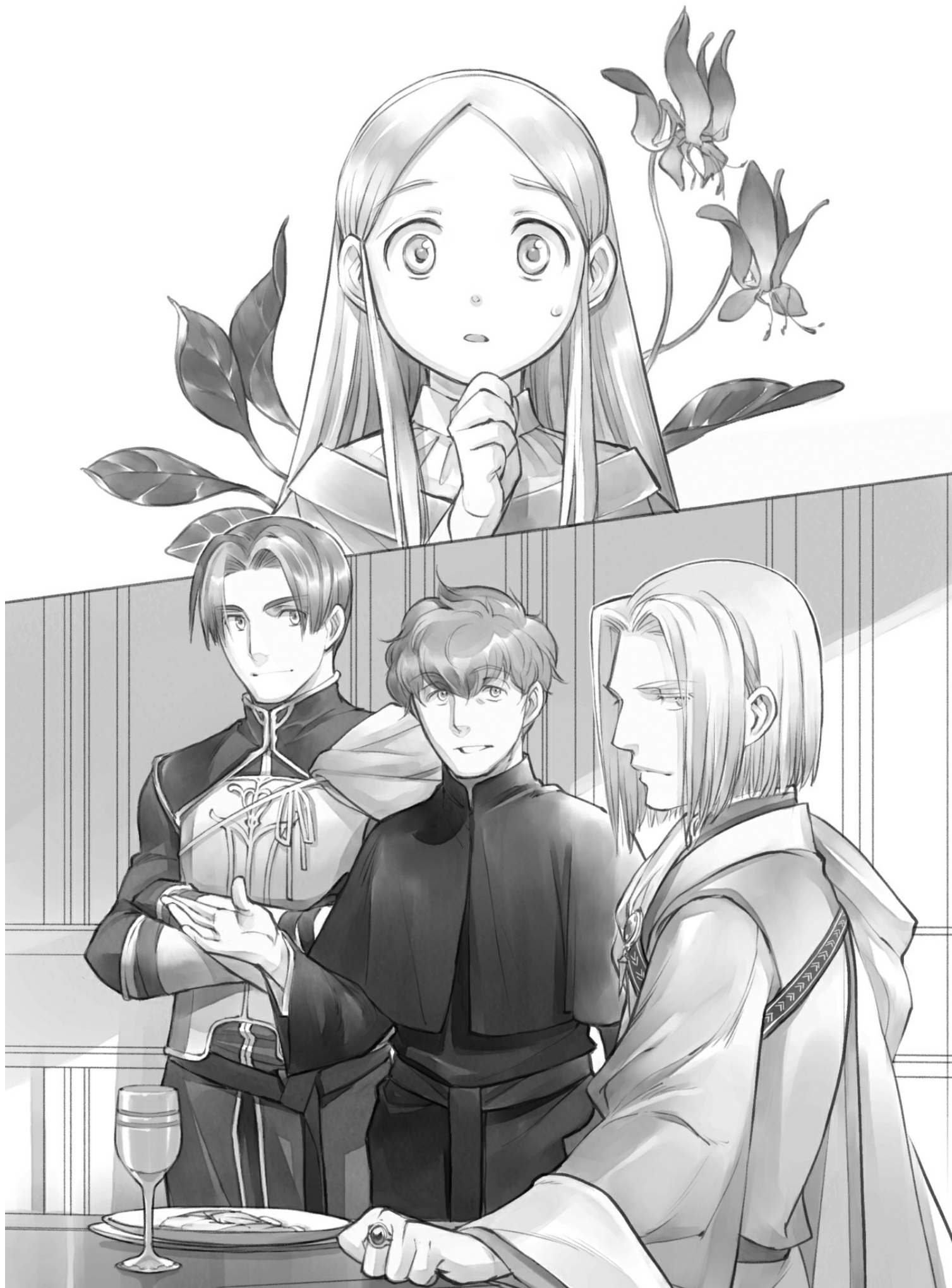
“Indeed,” Justus said. “Had those eitze not led us to that wild patch of verinurs, we would never have noticed them. It must have been the guidance of the gods.”

Eckhart nodded with a smile. “A glorious coincidence, indeed. Just a short while later and they would have wilted.”

Despite their insistence on the whole thing being a stroke of luck, I recalled Justus mentioning that eitzes were drawn to verinur nectar. It seemed to me that the Ehrenfest trio had subtly manipulated the knights into gathering the flowers... but perhaps it was just my imagination.

Would they really have planned all this, even scheduling our days of rest in a manner that suited their intentions?

I suddenly felt like a piece atop a gewinnen board, being moved wherever Lord Ferdinand pleased. The thought was nothing short of unnerving.



Afterword

Hello again, it's Miya Kazuki. Thank you very much for reading the second volume of *Ascendance of a Bookworm's* short story collection.

This installment, collecting sales bonuses and previously unpublished short stories, was a long time in the making. Readers of the e-books have been requesting many of these stories for quite a while, but we had to wait for enough of them to accumulate. Seeing them all together in one place reminded me just how many I've written.

Of course, another short story collection means more beautiful illustrations by Shiina-sama. In an ideal world, there would have been one for each chapter, but I once again ended up having to pick and choose. There aren't many stories from Rozemyne's point of view in this volume—sales bonuses are inevitably written from the perspectives of other characters—but that means a wide variety of artwork covering the lower city, the temple, nobles, retainers, and members of the royal family.

This volume marks the first time Shiina-sama has drawn Barthold of the former Veronica faction, though we have the illustrator of Part 4 of the manga to thank for his design.

Because the stories in this installment span Part 2 to Part 5 Volume 4, the cover art shows Rozemyne as both an apprentice blue shrine maiden and a third-year at the Royal Academy. In both cases, she's carrying a plant-paper book. The color illustration is a gathering of this volume's narrators. Shiina-sama commented on how many characters there were but still managed to make room for them all. I applaud her excellence.

Oh, and the four-panel manga are as adorable as ever. Thank you!

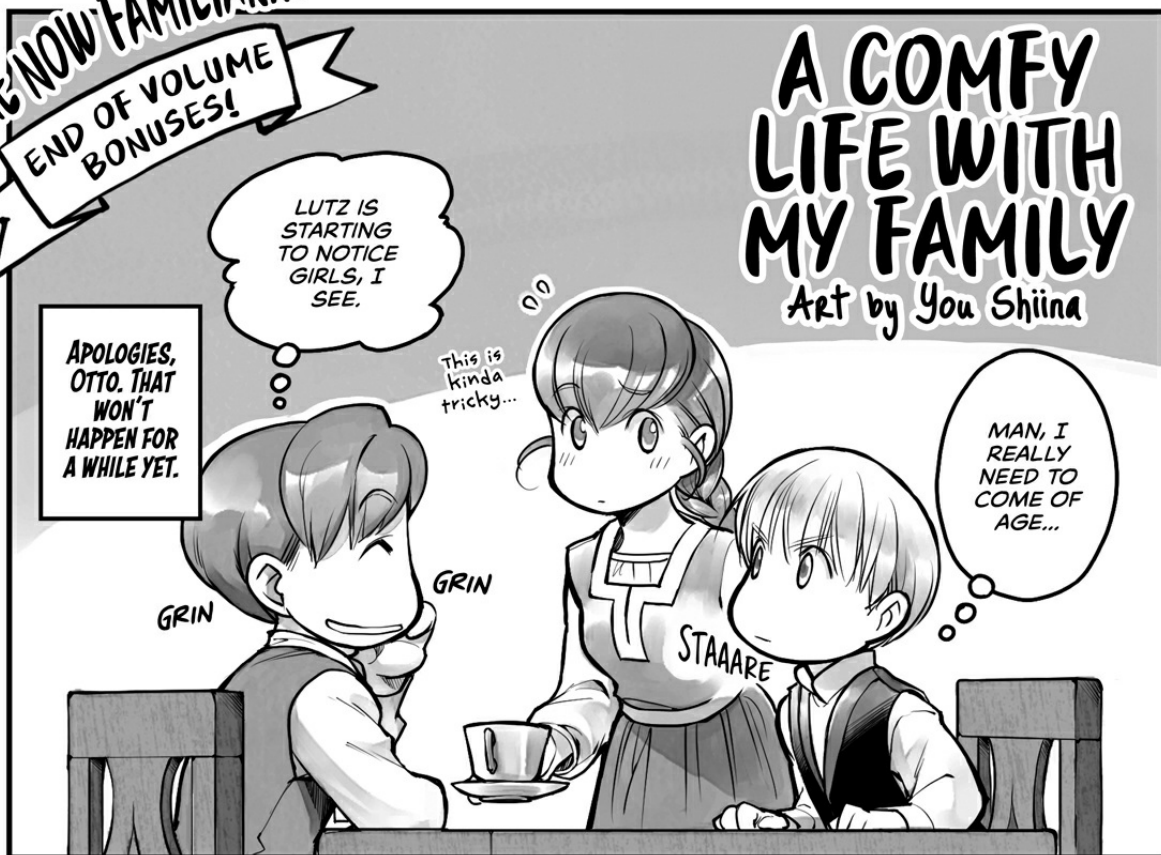
And, as always, my utmost thanks to everyone who read this book. Let us meet again soon.

November 2021, Miya Kazuki

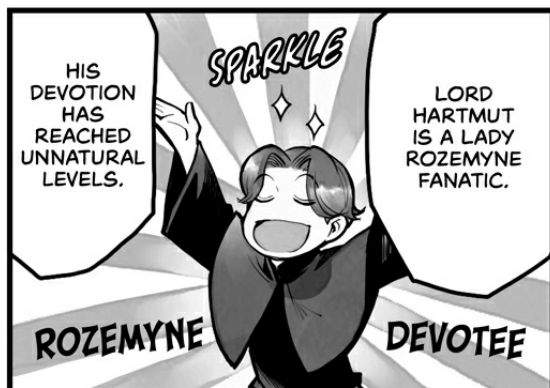
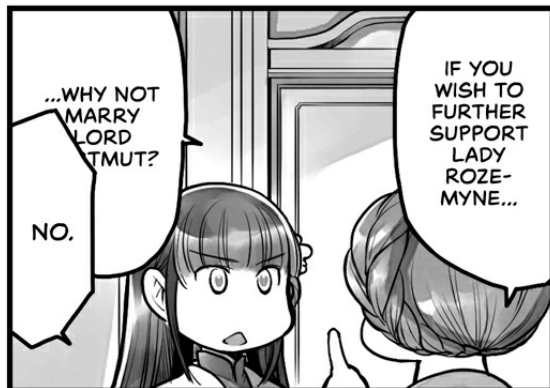
THE NOW FAMILIAR...
END OF VOLUME
BONUSES!

A COMFY LIFE WITH MY FAMILY

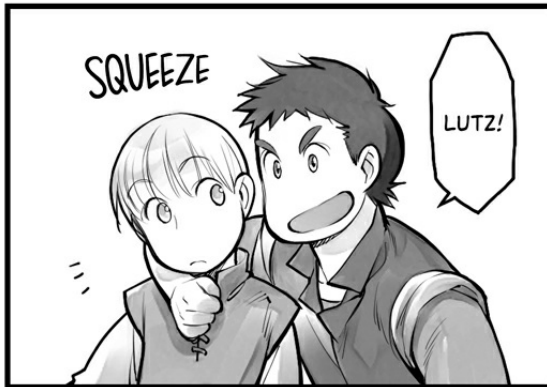
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Ascendance of a Bookworm: Short Story Collection Volume 2

by Miya Kazuki

Translated by quof Edited by Kieran Redgewell

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