

Fushi no Kami

REBUILDING CIVILIZATION

STARTS WITH A VILLAGE



7

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CONTENTS:

War of Papers

Promised Papers

Entrusted Papers

Deus Ex Machina

Closing the Book

War of Papers

Alicia's Perspective

While Sacula prepared for battle against Viscount Yanga, we in the capital were working on our own preparations. While we had no need to worry about any military force, we still needed to lay out the groundwork for our plans with the king. Before entering into an all-out battle with the House of Yanga, Sacula first needed to adhere to a few protocols. First, we had to present the king with a general outline of the war between the regions. This included details like: “Who is in the wrong and who caused the conflict?” and “How do we plan to resolve it?” If we hadn’t done this much, there’d be an uproar. It’d give reason for a third party to discredit the both of us and claim that we were both betraying His Majesty.

Count Gentoh, while reluctant to be in the palace, was walking through its halls to avoid that exact outcome.

“Datara’s lot sure are giving us a lot of trouble,” Count Gentoh grumbled as we headed toward the lounge room.

“Please do your best. Everyone in Sacula is working so hard, so it’s important that you support them as their count,” I said in an attempt to encourage him.

“I understand, Your Highness. I understand that completely. That’s why I’m here walking through this awful palace.”

Yes, you certainly are trying your best. The count was acting like a petulant child being made to drink bitter medicine, but, with me placating him along the way, we eventually arrived at our destination.

I gave a nod to the royal knight standing guard at the door. He then closely scrutinized our documents before asking us the reason for our visit. If we were central nobles, we probably wouldn’t have had to waste time following these unnecessary formalities. Feeling he was still not taking us seriously, I answered with a smile befitting a princess conducting royal business.

“I have an appointment today with His Majesty the King. I am Princess Alicia, and this is Count Gentoh of Sacula.”

“Of course, this was written in His Majesty’s agenda for today. He has yet to arrive, so please wait inside.”

While he had wasted our time with protocol, there seemed to be no ill will beyond that. When we’d first arrived at the palace, we weren’t permitted to arrange a meeting with the king at all, so this could be considered as us climbing up the ranks. It was the result of my gaining the support of the Church and the Frontier Alliance following the Royal Sword Fighting tournament. At the very least, I was now able to meet the king in my role as princess. If I weren’t in this position, it would have been difficult to support the House of Sacula and fulfill my role of making the king aware of our intentions.

The guard opened the door and I headed through, overjoyed to have this opportunity to help Ash. But the sight before me quickly turned my joy into bitter despair. For some reason, in the common room stood my elder brother, the king’s firstborn son, Prince Albert. Ever since Viscount Datara lost his position, it seemed that Albert had seized control of power in the palace. With that in mind, it wasn’t odd that the prince had taken an interest and was attempting to intervene, but it was still an obvious hindrance.

“How do you do, dear brother?” I gave a polite bow to try and disguise my dissatisfaction, but my brother remained seated and responded with a simple nod. He seemed to be convinced that he was of a higher rank than me.

“Oh, Prince Albert, I didn’t expect you would be here. I suppose you had nothing else to do today?” responded Count Gentoh, skipping any form of pleasantries.

“Not at all. I thought that today’s discussion would be beneficial for my future studies, so I made some time.”

“I see, that’s very diligent of you. An admirable trait, not something I enjoyed much myself.”

My brother had come here as a display of power, demonstrating the fact that he was next in line for the throne; however, it didn’t seem to faze Count Gentoh. Naturally, I had no interest in the throne and Count Gentoh also had no

intention of using me as a way to gain power in the central regions. Albert had wasted his time coming here, and I was appalled by his unwarranted suspicion. The count was also quite obviously unimpressed, choosing to directly comment on it.

“I’m jealous you have so much time to dedicate to your studies. Since it’s so laid back here in the central regions, I ought to take it easy myself.” Count Gentoh’s noble upbringing shone through his arguments and thinly veiled sarcasm. I was oddly impressed.

Albert, as one could expect, was here to simply make a statement; however, I wondered if the king was also partly responsible for this—he may have just neglected to tell us the prince would be present as well. Sitting opposite my brother on the sofa, I tried to work out the meaning behind all of this. Although the king was my father, I very rarely interacted with him, so I was unable to discern his real intentions. If it were Ash before me, I’d be able to say right away, “That’s something Ash would do.”

While I pondered on what they could possibly be up to, there was some commotion on the other side of the door, followed by a knock.

“His Majesty has arrived.”

Albert sprung to his feet, while I stood up calmly, and Count Gentoh sluggishly lifted himself up.

We all greeted the king, which he returned with a light nod.

“Sorry for keeping you waiting. Please, relax and take your seats.”

“Before that, Your Majesty, may I ask what’s going on here?” Count Gentoh asked before we moved on to the discussion at hand, glancing in the direction of my brother.

“Very well. Just like yourself, I’m not getting any younger. With the future in mind, I thought it was about time to start building up the prince’s experience and broaden his horizons.”

“That’s certainly important in regards to his education as a royal. That, I understand. However, I wish to know why there were no objections to the prince being in attendance today.”

“This isn’t an official meeting. I was told that this is just a preliminary inquiry.”

It seems they thought this was an informal meeting and thus didn’t feel the need to seek Sacula’s approval beforehand. *I had heard that Count Gentoh was on good terms with the king, but even then, that didn’t make this any less inconsiderate.* I was unimpressed with this so-called father of mine, but brother Albert was even more discourteous.

“It seems me being here in attendance is an inconvenience to Count Sacula.”

“It’s past being an inconvenience,” said Count Gentoh shortly. He shot a disapproving glance at the disruptive prince.

“It seems that Count Sacula is just as bold as they say.”

Count Gentoh had already turned away from Albert, but the expression on his face looked like he wanted to spit out the words, “rude brat.” At this point, I had to intervene.

“Prince Albert, the king and the count are in the middle of a conversation. Although we may be members of the royal family, I think it best if you do not interrupt. Of course, that goes for me too.”

“Unlike you, I’m actually involved in the affairs of the palace. I should have the right to have my say in a conversation between the king and a noble representative,” Albert snapped back.

“According to His Highness, His Majesty is allowing Prince Albert to be here as a part of his studies as a member of the royal family. If he is joining us as a part of his palace duties, then that changes the premise of this meeting,” stated Count Gentoh.

This was why Count Gentoh was questioning His Majesty so persistently. It was true that we were here for a preliminary inquiry, but this wasn’t a personal catchup; we were here on official business. If this were just useless small talk over tea, a sudden unexpected guest wouldn’t be that much of an issue.

However, there’s no way we would be okay with it in a meeting where we would be discussing private matters. Even more so when the party we were holding the meeting with wasn’t the most amicable. The king who allowed this, and the prince now proudly sitting here, were prime examples of the fact that

the apple really doesn't fall too far from the tree. Count Gentoh understandably let out a sigh.

"I have established a good relationship with you, Your Majesty. I believe that is due to the fact that I have no interest in the central regions, and that the central regions have rarely imposed on our humble city. Thus we've rarely had much in the way of political discussions."

He didn't say that they had never imposed on Sacula at all. He was indirectly alluding to the fact that we had been given some trouble and had not been appropriately accommodated for it.

"Thus, I am honored that you thought to be at ease with me and think this an informal meeting. However, I would like you to recognize that I am here with permission from Her Highness the Princess as an intermediary for the interests of the frontier regions and the Frontier Alliance. I am not just here as Gentoh."

I could easily tell that Count Gentoh was being very careful with his words and trying not to break formality. Internally, he was probably screaming with rage. Or, rather, at a point of complete despair and at an absolute loss for words.

"Is that so? I underestimated the situation. Would it be better if Albert took his leave?"

"It'd be quite harsh to ask him to leave now. As long as you understand, then it's fine," Count Gentoh replied maturely. He was reminding Albert that he could only stay as long as he stayed quiet. The count was completely different from how he usually was in private; it was a reminder that he truly was a noble after all. Albert smiled and bowed. He might have even looked grateful if he didn't have a slight smirk while doing so. Instead, his expression gave off a look that said, "If you're going to back down anyway, then don't throw a tantrum in the first place." *You were the one who barged in, weren't you?*

Our eyes met and Albert returned a sharp look. It certainly seemed like he wasn't pleased that I was also here.

"Well then, let's begin." Count Gentoh started to explain the reason for their meeting—the dispute between Viscount Yanga and Sacula. According to the refugees who deserted the viscount and fled, taxes were high, and the roads and rivers weren't well maintained. There were also no backup plans for bad

harvests, and seeking help from government officials amounted to nothing. They had no choice but to abandon their hometowns and seek refuge in Sacula, which prompted Viscount Yanga to go as far as accusing Sacula of kidnapping his citizens.

“As Count of Sacula, I can’t overlook such unseemly behavior from a noble. I believe Viscount Yanga’s title should be revoked and offered to someone else.” The Frontier Alliance had been talking about finding a distant yet blood-related relative of the viscount’s to take his place. Count Gentoh handed a written summary of the issues over to the king.

“Hm, if true, then the situation is serious. However, it is no simple task to unseat a viscount. Must we go that far?” questioned the king.

“We in Sacula do not wish to bring about unrest. Our first priority is to challenge his false accusation regarding our sudden intake of refugees,” replied Count Gentoh. “That should be a better way of handling it. However, according to information we’ve gathered from other houses, Viscount Yanga has been stockpiling food and weaponry.”

“Is he preparing for war?” asked the King.

“It certainly seems that way. We have been strengthening our defenses.”

The king shook his head. “How wretched,” he muttered. It wouldn’t just be Sacula that would be affected. Demons were attracted by war between humans. For those in Sacula, which was located near the Roaring Dragon mountain range—a place where dragons were often sighted—it was a real threat. The townspeople were so afraid that any discussion of demons was done in hushed voices. I didn’t know whether to be annoyed or appalled that Sacula had gotten caught up in Viscount Yanga’s foolishness.

“However, that is mere hearsay from the refugees...or rather, from Sacula itself,” spoke the man I considered my brother in blood alone.

“I do not find it proper to replace the head of a noble house based on just one party’s side of the story. Should we not ask Viscount Yanga for his account first, father?” Albert continued, clearly forgetting he was meant to be staying out of this conversation. Even though Count Gentoh continued to ignore him, the king seemed to be paying attention. To uncomplicate this situation, I had no choice

but to rally behind the count.

“Albert, are you saying that you do not believe what the count is saying?” I asked him.

“Not at all. It’s just a matter of principle. How do you think the other noble houses would feel if we were to make a decision based merely on one side’s report? I am simply saying that it is only reasonable if we hear from both houses, carefully carry out an investigation, and only once the results of said investigation are made public can we then make our decision.”

He’s right. That is reasonable. However, where the politics of the central regions were concerned, “principles” were merely a tool for persuasion. So, I put forth my own persuasive measures.

“What happened to Marquis Datara was a shame.” Even though it seemed off-topic, I brought up Datara’s name deliberately. My wording was very euphemistic, but to those present, the meaning was apparent. When members of the royal family started dying unnatural deaths one after another, many started to suspect Marquis Datara. However, we were unable to condemn him for it and his house continued to hold influence behind the scenes.

They had made fools out of the royal family. The Sacula-led Frontier Alliance had managed to more or less ostracize the marquis from high society thanks to a trap they had laid—successfully stripping him of his influence and cornering him in the capital. But Marquis Datara continued to wield the viscount like a dagger—could the royal family save face if they forgave Datara’s right-hand man?

“Hmm,” Albert responded to my hidden question. “I can’t really respond to that. However, some central region lords would be opposed to what you have suggested.”

By “central region lords,” you mean yourself, surely. Even if there were opposition, haven’t you been working to suppress their factions? Do you not have the ability to overpower them completely?

“But if we do nothing, then the remote region nobles will not stay quiet,” I replied.

“I believe that Sacula’s accusations are valid. However, a quarrel in the remote regions has nothing to do with the central lords; all it comes down to is power.”

“If it has nothing to do with them, then why are they opposed to the remote regions dealing with their own problems?”

“If only that kind of logic applied in high society.”

“There is also the question of how much the leaders of the remote regions participate in that high society. Not to mention, surely the subject of the former Marquis Datarā is more important to them than issues within the remote regions?” I asked. The downfall of a great house was like the door of a grand treasury being opened. The central region’s nobles were likely more focused on who could take advantage of the opportunity and to what extent.

There probably were central region nobles who would complain about the Frontier Alliance’s actions. However, if we remind them of everything Marquis Datarā had to lose—and what they had to gain—they would surely come around. That would mean it would be better for Albert to focus on trying to trip up the Frontier Alliance than curry favor with the central region nobles. In a way, that seemed almost obvious, but Albert was focused on the central regions regardless. I found his decision to look down upon the remote regions that took down Marquis Datarā somewhat foolish. *That reminds me, what was it that Ash said? It seems the crown prince has a clear perspective on the present but is making no attempt to look ahead.* He’s so focused on keeping Sacula in check that he’s failing to see the bigger picture. Having said that, I realize that I also had my biases—I was too focused on the remote regions, Sacula in particular. With that in mind, it seemed like it was time to end this discussion.

“Of course, I acknowledge Sacula’s statement.” The king interrupted our war of words. “There have been rumors that Viscount Yanga and the former Marquis Datarā were friendly and often neglected their regions due to them always being in the capital. The marquis has caused quite a stir, and those working under him are not innocent either. Some adjustments will be necessary, but I do not wish to worsen this situation,” said the king.

Once the king looked closely at the submitted documents, it seemed that the Frontier Alliance's request had largely been accepted. Count Gentoh stood up and bowed. "I am grateful for Your Majesty's wise decision."

"I am also grateful, Your Majesty. With this, you will earn even more respect among the remote region's leaders," I added as I stood and bowed. As a princess, I was finally able to pay back Sacula for their continued support. With the conversation now over, it would have been proper etiquette to promptly take our leave. I was the only one not occupied with royal duties. That said, I was still busy acting on Ash's behalf in the capital.

"Alicia."

As I headed toward the door, the king called and stopped me in my tracks. "Yes," I replied. As I turned to face him, I saw he had an odd expression on his face.

"I hear you've been quite busy lately. Are you looking after yourself properly?" Was he asking that as "the king" or as "my father"? If he's speaking in his role as a monarch, then did that mean he thought I was up to something? Maybe because I'm close with the Frontier Alliance? Did he think my activities in the capital felt a little too convenient? But what if he *was* asking as a father? I came here today as Princess Alicia. It'd be a little awkward to say something so personal now.

"Thanks to Your Majesty's gracious hospitality, I am fully enjoying my day-to-day life here," I responded. The conversation with His Majesty the King—my father—ended there.

On the way back, Count Gentoh bent down and asked me in a hushed voice, "Wouldn't it be better to be a little friendlier when talking with His Majesty? You are father and daughter after all."

"If...we had some private time together, I certainly could be more affable. This time, however, we were on official business as princess and count to inform His Majesty of the Frontier Alliance's views," I replied.

"But even the prince manages to be somewhat friendly, addressing him as 'father,' at least." Count Gentoh commented.

“Yeah, that’s true,” I responded.

Honestly, I felt uncomfortable with how the king and Albert acted. As if it were just some informal meeting where we happened to be delivering official information. I wondered what the prince would do with what he’d learned there. Did my father invite my brother without knowing what Albert planned to do with it?

“Anyway, since my brother was there, I can’t help but think that my father—His Majesty—is more focused on the prince than he is on the princess. If they expect me to be friendly, they are gravely misreading the situation.”

“Hmm...that’s fair.” Count Gentoh lowered his head and sighed. “However, speaking as a father, it’s difficult being treated like that by your daughter.”

Maybe that’d be true if we’d spent any real amount of time together in the first place...

“I’d never had the feeling of being looked after until I went to that ‘health resort.’” The only notion of a family I had existed in a distant region atop a windy hill.

After our meeting had concluded, we’d heard from Amin, the representative maid of the royal family, that a large horde of demons had appeared in Viscount Yanga’s territory. She’d been sent to Count Sacula’s quarters as part of a routine exchange of information where she then delivered the urgent news with an ashen face. The scale was unheard of—ten dragons and one hundred werewolves. To the citizens of the central regions, those numbers probably seemed like something out of a fairy tale.

Even in Sacula, you’d only hear of attacks on that scale in old records—a reminder to the guards never to get complacent. Even the knights of Sacula—who, during my time at the academy, I’d heard were the strongest in all of the land—would have been unable to do anything against such numbers. However, those teachings were from before Ash had begun to make a name for himself.

With that in mind, I broke out of my trance and sprung into action. *There’s no time to be idling around, Alicia. Time is crucial and every step is important.* Even though Amin didn’t seem like she was doing too well herself, she was looking at

me with a worried expression. *That's right. If I appear anxious, then the servants will end up spending more time worrying about my well-being than their own.* Everything will be all right. I can handle this much. Because I believe in Ash.

The reported number of demons would be enough to make anyone's face turn pallid. But things had changed now. Since Ash had joined the academy and become a knight, our old ways of fighting demons were no longer relevant. I'd heard that Ash was currently focused on building a fort to be used in the war against Viscount Yanga. *But surely it could also be used to protect against demons. Maybe I'm being too hopeful, but I believe Ash could do it. He could defeat the demons there. Ash will always be a figure of hope for me.* My faith in Ash turned into a smile and I nodded. In response, Amin let out a sigh of relief. Much like how Ash always had a way of making me feel reassured, I also had to make sure those around me felt reassured.

With Amin put at ease, it was time to move on to the next task. *Okay, think about it, Alicia. What can I do to help Ash while I'm in the royal capital playing princess?*

This initial report would now be about a week old. Considering the time it would've taken for the information to get from Yanga to Sacula, plus the time to write the report, plus the time it'd take to send a message from Sacula to the capital...the situation could be a lot worse now. The attack may have happened over ten days ago—perhaps, worst-case scenario, more than two weeks. It might even be over already. How did they fight? What was the result? Did they manage to wipe out the demons? Did Sacula sustain any damage? Working with unclear information was like walking around at night without even the moon as a guide. I had no way of confirming what was happening, so anxious thoughts began to crawl through my mind.

Amin and I had both been standing stock-still in the dark, so I reached for the spirit lamp—a made-to-order item designed by the Phoenix—on top of the table. It reminded me of Ash and Maika and illuminated the dark thoughts in my mind. There wasn't much I could do to aid in the battle against the demons—even as a princess, I couldn't command a single soldier. It would be best to leave that to the rulers of the affected regions. Hopefully, they were requesting

aid from their neighbors. It was for that purpose that their lords and representatives were out there. It would be no use for me to rack my brains regarding the battle—instead, I had to see what I could do to help in the aftermath. The happy memories of my short two years in Sacula helped to push the dark thoughts from my mind, the light of those fulfilling, sunny days continuing to shine here in the capital.

Even if Sacula had successfully held the demons off, Viscount Yanga's region would have no doubt taken a lot of damage. If that were the case, then there would be a lot of refugees. Postwar, that often ends up being one of the main issues. To avoid starving, many end up turning to banditry and plaguing the neighboring regions. Normally, the plan would be to increase the number of guards and improve the defenses in the villages within Viscount Yanga's region. *However, what about Ash? What would Ash do?*

Ash, who had once made sure not to overlook a small village suffering from a bad harvest. Ash, who went above and beyond to help me, his bothersome roommate, escape from assassins. *Ah, of course, that's it. Ash, if it were you, you would never hesitate to help.* You would be the first to hand a cup of warm tea to someone frozen by fear. I am here today because I was that frightened person once. That's why I now need to share that warmth and do anything to help you. It's strange. Whenever I think about you, I'm able to jump from one thing to the next.

"Amin, I know this is sudden, but I would like you to set an appointment for a meeting."

"Of course. With His Excellency Count Sacula?"

Yeah, it wouldn't be a bad idea to see what Count Gentoh thinks. He might know more about the situation. However, the information available in the capital was probably still outdated. I needed to move fast, or I wouldn't be able to keep up with Ash. I spoke the name of the most appropriate person to meet. "I would like to meet with Father Birkan. As soon as possible."

If my plan was to only mobilize the remote region nobles, I could do that without even being in the capital. However, mobilizing a huge organization such as the Church was something I could only do here in the capital. *This is definitely*

the best way I can help Ash.

The title of Head Priest of the Royal Temple held enormous power. They held authority over every region, especially those in close vicinity to the royal capital. That meant they had a large amount of the population under their control. It also meant that with the number of believers that followed the Church, they also had high mobilization and power. The influence the head priest held was comparable to that of the king. Head Priest Birkan's daily schedule was crammed; people with power often attracted much attention. That's why even if a princess like me asked to meet with him immediately and even if I was on friendly terms with him, I could still expect to wait a few days. But apparently, that was not to be the case.

"My goodness, I did not expect to be able to meet with you so soon. Thank you, Father Birkan."

"No need to thank me. I just happened to have time. No doubt it was thanks to the guidance of the Monkey God."

I performed a light prayer motion to show that I appreciated his kindness. It was apparent why he had gone out of his way to make time for me; it meant that he had also heard about the abnormal events taking place in Yanga's territory. Ash had gotten to know him well too, and Father Birkan had been sympathetic to his cause. Ash had done a great job making such a strong ally—someone with influence in the capital and an understanding of the regional nobles.

"Father Birkan, I believe you have already heard, but it's about Yanga's territory," I said, skipping the usual pleasantries. Father Birkan gave me a nod.

"I hear there was a horde of over one hundred demons—werewolves and dragons."

As expected. Despite Father Birkan's gentle expression, he was someone who stood at the head of a large organization, and he was no soft touch. I had only become aware of this news thanks to my connections with Sacula, but Father Birkan already seemed to know. I wanted to ask where he'd learned of the attack, but that was a different matter altogether.

"I believe the Frontier Alliance will work together to respond to this disaster."

“That’s wonderful to hear. To have already established an alliance before this great trial could have only been the work of someone blessed by the Monkey God’s love of harmony.”

While it was a very pious way of putting it, Father Birkan was complimenting the young red-haired mastermind behind the Frontier Alliance. “I completely agree,” I said with a smile. “However, from what I have heard, we can assume that the damage done to Yanga’s territory has been quite severe. I believe it may be too much of a burden for the Frontier Alliance to bear alone.”

“Quite true. The Church, we who act as servants to the gods, also need to offer our aid.”

“Yes, I was hoping that we could discuss exactly that. Unfortunately, while I don’t know much about the current situation, I can offer some knowledge about the Sacula region that may be of help.”

“Local wisdom would indeed be most helpful,” he replied. “We will keep that in mind.”

With that, I was confident that I could trust Father Birkan to help aid Sacula. However, while that may have been what Father Birkan wished to do, that did not mean that it was the wish of the entire Temple.

“Thus, it would be a discussion of how much you would be able to help...”

“Yes, that is somewhat of an issue. Even if we frantically pray to the gods, it’s not as if we can bring about endless miracles. It is the will of the Monkey God that we rely on our own strength when it comes to our own lives,” responded Father Birkan.

Although the Church held much power, it took much of that just to maintain the status quo. Even if the head priest wanted to help Sacula, without a balanced approach, there would be a lot of opposition. The same went for other nobles and even the royal family. A certain territory continuously inventing new things and always creating a surplus was an abnormality. *Ash was the epitome of the, what was it again...that “if there’s not enough, make enough” productive spirit.*

“I apologize. While it may be noble to starve oneself when someone else is in

need, it also makes light of one's own life. As a person of wisdom, I must strive to keep the balance."

In short, as for the relief supplies, I would have to offer something in return that would satisfy those opposed to the idea. It was time to use my head and come up with an idea to help maintain that balance. Ideally, something that would benefit us more.

"By the way, I heard that you were quite fond of new and novel things."

"Yes, though I would say it's not very befitting of someone my age..." laughed Father Birkan, looking a little bit embarrassed.

"I think it's befitting someone as wise as yourself, the Head Priest. I also like new and inventive things. I'm always looking forward to seeing what the research lab at Sacula comes out with next."

Father Birkan folded his arms, nodding in agreement.

"How did the Church respond when Sacula said they were looking for exchange students?"

"Why, there was a lot of excitement among the youngsters who wanted to go. There's no way I could scold them for it—if I were their age, I would have been thrilled too."

"Yeah, I understand completely. If I weren't a princess, I would have also joined in on the commotion."

We shared a chuckle. Our positions did seem to clash with what we'd actually like to do. There wasn't anything dark about it, but our laughs were still tinged with a tiny bit of pain. When our laughter faded, Father Birkan nodded in agreement.

"If you were to aid Sacula, it would be possible that the Church would then be able to send a few exchange students of its own," I continued.

"Yes, numbers are quite low here, so we may be able to gather more people if we tell them they'd have a chance to study at the very popular Sacula."

The recent commotion around Sacula was no doubt an issue for the Church. Their priests were seen as an image of wisdom. However, those very same

priests, who weren't fit for anything other than worship, would end up being stationed as regional knights. Father Birkan was friendly, but it would be hard to keep the unfriendlier priests' objections in check. Of course, if Father Birkan could get the exchange students, it still wouldn't mean that the arguments would die out completely. Still, it would be a lot easier to keep them under control.

"Central nobles will no doubt hold back on their support, so if we were able to turn this around, the Church may come into a position where they can manage the central nobles' personnel."

"Even the central nobles cannot ignore the recent developments and accomplishments from Sacula. But, if they are presented with a chance to know more about it...then they'd have no option but to rely on the Church."

This would be a great boon to an organization like the Church. It would also be an opportunity to restore the temple's authority—which had been somewhat weakened due to several recent scandals. Father Birkan's face lit up. "What a great idea. That's a fascinating outlook," he said with an intrigued nod.

"Up until now, the Church has been heavily biased toward the central regions," I added. "However, the Frontier Alliance now has something that can surpass them. We could use this opportunity to gain some footing in the rural areas. Who knows who will be regarded as the center of wisdom one hundred years from now?"

"If we can overcome this disaster, I believe your idea should be taken into consideration."

Nodding as if he wanted to say he was all in on the idea, Father Birkan let out a mischievous laugh. "Your Highness Alicia, you wholeheartedly believe that the Frontier Alliance will overcome this situation, don't you?"

"Of course. I am very aware of the abilities of those who reside there."

"Well, well... Then I must respect the opinion of someone with such a good grasp of Sacula's circumstances."

"Oh. Surely you also have at least an idea of what it's like over there?" The main source of Sacula's strength was none other than Sir Fenix, to whom Father

Birkan was particularly close.

Father Birkan let out a kind laugh. “Well, that is quite true. Ha ha ha, yes, come to think of it, that boy can do anything he sets his mind to.”

“That’s right. Regarding the appearance of the demons in Yanga’s territory, please wait until I receive news of how those in Sacula fared. Then we’ll be able to discuss it properly at the Temple,” I responded.

“That’s true. If we were to lose everything in the demon attack, there’ll be no place for our exchange students in the first place,” stated Father Birkan. “Let’s summarize. We do have a lot of people who will be willing to help upon hearing the name of Sir Fenix. If we are to lend our support, have you any idea yet what would be best?”

“I’m still working on that. I hope that’s all right.”

“Of course. If you come up with anything, you can discuss it with Father Folke or Lady Tris. They are more than suited for the task.”

To be honest, there was no one more suitable than them. I had known Father Folke for a long time—ever since Sacula—and Lady Tris was very knowledgeable. They would be able to offer a lot of advice.

“Thank you, Father Birkan.”

“No need to thank me. I owe Sir Fenix, after all. I need to give something back in return for that delicious tomato sauce.”

Father Birkan and tomato sauce. Now that was an odd pairing, but it seemed somewhat familiar...

After what felt like a short moment, my meeting with Father Birkan had come to an end.

Renge’s Perspective

I was abnormally cowardly.

I was so cowardly that even if I mustered up all my courage to talk with someone, it still wasn’t enough. So when I heard that a horde of demons had

appeared in a neighboring region and were now heading this way, my heart beat so fast that I thought it might burst. But, of course, there was no way I'd be at the front line. But even reminding myself of that fact wasn't enough to dispel my fear.

"Viscount Yanga was unable to hold off the werewolves and the condition of the other regions' knights and soldiers is currently unknown. Communication has more or less ceased. All we have is the information from the refugees..."

There was no good news from the intelligence department. All we knew was that the attack had significantly damaged Yanga's territory. It was a catastrophe. A devastating catastrophe. I instinctively held my hand up to my chest, and felt the frigid fear within—like a water well in the dead of winter. Then, taking a deep breath, I dived straight in.

"The emergence of refugees is genuine. We do not know how large the population is in Viscount Yanga's territory, so we also do not know how many more will come."

Based on what we'd learned from Ash and what the intelligence department had managed to dig up, I could foresee the future I feared.

"However, if the group of werewolves is heading this way, it is only inevitable that it will bring more refugees," I continued. "Based on what they have told us, we can expect a lot more refugees based on how much damage Viscount Yanga's territory has taken."

I was scared. Their numbers were impossible to know, but either way, it would be challenging. Trapped, hungry people often become rash and often have little regard for their own and others' lives, especially if they have a family to protect. When the Agricultural Research Institute was established in Ajole, Ash was very vigilant, no doubt thinking that if Ajole village were to be destroyed, its residents would turn to banditry. *Ah. Now I get it. That's the real reason why I'm so afraid.* If Ash had not been there, and if he hadn't acted, no doubt the Ajole village name would have faded from existence, with a hive of bandits rising in its place. But even though Ash tried his hardest, Ajole village was now an abandoned ghost town. *I should be afraid. This werewolf attack is just like the time my childhood friend was injured.*

I couldn't forget what happened then, and it was similar to what was happening now. But even though I was so cowardly, there was still *something* I could do this time. I had to do something. I raised my head and tried to push down my fear. We still had documents from the Territory Reform Promotion Office's activities in Ajole village. I stood up and headed toward the bookshelf. All the Agricultural Research Institute's records were stored here. Even though the operation was one mere step away from completion, it had failed and Ash had declared we would store it away. We couldn't toss it, nor could we forget about it. We just kept it so that one day it could help lead to a different success instead.

I won't let this pain be for nothing. The cold ache in my chest turned into a roaring flame as I pulled out the roll of papers. These were from the time when Ajole was suffering from a famine. The food distribution records listed should be able to help with our situation now. I read the report multiple times, flicking through the pieces of paper until I found what I was looking for. There it was, written in Ash's handwriting, the exact food distribution process and the consequent upgrades and modifications, all neatly detailed. "If I show this to Suiren, we'll be able to put together a plan of what we can do to help." If anyone knew what to do with this, it would be my best friend, the village chief of Ajole. I headed toward the door with documents in hand ready to call for her. Then the door opened before me.

"Renge! Did you hear already?!" said a strong, firm voice. It was accompanied by a stern gaze filled with anger and resolve. I knew exactly who it was.

Suiren, my best friend, opened the door, no doubt having received the same information as me, and had run here thinking the same thing. She must have been unable to wait. Our eyes met, and we both nodded at one another, instantly knowing what to do.

"Suiren," I said, holding out the documents toward her. They were filled with emotions from that time, and my best friend held her hands out and accepted them. Suiren was always so direct and strong...however, her hands were shaking.

"Renge, I guess I am weak," Suiren said. She took the documents and started shaking even more.



“It’s scary. If I act now, there are people I can save. Not only that, I can also take responsibility for those I couldn’t save. If I think of it like that...”

It was terrifying. Yet even though she talked about being a coward, I wondered whether she knew what kind of expression she was wearing.

“But Suiren, I know you can do it,” I responded. They weren’t my words—it was the message written all over her face.

“I’ll do it. I may be weak, but as both a resident and village chief of Ajole village, I have to be strong. I’ll definitely do it.”

My best friend, who would often drag me around by the hand, had become so strong and was pulling me along with her all over again.

“Me too...”

I placed my hand on hers. It was soft.

When we were younger, she was always there for me, but when we graduated from the academy, I could not be there for her in turn. Around the time the Agricultural Research Institute was established, I didn’t have the strength to be able to help her. If my best friend called herself weak, I was even weaker. After all, we were best friends. Even at times like this, we were both thinking the same thing, and we could hold each other by the hand and push on.

“I-I also want to get stronger, so let’s do it together,” I responded.

“Thanks.” She blushed and laughed. She knew I would say that. Suiren cast her head down and looked up at me just like I used to do when I was a child. “I-I guess...that was obvious, right? Of course, we’d do it together. I mean...we’re best friends, after all, right?”

“Yeah!” Even I was surprised by how loud my response was. She looked surprised too. It was a little embarrassing, but I was just that happy. Finally, Suiren was referring to me as her best friend. We parted ways once, but we had finally reconnected, and once again, Suiren stood by my side.

“Let’s do it, Suiren. I feel like we can do it properly this time.”

“Of course, especially since we’re together now!” Suiren said, giving me a

light fist bump. That made me even happier. It was something Ash and Hermes always did and it made them look so close. The knights did it a lot too, so I wondered if Suiren had picked it up from Glen. I returned her fist bump. We both laughed, and I no longer cared about the cold fear I had felt before. “Well, is it okay if I ask you to put together a plan for the supplies?”

“Of course, I wanted to get some documents to help with that, so I came here. Back then, I couldn’t write very well, and I couldn’t think very well either. Ash asked questions and then summarized what I needed to do...” *Now you can show us just how strong you are by thinking on your own, writing on your own, and acting on your own. My best friend was incredible—and even more impressive now.*

I felt a burning flame in my chest. My friend had overcome a lot to be here today. I can’t give up now.

“In that case, I’ll show our seniors the documents, and then I’ll see how much food surplus our territories have.”

“All right. Even if we do come up with a distribution procedure, we can’t do anything if we don’t have enough food in the first place. Plus, I think this situation will continue for a while, huh?”

“I believe so,” I said with a nod. Suiren tilted her head deep in thought. “If we go ahead with the plan, the hard part will be pacing the distribution. Back at Ajole, we could see how much we had and how much Ash had prepared...but then we had that incident, and it ended up being all for nothing.” Suiren pulled a sour face. “We can’t rule out something unexpected like that happening this time too.”

“Didn’t Ash bring extra food supplies?” I asked. “I think that helped in the end.”

“He did, so this time we’ll probably also have to pull out more food supplies from our stockpiles. If we do that, it would make sense to ask if our seniors can find out how much food the merchants can bring in from other territories.”

If we could just get an idea of how much the major trading companies have, that would be enough to work out a rough estimate of how much food we can import. That would cover, as Suiren said, any unexpected developments. For

example, the stockpiles increased when there were rumors of a war, and they decreased when there was a demon invasion. Along with the aid we could receive from Ash and the Frontier Alliance, the total amount could either increase or decrease.

“We need to make these plans while considering any fluctuations in numbers. But, of course, it is still a rough draft, so that much is obvious.” I said.

“Yeah, what I have in mind now is to start small, and then, as we start to understand the scale of distribution, recruit people to help as we go along.”

“For example, say we put together a plan for one hundred refugees, if we then have five hundred more knocking on our doors, then we’d just quintuple those numbers?”

“Exactly!” Suiren confirmed. “We’ll have one group ready to handle one hundred people, although most likely, we’d need to increase that group when more refugees arrive. If the scale of this project gets even larger, then we’ll need ten different groups...but then we’d need to find someone to manage those ten groups...”

If we started out small, then we could build the project up as we went along. It was the most reasonable proposition based on us not being able to tell how the situation would turn out. We had no clear idea of what it was like in Yanga’s territory, so we couldn’t even guess at how many refugees would end up at our doors. We didn’t even know how many people lived there, to begin with. There was no precedent for this kind of situation. Suiren’s idea of what to do was purely born from the position that we were once in.

“Plus, we heard that the territory had been attacked from the refugees themselves, right?” she theorized. *Just how exactly did we get that information? That was the simple conclusion, huh?* “That means refugees must have already reached Sacula. They probably have no belongings, are hungry, tired, and have no idea where to go. They’re probably crushed with worry.”

My childhood friend cast her eyes downward. She knew exactly what it was like. She and the people of Ajole village had been in the exact same position. That’s why my best friend didn’t stop there. “We have to do something. But I’m still weak. I can’t just look ahead into the future and know exactly what to do.

It's annoying, really annoying. Maybe it's impossible for me..."

Suiren, no doubt, was about to continue with, "If it were Ash, he'd definitely be able to handle this..." I was about to say the same thing. However, Suiren stopped herself and chose strength instead. "But I'm not so weak that an impossible task would be enough to stop me. And I'm certainly not so weak that I'd just give up without trying. Even if it's small steps, I have the strength to keep moving forward." Her positive outlook made me happy. I was delighted to be able to see her strength. And, in turn, it made me feel stronger as well.

"Exactly. Let's take it bit by bit. Suiren, you start with organizing the smaller tasks, and I'll ask around to get an idea of the bigger picture."

"Yes, please do! If you learn anything, we can revise our plans!"

Suiren couldn't do it on her own and neither could I. But the two of us together could probably be capable of doing stuff like Ash. Even if it's just a little, we could still do *something*. We were two people who had been stirred by Ash's bright, warm, and brave face.

"Let's do it, Renge."

"Yeah, let's do our best, Suiren."

I'm a lot stronger now, so I must stand tall alongside my role model. Actually gaining strength is a lot harder than just yearning for it.

I asked one of the senior maids for help finding documents related to the territories' stockpiles and any information on imports. She was already plenty busy, but once I told her what it was for, she promised to do her best to help.

"I assume this is important. Fine, if it's the Promotion Office asking, I'll do it," she said. We'd built up quite the reputation thanks to our consistent results. *In a few days, we'll have everything we need*, I thought as I headed back to the office.

Once I arrived, I bumped into Chief Reina standing in front of the door. "Oh, Renge, are you by yourself? I heard Chief Suiren was here; I thought she'd be with you."

"H-Hello. I believe Suiren is in the office. She was working there before I left..."

Is there anything I can help you with? Suiren is quite fixated on something right now, so I doubt she'll be able to receive any guests," I explained. Chief Reina thought about it a little, then giggled. "I believe we might all be here for the same reason. I thought we could prepare for what's to come."

Her expression and choice of words said everything. Chief Reina was also thinking about the refugees and what we could do from here on out.

"I was wondering if I could discuss it with you two if that's all right?"

"Y-Yes, certainly. I have time."

I opened the door, and Suiren greeted me with a "welcome back" without raising her head.

She was so focused on the documents splayed out in front of her on the desk that it seemed she hadn't realized that Chief Reina was here with me. I moved to inform Suiren that she had a visitor, but Reina stopped me with a slight wave of her hand and a smile. It seemed she found it quite amusing to see Suiren so absorbed in her work. She watched as Suiren wrote out procedures for food supply distribution and glanced at the Ajole Agricultural Research Institute documents that were laid in front of the busy girl.

Reina nodded, returned to my side, and whispered in my ear. "As I thought, we're working on the same thing. I'd expect nothing less from the chief of our agricultural research division. She, of all people, would know the most about matters related to food supplies."

"Ah, is that what you wanted to—"

"Yes, if we receive refugees from Viscount Yanga's territory, we must start preparations. However, I thought it best to leave the food supply to Suiren. It seems I wasn't wrong in thinking that," Chief Reina said with a sense of pride.

"Ah, then you came for a meeting with her. Shall I get her attention?"

"No, that's fine. No point interrupting her if she's already busy with what I was going to ask for. When she's like that, it's best just to leave her to it. Don't worry," Reina said, looking at Suiren as if watching a child absorbed in a game. "I'm used to people being so absorbed in their work that they won't even look up, so don't worry." That said, Chief Reina was considerably younger than us...

“Um, I just got back from asking my seniors if they would be able to confirm how much locally grown food and imported food we have stockpiled.”

“Oh, perfect. If they can check that for us, it’ll make things easier.”

“What will you do, Chief Reina?” I asked.

“I’ll be checking our medical supplies and helping the doctors.” *Ahh, I see.* I nodded. Even in Ajole village, we were often worried about colds and light injuries. There would probably be a lot of injured people fleeing from the werewolves.

“Moreover, we’ve also got to consider accommodations for the refugees. Then we need to prepare clean water, clothes, shoes...” she trailed off.

There’s a lot, huh? I thought we had our hands full with food. I felt the color drain from my face.

“We have a lot to prepare before the refugees arrive. So it’s a great help that you two have already got to work.”

When I heard her say, “before the refugees arrive,” I accidentally made a noise. She asked me what was wrong, and I looked at her apologetically. I explained our earlier realization.

“About that, Chief Reina...the refugees are already in Sacula.”

“What? Really? But I only just heard about the attack...”

She realized the answer to her own question. “The intelligence department heard about it from the refugees themselves, didn’t they?”

“Yes...I reached the same conclusion just before when talking to Suiren.”

“It seems the problem is closer than we thought. All right, let’s get started.”

Chief Reina brushed the hair out of her face. She wore a sour expression. “This much is nothing to worry about. Compared to what our friends can do, this is honestly a walk in the park. I’m used to having to improvise when unexpected situations arise.”

Ah, Chief Reina is also strong. As expected of one of the military academy’s best students. In actuality, my work at the laboratory was a lot easier. I had a

precedent to work with, friends, and everyone around me understood the problem we were trying to solve. Nevertheless, I always tackled my usual work with a sense of pride, so I was able to say with confidence that I would be able to do at least *something*. I guess it was more of a declaration. *I can do it. I'll show everyone that I can do it. It's par for the course for me.* It was only because of everything I'd experienced up to now that I could declare this with such pride.

"Renge, I don't know where we can put the refugees for now, but I'll go and ask around and see if we can find a temporary gathering point. As for the food supplies, I'll leave that to you and Suiren, okay?"

I respected Reina so much, but instead of shying away, I responded, "I'll do my best." I accepted the task without saying words like "but," "wait," or "maybe."

"Um...I'll also take care of the firewood and water," I added, pushing myself further. *I wonder if I can do it. There might be setbacks, and even if I accomplish what I set out to do, I might make mistakes.* But even though I was nervous, somehow my voice did not falter.

Chief Reina, who usually had an air of authority about her, bowed politely. "I'll take you up on that, Ms. Renge." She left the office, following up by saying that she would be in touch if she received more information. The sight of her walking away so elegantly with her back straight and footsteps precise was always impressive. I felt like today, I could also walk in a similar manner.

A few days passed, and after completing a number of drafts for our plans, we all gathered once again at the Promotion Office.

"Food distribution will look like this. To put it roughly, we will split the refugees into units of five people and they'll move around as such. We'll have a total of twenty of these units."

Chief Reina lightly applauded Suiren's announcement, then asked, "If we have twenty units of five, that should be around one hundred people. Do you have a basis for those numbers?"

"In my experience, I can be most effective with that amount of people, so I figured that other experienced people would also be fine with it," Suiren

responded.

“I see. Speaking of which, the military operates in groups of one hundred at most, so for military academy graduates, that should be a manageable number of people,” Chief Reina responded.

“Yeah, Glen said the same thing, so I thought it’d be the right number.”

“I think it’s a good idea. You’ve given it a lot of thought.”

“Thank you!” Suiren seemed quite pleased to have her plan complimented by none other than Chief Reina—someone continuously achieving new heights while managing the laboratory. Finally, Chief Reina’s gaze turned toward me. I was next up.

“Um, as for the firewood, other than what we have in the military reserves here in Itsutsu, the Quid Company has made arrangements to import stock from a distant region.”

“Never mind the Itsutsu stockpiles, why is the Quid Company going out of their way?”

“Well, when I asked President Quid about that, he suggested that it may be better to import supplies while we still can. As the situation develops, it may be more difficult to get supplies from further away.”

“I understand now. I wasn’t thinking that far ahead.”

“President Quid also asked if we would first like to stock up on a more multipurpose kind of wood. It’s more versatile than what we’d use for building material and may be more convenient.”

“I see where he’s coming from. However, that entirely depends on our budget; we would have to confirm that separately.”

Chief Reina had a good point. I nodded, then continued to discuss our water supply. “Regarding transportation, if we help get water to the slum dwellers, then they’d be willing to help us in turn, so that’s good news. However, I am a little concerned about how many water sources we have here in Itsutsu, and how hygienic they are.”

I hadn’t yet come up with a solution for this yet.

“That’s right. It won’t bode well if we give unclean water to already sick and tired people... It might be a good idea to place the laboratory’s water purification system near where the refugees are, then we’d be able to purify the river water and use it safely. As for sterilizing the water, I’ll have to come up with an efficient method for that.”

Chief Reina pursed her lips together; it seemed like she wouldn’t be able to come up with an answer for that any time soon. Then, after noting the main points on a piece of paper she had in her hand, and pondering on it for a while, her expression changed, and she began to make her announcement.

“I guess I’m next. Regarding where we can take in the refugees, it would be impossible to let them stay within Itsutsu city’s walls. All we can do is build temporary living quarters for them outside. Of course, it is also possible that the first few refugees might be taken in by residents,” said Chief Reina, but then she shook her head as if to say we couldn’t expect that much from the residents.

That was also to be expected. Right now in Itsutsu, from what I could see, we were already full to the brim, so we didn’t have much room in the inner city. That was even including the new two-and three-story buildings we had built thanks to the increase in bricks and cement. However, that still wasn’t enough with the recent increase in residents.

“If only we had a few more years...” mumbled Chief Reina, and with good reason. There were talks of expanding the slums, creating shared housing, and expanding the city walls. I could only wonder how much it would have helped if this had happened after all those plans were finished.

“As of right now, we do have plans to build a shelter near the west gate near Yanga’s territory. However, I will advise the construction teams to build it near the west river to create more distance.”

Suiren raised her hand. “But the further the distance, the longer it’ll take to exchange goods. Would it not make more sense to build it on this side of the river?”

“Yeah, I understand that it’d create more work in practice. However, the information coming in is worrying, so I don’t think it’ll be a small matter... As the number of refugees increases, I’m worried it’ll cause problems for the

residents who already live near the west gate. There were some small disagreements when we had to take in people from Ajole village, weren't there?"

"Um, yes...the population spike did lead to a few problems..."

While there weren't any real reasons for the arguments, it mostly came down to "Itsutsu is too small." At that time, we already had problems with overcrowding, so it led to even more arguments when we brought in more people. Suiren had a complicated look on her face. She must be thinking the same thing.

"Will there be more people coming in compared to back then?"

"I think there will be a lot more," replied Chief Reina.

"Yikes...Then we need to prepare a large area. The uncertainty is making me uneasy..."

Chief Reina let out a small sigh before giving Suiren, who was crumbling in the face of the meeting, a wry smile.

"With that in mind, I did ask if Seire would be able to help with getting an estimate. However, she said she was unsure how much she could do as we still don't know the full extent of the situation in Yanga's territory."

If Seire didn't know, then there was not much we could do. There was no one better at handling information than her. After that, we spent some time rounding up the plans we had discussed and once we'd covered all we wanted to cover, Chief Reina concluded the meeting with a summary.

"That's about all the Territory Reform Promotion Office can do for now. We still have some things to work out, but as long as the section chief and head of planning aren't here, we can't go much further than this. Our next problem will be getting the other departments to help us..."

Meaning that, until the battle at Fort Phoenix had concluded, all we could do was wait for Section Chief Maika and Head of Planning Ash. With that, the remaining members of the Promotion Office finished the meeting regarding the intake of refugees.

“We’re really feeling the absence of those two,” Chief Reina mumbled, looking slightly defeated.

Even though she was a highly respected chief at such a young age, she continued to aim higher, feeling she still wasn’t good enough. *I also have to get stronger*, I thought while clenching my fist. Suiren, who was beside me, did the same thing.

“You two really *are* close,” Chief Reina laughed.

“Uh, well, I mean...”

“Well, um, I guess...”

Suiren and I both blushed and stuttered, tried to look away, failed and made eye contact, nodded, and then responded in unison, “Because we’re best friends.” Chief Reina broke out into even more laughter.

After the three of us had enjoyed some tea together, we all set out to accomplish our own tasks. Suiren went to speak with Mother Yae, and Chief Reina went to the laboratory to discuss water purification methods, leaving me in the office. Thinking I should start working on organizing the food supplies, I opened up the file.

Hmm... Understanding food imports within Sacula was one thing, but working out what to import from outside of the territory is even more difficult. It wasn’t only dependent on each area’s yield but also on the conditions of the roads. Due to the attack on Yanga’s territory, maintaining the peace in areas close to Sacula would be difficult, which could lead to limiting what we could import from other territories. *It might be better to think of it in terms of how many carts the merchant companies can use rather than how much food they can carry, since we can use that for imports other than food.*

I wondered how long I had spent ruminating over it. I snapped back to reality when I heard footsteps coming from the hallway. I might not be as apt as the senior maids were at discerning who was coming just from their footsteps, but, I could easily tell who this was. They were making no attempt to conceal their presence and neither were the owners of the scuttling of smaller footsteps behind them. It was no doubt the acting count and his entourage.

“Is anyone here?”

“Ah, yes!” I stood up and answered immediately. “Please come in!” Before I had even finished responding, Lord Itsuki had barged into the room. *I guess I should have welcomed him in as soon as I heard his footsteps.*

“Hm, you’re here, Renge. Good timing.” Lord Itsuki was covered in dust. It looked like he had just been riding a horse. Lord Itsuki was meant to be stationed at Fort Phoenix in place of Ash, but seeing as he had come here in such a rush, I realized what it meant and responded in a loud voice, “Um, did Ash and section chief Maika return?”

“Yes, they did! As expected of the oldest member of the Promotion Office. You’ve good intuition!”

I’m so relieved. I always believed they’d be all right, but they really were all right. Not to mention, now that they had returned, we could make more progress with our plans. I let out a sigh of relief. I wanted to act immediately, but I also wanted to go and tell Suiren and Chief Reina the good news. However, I still did not know why Lord Itsuki had come all this way to the Promotion Office.

“Ah, um, Lord Itsuki, you didn’t come all this way just to inform me that those two had returned to the fort safely, right?”

“Once again, great intuition.”

I asked Lord Itsuki the reason for his visit and he pulled out a sheet of high quality paper, usually reserved for official decrees. Upon it was something that I was very used to seeing—Ash’s handwriting. Underneath it, there was section chief Maika’s signature. In other words, it was an official decree for the Promotion Office.

“Um, thank you.” I took the piece of paper, but before I could read it, Lord Itsuki explained.

“They want you to start preparing for the refugees that are coming from Yanga’s region.”

What? I unconsciously tilted my head.

“When we held a meeting before the battle, Ash figured that there would be a lot of refugees as a result and told me to get here quickly to pass on the order.” Lord Itsuki had an expression on his face that looked both hopeful and confused. “When it comes to that kid,” he muttered, “even when faced with a horde of werewolves, he’s already thinking about post-battle preparations. Ash practically pushed me out, saying with a smile, ‘There’s no need for the acting count to be on the front line. Please head back to Itsutsu and start preparations for after the battle.’ He practically kicked me out.”

“Y-Yes, th-that c-certainly sounds like Ash...” I always thought it amazing how even though they were apart in age, Ash treated Lord Itsuki like a close friend. It seemed, even though he complained, Lord Itsuki felt the same way about Ash and he never reprimanded him for it or ever got mad.

“I get what Ash is saying, but we have no precedent for accepting refugees from different territories,” he continued. “Even if we ask the regional nobles, they probably wouldn’t be able to offer much help. Rehousing settlers from our failed attempt at cultivating a village was already difficult, and now we’re having to take in refugees being chased by demons...”

I nodded in agreement. When I went to check if there were any records in the church we could use to expand on my own experience on what to do, I was shocked to find that there was hardly anything of use.

“Another reason to be thankful to Ash...” said Lord Itsuki, seemingly realizing just how much of what happened in Ajole village back then was still coming in useful today. It seemed that Suiren’s experience there would help us the most. Ash probably knew that Suiren herself had realized that.

“So, what about the Promotion Office?”

“Right. When I asked Ash what kind of preparations you should be doing, he said he doesn’t have enough time to explain but that there should be a record here within the Promotion Office that you can use. Thinking that the Promotion Office could use that, he asked me to bring this decree.” *I see. That’s this decree, then.* I glanced over it, but it was more or less the same information, just in different words.

I agreed, and Lord Itsuki lowered his head as if to bow. “I’m sorry, but I ask

that you do this as soon as possible. Even just an idea, for now, is fine. I will gather people to help. We were hosting some refugees temporarily at the fort, but with the battle closing in, we were unable to leave them there. So as it happens, they will be following me to Itsutsu.”

That’s no good! I have to go and get Suiren and Chief Reina. “Um, in that case...we do have a plan drafted up. I’ll bring it to you by noon. I would like you to go over it.”

“Hm?”

“Yes?”

Lord Itsuki’s expression froze. It was an expression that people often had when talking to Ash. But Ash wasn’t here. ...*He wasn’t here, right?* I looked around the room to check, and sure enough, he wasn’t here. I waited a little longer, then Lord Itsuki finally spoke.

“You’ve drafted a plan?”

“Y-Yes...”

“How come you already have one?”

“Well, I thought it would be needed, so... Ah, to be honest, it’s less of a draft and more of a framework of ideas, so I’m sorry I couldn’t be of much help...”

“What? I’m just shocked that you already have a draft. You sounded just like Ash just now! It’s terrifying!”

“No no! I-I c-could never say something I-like Ash!” If it were Ash, he’d already have a completed plan ready and would be waiting for permission to go ahead by now.

“Well, it’s not like it’s a bad thing anyway. It’s just my imagination. I’m surely just trembling at how reliable you are! Anyway, I must ask you to act quickly. I’ll be waiting in my office!” After that, together with Chief Reina, we presented our plan to Lord Itsuki. He celebrated as if he had just cheated death. Once he’d calmed down, he said, “So there was something scary about you.” I wondered if I had done something.

With that, the battle of managing the refugees had begun before the battle

with the werewolves at Fort Phoenix. The seriousness of which would undoubtedly increase once our head of office, Maika, and head of planning, Ash, returned.

...

I did not care for all this “apocalypse scenario” and “resurrectioners” stuff. *Well, that’s not exactly true. I did get a little excited when I first came here and suddenly started coming across all these science fiction words, and I do recall the word “resurrectioner” coming up when talking to Father Folke before.* I had thought that the administrator or whatever notice was perhaps a memory from my past life.

To be honest, I had those thoughts a lot. But even though I was thinking them, I was much too busy to entertain them. On my desk at the Territory Reform Promotion Office stood Document Tower, a pile of papers which was steadily becoming a high-rise building. It did well to demonstrate just how busy I was. Not to mention, that was not even all of it. It was going to get even bigger soon. The documents for the battle with the werewolves wouldn’t increase too excessively, however, the documents regarding our attempts to deal with the mass influx of refugees would surely begin to grow. After all, it had only been two weeks since the battle. Refugees had poured in yesterday and today, and would probably continue to pour in tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. Document Tower will receive a lot of extensions that would surely violate the building code. No one would want to come and see such a high-rise building.

Sacula, which had seen remarkable growth in recent years, was almost close to bursting. In terms of materials, there was still some surplus. However, Yanga’s territory was already half destroyed—if we handled this badly, it could finish the job and we would not have the resources to support them. And so, an even more urgent matter was our ability to process the refugees. *We will take in the refugees from the disaster.* That much was easy to say. Yet, every one of those refugees was a living person. The merchant companies stockpiling goods within their warehouses were out of my control.

Even those who escaped with just the clothes on their backs will still want new clothes. Those who have no complaints regarding clothing will still be seeking shelter from the rain and will request somewhere to live. And those

who could withstand filthy clothes and homelessness, would still not be able to withstand hunger if there were a lack of food supplies. In terms of public safety and sanitation, as the side that was taking them in, we had to provide for their needs. Few people were able to remain incorruptible when faced with poverty; even an honest person would be unable to escape the biological corruption of death.

So, we should have clothes, a place to live, and food supplied for every single refugee. However, there was a problem with that. None of those items were free, nor did we have a large surplus readily available. Where, and how, could we obtain all of that? How do you supply refugees who are exhausted from having to run for their lives? Moreover, there was a limit to our supplies, and it was evident that eventually, we would not have enough for everyone. We had to work out the bare minimum required first, then systematically distribute it.

These are just unreasonable demands. Currently, the situation Sacula's civil and military officials were up against was dangerous, sensitive, and complicated enough to make you want to cry. Even in the Itsutsu admin hall, where they took pride in having a large amount of first-class personnel, they were dealing with the fact that their work was on the verge of going up in flames. There was no department to deal with these kinds of situations. And having no department meant there was also no manual, nor a person with the required authority to handle these kinds of problems. For a society where villages and cities being destroyed by demons had been the norm for more than one hundred years, I guess that was to be expected. I realized that at the current level of civilization, there was no way to have a constant reserve ready for a territory getting destroyed. Rather than planning to take in the refugees, it would turn into a plan to deter bandits.

Because I was a virtuous and compassionate person, I was not one to jump immediately to a bloody solution. Generally, if one area faced decimation, that was due to their civilization regressing. But I was not about to allow that to happen. Thus, the Territory Reform Promotion Office was now carrying the burden of coming up with a solution to this problem. I gathered up the production reports from last year and worked out how to divide the refugees among the other cities within the territory, then threw the completed

documents onto a new Document Tower. This second Document Tower was depressingly small. As I looked at it, the door opened, and in came my fellow companion through this living hell.

“U-Um, Ash, there’s been a new report...” Lady Renge said earnestly. Judging from her less than articulate way of speaking, it seemed like this report meant more work. I could see Lady Renge’s expression peaking over Document Tower—a blend of apology, uneasiness, and worry. I could not say I was doing my job well as a supervisor if I made my subordinates look like that. I let out a sigh and showed her a wry smile.

“Go ahead, Lady Renge. If I do not know what it is, I will be unable to do anything about it. So please tell me the report.”

“Yes...well, more are seeking refuge at Fort Phoenix...”

Approximately two hundred, Lady Renge told me. She looked up at me like a child who had been caught doing something wrong, awaiting my reaction.

“They’re still coming... That would put the number at over three thousand now, right? I believe we are close to reaching the limit of how much Itsutsu can take...”

There were currently more than two thousand people staying in the hurriedly put together refugee district outside of the city walls. Incidentally, Itsutsu’s population had once been at just under thirteen thousand, so that meant the population had increased by one-sixth all at once. Imagine it like a household of six suddenly becoming a household of seven. Cleaning, laundry, and food costs would all end up changing. That had happened on a much grander scale. There was no way that this would not cause an issue for how we managed the city. I tried to see if I could split up the refugees into other territories, however, it seemed that they were struggling even more than Itsutsu was. They had fewer civil and military officials, so I guess there was nothing that we could do but wait a little before we sent more refugees elsewhere.

“Also, um...there’s been a report from the refugee district...” Lady Renge said.

“Has there been an increase in refugees there too...?”

“It seems fifty more refugees have arrived...”

The group consisted mainly of people who had run for their lives and probably lost contact with their relatives upon arriving at Sacula. Now that they did not need to worry about surviving, it seems that they had begun to move about on their own looking to reconnect with families. Currently, the city had taken in close to seventy percent of the refugees, and now families were naturally beginning to reunite. As a result, even though we had no more room to take people in, it felt like every day more and more were coming to the refugee district.

“Regarding what to do from here on out, I have been thinking it might be best to send them to different towns...”

Any sort of plan we have will be ruined if the number of people continues to increase. As I ruminated on the impermanence of everything, I grabbed a document from the top of Document Tower.

“We can do something about the extra fifty today, however, if this keeps up, there will be nowhere for them to go.”

“Th-That’s right. I have been telling them that we can’t do it as we won’t be able to keep up, however, around two hundred more people were accepted without permission...”

“If the number of refugees increases by even ten percent of what we originally planned for, we risk running out of food supplies and other resources. What is the situation like over there?”

“Ah, yes,” Lady Renge said as she leafed through the documents in her hand.

“According to Suiren’s report, as for the distribution system itself, we are registering the units of refugees one by one, and she says it’s going well. As for food stock, going by what they have now, it should see them through until winter, but she asks that you start to plan for after that.”

“That’s an uplifting report.” That was the one report today that didn’t send my head spinning.

“Yes. Suiren is really working hard.”

Thinking back to when I first met Suiren, while it may be bold for me to say so, it felt like I had watched my own child mature into a young adult. It seemed like

she did not only remember what I had taught her back in that cold and deserted village, but she was putting her knowledge to use. She had gained the ability to help people.

“If there isn’t food, then Sacula won’t be able to help them alone,” I remarked.

“Yes...while we have had an increase in supplies across the region, that won’t be enough to help.”

“The fall of a territory...”

While I did create the Frontier Alliance with this kind of situation in mind, I did not think it would be needed so soon.

“We recently requested supplies from a region particularly close to us, so we should be able to make it until at least winter with those. Please inform Suiren of this. Transport will be difficult, however...”

If the Frontier Alliance had made more progress, we would have been able to improve the transport routes. However, we had not seen much in the way of results in that regard. *But even with that aside, the surrounding territories know that if things were to go bad in the Sacula region, they’d be next. With that in mind, a good majority of the Frontier Alliance should be willing to help in any way possible.* It is a shame that we could not have done it a little more efficiently.

“However, this is not a problem that will be solved in the next one or two years. Having only the Frontier Alliance carry the burden is simply too much,” I continued. *I would like to skillfully squeeze that virtue out of the central region nobles.* As they were our companions in this same kingdom, it was paramount that they lend us their aid. *If they do not aid us, then they are not our companions, and if they are not our companions, then they are our enemies, and then if they are our enemies, then is it all right if we treat them as such?* I had left seeking cooperation from the central regions to His Excellency Count Gentoh and Princess Alicia, so I put that to one side for now.

“The next question is how many more refugees there will be after this,” I posited.

That depended on how much damage the Yanga region had sustained—something I was not able to discern unless we went there and saw for ourselves. I had heard that the southwestern half of the territory had been destroyed, however, it was unclear what the situation in the northeastern half was like. The number of refugees could significantly change based on the situation there. I wanted to know in advance if there were even survivors still in the southwestern half of the territory. While I still had a lot of work scattered about, it may be best to send scouts to Yanga's region. *I should discuss this with Lord Itsuki.*

"Scouts? To Yanga's territory?" Lord Itsuki asked in a tired tone of voice. He had an expression similar to what he wore during Sacula's busiest season—the winter hell. Even though he appeared to be exhausted, he had still come to confirm what needed to be done. Truly a professional when it came to overworking himself.

"Yes. I wish to gather information on how many more refugees we can expect to take in." Informing Lord Itsuki of my reasoning, I also let him know that we expect the number of refugees to increase. It looked like I had given him a headache.

"Right... Yeah, okay. Their territory has been destroyed, after all. It's not like it'll end with just one to two thousand people, huh." Lord Itsuki agreed, then let out a deep sigh as if he were about to vomit blood.

I did not have a clear idea of the total population of this world, however, I did know that one frontier city housed roughly ten thousand people, and around five thousand people lived in each of the surrounding villages and towns. Thus, there were just short of one hundred thousand people in the entire Sacula region. It felt a little low, but in a world where there was a need for anti-demon defensive equipment, it seemed there was an inevitable cap on the total population. It was estimated that around three to eight hundred thousand people were living in the Yanga territory. The reason for such a large margin of error was the recent mismanagement of the territory, so there were a lot of discrepancies in the tax revenues and other documents that would be needed to determine population. Whether the number of people would be high or low, it would still be an issue that would affect Sacula's management.

“I get it,” I said, “but even though it won’t change anything in terms of numbers, it would be good to have a heads-up. I think we can turn it to our benefit.”

If we can confirm how much damage there is, we can respond to the intake of refugees better, and, of course, we can start looking into how to rebuild Yanga’s territory. Sacula will not be overseeing the restoration, so we do not have to think about it too hard, however, there is no one else who can take in the refugees. Geographically speaking, the rebuild’s success or failure would have a variety of effects. If we did our best to research and come up with a report, we may earn the means to be able to pick a new leader for the territory and build a good relationship with them.

“Then with that last point of yours in mind, I’d certainly like to proceed in that direction. It is never a bad idea to be on good terms with your neighbors.” *It is even better if they are, like myself, a civilized person who returns kindness with kindness. But if they are someone who will not stand to reason, I will make sure to assert dominance by having them be in debt to me. Then they will have to play nice.* No matter how it turned out, I would have the upper hand.

“Hmm, I see you’re still very good at putting a positive spin on annoying things, Ash.”

“It is more that I want to see a return on my investment.”

“I can agree with that. Okay, let’s put together a scouting group. Is it all right if I leave that to you?”

“There is no way I can say I refuse with you looking like that, is there?” Truth be told, I did feel like I had a lot of work on my shoulders, however, thanks to my body’s improved capabilities following the battle with the werewolves, I felt I did not tire as easily. With what seemed like everyone reaching their limits here at the admin hall, I did not mind taking on more work as I did not have to worry about becoming ill.

“Ah, yes, Lord Itsuki. Shall we take the opportunity to go ahead and form a department to deal with matters like this in the future?”

“A department? A new one?”

Lord Itsuki tilted his head in confusion as I spoke.

“Currently, the Territory Reform Promotion Office is leading the current efforts.”

“I’d say that you, Fort Commander, are leading our efforts, rather than the Promotion Office.”

Huh, really? It seemed my shocked expression made Lord Itsuki laugh. “While we were preparing for the aftermath of the battle, you were already talking about how to handle the refugees,” Itsuki continued, “so I had figured that you had already brought the issue to the Promotion Office and were working on it already. I guess your friends are also doing the same thing, right?”

“That was simply because we had dealt with a similar issue in Ajole village. So it just happened to land in the Promotion Office’s lap.”

“Yeah, so in reality, we already have a department qualified for the job. There is no one else who can handle this, so I doubt there will be any complaints.”

It seemed that Lord Itsuki was leaving this matter to the Promotion Office. *I guess he doesn’t care much about how it happens.*

“I’m a little surprised...but in any case, even if we are working on it now, it is not the sort of work that we usually do.”

“Yeah, it is a bit outside of your usual scope. But even if we *were* to establish a new department, there is no one else we can leave this kind of work to...”

“Since they’re already working on it, you are free to choose personnel from the Promotion Office. However, since it’s not in our usual remit, I do not think it sets a good example to decide on a plan that is so far removed from our usual goal.”

We had already been getting involved with stockpiles, supply, and migration—all things that the Territory Reform Promotion Office usually would not be able to do without express permission. “While it may be urgent, using the Territory Reform Promotion Office’s experience as an excuse to allow them to manage population migration may cause problems later on,” I continued.

“Speaking of which, wasn’t there a time when a certain somebody bent our

information department appointment rules to take in someone from a different territory?” Lord Itsuki asked.

“It helped, didn’t it?”

I thought I was able to build a good rapport with Viscount Sukuna by doing that. I laid it all out and sincerely asked for their help. In doing so, we appealed to their sympathy, and they relented.

Lord Itsuki shrugged at my confident comeback. “Well, the question is whether whoever takes over from you can be trusted as much as I trust you. But, okay, a department to deal with the current situation, it is. Do you have a plan for it already?”

“Shall we just simply make it a Disaster Response Office? As for members, we could have Lady Reina as the main planner, with Lady Suiren supervising as manager.”

Lord Itsuki nodded as if to say “okay, that’ll do” like he was casually choosing what to eat for lunch. However, it seemed he had not forgotten about me.

“And Ash as section chief.”

“I was expecting as much.”

I would have preferred that Maika be section chief—just like she was in the Promotion Office—but she was busy as well, and beggars can’t be choosers.

I wanted Maika, who excelled at fighting, to join the scouting group that was headed to Yanga’s territory. It would also help diplomatically, since she was the granddaughter of the current head of the Sacula family. Both were field jobs. It seemed the role of making decisions and taking on the responsibility fell to me, who had no reason to leave the office.

“By the way...just how many titles do I have now?”

“A lot.”

He was not keeping count at all, was he?

Suiren’s Perspective

CLANG!

The sound of a pan being hit filled the area. I learned this crowd control skill from Chief Reina. Two people had started arguing over the amount of soup being distributed, which led to a bigger squabble—but all went quiet at the sound of my pan.

“I’ve been telling you lot not to bicker almost every single day! If you keep arguing, others won’t be able to get their food!”

Someone from the heart of the argument tried to butt in with a “but,” so I hit the pan again. *Shut up!*

“No buts! You’re not the only hungry one! It’s not just you! Everyone is hungry! Even I haven’t eaten yet! No one eats until we’ve finished distributing! Okay? Got it? So enough of the commotion!”

Even I knew what it felt like to be angry over an empty stomach. I mean, I was banging on this pan pretty hard.

“What are you gonna do if all this fuss ends up with food spilling?! You won’t get seconds! Actually, I won’t be giving any more to anyone who just wastes their food like that!”

You think we’ll let scum like that eat our wheat and potatoes? Not in a million years! Those harvests were the result of back-breaking cultivation from the farmers, sole-stinging transportation from the merchants, sleep-sapping ledger organization from a supervisor, hand-hurting preparation from a chef, and finally, distribution by me, who had to listen to ear-exasperating unfair complaints *all the time*. *Asshole!* We’re all struggling. We’ve been preparing it all today, yesterday, and the day before! That’s why, for all we’ve struggled, we have food. Plenty of food.

“We’ll have food ready for tomorrow and the day after that, so there’s no need to fight! What we don’t have today, we’ll have tomorrow, and if we don’t have it tomorrow, we’ll have it the day after that. And the day after, and the day after that, we’ll show you that we have food for you!” I should have enough energy to do that much. This time it’s different from when I could barely protect Ajole village, thinking I had my hands full. I had grown a lot since then. I had become strong enough to not turn a blind eye to people starving in front of my

eyes. I'll be able to do something about it this time. *I'm going to become the Ajole chief who rebuilds our village, so if I let complaints like this bother me, I'll never be taken seriously.*

"We have enough food for everyone, so form a line! If you all file up, we can hand out the food more quickly! The quicker we hand out the food, the sooner you all can eat!" Plus, once this is finished, the staff can grab something to eat, and then I can go handle some other work. If all goes well, it'll have a good effect on the food supplies. *I mean, if everyone just lines up properly, everyone will be happy, so, let's all be happy together! Those who don't agree with that just want to make everyone else miserable, and I won't stand for that at all, so it's okay if I bury them in the depths of despair, right? That'd fix things. Heh heh.*

"Listen up, it's really simple! Form a line! Those who have gotten food, head back to your groups and calm down!"

I hit the pan lightly. The disorderly queue was now orderly again. As expected, it was hard to control this many people and it was never the same person starting problems. The troublemakers might think they were only causing minor inconveniences, but for those who have had to put up with it countless times every day, it was starting to get tiring.

Once I saw the queue begin to dwindle, I unwittingly let out a sigh. But then another problem started in a different queue. *I just want to rest a little. Ahh, but, I guess it's a good thing both arguments didn't start at the same time,* I thought as I ran toward the problem, pan and ladle in hand. What I saw before me was a large burly man, grasping the shoulder of a small child. It seemed like he was accusing someone of something. I knew from experience that this was going to get annoying.

"I said already, he didn't spill it on purpose! I'm not asking for a huge portion or anything, all I want is another cup!"

Yeah, as I thought, this was going to be a bother. Here we go, I thought to myself as I held my head. I interrupted the altercation before the worker was overpowered.

"Give me your name and unit number."

"Who the hell are you?" the burly man replied.

“I’m Suiren Ajole. I’ve been directly put in charge of this operation by His Excellency the Count.”

Since I was often underestimated based on my appearance, I found that taking the high ground by stating my titles was quite helpful. It was the same when I met Ash and Section Chief Maika for the first time. I realized that when you state your rank, the person you’re talking to tends to go quiet. I couldn’t beat this large burly man with my strength, but he retreated once he heard my title. *If I can wrap up this conversation before he gets mad again, I’ve won.*

“I’ve told you my name. Now please give me your unit number and name.”

“Uh, well, never mind my unit number, our kid spilled his food, so I’m trying to get a refill for him.”

“I can’t give out food if I can’t confirm your name and unit number. I believe I’ve already said the reason, but do you want me to tell you again?”

“I just want another cup of food.”

“If we don’t confirm people’s names and numbers, then someone could keep coming back asking for more food. Not to mention, those who aren’t even registered as refugees would be able to come and get a meal. If that were to keep happening, the food allotment that we have very carefully calculated would end up being not enough, and then no one would be able to eat.”

I looked up at the man, and he glared down at me.

“Do you get it now? There is a limit to what we have prepared. If we simply think, ‘It’s just one cup, it won’t hurt,’ then that’s one person who then goes without food.” *How many times have I gone through this now?* I stopped counting at twelve times just today. All I could give them was this explanation, and no matter how many times they persisted with “but” and “wait,” I couldn’t give out more food.

“You don’t want to lie to get more food, selfishly stealing food from someone else, do you?”

“Of course not! Don’t treat me like a thief!”

You don’t have to shout, I can hear you well enough. I get that I could have

worded that better, but is there any need to get aggressive with someone so much smaller than you? Even Ash doesn't have to raise his voice, and he is one thousand times scarier than you!

"In that case, start by telling me your name and unit number! We still have over two thousand people to feed, so don't waste any more time! Name and unit number!" I repeated while glaring at him.

Finally, he broke. "Three two seven, Ailos..."

Finally, he answered my first question.

"And? Do you want another cup, Ailos?"

"No, it's for my son, Jack. He spilled his soup. His unit number is the same, 327."

"Registrar! Have these two only taken one portion each?" Now that I had their names and unit numbers, I called the registrar to bring out the checklist. I looked at it, and there were indeed two people with their names in unit 327 and they had both taken food today. There was evidence that they had received food over the past few days, however, there were no other notes besides that. It seemed they hadn't caused any problems before.

"Okay, I can see that you are both registered. You have heard the reason why, as a general rule, we don't allow those who have already received their portion to take another portion, right?"

"Wait, he dropped it while we were heading back! The little one is starving; surely you can spare one more cup!" This was the most annoying issue. There were quite a few bad eggs among the refugees, however, based on experience, the ones most likely to cause problems were those with small children. Since it was for someone else's benefit, they were more likely to ignore their surroundings.

"I'm sorry but, even if that's the case, it's one cup per person. Once we have distributed the food to everyone, if there is any leftover, we will bring it to you. Please wait until then."

"But there's never anything left. Will there be today?"

“This is just a rough estimate, but I don’t think so. Maybe it is better to talk with the other members of your unit, and ask if they would be able to share some of theirs with the child.”

There was no need to pretend that there would be some leftovers, so I was honest with him. *The refugee district has grown quite considerably today.* We planned for that and had made a lot more, but there was still a limit to how much we could do.

“Well, I guess all I have to do is wait, then!”

Though, to be honest, things aren’t going to get any better. I sighed. That man knew he would not be able to get seconds, yet he still decided to make a show of it. We had been saying from the start that it would be better for people to share what food they have with their unit members. If they asked nicely, surely others outside their groups would be willing to help too.

Of course, not everyone would, but those who were used to how it was here and knew they could be in that same situation tomorrow would be willing to help out. *Go talk to them before they finish. If you waste time fighting about it here, nobody will have anything left to share with you. And don’t cause issues with our food distribution; if you do, none of the other refugees will pity you.* Even now, the complaining man hadn’t realized that the people around him were already starting to throw dangerous looks in his direction. *That’s to be expected.* Even though they were hungry and standing in line, they had to wait longer for their food because of him. Not to mention, if he got his way, there might be a chance that they might lose out on a serving.

Behind the man, the cause of the argument—although I did feel sorry for him—stood Jack, looking very uncomfortable. If this continued, the man—*Ailos, was it?*—his position within the refugee district would become quite uncomfortable, so I should probably use my authority to shut him up. *I’ll get the guards to restrain him.* I didn’t like resorting to this as I didn’t want to earn the disdain of the refugees, but Ailos was in the middle of turning into public enemy number one here. *There’s nothing else I can do...*

As I signaled to the soldier who had been keeping a close eye on the situation, I heard heavy footsteps from behind me. I knew who that was.

“Suiren, I had a moment free so I came over to help out.”

My face lit up in response to his deep voice. On the other hand, Ailos, looking like he had just stood on the tail of the dragon god, looked above my head. It was the biggest reason why I was not afraid of Ailos and his towering build—my lover was bigger, stronger, and so very kind. I didn’t even have to look to confirm that, though he was kind, he was probably glaring at Ailos. The burly man froze, and those who had been glaring at him just before suddenly turned away and acted as if they had nothing to do with what was going on.

“Thank you, Glen,” I said without turning around, leaning on my big, strong, and kind companion, allowing myself a moment of weakness. *Aah, being supported by Glen’s firm body like this is so relaxing!*

I’d often talked about it with Mother Yae. She was saying that she could feel how strong Sir George was by leaning up against him. Chief Reina didn’t tell us much, but she was nodding along at the time, so she had probably experienced the same thing. *Ah, this is no good—I’ve gotta sort out this argument first.* Although it seemed like it was more or less resolved.

“Well, Ailos? Did you need seconds?”

“Ah, uh, no, actually...” Ailos stammered. He took a step back as if he wanted to run away, but he stopped when he looked at Jack.

“Ah, yes, that’s it! As a father, I can’t simply leave him to go hungry...!”

“What’s that, he needs something to eat?” asked Glen.

Ailos was leaning forward, but he stood up straight and responded, “Yes.”

“I see... In that case, since you seem to be in good shape, I’ll give you some food if you help me with my work.”

“Really?”

“It’ll be quite difficult manual labor. Food around here is important.”

“I’m fine with manual labor! My body is built for that!”

Ah, how kind of you, Glen. I guess it wouldn’t be much of a problem that way. Glen was offering work as an individual and was giving food in return as thanks. This wasn’t part of our food distribution system or our work with the frontier

territories. Upon hearing that, I imagine other people would ask for work expecting the same reward, but when Glen said hard manual labor, he really meant it... I imagine Ailos probably wouldn't be asking to do it again either. He might be tasked with fetching water from a well or helping with the food supplies. *My guess is whichever job is the hardest...*

"Well, Suiren, I'll be back after I get this man set up with some work."

"Okay, see you later."

I waved to Glen, then turned back to face the queue. There were still so many people. I wonder how many arguments would break out. Thinking about it made my stomach hurt. *But, well, I am used to that now.* This was nothing for the me trained by Ash back at Ajole village.

I'll get all the food handed out today!

Alicia's Perspective

A follow-up report had arrived from Sacula. Around the time of the first report, it seemed they were also a bit lost. From then, we received update after update—some even arrived before we'd finished reading the last! Count Gentoh had asked me to keep him up to date on the matter, saying that it was something he struggled to do himself. *I used to help Ash with similar tasks, so I know exactly what to do!*

Once we had (somewhat) made sense of the current situation in Sacula, Count Gentoh held a Frontier Alliance meeting in the capital manor to share the information with its members.

"Hey, is this true?" blurted out a Nepton diplomatic officer, sounding like she didn't quite know what to make of it all. She gave a brief apology for speaking out of turn and then reworded her question a little. "*How much* of this is true?" She'd tried to say it differently, but it came out exactly the same.

Count Gentoh had raised three main points regarding Sacula's current status. First, a horde of two hundred werewolves charged from Yanga's territory toward Sacula but were successfully repelled. Second, Yanga's territory had taken severe damage, and two thousand refugees had reached Sacula—with

that number still climbing. Other neighboring territories faced a similar crisis. Third, Sacula was taking in as many refugees as they could, and that approach had inspired other lords to lend their aid. The lords of the Frontier Alliance, led by the Nepton officer, were probably thinking something to the effect of: the first point was hard to believe, the second simply couldn't be true, and the third was absolutely unbelievable.

The frontier regions knew all too well the strength of a horde of demons. There were few who wouldn't lose all hope upon hearing news of one hundred charging werewolves. Though that may not be the case for those in Sacula. Not to mention that they had fought said werewolves and had come out of it mostly, unbelievably, unscathed.

Two thousand refugees were equivalent to the population of a whole city ward. If it were only one or two hundred people, sheltering them might be feasible, but managing numbers ten times that was difficult to comprehend. It could lead to trouble. Not to mention, if the number of refugees had already reached that high, how much higher could it go? The report was difficult to believe.

Coming up with plans was likely troublesome. Taking in people with only the clothes on their backs meant that they would have to provide food, clothing, and accommodation for several thousand people. An unimaginable decision.

The Frontier Alliance members all had their eyes on Count Gentoh, likely doubting the credibility of the report, especially regarding the third point—I imagine they were hoping that part, at least, wasn't true. Count Gentoh folded his arms and gave a nod.

"It's not a matter of how much is true... I mean, it seems they have already started."

"Your Excellency! Surely you can see how reckless this is!" The Nepton officer stood up, slamming the table.

"You ought to stop this intake of refugees! If you take in one, that leads to ten more, which will then lead to one hundred more, until you're overwhelmed! It's happened before. Those who get left behind end up attacking settlements because they feel they've been slighted!"

“That’s true,” replied Count Gentoh. The look on his face clearly showed that he understood the consequences far more than this young officer. He then looked upwards to the ceiling.

“Sacula has always been weak,” Gentoh continued. He was the leader of a region renowned for being the strongest in the kingdom, and he spoke as if he were addressing the top of the World Tree. “It has happened countless times in the past. Failing to cultivate villages, towns attacked by demons, territories meeting with disaster—they all result in refugees. Our weakness always leads to refugees and bandits.” He spoke in a somber tone. It was a history where people were rarely saved, always ending in death.

“I remember it too well,” reminisced Count Gentoh. “I ordered people so weak that they could barely hold a sickle to fashion spears out of wooden branches and chase off bandits. I had never felt so ashamed in my life.” The elderly members among the attendees all looked downwards, recalling similar memories.

The Nepton officer, having not experienced anything remotely similar, continued to argue. “I understand that the Yanga territory’s disaster is no doubt something that will cause pain to those close to the frontier regions. However, regardless of that, it does not mean that we have the capacity to deal with it!”

“Is that what you think?” replied Count Gentoh. Of course, Gentoh understood where she was coming from. But... “It seems our young companions in Sacula don’t agree.” He sounded pleased, waving the report from the territory he had left in his son’s charge like a flag. “We’ve become stronger. We’ve become so strong that when we say we’ll do something, we can do it. That’s why we have decided to take in the refugees. No one in Sacula will listen and obey whatever some old man who decided to retire to the royal capital has to say. All I can do is support them in their endeavors.”

The Nepton officer bit her lip—seemingly she still had something to say. But Count Gentoh delivered the final blow. “My region has decided they will do it. Do you think we would go back on something that easily? They’re the people who made Sacula what it is now!” I felt a sudden but refreshing gust of wind around me. *Ah, I remember this feeling. The wind in Sacula. That strong yet gentle gale was brewing a storm even here.* “Ha... Aha ha!” I couldn’t keep my

laughter in, causing everyone to turn to look at me. “Heh heh, I’m sorry. I just couldn’t help but think this is so very Sacula...” It was *incredibly* Sacula. The deep emotions and the outright stubbornness—these small nostalgic reminders of the place I hoped to return to someday brought a warm smile to my face. *That’s why I need to do my best to protect it.* Still smiling, I looked around at all the lords’ shocked faces.

“I, Princess Alicia, value Sacula’s decision, and I promise to do all I can to support them.”

There was a murmur in the room. While the response seemed positive, they also seemed hesitant. *It’s a start. Even if they keep out of it now, once they see that we can produce results, they will no doubt be swayed into joining our cause.* I knew because they were just like how I used to be. I also used to often complain, saying things were impossible and nothing could be done. However, when people are enshrouded in darkness, they become attracted to the light. *We’ll surely light the way for them.*

“As for support, I’m considering using the church’s authority to secure supplies. I was expecting that Sacula would take in refugees.” I smiled and looked at Count Gentoh who shrugged with a look that said, “you know more than me.”

“I have already met with Father Birkan. I suspect he will take action once I have given him this report,” I continued. That prompted a few murmurs from the room—they were already pondering the magnitude of the church’s authority. “There’s no precedent for sheltering this many refugees, so I understand your concern.” *There’s been a lot of unprecedented things lately. We discovered flight, the frontier regions stopped the central regions from monopolizing a certain technology, and a girl won the Royal Sword Fighting tournament, which led to the Frontier Alliance being formed.* Every day was different, but we were all facing it together.

“From now on, let’s become that precedent. The church will add to the power of the Frontier Alliance, of which Sacula is at the very heart. With this, we will be able to help people in small ways that were not possible before.” *I mean, this much is a small matter.* It’s not like we were forming a new country in the midst of a demon crisis like the first king Sodra once did. Just like those who once built

and protected the foundations of this country, we were simply trying to protect what we had and carry on. We were at a turning point in history.

“Let’s work together,” I continued. “This really isn’t that much of a big deal. If people are hurt, you reach out and help them, like you would for a family member or a friend. We’re doing the same as a kingdom, except on a larger scale. It’s time for the frontier regions to expand.”

Of course, I didn’t expect the lords to be immediately swayed by my words. Words are wind. I’d have to light the way like Ash would. “I have a plan. No doubt those in Sacula are already thinking the same thing, but I don’t think that we will have to support the refugees for long.” *Because we’re going to help rebuild the Yanga region.* We’d already been planning for Viscount Yanga’s downfall, and our search was underway for his replacement. Things were worse now than we’d planned for at the time, but we were still prepared to lead an election for a new viscount, manipulating the process to our benefit.

“We don’t have to let every town and village perish just because they get attacked by demons. We can pick an area that was slightly damaged and rebuild it steadily. As the construction progresses, we can start to send refugees back. We will have to continue supplying them with goods, but once the refugees can reclaim a semblance of their lives back, it should become less and less of a burden.” I could understand wanting to look away from the danger laid before us. It was enough to drive you to despair. However, that didn’t mean we didn’t have hope. A dangerous path was laid before us, but if we just take it one step at a time, we’ll finally get to the end of it.

“Of course, it will be a burden for the Frontier Alliance. But I ask you to think ten, twenty years ahead. The Yanga territory’s population has shrunk, and multiple cities and villages have been left to ruin. It would take probably ten years to rebuild them, but if we withstand the hardship now, we’ll reap the rewards many decades from now.” In order to reap those rewards, it all depended on how we acted now. If we can tolerate the pain, and take a step forward, then we could keep working toward our end goal.

“The hardest part will last a year, at most two years... After that, we’ll be able to slowly taper off support. The future of a larger Frontier Alliance is waiting for us.” I could see the path we needed to walk. It wasn’t going to be easy. The light

was dim, and the path was narrow and filled with obstacles. Nevertheless... “It’s not impossible. This may just sound like a fantasy, but it can be made reality. And for that reason, it’s paramount that we work together.”

I wonder if my words will reach them and illuminate the darkness. I wonder if I’m lighting the way, just like Ash would. I looked around the room at the attendees. They were all older than me and rich with experience. They no doubt once had the same hopes that they felt they had to give up on.

“Your Highness Princess Alicia.” Someone had responded, but then it was followed by laughter.

“Why, if you had let me know in advance you would put on such a performance, I would have lent you a hand.” It was the Nepton officer. Moments before, she was also loudly declaring her own stance, but she couldn’t help but give a bitter smile.

“A wonderful speech. You gave an overview of the plan, and then showed what we have to gain. Not to mention, delivered with such fiery passion of which we in the Frontier Alliance are very fond. I’ve not been so dampened by these central regions that I am unable to get fired up by the right speech,” said the Nepton officer.

Theirs was a region where the sea breeze blew ferociously. They must be used to walking straight into a storm.

“All right. As the monkey god once said, ‘cooperation is the best cane, and if you are to walk a long path, you will be needing a robust one,’” continued the Nepton officer. “The House of Nepton will become Your Highness’s and the Frontier Alliance’s cane, and we will support you on this path for many more years to come.” She delivered a similarly elegant speech to my own.

I made sure to include the words “Frontier Alliance” to put pressure on the others. I was more or less implying that if anyone was to back down now, it would put the whole alliance at a disadvantage. It was easy to tell that I had ignited some passion into the room, rekindling the fire in their hearts. It was time to walk the path no one else in the kingdom had ever walked—the path to saving the Yanga refugees.

At the same time, I felt the weight of responsibility. Who knew how much

damage this would cause for other people? My stomach was in knots and I felt like running away. *Aah, Ash always managed to keep smiling even when he had to carry a similar kind of responsibility. I can't run away. The more I learn about you, and the more I try to keep up with you, the more I fall for you.* I smiled as I felt the flame within me blaze anew.

Now that I had set the Frontier Alliance into action, next up was the central regions. Although it was happening far away, there was still a large horde of demons. Even the central region lords who had enjoyed one hundred years of peace had to acknowledge how dangerous the demons were, and although they weren't in a rush to act, they did want to be kept up to date on the situation.

However, there had been no information from the epicenter—the Yanga region. The central region lords had tried to squeeze it out of Count Gentoh, but the problem was that he absolutely despised them. When summoned to a royal banquet in the past, he claimed that he was busy and that he couldn't stand the central region nobles anyway. One time, they tried to get their wives and consorts to interrogate Gentoh's wife at a tea party—but it turned out he was single!

If the central lords were going that far to get info out of Gentoh, then it was likely them who had persuaded the king to hold this meeting. He had called for a royal council meeting. The Count of Sacula only accepted it on his duty as a noble.

"So, why is Alicia here?" asked the crown prince who was seated to the right of the king.

"His Excellency Count Sacula invited me to be here due to my familiarity with the ongoing events in the remote regions. I plan to just give my insight where needed. His Majesty also gave me permission to be here, Your Highness Prince Albert." My brother continued to be condescending even in official meetings, so I responded by being overly formal with him. *Honestly, it was tiring.*

I wonder if it bothered him that the princess who up to now had no place in politics—or rather, was unable to have such a place—had now earned enough

authority to be able to attend a royal council meeting. After all, I *was* second in the line of succession after Albert, so it probably did bother him to some extent. Even then, he had been given a seat on the right side of the king, clearly signifying his position as heir, and yet he was still wary of me finally getting an invitation, even just as an informant. If it were Ash, he would have welcomed me with a smile, keen to hear more. *I guess Ash is just of a different caliber.* Though, could I really say that? Ash seemed to enjoy just about anything, so I don't think "caliber" is the right word here.

While my thoughts wandered back to Sacula once again, Count Gentoh sluggishly rose to his feet and gave his report.

"First of all, I would like to dismiss the notion that the Sacula army has trespassed onto Yanga's territory. My report today concerns specifically what is happening in Sacula's territory. We've received information regarding the situation in Yanga's territory from the refugees and our envoys who met with Viscount Yanga before the werewolf attack. I have already—"

Albert interrupted before Count Gentoh could finish. "What was that group of envoys doing?"

"I have already reported this to His Majesty," Count Gentoh replied, giving him a bothered look. He was clearly thinking, "Weren't you in that meeting?"

"In recent years, there has been an influx of residents from Yanga's region fleeing to Sacula. Due to repeated threats, we simply sent the envoys as a warning and to ask them to keep in line. Is that explanation acceptable?" It was apparent from Count Gentoh's tone of voice that he wasn't pleased.

It was easy to understand why. Since this meeting had been scheduled, he'd been complaining that every little thing he said was just going to get nitpicked. With his territory currently in danger, he was more irritated than usual. Prince Albert seemed somewhat upset by his response, but the king quickly intervened.

"That has been acknowledged. I was made aware of Viscount Yanga's wrongdoings at the last meeting," said the king before asking Count Gentoh to continue.

The count let out a sigh and picked up the report. "First of all, a horde of

werewolves has been spotted in the wake of the refugees fleeing from Yanga's territory. While we do not have a specific number, it seems to be somewhere between two hundred to three hundred. Probably on the lower end of that scale."

There were voices of both disbelief and doubt—they still seemed to doubt the report. Count Gentoh frowned, but he didn't seem too bothered by their response—he appeared to have expected it.

"It's difficult to determine the exact number, so I wouldn't bother asking for details if I were you," he added.

"Are you at least able to work out the number of werewolves slain?" one of the attendees asked. They were implying that the remote regions couldn't do a job so simple, but that thought was laughable. If it were a number we could count, then we wouldn't be here worrying about the remote regions getting attacked. The central region lords still couldn't accept the reality of what's been going on.

"There's more than we can count, you see," Count Gentoh replied.

His response probably didn't make much sense to the doubtful lords. It was hard to imagine demons—or humans, for that matter—being at such a number that you couldn't determine how many there were. It took me a little while to understand too. *But, well...it was coming from Ash, after all.*

"We managed to intercept the horde by using our new weapon stationed at our completed fort. Fortunately, our forces only suffered light casualties, although there could have been more severe injuries or fatalities before or after the battle."

There were a few attendees snickering in response. I could tell what they were thinking: if we were going to lie, why wouldn't we at least try and make it sound believable with some exaggerated numbers? The outcome of the battle no doubt sounded a bit *too* convenient.

I couldn't let them continue thinking of this as simple child's play, so it was time for me to throw my hat in the ring. I gently raised my hand. The king nodded, giving me permission to speak.

“I have something to add to His Excellency Count Gentoh’s report. I have received some information from Head Priest Birkan. As you are all aware, with the exception of those born and raised outside of the capital, the Church sends priests out into the territories.” This time, my source wasn’t from Sacula. If those in attendance had heard this information from Prince Albert and the central region lords, it definitely would have come across as if Sacula was lying. The lords’ expressions changed upon realizing this information was coming from me—a known supporter of Sacula.

“According to Church’s intel, there were between two hundred to three hundred demons in the Yanga region, and there were fifty dragons. They also concluded that the dragons flew toward the mountains while around half of the werewolves flooded into Sacula,” I continued.

A few still doubted me, but I told them to take it up with the Church. *You should just go confirm it yourselves.* At the very least, that’s what Father Birkan was doing. While he was friendly with Sacula—or rather, with Ash—he wasn’t spurring such a large organization to action because of that alone. He used his authority within the Church to secure evidence and confirm it for himself. When Father Birkan said that he would verify the facts, he was insinuating that doing so would be helpful for Sacula, and that was exactly the case. *I’ll be sure to tell Ash what Father Birkan has done for us.* Birkan had been pestering me to do so, after all. He knew that Ash would be sure to reward him generously as thanks.

It seemed they were finally starting to realize that the number of demons Count Gentoh had reported was in fact correct.

“Count Sacula, you said just before that your house didn’t sustain much damage.”

“Yes, that’s correct. Raising an army was a drain on our resources, however, we did not lose any men in the battle. Our military strength remains unchanged,” Count Gentoh responded. We didn’t need to spend time trying to convince the remaining skeptics. *Instead, since we are estimating the ramifications of the demon attack, the royal family needs to be thinking about compensation.*

“The problem lies not with Sacula but with the Yanga region. From what we

have heard from the refugees, it seems that all villages and a few cities have been all but destroyed,” Count Gentoh explained.

“Have you been able to confirm that fact?”

“We should be sending out a scouting party to the region but unfortunately, with everyone busy with the refugees, we’re short of hands. Ah, Your Majesty, could we send a scouting party from Sacula to the Yanga region?” Count Gentoh asked.

“Since we have yet to receive any official report from House Yanga, sending a scouting party is about all we can do. I do not see anything wrong with it,” the king responded.

“Quite so. They will simply be going there to confirm the situation firsthand,” confirmed Count Gentoh. “Sacula plans to continue taking in refugees and offering them protection.”

“Protection?”

“Yes, protection. We at Sacula have decided to provide them with food, clothing, and shelter.”

It was probably best to ignore those who seemed to think that was an idiotic thing to do. It was better to take note of those whose faces changed color upon hearing his declaration. Like, for example—you guessed it—Prince Albert.

“Wait, Count Sacula. The citizens of Yanga’s territory aren’t *your* citizens.”

That was the response from someone who didn’t want House Sacula gaining more power than they already had.

“I am very aware. Hence why I said that we would *protect* them, meaning that we will take them in temporarily until the situation in Yanga’s territory settles down. The refugees have empty stomachs and nowhere to go. A lot of people in my region could not bear to leave them like that.”

“So, it’s not that you’re planning to rob Yanga of his civilians before slowly dismantling the region in order to usurp the viscount?”

Count Gentoh looked at Prince Albert like he was an idiot. Even if he were planning something like that, it’s not like he would just outright admit to it. But

even then, what would Prince Albert even try to do about it, if it were indeed the case?

“Speaking for Sacula, we all just want the situation in the Yanga region to be resolved. If you are *that* doubtful of our intentions, we can stop helping the refugees, but it’ll be *your* words that condemn them. Would that be all right with you?” responded Count Gentoh. If Albert wanted to complain, then he’d have to be prepared for the resulting banditry and violence to forever be associated with his name. Not to mention that if that were to happen, the royal family would lose all its reputation.

“I’m not saying that. House Sacula is a very honest family. I was just making sure there was no ill intent.”

“Thank you for your concern,” Count Gentoh sneered. It was obviously an excuse. Prince Albert should have backed down after that, but, having felt slighted, instead continued to fuel the flame.

“However, come to think of it, won’t this be a large burden for House Sacula?” Prince Albert responded in an attempt to feign concern. *Ah, now he’s done it. Count Gentoh looks about ready to punch him.*

“You are correct. It will indeed be difficult to accomplish alone, Your Highness.” I quickly interjected. Count Gentoh probably wouldn’t have punched him, but I jumped in just in case. “That is why Head Priest Birkan has offered to lend Sacula his aid in accordance with the teachings of the three gods. I am moved by the Church’s mercy, and with all due respect, I plan to donate to the budget for this venture myself.” I glanced at Count Gentoh as I said that. I needed him to know that this is why I brought him here.

“The lords of the Frontier Alliance have already pledged to help us. I ask that His Majesty give due recognition to the nobles who are trying to save the lives of their people,” I said, acknowledging the allies we’d gained in this plight. As protectors of the entire kingdom, the royal family wouldn’t be able to remain simple bystanders. Helping those in peril is fundamentally a good thing, and the king should be acting as the entire kingdom’s protector. With my contribution to the budget, the operation should go ahead without a hitch. The royal family probably only wanted information on the ever-growing Frontier Alliance, but I

won't give it to them. I needed to do my best for Ash.

...

Fall rolled in, signaling that it had been a month since the battle at Fort Phoenix. Fortunately, everything was going to plan regarding the refugees in the Sacula region. That seemed to also be the case for the other regions within the Frontier Alliance; checklists confirming available relief supplies were continuing to come in day after day. With this, we no longer had to worry about food. The Territory Reform Promotion Office had temporarily become the Disaster Response Office, and, to my relief, everything had gone smoothly. *It was good news. Yet, where there is good news, there is also bad news.* The bad news came in the form of a report from Maika who was leading the scouting party into Yanga's territory.

"The situation is worse than we thought," Maika told me. It was the night of her return and we sat on our bed. She had not even put together the report yet. My usually angelic Maika, whose bright smile alone was enough to put me at ease, grabbed my hand and rubbed it. She did not look pleased. Seeing someone with as much battle experience as her feeling this miserable... It meant the situation in Yanga's territory must be bad. Maika let out a sigh and she told me that there were no survivors anywhere between the central part of the region to the southwestern border.

"It seemed the survivors either made their way to the south of the Sacula region or headed to the damaged eastern and northern areas of Yanga's territory." Maika, with a heavy expression, went on to explain that the bodies of the deceased had been left to rot in droves in the villages and towns.

"The refugees that came to us were lucky. I mean, you had an idea that something like this would happen, and you did everything you could to welcome them."

"I take it that those who fled north and east were not so lucky then?" I asked, stroking her head. Maika nodded silently.

"They were treated like bandits. I imagine that would mean there have been other such 'bandits' in the past."

With a forlorn expression, Maika mumbled that the eastern and northern

areas had suffered more than the area that was attacked by werewolves. She then wrapped her arms around my waist and hugged me. As she buried her face into my chest, I switched right to comforting her. I hugged her back with all my might.

“Thank you, Maika. Thanks to you, I feel like I can work even harder at welcoming the refugees in.”

“Mhm.” Maika nodded in return, her gentle breath tickling my chest. I gave Maika a kiss on her cheek and began to process the information I had received from her.

It had been a month since the battle, and the number of refugees within the Sacula region had risen to six thousand. Three thousand of them were in Itsutsu city, and the other three thousand were elsewhere in the territory. An additional one hundred refugees were spread about various towns and cities in neighboring territories. I wanted to send more to our neighbors, and there had been offers from a lot of lords, but it would have been difficult to send them far distances. While the refugees would receive better treatment there, they were all too exhausted. The logistics just did not work out. There were also regions that were receiving refugees from Yanga’s territory directly, and as far as the Frontier Alliance could confirm, that number was over ten thousand. If Maika’s report was anything to go by, there would be more still yet to come.

There was no one left at the crisis point, but it seemed that even more refugees had begun to emerge from northern and eastern areas. It seemed they were people who had been unable to find asylum, had given up their own territory and were now seeking somewhere else to live. After being chased from their homes by bandits, they would undoubtedly end up right here.

“I guess if half the refugees out there come to Sacula, there’ll be about another ten thousand?”

“I think there’ll be a lot more.” Maika corrected my rough estimate as she continued to bury her face into my chest. “Refugees are being chased out of other territories so they’ll be coming here too.”

“Is that so?”

I often forgot since we were treating them as asylum seekers, but in this

world, they were first regarded as bandits. In this world, there were no plans in place regarding what to do with refugees.

“Yeah, they were telling me about it. When they were chased out, they were told that Sacula would take them in instead. Since they knew I was from Sacula, they wanted to know if they could really come here.”

“Those who kicked them out no doubt felt awful seeing these people putting their lives on the line.” As I thought, society as a whole had a lot more room to improve. Since we are all here as humans, we should do our best to live positively and freely. At the very least, we should be able to extend a hand to someone who is quite clearly struggling.

“Ash, you’re amazing.”

“Hm? I am always happy to hear your compliments, but why all of a sudden?” I asked as I continued to stroke her head. She finally looked up at me, wearing a smile as bright as the sun.

“I was able to look them in the face and tell them that everything will be all right. I was able to tell them that if they come to Sacula, it’d be all right. I was able to tell them that we had everything prepared, and we were ready to take them in.” She smiled as she went on to tell me how relieved the refugees were when she told them she could help.

“If you weren’t here, Ash, I wouldn’t have been able to tell them that. I mean, taking in as many refugees as that? Usually, that’d be impossible. No one has ever done it up until now, and no one has ever said that they’d do it either.”

“Is that so? I feel like, before the battle, I said I would and everyone agreed immediately. You all helped me get to work on a plan, remember?”

“Because it was *you* who said it. Because you said it, everyone thought that it was possible. We all thought we’d show everyone that we can do it. We wanted to do everything that we could.”

I remembered how everyone looked when I first proposed what to do at our pre-battle meeting. Speaking of which, everyone had a stiff expression when the battle had ended. I thought that was only natural considering how difficult it would be to take in and manage that many refugees, however, I wondered if

it actually came from them realizing they had to follow their hearts and do the right thing.

“Everyone’s smiles get stolen away from them, but you, Ash, you’re the one who returns them.”

“It is not just me. Lady Renge and Lady Sui ren, Lord Itsuki and His Excellency Count Gentoh, Officer Raino and Viscount Sukuna—a lot of people lent me their strength, and as a result, we were able to accomplish what we set out to do.”
Of course, Maika and Princess Alicia too. Maika blushed as I smiled and stroked her cheek.

“Ash, you’re always like that. When people think something’s impossible or that they can’t do anything, you’re always there with a calm expression. You give off this mysterious light, and then suddenly everything feels possible.” Maika started counting on her fingers the number of things that mysterious light had led to.

“You made our studying fun, you helped make our village successful, you came up with medicine to cure disease, reintroduced beekeeping, came up with new methods for agriculture, discovered flight, found out how to bring back a village that had once disappeared...and you found our good friend, the Princess.” She nuzzled her face back into my chest as she playfully recalled our memories together.

“Ash, I love how bright you shine. Let’s continue to illuminate the way with your wonderful light.”

“Of course. Anything to help you, Maika.” After that, I heard Maika’s soft breathing as she slept. It had been a while since I had seen her so exhausted. “Thank you,” I whispered as I continued stroking her head.



Suiren's Perspective

I was abnormally cowardly.

I was so cowardly that I hesitated to ask anyone for help. Even so, I felt like I'd become somewhat stronger. The fact that I was able to stand in front of a load of refugees while banging a pan and shouting out orders was good evidence.

Naturally, as someone who was born cowardly, I was usually exhausted after work. When I realized that I'd have to do this all over again tomorrow, I lost a little of my sanity. However, I didn't have the guts to abandon my work. I also didn't have the guts to betray all we'd learned from the Ajole village incident. I could never show that pitiful side of myself to Renge and Glen. *That's where my strength lies.* Thinking that I didn't want to harbor any shameful feelings toward both those who had helped me and those most important to me wasn't the most progressive way of thinking. The reason we were able to come so far on this uncertain path was thanks to the light behind us that illuminated the way ahead. That was the case today as well.

"There has been a report from Maika, the scouting party leader."

I had heard that Lady Maika had returned from her venture into the Yanga territory. Renge and I concluded that the reason Ash had summoned us was due to the results of that report.

"We have been able to discern how many more refugees we can expect to come out of Yanga's territory, so I called you both here today. I understand that you are both busy, however, this will affect your current work," Ash began.

As expected, he had called us here to give us an update on the refugee numbers. *That's Ash all right, he's always quick with his work.*

"Based on the report, we estimate that the total number of refugees—this includes those that we have already taken in—will reach twenty thousand."

If this continues, the Disaster Response Office is going to collapse in on itself. *Sure, Ash's light lets him soar through the sky, but as a normal person who is confined to the ground, I'd never be able to reach him—not in this life, not in any life.*

Twenty thousand? *Twenty thousand?* I had managed to keep a good track of the food supplies we required in my head, but this just messed everything up in one fell swoop. *Ah, that's it. This is definitely the sound you hear when everything is about to collapse.* I looked over to Renge who was standing beside me; she no doubt heard the same thing I did. Her face was drained of color.

"Twenty...thousand...?" Renge asked, trying to confirm that she didn't hear incorrectly, almost as if she was pleading for that to be the case. However, Ash didn't respond.

"I mean, that's absolutely..."

Impossible. However, I couldn't bring myself to say that part. Even if it was impossible, I still had to do everything in my power. I had decided that I would do *something*. That's why I could never say it's "impossible." Nevertheless, we never anticipated these numbers, meaning that the food distribution plans Renge and I had worked so hard on were beginning to crumble. Everything I had built in my head now lay in ruins. *Aah, this really sucks. What would you call this? Exhaustion? Helplessness? Or just plain old despair?*

Right before the meeting had started, we were all working hard even if there were problems and we didn't have everything we needed. It was only natural that we were exhausted. There hadn't been a day where my stomach didn't hurt. *Even then, we've managed to make it this far without giving up...* My head felt heavy. I couldn't look Ash in the eye. I wondered if I was being weighed down with despair. If that was the case... If just for a second, that was the case, it was really not that big of a deal. The fire that burned within me was stronger, bigger, and more ferocious. *I hate this. Even though we tried so hard. I really thought I could pay them back for their help. I really felt like I had become stronger. I hate that our plans will fall apart and there's nothing we can do about it. I hate it. I hate it so much. I'm still too weak. I don't have any strength. I hate it so much, I could cry.*

But it wasn't over yet. If I could just overcome this despair, I could still do something. I had to do something. I couldn't stop. I had to continue. I had this strength all along—it'd been with me since Ajole village fell to the treants.

First of all, we had to start from the ground up. *Ah, this could be perfect. All*

my plans turning to dust couldn't have happened at a better time. I almost let out a laugh.

“Similar to those from Ajole village, we need to help the refugees get back on their own two feet. They will need a place to stay, a place to get food...in other words, we need land.”

Listening to Ash's words, I was brought back to the time just before Ajole village fell. With support from Itsutsu, the research institute taught us farming techniques and helped us revitalize our farms. Our plan was to help the refugees do the same thing. *We could probably do that. We probably have the means to do that.* I was able to clear up the dark clouds in my head. Surprisingly, there may be no need to build something again. The foundations had already been laid.

“We have quite a lot of land out here in the remote regions. For those who wish to migrate, there is a wide selection of plots I would like them to cultivate. I had been wishing to revitalize them anyways, but I lacked the means to do so.”

Behind those dark clouds was a bright and warm sun. No, it wasn't a sun at all. It was a dream that shone just as brightly. Like a plant, I rose up toward it, bathing in its warmth.

“You can help with this, right, Lady Suiren?” Ash asked.

Yes. Yes I can. My Ajole village—our Ajole village—was waiting for us. That was why I'd been trying to get stronger. That was why I was able to. I had come this far so I could finally realize my dream of restoring Ajole village.

Ash's words helped me realize that the dream I had been chasing was in front of me the whole time.

“In all honesty, it would be quite difficult for us to take in that many refugees. However, if we were to take them in as immigrants, that'd be a different matter,” Ash added.

That's right. I nodded in agreement. If we say we are protecting refugees, that limits what the refugees can do. It's like having a guest. If they get injured or just wander off on their own, it'd lead to problems. As refugees, we would have to keep them gathered in one place and keep a close eye on them. On the other

hand, if we were to take them in as immigrants, they would more or less become one of us, and it would be easier to get them on board to do things.

I'd be able to recruit different villages to help out too. My friends from Ajole village were saying they had a lot of fields that required more workers. *But then we'd need more tools, preferably iron...* Ah, that's right, we should have tons of iron from all those werewolves that were slain. Then the hard part would be getting farm horses and cows. I guess that was the reason we were suffering food shortages. *I could ask the research laboratory if they'll let us borrow the steam locomotive.* I kept coming up with ideas. There was still lots I could do. Restoring Ajole village used to be a distant dream—but this time, it was different. *Now I have the power to get closer to that dream.*

"We can do it. I assure you," I declared.

Of course we can do it. Ash nodded, pushing me forward. He used to be so strict with me back then, but he knew this was within our capabilities.

"The plan from now on is not to take in refugees, but rather to nurture talent and cultivate new land. I believe you two are fit for the job, right?" Ash asked.

"Of course!"

This was my way of paying back Ash for everything he'd taught me how to do up to now. I might be a coward, but I was able to hold my head high and respond with confidence. I was happy that Renge, who was standing next to me, also responded in an unusually loud voice. She'd always looked out for me, and when I was dealing with the restoration of Ajole village, she told me that she would help me in any way she could. She kept her promise too by helping me come up with ideas. As a result, we were able to be here and look Ash in the eye, showing that no matter how difficult or stressful a plan may be, we would be able to try.

"Wonderful," Ash laughed. It was a bright laugh brimming with power. I remember being scared when I first met him, but now I instead felt hopeful.

"All right, let us get right into planning. We will continue taking in the refugees as we have been up till now. We will then narrow down a group who either wish to, or don't mind, moving to another territory." Ash had given us a framework to work with.

“Um, even if there are people who wish to move, wouldn’t it be impossible to move them straight away?” asked Renge.

“Yes, they are, after all, Yanga’s citizens. But that does not mean that we can allow them to stay here permanently until a new Viscount is selected,” Ash responded. That’s why we had been treating them as guests up until then. They were still Yanga’s citizens, so we couldn’t ask them to go work for other lords.

“That is why I ask you to treat this as them working in order to earn their keep while they take refuge. If they cultivate the fields, that means that there will be more for them to eat,” Ash continued.

“I guess if it has to be that way then...will the surrounding territories accept that?”

“Good question. If Sacula is the only territory accepting immigrants, there will be a lot of complaints.”

I had asked around to find out if the refugees would want to help out with farm work, but they all said that they would rather help in their own way. They seemed wary of central region nobles and cautious of the remote regional nobles as well. Ash, who wanted to put a stop to that, gave a wicked smile as he changed the subject.

“I wish to continue exchanging technologies within the Frontier Alliance. We’ve certainly got useful farming techniques to offer. It seems the exchange students had a lot of good things to say about it, right, Lady Sui ren?”

“Oh? Ah, right, yeah, all of the exchange students were saying that they wanted to try it out in their home territory...”

As I was the Territory Reform Promotion Office’s Advanced Agricultural Technology Officer, I had been drowning in questions regarding our farming tech. Viscount Sukuna had asked for ways to cultivate produce in order to help promote tourism, and Baron Nepton had asked for farming techniques that would be fit for a coastal region. While I did have answers for them, it was hard to explain, and we also couldn’t know for sure whether they worked. Even if they asked me to teach them or go to their territory and show them how to do it, we couldn’t just stay there teaching for years. Suddenly, I realized something.

“Wait, I get it now. If the immigrants were taught Sacula’s new and inventive farming techniques, then Frontier Alliance territories would welcome them with open arms.”

I wonder how that would go... The residents of Ajole village, for instance, were now regarded highly in Sacula, sometimes even being scouted for other territories.

“We have gone a little off-topic,” Ash said, interrupting my chain of thought. “Lady Renge, it should be noted that Sacula does not plan to have a full monopoly over those who wish to migrate.”

“Y-Yes. As expected of you, As— Ah, uh, Chief Ash. I don’t think there’ll be any complaints.”

It seemed there was a lot to consider if we were to distribute refugees elsewhere, but if it were skilled workers we were sending, it seemed there would be some merit to being careful about it. *Food is incredibly important, after all.*

“It is not just me, after all. It’s a result of everything you two, as well as Lord Hermes and Lady Reina, have achieved as a team in the Territory Reform Promotion Office.”

I felt myself grin hearing that. *I gotta go tell everyone from Ajole. Not only will this help us restore the village, but we’ll also be able to help everyone else too.*

“The skilled workers do not need to just be limited to agricultural work. There are bound to be wood and metal workers among the refugees,” Ash continued. “There should also be a good amount of youngsters with no specific trade but are still able to carry out manual labor.” As far as I knew, there were a lot of people like that. I had already asked the craftsmen for help before, and it was often the case that those with more strength were always at the center of disturbances. I remembered that Ailos seemed quite strong, and he had enough energy to cause a ruckus last time. *Glen is stronger, though.*

“I do have plans to improve trade routes throughout the Frontier Alliance, so if we teach the refugees how to pave roads, they will become even more popular than the agricultural workers. Incidentally, we’ll also be able to develop our trade routes even further while we research how to make paved roads. We

can also use them to help rebuild the Yanga region.”

Ash chuckled to himself, seeming pleased. “Since road paving comes under trade, then would it be okay to leave the agricultural side of things to you, Lady Suiren?”

“Yes, of course! I worked hard for this very moment! Please leave it to me!” I wouldn’t allow him to pass this over to anyone else. This was my work as an agricultural instructor. *I wonder how many refugees will take part? I should make sure a lot of people join. My first objective is to teach them how to grow their own food.*

“We could expand the experimental farms in the suburbs. But if that isn’t enough, we would need an area where it’s easy for the refugees to gather—like the cultivable land near Fort Phoenix,” I continued. “Then lastly, we have areas of land within the territory suitable for agricultural work. I guess that kind of order would be all right? As for candidates...”

There wasn’t a lot of land that was readily available—the parts that already had people working on them. But although there weren’t many options...there was one piece of land within Sacula that would work just fine. *I wonder if I should say it. It might cause a commotion.* I had a little glance at Ash’s expression. Ash nodded back to me, implying that he already knew about it.

“Ajole village would make for a perfect candidate. Please put that on the list for consideration.”

“All right!”

This can’t be real. I thought I wouldn’t be able to go back to my hometown for a few more years. I had already accepted that it was something I’d have to leave until later—I never thought I’d go back due to the refugee crisis. Feeling there was nothing I could do, I just kept running, accepting I would have to leave it for now and not think about restoring my village. But once I’d finished running, Ajole village was there waiting for me. *I’ve gotta let the others know. They’re gonna be so happy.* There were probably people who would stay here, especially those who had gotten married or worked as mentors. Not everyone could return home—that much was expected. Even then, everyone is going to be overjoyed. *We don’t have to abandon Ajole—we can bring it back to life.*

They can wear it as a badge of pride, evidence of us getting stronger. *I wonder what the fields are like back in Ajole?* They were probably all destroyed. They were probably even worse than they were before Ash came.

We worked so hard when Ash was dragging us around. We worked hard to cultivate the fields with our own hands. The refugees who will receive agricultural mentorship will probably go through the same experience. *But if I was able to withstand it, they'll be fine.* The main issue was whether we had enough food to last until the fields were functional. Back in Ajole, Ash oversaw the fields, but now it was up to me. *We don't really have any extra food, clothes, or...*

While I pondered over what to do, Lady Maika came up to us. She had a letter from the royal capital with a stamp I was very used to seeing.

"Ash, Mr. Quid gave me this letter. It's from Alici— Her Highness the Princess." She was our royal benefactor who always provided us with supplies. I hoped one day to meet her so that I could thank her directly. Ash's smile deepened when he looked at the letter.

"We have just received some fantastic news, everyone."

Ash informed us, quite proudly, that the princess had been working within the capital to ensure we'd receive relief supplies. For some reason, even Maika looked like she was full of pride. She looked as if he were talking about her personally. I found it odd, but I was more focused on the contents of the letter.

"That'd be a big help! Now that I'm thinking about it, we are going to need a lot of different items for the agricultural tutors!" I said.

"Yes. Although I cannot say how much we will receive, with the Church helping us, I think it is safe to assume it'll be adequate," said Ash. "As expected of the princess, she was able to navigate the capital and deliver such fast results." Maika nodded enthusiastically alongside him.

"Not to mention, if we can get a new Yanga leader elected, we could begin negotiations to rebuild the damaged villages and towns. We might even be able to get some refugees back home," Maika added.

It seemed Ash had his eyes on the goal. Although I couldn't yet see it, I

wanted to do all I could to keep up with Ash so that I could someday see it too. *Actually, I'll just keep going anyway.* I knew it was going to be hard. But I also knew that an abundant future was waiting for me at the end.

Alicia's Perspective

I was going to send relief supplies to Sacula. With that solved, all that was left was to deal with the chaos it caused. It was hard to discern how much they needed, and even if we could work that out, it most likely wouldn't match up with what we were able to send. They definitely needed more food, but if it were to go bad before it reached them, it would end up being of no help at all. All we could do was ask that they seek help from nearby allies in the Frontier Alliance. With that, we would be able to focus on sending nonperishables. It was approaching the time of year when the sun hung low in the sky, bringing along with it the cold chill of winter. They could probably benefit from more cloth. They could make them into clothes, or better yet, they could wrap themselves in cloaks.

"Hey, Your Highness Alicia. Wouldn't it also be a good idea to send more leather? Or would it be difficult to gather more?" Tris asked me as she looked over the items we planned to send. We were using a room usually reserved for researchers from the Church, and as Tris was learning to be a priest, she was very relaxed here.

"Leather? We could probably gather more, but don't you think it'd be better to get more materials for cloaks?"

"That's true, but couldn't they use it for tents? I mean, Sacula is getting a lot of people, right? So there's definitely not gonna be enough places for them to stay."

I had also been worrying about living spaces, but I'd never considered tents. It reminded me of the camping trip I went on back in Sacula. I was thinking about sending them wood they could use for building, but even if they were frugal with it and only built small wooden houses, I imagined it wouldn't be enough. Tents in winter probably wouldn't be the most comfortable, but it would be better than being exposed to the elements.

“I’ve seen it before—the inside of a tent can be quite warm if you use a heater. But I guess it’s a little dangerous since there is a risk of fire and it can ruin the air quality within the tent,” Tris explained.

“Tris, when you say you’ve seen it before, do you mean in a book?”

“Yup. Do you want me to gather more information and compile it into a report?” Tris smiled at me as she left the room. Having the opportunity to relax like this reminded me of my time as Arthur. While I was talking to Tris, I’d thought of a lot of things I wanted to ask Ash about.

When I was struggling, Tris would ask stuff like “Do you wanna know more?” or “Do you want me to find out more about it?” At any rate, it seemed Tris herself was enjoying herself, so I didn’t feel so bad about asking her for help. She was a great person. If we sent Ash the report along with leather and wood, he would be able to decide how to use it. Even if they couldn’t make tents with heaters, there were a lot of ways they could use leather and wood. While I thought through the options, Lusus—a priest-in-training—entered the room.

“Your Highness. It is a pleasure to see you.”

“Thank you. Can I help with something?”

“Ah, yes, if you are wishing to send supplies to Sacula, then I wanted to let you know that I have put together some pharmaceuticals,” Lusus responded. As he handed me the documents, I noticed there were a lot of them. Having a closer look, I realized they were instructions on how to use various pharmaceutical items.

“I’m sorry for putting this on you when you are no doubt busy with patients.”

“Not at all, it was my pleasure.” Lusus was very polite compared to the more casual Tris. It was funny how much of a difference there was between them. Following my discussion with Father Birkan, it was decided that the Church would send relief supplies to Sacula, and they had reached out to me for support thanks to my knowledge of the region and its capabilities. I had no qualms helping them. I was able to work toward helping out the place I hoped to return to, and there was no other fulfilling work like it here in the capital.

I had originally planned to come as Arthur, but the youngest child of House

Sacula receiving aid from the Church would've left a lot of room for suspicion. Therefore, I came as Princess Alicia instead. We were so similar that people would start to get suspicious. When I mentioned this to Ash, he seemed really happy. He was the kind of person to say that if keeping up appearances is important to them, then just show them what they want to see. I started to understand why he was so close with Father Birkan. As a result of coming out as Alicia, I was able to tell Tris and Lusus that I was Arthur. *After all, I couldn't not tell them. They were assigned by the Church to specifically help me.* They knew how I was as a person, they knew I had a connection to Sacula, and the whole Church knew of my abilities. These two were perfect. Tris didn't change how she treated me at all, but Lusus started acting like he was now. I told him that he could be at ease with me, but it seemed he himself didn't want to. He was a serious person. Ash also trusted Lusus, and his patients probably felt safe with him too.

"However, while I can arrange the reagents for the medicine, will the doses be all right? I know Sir Fenix was worried about training the doctors, so I am worried we will not have enough people," Lusus said.

"I haven't yet heard if they solved that..."

Ash was working on educating doctors on medicine. Or rather, it was *one* of the things he was working on. I had heard from Ash himself how hard it was to get medicine back in his hometown. He told me this while he poured "medicine" (it was actually poison) down the throats of "guinea pigs" (they were actually mice). He looked genuinely concerned, recalling it as he moved onto another mouse. Thanks to the enthusiasm he had for medicine, I was able to drink herbal tea even while in the capital. In short, it seemed Ash was trying to teach doctors about it.

"If he's trying to teach doctors, I guess he has some ideas already," I pointed out. Lusus crossed his arms, nodding.

"Speaking of which, Ash was the one who came up with the idea of Father Folke's orphanage, right?"

"He was. If we have the ability to open the first orphanage in the capital, don't you think we're also able to increase the number of doctors?"

“Once I am done here, I plan to speak with Sir Fenix. I wish to ask him how much help that would be. If only I could also just freely go to Sacula.” Lusus had patients to look after, so he was stuck here. After the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament, the sick and wounded had been left in Lusus’s care, and Baron Nepton had left his own ailing citizens in his care as well—Lusus was quite busy.

“Recently, I have been wishing there were two of me.”

“Heh heh, that would be quite hard to make happen.” If anyone could do that, it would be Ash. He had me acting on his behalf here in the capital, not something a lot of people could do. *Right, it’s almost time to meet with Father Birkan.* I stood up and grabbed the roll of papers.

Sending the relief supplies was turning out to be quite difficult. A while ago, Tris and Lusus were helping me decide on what to send. But even though we’d discussed it with Father Birkan, we ran into problems on the way—like being unable to acquire some supplies or needing more than we’d originally thought. I was discussing the best way to send them with Father Birkan.

“The Church would like to make use of a caravan to send supplies to the viscount’s region,” Father Birkan started.

“I see. That’ll take up one transport route...but won’t that mean there won’t be enough caravans to go to Sacula?” I answered.

“You’re right...what a bother.” We both sighed while looking down at a map spread out on the table. We were working out which trade routes would be the most expensive to travel. The caravans would carry a certain number of people and they would need to pay for lodging, food, and shopping. Currency would make its way into those regions, and since a lot of nobles had donated to the Church in anticipation of this, we couldn’t neglect that fact. Not only did we have to take into account the amount of donations, but we also had to come up with an efficient route, make sure we had a decent amount of supplies, and consider the conditions of the roads. *This is making my head hurt...* I looked up, and I saw that Father Birkan was pulling the same anguished face.

“This much should be easy, seeing as we haven’t received many requests from your faction...” Father Birkan said. My faction, which was more or less made up of lords from the Frontier Alliance, were easy to handle. We did have

to be careful with a few, but even if it was looking like there wouldn't be much return from delivering supplies, we would still be able to offer information and technology from the Sacula research laboratory. On the other hand, if we didn't give the central region lords an idea of how they might benefit, they might put themselves in the debt of Crown Prince Albert, which would temporarily pause the relief supplies. Although it was a problem, it seemed that dealing with the central nobles wouldn't be as difficult as we first thought.

"Prince Albert continues to be a thorn in our sides," Father Birkan muttered while shaking his head. This time, Prince Albert had tried to stir things up among the central region nobles.

"With these supplies, the royal capital's wealth would spill into the remote regions."

"Is Sacula going overboard with their military prowess?"

"Is the Frontier Alliance even needed by the kingdom?"

"Wouldn't it be all right to just leave the current Yanga situation to the distant region nobles?"

He was spouting a lot of contradictions, however, Prince Albert didn't really care about that. The state of internal politics within the capital was everything to him, and he hadn't even spared a thought to responding to the disaster within the remote regions. It was safe to say that as far as palace politics were concerned, the crown prince was probably somewhat suspicious of Princess Alicia's movements. But instead of focusing on the princess and her connections with the remote regions, he instead was choosing to focus on the wealth of the central regions.

Those who understood the prince's obsession with wealth were more inclined to gravitate toward him. But I believe I can provide actual results rather than just promises. Or at least I think so...

"I want the heir to show us his true intentions."

I agreed completely. Prince Albert's actions were slowly hardening the remote region lords' behavior against him. The fact that he was still ignoring how the

central regions continued to make fools out of the remote regions was starting to seem hostile. The central nobles were acting as an obstacle in our path to band together and overcome the disaster in the Yanga region. However, together, our union had become stronger and we were standing our ground. In a way, this was expected. It appeared that Prince Albert was trying to take advantage of the situation to get the central nobles on his side. Much like the recent actions of those among Datara's faction of nobles...

"His Highness Prince Albert is probably thinking this is a good opportunity to strengthen his own faction..."

"It could be a good opportunity. Working out if they are friend or foe, and not forgiving those who stay neutral is a good way of knowing."

"I don't think it a clever idea," Father Birkan said bitterly. "Anyone can destroy a book, however, it takes skill to restore it. It's something all priests learn how to do as a part of their training. Our teachings tell us not to destroy or break books but to preserve them instead."

I nodded in absolute agreement. *Ash often passed out when he saw that a book was damaged.*

"As a priest of the Church, I consider his actions to be akin to destroying and disposing of a book. He is only interested in what he can gain from it. Thus I believe I have to take some distance from him."

Prince Albert had lost a big playing piece. Father Birkan had always been cold to Prince Albert in his role as Head Priest and always friendly with me—although he was supposed to remain neutral.

He continued, "For that reason, I find what you are doing to be magnificent. The support you are giving Sacula is just like carefully restoring the pages of a broken book. It is a clear indicator of the care in your heart."

"Thank you. You're going to make me blush if you keep complimenting me like that." In reality, I was doing it for selfish reasons—I wanted to show the person I loved what I could do. That's why I sometimes felt a little guilty when praised. *But surely it's all right. Ash often said that he liked lies, so he would probably laugh at a lie like this.*

“So, Father Birkan, regarding the allocation of the caravans.”

“Your Highness Alicia, you’ve really got the endurance of a boulder,” Father Birkan said, looking to take a longer break. I was still doing fine.

“I’ve always been like this. Not to mention, Sir Fenix is about ten times busier, yet he carries on.” *Winter hell at Sacula was rough...*

We were somehow able to send out the first caravan of relief supplies. It would take a while until they arrived, but they should make it to Sacula by winter.

“Excellent work, Your Highness,” said Head Maid Amin while I sipped on herbal tea in my private quarters.

“Thank you. I had hoped we could have completed preparations a little sooner, though.”

“The situation changed. There was nothing you could do. Even with that, you still managed to complete it quite quickly.” I had started hearing more and more often that I was quick at my work. It first started with the royal head priest, but now I was hearing it at the palace as well.

“Do you mean to say that I’m faster than other central nobles?”

“I wonder if they are at a disadvantage compared to the house that managed to organize the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament in just one night,” Amin said. She really understood me. This was just the standard for me.

I could have used the excuse that I was not used to working with the Church, but Ash had done the same the moment he arrived in the royal capital. He was also very aware of the importance of networking. Why would a new knight who had just arrived in the capital be able to order Count Sacula around and even give out orders to the princess? Well, that’s because it was Ash. Comparing myself to him was no doubt a little strange, but Amin comparing me to the central region nobles was also strange.

“The central regions act too slowly. I wonder why they’ve yet to decide who will take over as Viscount Yanga?” I mused. Before disaster struck the Yanga region, Count Gentoh had already started researching who could take over.

Maybe the situation had changed due to the demon attack? Even then, since the situation had changed, that would mean it would be better to decide his successor sooner.

With the absence of a viscount, the neighboring territories weren't able to do anything. You could probably get away with sending envoys, but sending in military power would be seen as an attempt to invade. Even if that military power was there to help deliver relief supplies. While I was busy with the Church, Count Gentoh had asked for an audience with the king in order to request support, but since they could no longer use him as a go-between to get to me, he was being passed from pillar to post. *No doubt Prince Albert's doing.* Albert had solidified his faction within the palace. However, while he did have powerful connections, the palace should also consider their connection to the Frontier Alliance...

Just what was the king thinking? While I was suspicious, I realized I was unable to imagine what was going through his head. He was supposed to be my father by blood, but he always kept his distance. When I thought about it, I was closer to Count Gentoh by far, down to even knowing his favorite foods. It's meat, by the way. Preferably fried.

I finished drinking my herbal tea as I ruminated. "Amin, request a meeting for me with His Majesty. I need to talk with him about the Viscount Yanga replacement."

"I have already requested one," Amin responded. I complimented her, and she responded with a small nod, but her expression remained the same. As expected of her, however, I could sense a small amount of pride. She had been with me long enough to know exactly what I wanted to do without having to be asked.

"I am aware that His Excellency Count Sacula has been quite irritated by everything lately. It seemed he was terrified of what his grandchildren would say to him if he were to drag his feet," Amin added.

"I could sense that. We must first continue the conversation before Sacula storms the palace with their military forces in tow." Although I did kind of want to see that. If that were to happen, I'd act as a guide on the inside. I'd even

open the castle doors for them. While I amused myself, another maid entered and whispered something to Amin. It looked like something terrible had happened. I could tell by the way she furrowed her brows.

“Your Highness Alicia.” I felt nervous like I was about to receive my first real important job. Amin faced toward me. “His Majesty is on his way here.”

My first real important job *was* here.

“His Majesty? Here?” I repeated. Amin nodded. “Why here all of a sudden? Why not in the meeting room? Or a banquet would’ve been better...”

“I’m not privy to know why.”

“Yeah, okay. That’s...troubling.” I didn’t mind him coming here, I just had no idea how to approach it. Since he was coming all the way here to my personal quarters, I assumed he wanted a place where we could just be father and daughter. In any normal situation, that would have been the case. However, he had never done that before, so I had no idea how to act like a daughter. Suddenly, memories of my time as Arthur came to mind. How I acted warmly to the people in Sacula. *Maybe that’ll work.* Although he was a person I had only ever interacted with as the king...

“Amin, prepare some herbal tea. Um, my favorite one.” Since he was coming to visit me on a personal basis for the first time, I decided to treat it as such. It was no doubt going to be awkward. I was meeting with him as my father for the first time.

The king looked the same as when I met him for an audience in the meeting room. However, this time, he had hardly any followers—it was plain to see that this was an important meeting.

“Thank you for taking time out of your busy day to visit me.” I greeted him quite stiffly. But I couldn’t help it. *I should try to be less nervous.* The king—I mean, my father—sat down. I had swapped out my table and chair, which was specially made by the Tallade workshop back in Tolly’s hometown, for more luxurious furniture. This room was originally prepared for when I returned from Sacula and no doubt was set up based on orders from my father. My usual furniture fit my personality better, but for welcoming my father, this would do for now. On the other hand, I had asked Amin to bring herbal tea, which was

allowing a little bit of the Sacula in me to show. Count Gentoh would probably say that it seemed like I was trying to send a message.

I stopped Amin who was about to serve the tea and took the teapot from her. “I’ll serve His Majesty.” Anyone would be able to understand the message I was trying to send now. This tea was my response to my father suddenly wanting to meet with me. I started to imagine how the meeting would go. *After taking a drink, he’ll no doubt tell me what he thinks.* It was, after all, a rare flavor here in the central regions. *I’ll start to explain what it is, which will turn into a small chat, then the conversation would go from there naturally...*

After I finished serving the tea, I took a seat. My father had not yet reached for the tea. *Ahh, yeah, his servants will have to test it for poison.* That certainly was important. I wondered if it would be better for me to take a drink first. I picked up the cup and brought it close to my mouth. I could smell the faint warmth of the tea.

“Alicia, about the next Viscount Yanga...”

It felt like the warmth of the tea had turned ice cold. I put the cup back, let out a small chuckle, and raised my head. My laugh didn’t come from Alicia, it came from the princess.

“Yes, Your Majesty. I had planned to speak with you regarding that. What is it?”

“Yes. I thought so. I have come to explain why we have yet to pick his successor.”

“Is that so?” I responded, my voice hinting slightly at my surprise. That just more or less confirmed for me that my place wasn’t here—I belonged in my real home far from here. Never mind that, Viscount Yanga... That was more important than House Sacula right now. *I’m not hurt. Why would I be hurt?* I felt a burning sensation deep in my eyes. It was a fire that melted any sad feelings I had. I came back to my senses, rubbed my eyes, and took a breath. Taking in the coldness of the atmosphere, I used that to suppress the fire within me. I turned to face the king in a calm manner.

“Every detail regarding Viscount Yanga is important. I am curious as to why you have not yet decided upon a successor.”

“The nobles are restless.” I didn’t understand what he was saying. The king was probably referring to the central nobles. They probably weren’t happy that he was dragging his feet. *Weren’t there always nobles who were unhappy about something?*

“I heard that Prince Albert was forming his own faction...” I responded.

“That’s what it appears like...however, it would be more accurate to say that he has *already* formed his own faction,” said the king. I asked what he meant by that and he told me that the faction had grown too big and was causing tension internally. “I didn’t mind him getting involved with the people who were originally behind Marquis Datara, however, there have been conflicts over who will follow in his footsteps. It seems to be problematic.”

“I feel like if you’re going to lead a faction, you should be able to keep some control of it...” That was all I could say. I was embarrassed for my brother. He treated us like enemies, made his own faction, and then it all became too much for him to handle.

“Having it grow unexpectedly is a result of power.” The king looked at me while he stated his reasons for protecting the prince, hoping that I would agree. But I remained silent.

“May I ask what that has to do with Viscount Yanga’s successor not yet being decided?”

“Forgive me for being vague, but the problem is not with House Yanga itself, but rather you, Alicia.”

“Me? I mean, I know I did give my opinion as an intermediary last time...” However, that didn’t mean it was only my idea. It concerned what the Frontier Alliance, and my own faction, had to gain, but it seemed the central nobles were sensitive about me forcing my way into the conversation.

“I did say I was being vague. There are rumors that it is you who is next in line to the throne.”

I stared blankly. “What?”

Nowadays, if you had told me that airplanes are flying, I would have found that easier to believe. However, that would have been good news. This was bad

news.

“I’m next in line? Who would anyone even think that? Thanks to my time at the ‘health resort,’ I have no special training, and I’ve only just been able to stand attendance in official meetings. Surely, it’s impossible that I would be the heir.”

“Normally that would be the case but with all my older sons having passed away, the only scions I have left are you and Albert.”

Why on earth did people think I would be next in line? No matter how I thought about it, the idea of becoming queen filled me with dread.

“There are also those who wish for that to be the case. Even people within Albert’s own faction. Namely, those who aren’t happy with his leadership.”

“This is giving me a headache... So you mean, those people aren’t wishing for Albert’s success and instead want me to take his place?”

“To put things clearly, Albert’s supporters aren’t too pleased with him, and your name has come up more than a few times as a result. They seem to be taking advantage of the opportunity. And to make matters worse, you went and worked with the Church to send off relief supplies.”

“To make matters worse?” “Went and worked with the Church?” His words just confused me further.

“To those people, while Albert is sitting around doing nothing to address the situation in the Yanga territory, they see Alicia working together with the Church to send supplies—doing her duty as a royal family member. They’ve started rallying to make you, someone known for her competence, the heir instead of Albert,” the king continued.

“Without so much as a word said to me. If they really want me to be a ruler, they aren’t doing a great job of showing it.” It was probably more of a way to scare Albert into ruling his faction better. I was just a bargaining chip that they pretended to be concerned about. If I were actually to take them up on it, something I would never dream of, they would no doubt shut up and abandon me. Plus, if that kind of story was circulating about me, then people would be quick to make accusations whenever something has my name attached. Sadly, I

could understand why.

“Your Majesty, I know I have already stated this once before, but I have absolutely no interest in being your heir. If I am causing trouble to the royal family, I do not mind if you strip me of my royal status.”

“That is simply not an option.”

“It’s not impossible. Your Majesty must have seen the reports regarding Viscount Yanga and his influence on Sacula and the remote regions. There are plenty of ways. You could send me to a different house as an adoptee, or send me to be betrothed.” I couldn’t imagine being betrothed to anyone else other than Ash, but that was one thing I’d had to learn as a daughter of a royal.

“That simply won’t work. There would be a lot of consequences if the princess were to be sent off like that. These things aren’t decided so easily.”

“It’s not about being able or not being able to... Anyway, please quickly decide a successor for the Yanga region.”

“We can’t. Alicia, do you not understand?” *Do I not understand? Yeah, I don’t understand. Not at all.*

“Your Majesty, do you plan to abandon them as they suffer?”

“I know this will cause a lot of pain to Gentoh and the others. However, if I forgive the chaos being caused in the capital, it will bring danger to the royal family. In that case, we simply can’t lend support. As king, sometimes I have to give up on some things.” *I don’t understand. I don’t even want to understand. What a coward. A family of cowards.* The problem was the central nobles and the royal family being too strongly entwined. In order to protect that, he would simply cast the people living in the remote regions away. How could they be okay with throwing away people’s lives?

“In that case, I assume you are preparing to also abandon the Frontier Alliance? I will be standing alongside the frontier region lords in their anger.”

“Please calm down, Alicia. If you do anything more, you’ll only create more problems.”

He’s really asking me to calm down? I plan to bring down the full power of the

Frontier Alliance and the Church. The glint in my eye probably told him everything he needed to know. The king let out a sigh and stood up.

“Alicia, realize that this is the beginning of a lot of turmoil.” He drove the wedge in with cold anger.

“What have I even done?”

“We do things a certain way here in the central region. Having you here was always bound to fail. I warned Albert to not get involved with the Church too.” *What kind of excuse is that? Who was the one who was unable to protect me from Marquis Datara? Who was the one who called me back? Who was the one going out of their way to amass a huge faction?* How had I done anything wrong? I just came here to help Ash... Did I do it wrong? There probably was a better way. If I had known it would end up like this, I would have approached things better. I was the one in the wrong.

“I’m going to place you under house arrest. You will be unable to leave the palace without permission.” *How cold.* His words were as icy as a northern wind. They made me flinch and unable to speak properly. It felt like I had gone back to the time before I met Ash.

“It’s for your own good, Alicia. There are also rumors that people plan to dispose of you so you don’t interfere with Albert. I don’t want to lose any more of my children.”

Your children? I’m having to go through this because I’m your child? I had to stop myself from crying right then and there. The man who called himself my father left the room. The room felt frigid.

The maids and servants, worried for me, started talking. *I have to respond. But what do I even say? What is the correct way to respond? I don’t even know. This is no good. What should I do? I have to do something, but I can’t.* Once you’ve stopped moving in the cold, it’s hard to start moving again. But knowing that didn’t help any. I looked at the cup on the table. The cup was filled with the very same herbal tea that filled me with warmth on that cold day, but the contents of *this* cup had chilled.

“Ash...” *I miss you.* I mumbled toward that distant light in a faraway region.



Gentoh's Perspective

The Frontier Alliance meeting at the capital felt more like a bunch of seniors chatting over some tea. Although there were some topics where we were at odds, they were matters for the territories to deal with. There wasn't much reason for those stationed far away in the capital to be unfriendly with one another. Of course, if something was wrong, it'd be paramount to discuss it, but it was best that those unaffected keep things civil. That was why it was important to gather easy-going bureaucrats with little personal stake. If we weren't, then we'd probably end up arguing with the central nobles until the end of time. As for me, I was asked by my vassals if it would be okay for me to be permanently stationed in the royal capital. I assume that was the case for many other houses too.

However, today there was a bloodthirsty atmosphere among the usually level-headed members. *Our enemies have really done it now—angering the normally good-natured members of the Frontier Alliance to this extent.* Her Highness Princess Alicia's maid, Amin Remenge, sat in Her Highness's spot and gave a report sitting where Her Highness always sat. As expected of a palace worker, her appearance was neat and tidy, and her expression did not falter as she spoke—she was stronger than she seemed. *She would do exceptionally well in Sacula.*

"The following is a message from His Majesty the King. Her Highness is to remain confined to her personal quarters under the protection of the royal guard and is forbidden to leave unless escorted by myself or other attendants. Her Highness Princess Alicia sends her apologies that she is unable to attend today," Amin reported.

"Understood. Her Highness need not apologize. She is not the one at fault," I responded, and everyone in attendance nodded along in agreement. It didn't matter if they were usually at odds with one another, we were all in this together. I leaned forward to present a question. "So, with Her Highness the Princess under house arrest, when do we rally the troops?"

The plan was to attack the palace and take back Her Highness Princess Alicia.

Act now, questions later. Those in attendance didn't seem too surprised at this. *What did you all expect?* Her Highness Alicia was the only royal we respected, and she did all she could to accommodate our wishes—for that, we should be grateful. We simply couldn't feign ignorance as to what was happening. *I'm the head of House Sacula. I take pride in the fact that I have never left even the smallest of favors unpaid.* Claiming that they feared the central nobles would try to harm Her Highness, the royals had confined her to a small room, protected only by some weak guards. *We can't ensure she's safe there; under my protection, she would be able to move around freely and face no harm. We'll attack them head-on and take her back.*

"Baron Nepton and Sir Argos will gladly join you, Your Excellency Count Gentoh. However, we ask that you first wait," Officer Raino interjected, holding me back from diving straight into an attack. She had a bloodthirsty grin on her face, so she seemingly agreed with the notion of attacking. "It'll no doubt be easy. Central soldiers are weak and will be swept away like a loose branch in the rage of a stormy sea. But I can't help but think of the consequences—it may just end up being a waste."

"A waste? I personally find Her Highness Alicia being stuck in the palace to be a waste already." Seeing how well she had done in preparing the relief supplies, I was planning on leaving the management of the Frontier Alliance to her. I wanted her to lead it so that I wouldn't have to spend time mulling over bothersome things.

"I agree with you. However, if we were to attack the palace, wouldn't it become more difficult to squeeze money out of them later? If we make problems for them now, we wouldn't even be able to secure compensation..."

"Hmm, that's true..."

A lot of people nodded in agreement with Officer Raino's reasoning. I understood her point too. Baron Nepton was very well-versed in finances. He knew that this would end up with the crown denying us any compensation for the damages caused by the fall of the Yanga territory. It was tempting to hold back—we needed those funds.

"Then what do you suggest? Do you plan to remain silent?" I asked.

“Of course not. The lords of the Frontier Alliance would never abandon Her Highness Princess Alicia. I believe that is the opinion of everyone here,” Officer Raino said as she looked around the room. No one looked away, all meeting her gaze. Those who didn’t agree had skipped the meeting. *Or, at least, none of those cowards are here today.* “Let’s first protest the decision with all our might. It seems that the royal family and the central nobles all plan to use the election for the next viscount as a means to try and gain power,” Officer Raino said as she looked toward Viscount Sukuna’s officer. As a member of the most information-savvy house, the officer frowned and returned a nod.

“It’s less of a rivalry between factions and more that Prince Albert can’t control the infighting within his own faction. It seems that the Yanga election has become an opportunity for a power grab—the lords want to make their own candidates the new viscount.” The officer continued, “But while they’ve been squabbling, others have grouped together. It’s all just become chaos.”

“While they bicker over it, they forget it’s we who have to deal with the consequences,” I responded.

“No, they just don’t care. It’s all a game to them. If this had a direct effect on the central regions, don’t you think the royal family would be quick to take control of the situation?” As always, Viscount Sukuna was straightforward yet calm. He was never afraid to put things bluntly. *Forgive the wrinkles between my eyebrows. At this age, I’m the kind of person who will pull a face even when eating something I don’t like.*

Even amid the strife, I’d thought I was good friends with the king. It hurt to know that the king had no qualms about harming someone important to me. I still fondly remembered the times when we would go drinking and I would listen to him vent. I went because I wanted to, but he probably thought it was fine to drink with me since I had no stake in the central regions. I felt that since I was now involved with the central regions, everything was different. *Times have changed.*

“As Viscount Sukuna said, this is quite a complicated situation for the central regions,” declared Officer Raino. “However, for the Frontier Alliance, it is actually quite simple. All they have to do is decide. So we should push them to hurry up and make a decision.” No doubt the others in attendance were

thinking that much would be enough. But I disagreed.

“We will protest every day, all together, all the time, under the pretense that we can not go ahead with other duties until this has been decided. How does that sound?” Officer Raino continued. Lady Amin—who knew the most about how things worked here—nodded to Officer Raino, who had a huge grin on her face.

“It would probably be a good idea to come up with a few reasons as to why, and then send them to different departments within the palace. I can provide various methods of doing so,” Amin continued.

It would probably be a good idea to buy up most of the paper here in the royal capital. Although temporary, the price of paper is probably going to soar.

Once we’d decided our next steps, the meeting adjourned. While the central nobles were heavily underestimating the Frontier Alliance, if we were to send in a large number of complaints, that should be enough to force a meeting to decide the next Yanga viscount. Or so the (reasonably) wiser members of the Frontier Alliance thought. As opposed to our more combat-minded members who thought it would be better that we prepare to attack the palace at any given moment. I was one of the latter. I even went so far as to check that the head maid’s breastplate wasn’t rusted.

I should probably preface that everyone in the capital manor was battle trained. Although those stationed there were probably not as skilled as the central region’s nobles. In order to overwhelm them with numbers, we had to make sure that even the maids and cooks would be able to fight. This kind of mindset had proven useful in the past, so it could come in handy again. Just as I was about to ask them to prepare the head maid’s equipment, Amin spoke up.

“Your Excellency, sorry for asking so soon after the meeting, but could I have a little of your time?”

“Hm? Sure,” I responded. Lady Amin was one of the first attendants sent to me from Lady Alicia. Unlike those from the central regions, she was both quick and thorough. I doubt she had stopped me simply for an idle chat.

“Has there been word from Her Highness Alicia?” I asked. I thought that was what she wanted to talk about, but strangely enough, Amin seemed to hesitate

with her response.

“No. I have decided to discuss this with you of my own accord. I may be going against Her Highness Alicia’s wishes, but I thought I have to tell you this...”

This is even stranger. There may have been times when Lady Amin had been one step ahead of her mistress, but she had never once gone against her will. She had the expression of a mother desperately trying to protect her offspring.

“I can tell this is quite an important matter. Should I ask the other attendees to leave?”

Lady Amin had a troubled look on her face as her eyes darted about the room. It seemed she wanted me to ask the others to leave but wasn’t brave enough to come out and say it.

“I sincerely apologize—” Amin said.

“No need, nobody would be put out by such a beautiful woman’s request. If you are that worried about it, the palace sent me some tea. Would you care to join me?” I asked.

“Okay, I shall prepare some sweets.” The others would no doubt be happy about this too. The frontier regions were not ones to easily forget a favor. They also do not easily forget betrayal either.

“So, what seems to be the matter?” I asked.

“It seems Her Highness Alicia was terribly hurt by what happened lately...” Amin started.

“She was placed under house arrest by her very own father. It’s to be expected. That’s all an old warrior like me can really say...” I had only known Her Highness Alicia for a short time, but she was a diligent, kind, and friendly person. I could only imagine how much pain she was in.

“I’ve been trying to cheer her up, but I only end up making her worry about me.”

“Even in difficult times, she finds it hard to not worry about those who serve her. A wonderful trait to have as a royal.” *The prince and king could learn a thing or two from her.*

“So, are you asking me how to lift her spirits?” I didn’t mind being asked to do so. I wanted to invite Alicia here for a few days—she could eat her favorite foods and use the kitchen as she liked. However, I could not even meet with her, let alone have her stay here. *Just what on earth were the royals doing to this endearing young girl?*

“I was wondering if it would be possible to send a letter...”

“A letter? Of course, that much we can allow.”

“Her Highness Alicia expressed a wish after her talk with His Majesty. I thought it may be good to let you know...”

Lady Amin was struggling with her words. She usually spoke quite clearly, even if she didn’t have anything nice to say, so her hesitation and secrecy were really odd.

“I believe Her Highness Alicia didn’t expect me to hear, but I couldn’t stand to see her like that...”

“Hm, I can see why you hesitated.” *That’s why she was struggling to say what this is about.* Amin was trying to reveal what her mistress was so desperately trying to hide. You could say she was overstepping as an attendant. However, they were also friends. As expected of Arthur. Much like how Itsuki was admired by Sir George, it seemed my youngest child was also admired by a good friend.

“Why, in the remote regions, it’s not unusual for a master to make friends with their attendants. Although you rarely hear about it around here. I think it’s fine for you to talk about it. It could also end up helping my youngest son.”

“Thank you,” Amin said in a hushed voice. “Alicia mentioned that she wanted to see Ash.”

That’s a simple wish. I could come up with any old reason to call for my knights. Although they won’t have to put up with this for much longer, I didn’t think it would be good to allow Arthur to continue on like this.

Promised Papers

Time passed, and with it came winter. This was the most difficult season for those living in tents in the refugee ward, however, thanks to Princess Alicia's careful consideration, we were able to ensure they were comfortable. Since Sacula was quite far from the central regions, Princess Alicia had opted to send clothing, materials to protect against the cold, bedding, and instead of food, they had sent cooking equipment. They had also sent wood which we used for fuel and to build windbreaks. The doctors were working around the clock, expecting frequent outbreaks of the common cold. But since we were able to build suitable accommodation, not that many people ended up getting sick. *This is a satisfactory result.*

I had turned eighteen along with the change of season, and I was still as busy as ever. Once I had completed my inspections of the refugee ward, I joined the meeting of Frontier Alliance leaders. With a calm and confident voice, I asked, "So? Why have they not yet decided on the successor to Viscount Yanga?" *What on earth were they doing in the capital? If they don't give me a satisfactory reason, I might just have to go all the way down there and knock some sense into them. I've gained a lot of mysterious power from fighting the werewolves and have (maybe) leveled up, so if I wanted to, I could probably run to the capital faster than a horse. I'm that serious about it.*

"Maika, he's doing it again. He's all fired up. His voice is scarier than the werewolves' roars..." Lord Itsuki commented.

"You should know why by now, uncle. I get why he's annoyed about this..."

"I should think everyone is annoyed, to be honest. It's been hard. We've taken in over ten thousand refugees," I responded. *Ten thousand? That was nothing. Just last week, we hit 12,017.* I did not expect the number to increase much over winter, however, we could probably expect more refugees in the spring.

Bandits would probably resurface when the villages could farm again in spring

too. I thought of them like bears. They filled their stomachs in fall, hibernated through winter, and then started looting again when spring hits. On the other hand, villages that had been spared bandit attacks during fall could relax over winter. Naturally, I wanted to somewhat lessen the burden on the Yanga territory by striking a deal ahead of time.

If we were allowed to send workers there, we could take a selection of refugees—under the protection of the army—to the destroyed areas in the southern region to offer aid and relocate the refugees, but for some reason, we had not been able to do something as simple as that. Even though I had gone out of my way to come up with a plan that marked out the settlements with close to no damage, organized a group of escorts, and even plotted out the route they would take! But I could not do anything purely because they had yet to decide Viscount Yanga’s successor. The Frontier Alliance already had three candidates picked out, and we should have had it decided in no time. *So just what exactly was taking them so long?* As I waited for an explanation, Lord Itsuki, who had been enjoying a pleasant conversation with his niece, finally moved the conversation along. *Better late than never. I would prefer if he could properly separate work and pleasure.*

“Ah, yes, Ash’s question. I’m sure everyone else is thinking the same thing.” The acting count looked at all the faces of the leaders, however, his gaze avoided me. *I wonder why? Shouldn’t I be included seeing as I work so hard?*

“My father, His Excellency the Count, isn’t taking this situation lightly either. He has sent us a letter from the capital explaining why things aren’t going as we expect, so I’ll be able to answer your question with His Excellency’s words. I’ll read it now.”

The letter began, *“Maika, I am really sorry. Your grandfather is taking this seriously, so I ask that you understand.”* To summarize, and put the message to his granddaughter aside, the letter continued by detailing the royal capital’s chaotic response to the Yanga territory’s disaster. Somehow, they were having a harder time than we who were actually having to take in the refugees.

“One would think that it is the king’s job to maintain control of everything,” I remarked. This world’s society ran under absolutism. If the king were to say he would do something, the influence of that statement would be enormous, if not

absolute. It seemed that Princess Alicia was well aware of how important the king's actions were. However, since Sacula was lending quite a bit of money to that very king, one could at least expect him to exercise some form of authority...

"Speaking of the royal family, it seems the crown prince is proving to be quite the problem," Lord Itsuki said.

"The crown prince?" *I wonder what that boring-but-good-looking guy has done.* "I don't recall ever being in touch with him."

"That's probably where we went wrong."

According to the letter from His Excellency, it seemed the crown prince was becoming suspicious of Princess Alicia's actions in the royal capital.

"Her skills in getting relief supplies sent to Sacula seemingly attracted a lot of attention. It wouldn't be too bizarre to imagine that it's caused conflict among the crown prince's supporters regarding the line of succession," Lord Itsuki explained.

"What? What are you saying? There's absolutely zero chance of that."

"Is there really?" Lord Itsuki smirked.

"Her Highness is intelligent and extremely beautiful. She is even popular among the general public. I think it is entirely possible that she could overthrow the line of succession if she felt like it."

"Ha ha, I bet she could usurp the throne quite easily if she wanted. I still doubt it would happen though." As far as we were concerned, this competition between the crown prince and princess was not necessary.

"Right, I see now." *Of course, you do.*

"If we are talking about the possibility of Her Highness being interested in the throne, then there is zero chance of that." She had told me directly. Her hometown was Sacula—the place she wanted to return to someday. To her, the throne was simply nothing compared to that. "However, I understand that the crown prince has neither the insight nor ability to understand that himself."

"I see you're also quite bitter about the royal family," Lord Itsuki commented.

That was about one percent of the things I could say about them, but I was holding back. They were, after all, still Princess Alicia's family, so I did not want to speak *too* badly of them.

"Well? Is there anything in that letter that might suggest what we can do about this? We have a crown prince without the power to even go so far as to befriend his sister but still believes he holds all the cards and a king who's so unpopular and uncharismatic that he leads his people to ruin." That was about two percent of what I wanted to say.

Lord Itsuki—who was certainly more reserved than I—was evidently restraining himself as he spoke. "There we have it, Ash is at it again. I don't feel like stopping him."

"I am head of the Disaster Response Office. I have the lives of 12,017 people in my hands. I simply do not have the time or will to deal with a petty prince who cares for nothing except the throne." My stomach hurt to the point I could vomit blood. I could not have these common colds worsen—we needed the crown's help to prevent their deaths. *I could do without this childish petty game the crown prince is playing.*

"You're right. That was imprudent of me," Lord Itsuki said as he bowed his head and passed me the letter. "His Excellency is summoning you to the royal capital."

"Still working me like a draft horse." *Field work is usually Maika's department,* I thought to myself as I looked down at the letter.

"I guess we're kinda stuck for time?" Lord Itsuki asked.

"Yeah, we are..." However, as I scanned the letter, it was sure enough written that I needed to go to the royal capital. I let out a chuckle and a sigh. "I suppose now would be the best time for me to go with the refugee situation calming down somewhat." With more refugees likely coming in spring, I was unsure when I would next be able to leave Sacula. As a result, I would have to suck it up and go now. Plus, I would get to meet with Princess Alicia, and it would no doubt be fun to spend time with her. "Maika, I am going to meet with Alicia. Is there anything you would like me to pass on?" I asked. Maika was leaning on me, reading the contents of the letter over my shoulder. Once she had a good

read of the letter, she faced me with a serious expression.

“I don’t really have anything for Alicia but...there is something I want to say to you.”

“To me?” Maika was staring at me with an expression similar to the time at the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament when she told me she had something important to tell me.

“Don’t forget what I said that day. I’m your fiancée, we’re gonna get married, and I want kids...” Maika said as she looked at me with carnivorous eyes, lightly hitting my chest. “But it’s all right for you to do what you want to do. Don’t worry about me. I’ll always be by your side.” She was telling me to go ahead and do what I needed to do. It reminded me of something Princess Alicia would say, however, I found it a little strange.

His Excellency Count Gentoh had summoned me to the royal capital to attend a royal council meeting with His Majesty the King and explain the situation from Sacula’s perspective. I was curious as to what purpose it would serve, since the nobles and crown prince didn’t seem to have a grasp of the circumstances in the first place. But the count had gone out of his way to organize this, so there must have been a good reason for it—he hated having to sit still and pay attention.

Before setting out for the royal capital, I spent a week or so handing over my tasks to others while thinking about what might happen. On the way, I planned out what I would say—including memorizing all the facts and figures—to those in the capital who were taking this all too lightly. I had no idea where to begin. Should I mention the number of refugees? Or the number of tents? How much food we had? Should I talk about the arguments? The looting? The illnesses? The failing sanitation?

I wanted to get there quickly, so I was traveling alone this time. Lord Itsuki and Maika seemed to have been quite worried for me, however with the refugee crisis within Sacula at the moment and bandits roaming the lands, it was actually a lot easier and safer to travel alone. It would have been difficult to assign knights for protection too. *Believe in Ash, the phoenix*. I was not lying when I said that I had leveled up and my mysterious power had gotten a lot

stronger. Halfway to our destination, I got off the horse and tried to race it, and I really was able to run faster than a horse. *Humans really are the best long-distance runners in the animal kingdom. Even I am surprised.* After resting at an inn (and organizing documents), I traveled at the speed of a horse all day and all night until I was only two days away from the royal capital. I had about a week until the imperial council meeting, so figured I had enough time to stay at an inn that night and finalize my documents for the meeting. The documents were ninety percent completed, but just as I was looking to finish them off, I heard a deep voice outside causing quite the commotion.

“Pardon my rudeness! Please forgive the disturbance! It’s an emergency!” I had heard that voice before. I looked out of the window and headed for the door.

“I’m looking for someone! Is Sir Fenix here? Sir Fenix, the knight from Sacula?” I opened the door just as he had called my name. The owner of the loud voice looked right at me.

“Oh, Sir Fenix! What luck!” The large burly knight raised his hands in surprise and relief—it was Seus Argos of House Nepton. He was dripping with sweat as he grabbed my hands, and he smiled broadly.

“Long time no see, Sir Argos. I am glad you are doing well.”

“You too, Sir Fenix! It is a pleasure to see you again!” He smiled as we exchanged greetings, but the expression of the knight—who was well known for being so upbeat—soon clouded.

“Aah, there is much I could tell you about, like what happened with my son and how I broke a bone, but there’s no time.”

“I can see that.” *If there was, he would not have been shouting outside.* Sir Argos had a large stature and a loud voice, but he was not the kind of person to act so out of turn for no good reason.

“That’s right, Sir Fenix. I’m glad I was able to meet with you. We might be able to make it there in time.”

“Make it in time...do you mean the imperial council meeting?” That was my only scheduled appointment. Or rather, my only scheduled appointment in the

capital—I still had a lot to do back home. “Right, I see. They have sent you running to tell me that the date has changed, have they not?” *That is surely the reason, right?*

Sir Argos nodded, clearly trying to hold back his frustration. “It is exactly as you say, Sir Fenix. Officer Raino believes they are aiming to make you late so they can say that there wasn’t enough information to come to a decision.”

“I see.” It seems those in the royal capital had actually put some thought into something for once. At the very least, they had probably figured out that I would be too busy to attend another time with the upcoming resurgence of refugees in spring. They were probably planning to go ahead with the meeting but not decide anything, and then when they attempt to hold another in spring, they could use the excuse that everyone is too busy to attend, thus postponing it even further and not having to make a decision. With such a highbrow conference like a royal council meeting, it would not be unusual for it to be postponed until January or February. After all, we were dealing with territory leaders who took their jobs seriously. If Lord Itsuki, who was probably the most serious, were to say that he had no time and could not make it, they would just say that it was fine. However, everyone knew just how “busy” those in the royal capital were. In other words, they had no interest in becoming partners with us.

I could see how mad Sir Argos was about this. “It’s obvious that those guys in the royal capital do not give a damn about the refugees. They’ve lost their homes, their hometowns, relatives, neighbors!”

“Yes. They really do not seem to care.” The longer they postponed their decision, the more of a burden the remote regions would have to carry. A month’s delay now could possibly set back the whole operation by three years, putting us at our wits’ end. Those who wished to prevent our plans knew that, and that is exactly why they were doing this. *This is too convenient. I no longer have any doubts about it.* The hostility is all on purpose—their lax attitudes to the rise in disputes, the issues surrounding the royal succession, there was just no other way to look at it. All this time, I have gained a lot of power. I borrowed it from others to invent new agricultural practices. I built upon it to lay paths for the Alliance. But I was not prepared to use my power to treat suffering refugees as political capital only to later ignore them. *As a protector of civilization, I can’t*

let evil win. First, I have to find out who my opponent is... You would have to be someone in a high-ranking position to postpone the imperial council meeting. “This is the crown prince’s work,” I concluded.

“Exactly, Sir Fenix. Officer Raino was thinking the same thing,” Sir Argos confirmed. *Of course.* Maybe another nobleman requested it, but the person who accepted it and allowed it was the prince—my opponent. *I’ll let this stupid fool discover who he needs to cross to sit on that cheap throne! He thinks he has just insulted a mere mortal, but he is actually dealing with the riot express train to hell! I will drag him around by those ostentatious clothes he wears until they are but mere threads. That, or I will leave him in absolute tatters!*

“Sir Argos, would it be all right to leave my horse to you?”

“Hm? Sure, no problem. You’re leaving already, right? I’ll get it ready while you pack.”

“Ah, no, that won’t be necessary. I’m leaving my horse *to you*. I wish for you to ride it to the royal capital.” Sir Argos looked considerably confused by my words.

“If I’m not mistaken, that means you won’t have any way of getting there...”

“Ha ha, that is not quite the case. We both have a fine pair of legs, no?” I had already confirmed that I was faster than a horse. I headed back to my room to pack the things I would need for the meeting, only taking necessary documents and some formal clothing. As for the rest—*Sorry, Sir Argos*—I left them to him.

“Well, Sir Argos, I shall be leaving now. Thank you for delivering the message. I will be sure to pay back the debt one day.” I bowed to the dutiful knight and left the inn. My destination was the home of the stupid foolish crown prince. *Ha ha, you sly, slow turtle. The hare is going to catch up to you in an instant.*

The next day, I arrived at the Sacula residence within the royal capital just past noon. *Ha ha ha ha, I managed to arrive here in less time than a horse! It should have taken two days, but I got here in one!* Even I was surprised by my world record. The guards at the residence were equally shocked when they saw me approach.

“Sir Fenix?! Hey, Sir Fenix has arrived!”

“Ah, yes, greetings. Could I bother you for a glass of water? I need to dust myself off and change clothes,” I responded. The guard ran off toward the well—abandoning his post in the process—saying that he would be right back. He did not forget to yell that I had arrived while doing so. I waited in the doorway, brushing the dust off my clothes until the knight returned with a bucket of water alongside a maid. Central region noblemen often said that the attendants who worked at the Sacula manor had no class. However, they would have been highly regarded back home—they worked fast and were wonderful at their jobs.

“Sir Fenix, you made it here early! You should still be able to make it in time!” called the maid.

“Have I just barely made it? Where is His Excellency Count Gentoh?” I asked as I removed my dusty travel clothing and washed the sweat and dust off my body.

“He has already made his way to the royal castle. The meeting will begin soon, however, His Excellency and Officer Raino have been trying to stall for time.”

“Understood. We won’t be able to meet before it starts then. Where is it being held?”

“I heard it is being held in the east wing of the royal castle,” the maid responded.

Once I had cleaned up, I changed into my knight uniform. “Is there anything else?”

“Just one thing!” the maid enthusiastically responded, clenching her fists so hard that I could see the blood vessels in her hands. “Please give them hell!”

For a civil servant stationed in the capital, it was apparent she had not lost her fighting spirit. Her outburst captured the very spirit of Sacula. Those in Sacula were normally calm and polite people, but they were not afraid to act when needed. For example, when I was delegating tasks to the usually reserved Lady Renge, she looked at me with eyes full of fighting spirit and wished me a good battle. I had never heard her use such a deep voice before. And yet, while aware of this, the crown prince and the central nobleman were still picking a fight.

I nodded with a huge smile on my face, pitying those who had the wrath of Sacula coming for them. “Yes. I will be sure to let them know exactly how you all feel.”

Well, time for me to go. I sprinted through the streets of the royal capital, eventually arriving at the gate to the royal castle. It was still a gaudy waste of stone, however, as I was already brimming with frustration today, I found it even more annoying than usual. Because of my sudden arrival, the guards readied their spears with shocked expressions. I could not waste time settling a ruckus, so I slipped past the tips of their spears and tapped the shoulder of what appeared to be a high-ranking knight.

“Ahoy there, I see you are all working hard as always. I am Ash George Fenix, a knight of Sacula. I am here to attend the royal council meeting, and I was wondering if you would allow me to enter.”

“Eep! F-Fenix?!”

Surely there is no need to be that surprised? It gives a lot away. Although I had gotten faster, I was not quite as nimble as Maika’s headhunting technique.

“Yes. I am Fenix from the House of Sacula. I heard that the meeting is being held in the east wing of the castle, could you please guide me?”

Giving no room for refusal, I started walking while pushing against the knight’s back.

“W-Wait, Sir Fenix!”

“Yes? What is it? Is there something you wish to talk about? Please go ahead,” I said, but I did not wait. I continued pushing the knight with me toward the east wing.

“S-Stop! I was told that the meeting has already begun, so we can’t let you in!”

“What’s that? The meeting has already begun! Then we must hurry!”

“Huh? Are you even listening? Stop pushing me! Stop! STOP!” *No. While I am listening, I am just choosing to only pay attention to half of what you are saying.*

It seemed these guards were stationed at the palace gates ahead of time to block me from participating in the meeting. *Unfortunately, I am not so nice a person as to take orders from my enemy.* “What do you take this meeting for?! A lowborn nuisance such as you can’t simply join the meeting late!”

“Ah, dear knight, could you please tell me your name? Thank you so much for guiding me here. I owe you my thanks, I will be sure to return the favor someday.” I thanked him with the same formality as I did Sir Argos. However, my intentions this time were much more hostile. While asking his name, I focused on a certain scent in the air. I could not expect them to lead me to the meeting, so I would have to find it by my own means. Fortunately, my five senses had been strengthened thanks to my mysterious power, and I was able to identify the scent of the meeting’s attendees and locate it that way. *There it is.* The scent of Princess Alicia’s perfume. It was the same as Maika’s, so I was able to identify it immediately.

“Please do tell me your name. We have almost arrived,” I said, ushering the knight onwards.

“Hey, you insolent brat! Oi, you hooligan!” The doors to the meeting room came into view and the knight called out to the two guards standing in front. “Don’t let him through those doors!”

“Huh, Sir Graham? Whatever is the matter?” asked one guard.

“Weren’t you supposed to be standing guard at the main gates?” asked the other.

The knight—named Graham, apparently—ordered them once again to not let me through. He seemed to be of a higher status, and the two dutifully crossed their spears and blocked the entrance to the meeting. *Well, that confirms this is where it is being held.* I let go of Sir Graham’s hand and grabbed the crossed spears. Using my mysterious power, I was able to push them away easily. It was with a force that could easily shove a werewolf. Unlike the stalwart guards of Sacula, these guards gave in and let go of their weapons. With both my hands still holding onto the spears, I had to open the doors to the meeting with my foot. *Sorry for my tardiness,* I thought as I kicked them open.

For some reason, everyone’s gaze turned toward me. *Strange.* Since the

meeting had already begun, I figured that everyone would be too distracted by a fiery discussion to notice my arrival—that seemed not to be the case. In fact, this was a good thing. *I ought to apologize for my tardiness.* I was planning on a polite bow, but I didn't really know what to do with the spears I now wielded. They had blocked my way, so I decided it would be best to destroy and dispose of them. *They are not very high quality.* I easily snapped them in two, then bowed with a smile.

"I am Ash George Fenix, a knight from Sacula. I have just arrived, but I deeply apologize for my tardiness. Sacula is quite a distance away from the royal capital," I said with a grin directed at the crown prince. "While I ask for your forgiveness, I believe you understand that I've been occupied with the unfortunate disaster in the Yanga territory and its displaced citizens." My performance seemed to be novel to some, and their only response was to hang their mouths agape silently. Though, there were also those present who were very used to my performances. The first to stand was His Excellency Count Gentoh.

"Ah, Sir Fenix, you're late," Count Gentoh laughed with a wickedly predaceous smile. "It's no matter, however. We've yet to begin."

"Is that so? How fortunate—although quite strange," I said as I turned to face the panicked knight at the door. "Sir Graham, I am quite sure you said that the meeting had already begun." *That really is strange. Why would you say something like that?* I slowly sauntered over to Sir Graham. "Now, what was it again? You said the meeting had already begun, so you couldn't let me in..."

"Eeep!"

I firmly grabbed Sir Graham's shoulder. The guards' spears were weak, but his shoulders were even more so. *You should train more.* The thought made me laugh.

"Hm, told that he wouldn't be able to join midway?" Count Gentoh asked. "Since when was that a rule at a royal council meeting? I may not know much about this stuff, being a country bumpkin and all, but does anyone know if that was always the case?" Count Gentoh interrogated them like a thug giving someone a shakedown, but they answered in silence. "Hmm? Sir Graham, could

you please give us an explanation?”

“I-I didn’t know! I’m also not too read up on royal council meeting rules! I just heard it from someone!”

“In that case, who did you hear it from? Or rather, who reported that the meeting had already begun?”

“Um, well, uh...” As Sir Graham struggled to get his *words out*, I noticed that his gaze had moved to someone behind me. His eyes said it all. As you all know, I am a kind person. A civilized person who loves peace, however, I have no such restraints when it comes to my enemy. I decided to go for the kill.

“You surely do not mean to say that regarding such an important event as the royal council meeting, you simply accepted an unknown person’s orders?”

“Ah, no, uh, well.”

“Then, just who needs to take responsibility for this? Your boss? Your boss’s boss? It has to be one of your bosses. Who is responsible for such a grand blunder?”

“U-Uh, I-I don’t really remember—”

“You ‘don’t really remember’? If you are unable to determine who is responsible, then that responsibility will fall to none other than His Majesty the King. Do you *really* not remember?” The knights served directly under the king, and the king was above everyone else. Any misconduct by the knights would then also be the king’s misconduct. Was the knight completely unaware of that? If so, I felt deeply sorry for him. However, even if he was unaware, a crime is a crime. “You risk damaging His Majesty the King’s authority with such a mistake. But if you were tricked by someone into making me purposely late for this meeting, it would then be a different matter...” Sir Graham went deeply pale, looking as if all the blood had left his body. *I will make this a lot easier for you if you just own up to everything.*

“That is enough, Sir Fenix.” The crown prince spoke up, putting a stop to it just as I was kindly giving the culprit a way out.

“Your Highness, may I ask why you stopped me? I believe that this is a highly important matter.”

“I agree that is important, however, there are more important matters at hand.”

“Ah yes, there are more important matters than the competence of a knight whose duty is to protect the royal family.”

“Exactly. You came all this way to discuss matters of paramount importance such as the disaster in the Yanga region, the subsequent emergence of refugees, and thousands of citizens’ lives. You should know which is more important.”

Know which is more important? I came here exactly to get that across. For someone with such a boring face, he sure says interesting things! I was unable to laugh, but I did my best to force a smile.

“Exactly! It is exactly as His Highness says! However, allow me one small correction, Your Highness. You said thousands of lives, but that is not quite correct.” Once you considered the population of Yanga’s territory, the number of refugees that flooded into Sacula, and added those who will be affected financially and logistically into the equation, the number of lives at stake jumped up quite considerably. “If we had mishandled this situation, we would have lost somewhere around two hundred thousand citizens. Thus ‘thousands’ isn’t quite accurate. ‘Tens of thousands’ would be closer, Your Highness.” The crown prince seemed a little daunted by the numbers, but after glancing at Sir Graham, he accepted the facts.

“I understand now, Sir Fenix.”

“Thank you. Now, building on that point...” I once again looked at Sir Graham. “The lives of tens of thousands of civilians are riding on this meeting, and yet one of the royal knights made such a blunder. I have reaffirmed that it is a matter that we must pursue for the sake of the kingdom.” *What’s that? Did you really think I would listen to what the crown prince said? Ha ha ha, I’m just kidding.* All I had reaffirmed was that this meeting was actually *really, really* important and that they would decide the outcome of tens of thousands of lives.

“First of all, Sir Graham. How do you plan to take responsibility?”

“Ah, um, whole— Wholeheartedly.”

“Wholeheartedly! How wonderful!”

If he is thinking he can get out of this with just that, then he really does have a brilliant mind. “However, unfortunately, no matter how many assets your family has, I am of the opinion that they will not cover the cost of compensation. As of right now, as far as I am aware, the number of refugees in Sacula has reached 12,153. There are one thousand tents to protect them from wind and rain, seven hundred temporary houses, and three thousand temporary residences. Not to mention that their food, medicine, and other essential daily items are equal to those consumed by one of Sacula’s cities. The area is unsafe, resulting in more work for the knights, and the region as a whole has taken a huge hit financially.”

I let out a grim sigh—not as a part of the act, but a genuine one—and glared at Sir Graham. *The person I really want to glare at is behind you, but since I can’t say you are completely innocent, you will be my outlet for now.* “And, while I regret to say it, our facilities are not the best for receiving the refugees. Because of that, we have people getting sick and dying. We’ve confirmed 2470 deaths, and the expenses they have incurred have also gotten quite high, meaning less money is available to help the refugees with.” *I will speak on the behalf of the dead.* “I believe you now understand just how much Sacula is struggling. Thus, I wish to ask, how do you plan to take responsibility?”

Sir Graham, who had no real way of taking responsibility, shook his head while nervously trembling.

“Then, who *will* take responsibility? Who gave you the wrong information? You said that you did not remember, but do you remember now?” Sir Graham continued trembling, this time giving nothing away with his body language. “Sir Graham, is this your way of wholeheartedly taking responsibility? You have decided to remain silent?” *You’re picking the wrong fight.* I was close enough that I could hit him if I wanted, but as I continued to forcefully stare at him, he started crying. I hope he did not think that would mean I would let him off.

“Sir Fenix, enough.” Just as I thought that I should lay off him a little bit, a new voice spoke up. It was His Majesty the King wearing a frown on his face.

“Yes, Your Majesty.” I obediently heeded his royal command, and I felt the

tension in the air leave the room. “However, Your Majesty,” I continued, bringing the tension right back. “I am still concerned with where responsibility for this blunder lies.”

“Do not worry. As you said yourself earlier, I am responsible for the royal knights. I will bear the responsibility and see to the situation.”

“Yes, as you wish, Your Majesty.” I stepped down in order to respect His Majesty’s authority. Although honestly, I thought his authority as weak as a winter’s sunshine, and I thought nothing of it. He was obviously protecting the crown prince, so I gave up trying to find any kind of serious solution to the situation. As I glanced over to Count Gentoh, he returned a nod with a sour expression on his face. Count Gentoh and the king were good friends, but even Count Gentoh realized we had to give up. I sat down next to Count Gentoh with a shrug and a sigh. “I apologize once again for my tardiness. Please, begin the discussion.” I believe I had done a sufficient job of showing who was in control here.

The royal council meeting was delayed because of me, but it was still one week ahead of the original schedule. As a result, the way I saw it, the meeting had begun early. Count Gentoh began by stating our agenda —deciding what to do about the disaster in the Yanga territory and the subsequent emergence of refugees as soon as possible. The crown prince stood up and responded, “Count Sacula is quite correct. With our people struggling, we do not have time to waste. I would like us to discuss what kind of support is required.”

“Oh?” *All right, Crown Prince, that’s enough. It seems you are toeing the mark and trying to take control again. Like I’m gonna let you do that.* “What kind of support? Your Highness, are we here to discuss that today?” I asked. A frown appeared on his face. *Being born into such a prestigious position, I doubt he’s ever had someone make a fool out of him like this.*

“Is there a problem, Sir Fenix?” asked the crown prince.

“I find it rather odd that you think I *would not* have a problem with that. It has already been three months since the demon disaster. I believe there has been more than enough time to consider what kind of support is needed.”

“I understand why you are in such a hurry,” the crown prince said in an

attempt to quell my irritation. “This is a difficult situation. There is quite a bit of distance between the royal capital and Sacula, and we require the personnel and finances to be able to gather more relief supplies. We first need to consider if we can even replenish our stock afterward.”

“I see. In other words, it has been three months, and you have been unable to come up with even a basic plan on how to deal with this, since it is *that* difficult of a situation,” I retorted.

“Even more than you think, sir,” the crown prince replied.

“I sincerely apologize, but Her Highness Princess Alicia and Father Birkan were able to gather up supplies in less than a month, and by the second month, those supplies had already made their way to the affected areas. I thought that surely the royal capital would have enough personnel to be able to pull off that much, but I guess I misunderstood.”

Moreover, the supplies had been carefully selected based on what we needed. Sure, with the scale of the disaster, it was not enough, but it helped more than I could have imagined. “Although that is not unusual for Princess Alicia and Father Birkan,” I continued, turning toward the two of them. “That reminds me, I offer you both my deepest gratitude and respect for your support regarding the refugees.” I bowed to Princess Alicia and Father Birkan, and they returned modest smiles. The head priest looked like he always did, but Princess Alicia did not seem well. It was just like Count Gentoh had written in his letter.

“The answer is simple,” I went on. “We need not have a lengthy discussion in front of His Majesty. Her Highness Princess Alicia and Father Birkan’s support was enough. It would be better to simply expand and continue doing what they were doing.” Thus I had resolved the problem that the royal council’s higher-ups were unable to. I smiled at the crown prince, and he returned a scornful look. It was not hard to tell that he was incredibly mad and not having the best of times right now. While he was focused on Princess Alicia and the conflict regarding the line of succession, she had gone ahead and solved a problem that he had regarded as impossible. *You saw how the princess skillfully provided relief and decided to make problems for us, so why are you bringing it up? To me, it just looks like you’re diving into the grave you dug for yourself.*

The crown prince continued to have a glaring match with me but stopped to speak. “However, if we take a wider look at the situation, you may not be able to say that Princess Alicia’s support is enough.”

“A wider look. Yes, you are correct, there could be better ideas,” I responded.

“Exactly. So I would suggest we reconsider what to do.”

“Let us discuss what we can do on a wider scale, then.” I completely agreed with the crown prince. However, our intentions differed slightly.

“First of all, as someone with first-hand knowledge, I will propose an idea,” I began. I had an ace up my sleeve. “What we need the most right now is a new leader for the Yanga territory.”

I felt like I heard “No, we don’t,” come from the crown prince’s mouth, but it was my time to talk.

“Sacula cannot continue to keep taking in refugees, and there are still a lot of citizens remaining in the Yanga territory. The responsibility of rebuilding and managing the refugees from here on out should fall to the person responsible for those decisions—in other words, the leader of that territory.” *Now, let’s begin.* I was prepared to get into the meat of the discussion, but it seemed the crown prince did not share my enthusiasm.

He kicked back his chair as he stood up, and spoke in an angry tone of voice not very suitable for a discussion. “Stop right there! Didn’t we say that the purpose of this meeting would be our plan to finance the relief supplies?”

“No? I am pretty sure we just said that we would talk about the situation on a wider scale.”

“I didn’t agree to this!”

“I am not sure what Your Highness thinks, but surely you acknowledge that the very capable duo of Her Highness Princess Alicia and Father Birkan have been very successful in donating supplies. While we still need to improve the pipeline there, it is not a pressing issue right now,” I explained to the crown prince. “The problem is less how much support the royal capital and central regions can provide and more that there are too many large decisions we are unable to make or act upon. There is no Viscount Yanga and no one else in this

world who can call the shots and make decisions for the territory in their place. To put it bluntly, only His Majesty the King holds the authority to do anything there.” Once a territory had been left in the care of a feudal lord, then not even the king could interfere, however, he could use his authority to act on their behalf. If the king was to formally declare a plan to recover the territory as a jurisdiction, he would then be able to exercise full authority.

“However, I am not about to ask the king, who resides here in the capital, to take command of a territory on the outskirts of the kingdom. As the crown prince said previously, it is too great of a distance, to the point that it took three months for the supplies to arrive. It would not be possible to ask that of our king.” If we were to look at the situation on a grander scale, the conclusion was obvious. “Rather than discussing small matters like relief supplies, we should decide who will be the successor to the Yanga territory. I have said it a few times now, but even with the best people for the job, the distance between the royal capital, Yanga, and Sacula is too far. Right, Your Highness?”

I used the crown prince’s own words against him in order to gain the upper hand. I kept the blows coming. The crown prince may be above me in position, but in all other matters, I had the upper hand. We had both the Church and intelligence experts sponsoring us. We were based at Count Sacula’s manor, which was known for its military strength. Anyone who fought someone in the ring a whole league higher than them in terms of authority and military force was crazy. They should have dropped from the fight when I made it here to the meeting on time. Maybe they just did not see the realities of this battle, or maybe they were just mistakenly obsessed with the idea that Princess Alicia might disrupt the line of succession.

Well, I think I’ve done enough damage. If this had been a boxing match, now would have been the point when the referee stepped in to stop me from throwing any more punches. However, unfortunately, this was not a boxing match, and we could not expect the one person who could act as a referee to play fair.

“Sir Fenix, your statements have been acknowledged,” spoke that same referee, who I trusted even less now. “You are correct that a successor to Viscount Yanga must be decided. I promise that I will consider it.”

“With all due respect, Your Majesty, I believe a name has already been given, so I wonder how much longer you will need,” I responded. *Are you so much of an idiot that you had three months and were still unable to decide?* I tried not to ask that out loud and held back a sigh in the process, but all had become clear now. *He is an idiot.*

The current king would not even swat an insect harassing his daughter if he thought it might affect his position. Of course, he was carrying out his duties as king, but he should regard his daughter’s position as princess equally highly and act immediately on her behalf. He only seemed to care for his responsibilities, not the responsibilities of others. *I can’t make sense of it.* And now, the king was wrapped around the crown prince’s little finger. If he was offering no help to his daughter, then was he helping Prince Albert as the king or as his father? While he would never state his true intentions, it was quite easy to tell from his actions.

“These things take time. I will spend some time thinking about it,” said the king as he concluded the meeting. If anyone had gained anything from this meeting, it was the beaten crown prince. Or, to put it in other words, despite being so close to delivering the knockout, the Frontier Alliance had lost the match thanks to an unfair referee. *How did it come to this?* His Excellency Count Gentoh, Alicia, and myself all gathered at the count’s mansion within the capital to lick our wounds and recount the day’s events.

“Ash, I’m glad you were able to get here so quickly. Good work,” Count Gentoh said, kicking off the discussion.

“You should thank Sir Argos. I would not have known if it were not for him...though, did you send out other envoys?” Count Gentoh grinned. It seemed that Count Sacula, Baron Nepton, and Viscount Sukuna had all worked together to send envoys from their respective houses. “Is it all right if I leave my thanks for that until another day and ask about the meeting?”

“Yeah, about that...” Count Gentoh shrugged his shoulders. “I never anticipated that the king would make such a biased decision. I suppose that’s on me. I thought that if it were a formal setting, he would make a fair decision.”

“He’s a dumb parent advocating for his idiot son,” I responded. Count Gentoh

had a distant look in his eyes. He looked like he had just lost a lifelong friend.

“The king probably thinks that if this conflict over succession gets out of hand, chaos will erupt within the royal capital, so he’s advocating for his son in order to avoid having to see his children fight.”

Did he mean that he was using his public position as a means to satisfy his personal feelings as a parent? The same king who watched the second and third princes get assassinated and let his daughter lose her position and get used as a puppet? “I do not really understand what you are saying,” I responded.

“Neither do I. I think that’s why I completely misread how the meeting would go. He’s probably tired of his responsibility as king.” Count Gentoh sighed. I never once thought the king was doing his job well, and I would have liked to stop him from getting others involved if he was truly tired of his job. His actions were largely to keep the peace in the capital, but that meant overlooking the turmoil in the remote regions. *It must have taken guts for those around him to pretend not to notice.*

“If the king is truly only thinking about the royal capital, then we have no need to give this place any thought ourselves,” I concluded. *The royal family and the central nobles probably think that they are in a position to just ignore the remote regions. How wrong they are. It’s us who are in the position to ignore them.* “If that’s truly how they feel, then I have a proposition.” We cared about the position of the nation, and we were simply just waiting for the king to make a decision. The ace in our hand was that we could make our own independent decisions. To be honest, I was confident that we would be able to work a lot better that way. “Your Excellency, since we cannot expect the king to make a decision, we should just do what we want. If we negotiate here in the royal capital, it will lead to more responsibility for yourself and especially Princess Alicia but—” As I gave Princess Alicia an apologetic look, her expression changed in an instant. It reminded me of the face she used to make back when I used to call her Arthur and we were being chased through the forest by assassins. It was a look of despair.

“Ah, um, Ash, um, I-I’m sorry.” Her face was as white as a sheet. “E-Even though I-I have to help you... I... It’s...all my fault that everything... I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...”

“What?” Princess Alicia’s words acted as a catalyst for the build-up of complaints I had within me and set them all alight. “Lady Alicia, what did you just say?” I think I lost myself for a moment and spoke more harshly than I intended. My patience and ability to control my feelings had run incredibly thin, however, I could not keep up this kind of attitude with Princess Alicia.

“I-I’m sorry... Y-You’re mad, huh...” I realized I had let my anger boil over and had taken it out on Princess Alicia. She looked tearful. *I am mad. I am actually irate. However...*

“I am not even remotely mad at you, Lady Alicia. I am simply enraged beyond words at whatever made you feel like you needed to apologize.” *Why must Princess Alicia feel so guilty that it brings her to tears? What has she even done? Didn’t she only try to help those in need with her own talent? Those who were unable to act themselves were just simply jealous of that fact. Even so, why does Princess Alicia have to look this sad? I know that she is dedicated. I know she is diligent. That’s why, even now, her sense of duty and responsibility makes her feel worried. However, you are not the one who should be feeling sad. You should be so mad that you tear everything to shreds.*

“Lady Alicia, I said this once before, but I will always want your help.”

“Yes, of course I remember,” Alicia responded.

“That does not change even now. If you want to help me, do everything in your power to lend me that strength. If there are any obstacles in your path, you kick them down.” If there was ever a time for the words I spoke that day, it was now. The color returned to Princess Alicia’s face in an instant, and she was deep in thought.

“But, if I were to do such a thing...” Lady Alicia frowned. Although resilient and diligent, she was still weighing the pros and cons of her own suffering against the suffering of others. *She’s smiling, but I can see that she’s in pain.* “I’m all right... Don’t worry about me, Ash.” She was once again hiding her true feelings behind a lie.

“Lady Alicia, while I do like lies...” Princess Alicia no doubt remembered that line from before. She raised her head. “Do you need that lie in order to live?” I asked her.

“Th-That’s...unfair, Ash. If you ask me that...” I was going to bring out her true feelings to the light. With her true feelings exposed, she let go of the tears she had been holding back for a long time. “Help me, Ash. I don’t want to be here anymore. I want to go back to where you’re from.”

“Your wish is my command.” As I was about to say my next words, I suddenly thought of Maika. *I remember now. Just before I left, when she told me to do what I wanted, she probably anticipated a moment like this. As expected of the daughter of a goddess, Angel Maika.* With thanks to my fiancée’s clairvoyance and generosity, I held Princess Alicia’s hand. “I am going to abduct you. This, I declare.”

“Y-Yes...” I looked at Princess Alicia’s cheeks as they flushed red. We may have been looking at one another a bit too seductively, especially considering we were in the Sacula manor where there were a lot of eyes on us.

“Ah, Ash. While this is a scene straight out of a painting, I wonder if we could continue the conversation?” Count Gentoh interrupted.

“Ah! I-I’m sorry! Your Excellency Count Gentoh, p-please proceed!” Princess Alicia panicked, distancing herself from me as her face went bright red. *It seems she was enjoying that quite a bit.*



“So, Ash. I understand you wish to abduct Her Highness the Princess, but how do you plan to do that? I’m especially curious about what you meant by ‘abduct’?” Count Gentoh inquired.

“As far as the king and the crown prince are concerned, Lady Alicia may try to exercise the right to succession, although that is a groundless suspicion. So, I thought, it would be a good idea if Lady Alicia officially lost her right to claim the crown.”

“No, no, she can’t just throw it away like that.” Count Gentoh refused the idea, but looking at Princess Alicia, it seemed she had already decided.

“I don’t need my royal position. I won’t miss it. It’s just a bother.” Princess Alicia allowed herself to be frank and say what she was really thinking. She had always wanted to say this, but she was unable to due to her position.

“Says the lady herself, thus I think we should allow Lady Alicia to throw it all away and return to the remote regions. We just so happen to have a territory available for her,” I followed up.

“Her Highness Princess Alicia...to Yanga? Hm...” Count Gentoh shook his head, although it seemed he did not think it was a bad idea. “I have no complaints about Her Highness Princess Alicia becoming the new lord of the Yanga region, however, that would make that region a duchy. If she is to be a duchess, she would still be in the running for the throne.”

“That is correct. That is why I need to abduct her,” I replied.

“Ash, are you serious about abducting her?” Count Gentoh scanned both my face and Princess Alicia’s. I was as certain as ever, and Princess Alicia was looking down, her face glowing bright red. *Stories from all ages and countries always end up in marriage when the princess gets abducted.* “Although, I suppose if she marries Ash, she will lose her right to succession.” *I am the son of a farmer, after all. She would go from the top to the bottom of the hierarchy.* It would be difficult to abduct the princess, but that did not mean it would be impossible.

“Therefore, I would like to request all of my accomplishments up to now, Your Excellency.” *I plan to give her a whole bouquet of accomplishments.*

Renge's Perspective

Lady Maika had sent a message calling for a meeting. "There has been strange news from Ash in the royal capital." Everyone nodded and looked at each other.

"To be honest, a lot of what Ash has to say ends up being a bit strange." Suiren looked at me while she said it, but they were words that everyone gathered in the Promotion Office could agree with. We were all—Lady Maika especially—very well aware of what Ash was like, so for her to say there had been "strange news," meant whatever she had received must have been *especially* strange. Everyone's expressions—especially those of the research laboratory's Chief Reina and Deputy Chief Hermes—were frozen.

"I wonder what he's been up to now..." Chief Reina wondered out loud.

"We're already busy increasing the production of transport carriages and hearths..." Deputy Chief Hermes responded.

"I know. We have to try and do our best to not get consumed by any more work."

"Reina, you don't have to try so hard, you know. There are some things that are just impossible no matter what you do." Hearing Hermes say the word "impossible" made me feel like we could do nothing but give up. The research laboratory was constantly coming up with new inventions. In fact, I found it quite amazing. It was rumored that "nothing was impossible" there. *Though, well, for me, it probably would be impossible.*

"Uhh, I'm also super busy at the moment. How about you, Renge?" Suiren asked.

"Um...well, I... I am also...busy, I guess." Suiren and I were both rushing around managing the refugee ward day in and day out. I had become somewhat used to the work, but it was somewhat difficult without Ash here.

"Yeah, no surprise there... But if Ash is saying he needs us, then we gotta try our best."

"Yeah. If Ash is relying on us, then it probably is a tiny bit impossible." Everyone exchanged wry smiles and let out sighs thinking about Ash's accomplishments. He had asked for our help, and with him having done so

much for me, I wanted to do my best to help him in return. With that said, this task would likely be reasonably difficult—in fact, it'd probably be too difficult, and as everyone was inspecting the others in the room, wondering if we could even peacefully resolve this, Lady Maika arrived at the office.

“Sorry, sorry I’m late. The discussion with my uncle and the military went on a bit longer than I expected,” Lady Maika said as she rushed to her seat. Chief Reina spoke up on our behalf.

“That’s fine, we were able to rest for a little bit. So, you said there had been strange news? So strange that the acting count and the military are now involved?”

“Yeah, when I said strange, I guess I meant unusual... We also need to get the other Frontier Alliance houses as well as the Church involved too.” *This is on quite a large scale.* It made me slightly nervous. Thankfully we had already been in contact with departments from other houses more frequently since the refugee crisis, so I was more than used to it by now. This was fairly normal for a request from Ash, though. It clearly wasn’t the “strange” part.

Chief Reina seemed to be thinking the same thing, and she decided to probe further. “That’s going to be quite a lot...what is he planning?”

“He says he wants evidence of his accomplishments.” *There it is.* Everyone nodded together with the same expression. *Accomplishments. Evidence of accomplishments. Ash’s accomplishments.*

“Huh, that *is* going to end up being a lot!” I spoke the first words that came to mind. Ash, as head of planning in the Territory Reform Promotion Office, held authority over the department. To put it bluntly, all of our accomplishments were actually Ash’s. That’s how we all saw it, anyways. Ash, on the other hand, was the only person who said that “It is all the result of everyone’s help!” in an attempt to make it fairer. Setting aside the fact that Lady Maika had bulldozed through all of the planning and budgets at the meeting with the higher-ups, I felt like my clerical work hadn’t been much help... It was really strange that Ash had asked for “as many accomplishments as possible.” *I guess that explains why Lady Maika said she had received strange news.*

“I get it; I understand why everyone is confused. I can offer a suitable

explanation for it.” Lady Maika laughed while spreading her hands out. All of us *were* quite confused. “Ash hasn’t been possessed by an obsession with glory. Rather, he needs glory to achieve his current goal instead of money or other resources.” So he needed to prove that glory with all of his achievements. I could understand that. *That sounds like Ash, all right.*

“Um, okay. Then shall I gather all of the accomplishments the Promotion Office has managed up to now? Almost all of them have Ash recorded as the head of planning. We can use them, right?” I suggested.

“That would be great, Renge!” Lady Maika said before turning toward Suiren. “I hate to ask this of you, but could I ask you to handle all the documents relating to Ajole village?”

“Of course, don’t worry about it. I guess it’s better if I make a list of all the thanks we got when Ash protected the village from the treants?”

“If you wouldn’t mind, that would be great! Reina and Hermes, could I ask you to gather all of the results from the research laboratory?”

“Almost everything from the research laboratory is Ash’s work. Should we gather everything regarding what our laboratory has achieved, including the applications of our discoveries?”

“If the lab isn’t too against it, I’d like you to gather as much as you can.” *I wonder if anyone would be against it?* I thought to myself.

Chief Reina looked at Deputy Chief Hermes. “Would anyone be against it?”

“I feel like the newcomers mightn’t find it very interesting, but that’s about as much commotion as they’ll make. They don’t have the results to really say anything about it, though. Anyone who has achieved something there has no doubt already read through Ash’s documents many times before. I wasn’t lying when I said that all the breakthroughs we’ve had in various fields are the result of Ash,” Deputy Chief Hermes said. “Even the airplane was thanks to Ash. The same goes for things like the steam engine, electrical technology, distillation and carbonization machines... It’s all him. He even standardized all the weights and measurements and introduced them into our work. As for things we could have done without him? I can’t even name one thing...”

Chief Reina smiled—she looked like she was reminiscing. “When you said you wanted to make a tendon-powered airplane, he handed you a ruler and a protractor. I wonder if that was the first time we used standardized measurements in the research laboratory?”

“You’re right, he did. We weren’t even a research laboratory then—we were still at the military academy... Actually, we were mostly doing agricultural work then, like growing tomatoes in the garden,” Deputy Chief Hermes responded.

“Ash also knew that tomatoes didn’t actually have poison in them. Now our famous dishes can’t do without them.”

“If we didn’t have Ash, then we wouldn’t have tomato meat sauce...”

“You really like pasta with meat sauce, don’t you, Hermes?”

“I mean, it’s delicious. Surely I’m not the only one who likes it, right?” said Hermes. He and Reina turned to face their chief.

“Meat is delicious,” responded Maika. “Actually, I’ve liked tomato sauce since I lived in Noscula! Ash used to make pizza bread and Hamburg steak when we lived back in the village together.”

“Now they’re all foods that Sacula could never do without. We could also use his contributions to food culture as an example of his accomplishments!” responded Chief Reina.

“Yep! I’ll ask the temple within the royal capital to do that for us,” Lady Maika replied.

“Why them...?”

Lady Maika laughed. “That’s a secret.” She was most definitely up to something with Ash. I could tell from her smile.

“His accomplishments with the Promotion Office will work, but I think his military accomplishments are where he’ll really shine. Though that is related to Suiren’s Ajole village too,” Lady Maika continued.

“The subjugation of the treants, right? It certainly was a magnificent military accomplishment—no villagers were harmed,” Suiren, one of such villagers, spoke triumphantly. “At the time, I remember being so impressed and so

grateful that he helped us. Come to think about it, his ability to command troops and completely wipe out the treants was extraordinary.”

“Yep. Sir George, who was leading the main subjugation force, seemed so impressed,” Lady Maika responded.

“Glen said that Ash completely revolutionized how they fight treants that day. They introduced pots of fire as part of their compulsory equipment.”

“That’s also one of Ash’s accomplishments. The spirit lamp fuel production, along with the discovery that some creatures can only survive in clean air.”

“Ah, but that’s not simply a military accomplishment...” Suiren frowned, seemingly struggling to summarize all of Ash’s accomplishments in a concise manner.

“We may need to simply say that Sacula’s recent growth can all be credited to Ash.”

“Ah, that’s just like you, Renge. You made it easier to understand, and it sounds way more amazing that way,” Lady Maika said with a smile. In reality, it actually *was* amazing. We had more farming methods and a lot of new inventions. We had stronger relationships with other territories, and Sacula had now come into a lot of good fortune. That fortune spilled into neighboring territories, and the Frontier Alliance’s finances were all on a good upward turn. The maids working in the commercial sector were recently complaining that they didn’t have enough people to keep up with the ever-increasing demand. But, well, that went for everyone, to be honest.

“I’d also like to use Ash’s work in regards to finances too... Renge, could I leave that to you?” Lady Maika asked.

“Of course, I’ll take on the task. However...do we need this many accomplishments?” *I wonder why we need to gather up so much of Ash’s accomplishments.* I couldn’t imagine what it was for. I mean, when it came to Ash, he had pretty much made everything we needed... As I pondered over that, Lady Maika spoke with a smile.

“He needs to obtain a gold service medal. Once he has that, he can ask the king for anything he wants. One time use only, though.” *Right, I see.* I realized

he was putting a lot together since they had yet to decide on a successor to take over the Yanga territory. He needed that so he could have a direct audience with the king. Even though I understood why now, something seemed strange about Lady Maika's smile. She seemed really happy, like a child who had finally gotten a toy they wanted, or that her lifelong wish had finally been granted. It was Chief Reina who managed to work out exactly what her expression meant, though.

"It's not really all that simple, though, is it?" Chief Reina asked.

"Heh heh, I can't tell you anything more! Please look forward to it!"

"Maika... Ash can surprise us without any tricks, but now you're trying to surprise us too? Is this like a married couple hobby of yours? Playing with people's hearts like this?"

"W-We're not married *yet.*" *Lady Maika always gets shy when teased like that.* I wondered if Lady Maika had picked up on Chief Reina's subtle glare telling her to be a little more discreet. She seemingly hadn't. Chief Reina smiled wryly. It seemed Lady Maika was all lovey-dovey with her and Ash being referred to as a married couple. It was troubling but cute. Her feelings for Ash were so straightforward, so bright and deep. While I probably couldn't shine as bright as her, I wanted to focus that energy into my work.

The conversation slowly came to an end and everyone set out to do their individual tasks. Deputy Chief Hermes faced Lady Maika. "When we were talking about tomatoes and the royal capital, I remembered something. Is Ash still on good terms with Arthur? He's in the capital, right?" A nostalgic name, yet one I had seen many times on documents before. I recognized him as someone that had helped with my work one winter, but looking at Chief Reina, who was a classmate of his at the military academy, her smile seemed deep.

"That reminds me, Arthur likes tomatoes, doesn't he? Especially on pizza. He would often be hanging around at the research laboratory's cooking pot. Well, back then it wasn't the research laboratory, though," Chief Reina recalled.

"That's right, we were just working in a repurposed shack for prisoners... Ah, it was forbidden to eat tomatoes, wasn't it? The dormitory supervisor, Rihn, didn't let us."

“He he, that takes me back. It definitely feels like we were lied to about tomatoes having poison. Ash was eating them like it was nothing.” Chief Reina fired off an accusatory glare toward Maika and laughed. Clearly Ash wasn’t the only one.

“Now that you mention it, weren’t you also eating them in secret, Reina?”

“Arthur too. Everyone in the study group, to be honest. All of us just went against the dormitory supervisor’s rules.” Suiren and I exchanged glances. This was a secret conversation between some of the military academy’s greatest students. *I can’t believe they broke the rules.*

“Okay, so the talk of tomatoes reminded you of my accomplice, Arthur,” Chief Reina remarked.

“We were talking about the royal capital, right? Is Arthur ever gonna come back? I know he’s probably got a lot on his plate, but I have so much stuff I wanna show him,” Deputy Chief Hermes responded.

“You two were quite close, huh.”

“He had no reason to dislike my love of airplanes.” Chief Reina and Deputy Chief Hermes continued reminiscing about old times together. “I’m excited,” mumbled Lady Maika, looking like she was having the most fun. She looked exactly like Ash did when he was about to do something.

...

As I was working on political sabotage in the royal capital, I bumped into Father Folke.

“Yo, Ash.”

“What is it, Father Folke? I am quite busy today, so I am not available to receive guests.” I opened the door and welcomed Father Folke into the office Count Gentoh had let me use. I was busy writing replies to letters and whatever else needed doing. *What’s that, I never actually invited Father Folke out loud? Well, you see, this is actually how me and Father Folke greet one another. I would have actually turned him away otherwise.*

“I’m also busy running the orphanage you know, but I was sent here by the

Church. I'll be leaving once I'm done here," Father Folke responded.

"Then hurry up and say what you need. I shall prepare us some tea." This was not just me welcoming him, this was actually me being *very* welcoming.

"No need. The maid who escorted me here said she would prepare some for us."

"No, no, this is tea prepared especially for you, Father Folke."

"By 'especially,' do you mean especially bad?" *Of course, it is. We don't have a relationship where I would prepare especially good tea for you.* As we playfully exchanged jabs, he handed me a letter with the head priest's seal. "When he handed me this letter, Head Priest Father Birkan told me that you needed a 'merit'?" Father Folke asked, unable to hide his suspicions. "You've never really cared about stuff like that, so why the change of heart?"

"Hmm?" I responded in an uninterested way.

Father Folke carried on, remembering something. "I also heard that the whole deal with the successor to the Yanga territory is a mess. Could this possibly be related to that?"

"There's something eerily strange about you being aware of what is going on in the world. Are you an impostor?"

"Enough of the impostor jokes already," Father Folke retorted. I wasn't joking though. This really was eerily strange. Father Folke sighed and grumbled that he would not get involved in my jokes.

Then he nodded. "If you need proof of your achievements, I can put in a good word for you. Stuff like the Fenix Orphanage, deciphering ancient languages, and so on."

"You really *are* an impostor, there is no doubt about it."

"I said stop with the impostor jokes, you brat!"

I continued to confirm that the middle-aged man swearing like a sailor in front of me was actually Father Folke while we waited for the maid to bring the tea.

"You're too old to be talking like such a brat," Father Folke continued to grumble to himself as he relaxed his shoulders and took a sip of tea.

“All I said was that you are not acting like your normal self. I will take you to see Doctor Lusus. There is definitely something wrong with your head. No doubt about it. When did you hit it?”

“You try to be nice to someone for once and this happens. You do know I’m not going to put in a good word for free.”

“You should have begun with that. Now that is something the real Father Folke would say.”

He wanted knowledge in exchange for saying nice things about me. “Have you heard the words ‘self-propagating nanobots’ before?” Father Folke asked.

“Nanobots?” They were cutting-edge technology used by the society in my past life. To put it in layman’s terms, they were nanometer-sized machines that users could manipulate at will. They were incredibly useful items, being used in artificial intelligence. For example, nanobots used in healthcare could completely cure a cold or the flu in just a few hours. You would make a full recovery without feeling any side effects. When used as a vaccination, as long as the nanobots were working, you could expect to never catch a cold at all. Other iterations of the nanobots were strengthening people’s immune systems.

“I do remember reading about something like that in the early civilization legends, yes,” I responded.

“As I thought. I had an idea that you would probably know something about it, but I’m still surprised that you do.”

Father Folke mumbled to himself about it being an ancient artifact and then looked up at the ceiling with a bewildered expression. “Back when I was deciphering ancient texts, I came across that word. I didn’t know what it meant, so I was at a bit of a loss.”

Father Folke thanked me for my help and then promised that he would put in a good word for me. “Well, it would be less of me putting in a good word since, well, you came up with the study plans at the orphanage, and you always helped out with deciphering ancient texts. So, if anything, I’m simply reporting your achievements.”

“That will be a great help,” I responded. Father Birkan’s letter said more or

less the same things. He had promised to include various reports from Sacula's church, how I helped organize book lists for temples in many territories, and other such accomplishments. Sacula had also replied saying that they would gather together all my accomplishments from the Territory Reform Promotion Office and the results of the battle with the werewolves too. The leaders of the Frontier Alliance had also sent correspondence promising to mention my work within the alliance. *Okay, this should be enough to display my various accomplishments.* All for a gold service medal that would allow me to marry the princess.

Alicia's Perspective

"Your Highness Alicia, it appears that Sir Fenix has completed his preparations." Amin relayed a recent report from Sacula. She stood straight, exuding an aura of fighting spirit.

"Thank you. I know it's quite an imperious plan, but do you think it'll be okay?" Ash was going to marry me. Anyone would say it's nothing short of a dream. Ash was born into a family of farmers, and a lot of people were against him being with Maika. But now he had his eyes on me, the princess. It was so far removed from reality that I felt like people should be telling me to get a grip with a sneer. Even I thought it sounded like a dream. A happy dream, of course. I've started waking up with a smile recently.

"Under normal circumstances, I would say it was an impossible wish but...the fact that we're about to make it come true is a little scary." Amin faintly smiled as she continued relaying the report from Sacula. "Sir Fenix has managed to secure three gold medals."

"Three! On his own? In one go?"

"I believe this is the first time that's ever happened," Amin responded. *That's Ash, all right. Once again, he's broken records and raised the bar.* Gold service medals weren't just something you received as a reward for good results. A lot of political maneuvering was required just to apply for one. Even if you had really impressive results, you would have to submit them to the royal palace, and during the acceptance process, a lot of points would be taken off. Some of

the credit would be shared with any collaborators, some points could be deducted just based on the mood of the noble put in charge of applications, and bargaining within the palace could cut down on merits as well.

By the time your application had gone through this ordeal, you'd have lost a lot of your points already. That's why it was said that fighting in the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament was the easiest way to get a gold medal. One person receiving three medals, let alone all in one go, was unheard of. It was possibly the first time in recorded history.

"What kind of accomplishments did he get acknowledged for?" I asked.

"Sacula sent in recommendations regarding his work on the airplane and deciphering ancient civilization texts, and the Frontier Alliance praised his successes in agriculture, food production, and his military prowess against the werewolves. The Church backed up all of these claims." It was impossible to ignore Ash's many feats. There should have been obstacles when submitting the application. We were sure he would get marked down for the many collaborators involved, and he no doubt didn't want all of it to be recorded as one person's successes in the history books. Ash wouldn't have even wanted this if it weren't for me. He always said he was blessed by those around him and never sought glory. That's why whenever he asked for help, he'd always received it.

"With all this, there's no way they'll turn him down." While it could be seen as nepotism or forgery, and the applications were scrutinized heavily, a recommendation from a noble house was essential for getting it seen by the royal family. If they didn't acknowledge House Sacula's authority as guarantors, it would be a black mark on the palace's reputation. Nonetheless, thanks to my house arrest, relationships were still tense between the Frontier Alliance and the royal family. The conditions here had improved somewhat, but nobody was happy with the conflict. Issues kept coming up and slowing down the application process. The central lords didn't seem to understand how important this was to rebuild the Yanga region. "If they try to stop us, then I'll just have to fling open the palace gates for my fellow rebels." Sacrificing the king would be a small price to pay.

"All right, we should start preparing things here too. Let's invite Ash to tea." I

turned toward my house servant. “Ah, Tolly, make sure we serve herbal tea. Enough for two people.” She looked back at me with a confident expression, as if she had already known what I was about to ask. I planned to invite three people, but the third guest wouldn’t be drinking tea.

Since they had softened my house arrest, I was allowed to walk around the royal family’s private areas more freely, and following the royal council meeting, the frontier lords could bring me to Count Sacula’s manor. Even so, I tried my best to limit my outings to avoid attracting too much attention, and so when I walked into the hallway, the knight guarding the room seemed startled. He was supposed to be keeping an eye on me, but when I started walking away, he looked dumbfounded. I would push ahead with this plan without giving our enemies the time to react. *This is how we do it in Sacula. Just like Ash. It’s all very nostalgic.* Like when he just went ahead and asked Rihn to give the acting count his agricultural improvement plan. *What was it that Maika and Mother Yae often said? “Secrets are powerful when bargaining in love.”* Ash was strong because we never knew what he would do next. That was exactly their point. I had to learn to be like that. However, I also kind of wanted Ash to know everything that I was doing.

“Your Highness! Your Highness Princess Alicia! Please let me know where you are going!” the knight called out after he had come back to his senses. I stopped him with a wave of my hand. One of the maids who was following me stood in front of him, blocking his way.

“Relax. This is still within the palace. If there is anything I can do for you, I’d be happy to help,” the maid spoke.

“What do you mean?! This wasn’t on her schedule! She can’t be let out without an escort!”

“It’s an urgent matter. The palace is perfectly safe, surely. If she were to leave the palace, she’d be escorted by Sacula knights, so there is no reason to worry.”

“By Sacula knights?!” the knight repeated incredulously. He started to head off, but the maid stopped him in his tracks.

“Oh, where are you trying to head off to? Aren’t you Princess Alicia’s guard? In that case, you should follow her.”

“No! Wait! I need to go report this!”

“You’re going to leave your post? Or do you need to go fetch someone else to help you guard one girl? Both possibilities are quite alarming. That could do quite some damage to your reputation as a knight.” That should slow down word getting out. Ideally, I would make it to my destination without more interruptions.

If I were walking around with my maid escort, it would draw people’s attention to me. We were able to stop the knight, but we wouldn’t be able to talk our way around every obstacle. *I wonder if my enemy, Prince Albert, will make it in time. He should be busy around now.* The frontier region lords and the Church had asked for an audience with him. Even if he could make his excuses not to meet with the lords, he couldn’t say no to the high priest. There’d been talk that the Church and frontier lords were about to take action. Then, suddenly, I’m acting suspiciously as well. The prince is probably panicking over what to do.

Unable to stifle my smile, I made my way through the palace hallways. My destination wasn’t where I could meet with those from Sacula, but rather, I was headed to the drawing room where the king did his work. Although it was one of the areas of the palace held in high prestige, there were several people walking around quite carefree. Their clothes weren’t that extravagant, yet they carried themselves with an air of importance that gave the impression of high-class nobles nonetheless. As I made my way to a spot where I could see their faces closer, I could tell from the smiling face looking back at me that everything had gone to plan.

“Father Birkan, it’s nice to see you.”

“Your Highness Alicia, it is an honor to see you doing so well.” He could tell that all had gone according to plan from my expression. “I have just finished speaking with the king. My appointment ended a little earlier than usual so he has some time to spare. I believe Count Gentoh will be here soon.”

“Oh, so the king is available right now?” I confirmed.

“Yes, I believe so. If you also have time, Your Highness, maybe you could also have a talk with him? It might make you feel a bit better after being locked up

here for so long.”

“Yes, I think I will.” Although we weren’t far apart, we spoke in loud voices aimed at the king who was further behind us. Naturally, this was all a part of our scheme.

First, Father Birkan requested a meeting with the king. Then Count Gentoh requested one too. Father Birkan would cut his meeting short, allowing the king some free time in between, which would be my opportunity for a “chance” meeting with my father in the hallway. Inside the palace, I had been enduring an overwhelming loss. But outside of these walls, that wasn’t the case. Ever since I worked with the Church to send relief supplies to Sacula, they’d been looking out for me. Father Birkan would have been talking with the king about just how hard it was getting relief supplies to Sacula with the princess now under house arrest. The king, no doubt sensing the irony in his voice, would have to acknowledge how difficult it would be for the princess to do anything locked up within the palace. Then, all I had to do was take advantage of that and propose a plan. There was nothing odd about a daughter inviting her father to tea, after all. After all, Prince Albert would often play it up, calling him ‘father’ in official settings. So it wouldn’t be all that strange if I did the same.

“So I’ll speak to him as a...” However, I found it impossible to call him father. “I’ll speak to him as the princess.” My smile was just part of the performance. A calm but elegant expression befitting of a noble and a princess. This masked smile I wore was a symbol of *my* pride, and the tea would act as a reminder of that day my favorite herbal tea was left to go cold. It may just be a beverage, but it was something I had been given by Ash, and it was so very important to me. Yet the king didn’t seem to care to find out how much. I wasn’t going to let him laugh it off as if it were a simple drink—that tea meant everything and it warmed my heart.

“As it appears you have time, I would like to invite you to my room to have tea. I have something I wish to discuss with you,” I asked the king once he’d walked over.

“It seems Princess Alicia feels very strongly about this,” Father Birkan urged. The king focused on Father Birkan’s expression rather than mine and accepted. As king, he was more likely to acknowledge someone in a higher position. As a

king, he was still able to respect someone else in a high position. That could be seen as a respectable trait.

“Alicia!”

However, his one big downside had arrived. Prince Albert. Judging from his sweaty face, he had run here in quite a hurry. He must have completely fallen for the plan, thinking I’d left the palace when in actuality, I had come to meet with the king.

“Oh, it’s His Highness Albert. Whatever could be the matter?” I asked.

“That’s rich coming from you! You’re banned from leaving the palace!”

I acted surprised.

“I have no plans to leave the palace. What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play the fool with me! I’m fully aware that you planned to leave the palace surrounded by your subordinates, and then once you were outside, you were going to seek escort from the Sacula knights!”

“Well, yes, that was what happened after the royal council meeting not too long ago. But I’ve never once said that I planned to leave today.” I wasn’t lying. Count Gentoh was the one who had said that if I ever needed to go outside the palace grounds, the Sacula knights would escort me. However, we never spoke about when that would be.

“In that case, why are there people from Sacula here within the palace!” Prince Albert pressed on.

“I mean, I don’t know why you’re asking me... Actually, Father Birkan did just mention that Count Gentoh would be meeting with the king soon. I guess they’re here for that?” That was indeed the case, so all Father Birkan and the king could do was nod in agreement. “Anyway, if you have no other urgent matters, could you please give us some time? I plan to have tea with the king now.”

“You and father? Wait, isn’t Count Sacula supposed to be meeting with him now?”

“We still have some time before that, so I took the opportunity,” I responded.

“Oh? Father has some time now? As luck would have it, I also need to speak with him.”

“What...” mumbled Father Birkan. While Prince Albert had no idea what was going on or what we had planned, he was trying to brute-force his way in regardless. *How shameful*. He was being too blatant about it, no doubt on purpose. Father Birkan had a troubled look on his face.

“Your Highness Albert,” I addressed him. “I have asked the king to have tea with me, the princess. He accepted that invitation.” Prince Albert raised his eyebrows. The fact he wasn’t able to understand what I was trying to say to him the first time could be proof that he wasn’t too well-versed in high society decorum. That, or he felt he was too high ranking to need take notice. *It’s probably the latter*. The king, the prince, and the former Marquis Datara all thought of me as a puppet. However, that was before I had gone to Sacula.

“Since you have been saying ‘father, father’ this whole time, I believe that your matters are more personal. I will be speaking as a princess to the head of the royal family. You’re interrupting a formal discussion between two public figures. Please refrain.” Since I would be talking with the king as the princess, I was treating Albert as if he were a rank below me. Albert went bright red, or rather, acted like a child in response.

“H-How dare you! You are speaking to your brother!” Arthur spat out.

“I, as princess, am speaking to you as Prince Albert. How about you speak in a manner fitting your position?” I scolded him as if he were a child. “Now, Your Majesty, please let us proceed to my quarters. I’m afraid that if we stay here any longer, Your Majesty may end up laughing at your heir, Prince Albert, for his inability to be apart from his father for too long.” If the king went back on what he said, it would be problematic. It would send a message that neither the king nor heir could separate personal from official matters. It would be especially foolish to do so in front of Father Birkan, who cleared his throat to indicate he was still present. Plus, we were surrounded by both the king and prince’s subordinates—they would no doubt also form the same opinion.

It seemed Prince Albert was starting to realize that his deliberately large faction was failing and that both his and the king’s failure to coordinate had

made them a target for the frontier lords.

“So, Your Majesty,” I spoke as I glanced at the king and began walking. Ideally, I wanted to take his hand and pull him along, however, it seemed my glance was enough to get the point across. Father Birkan simply ushered us along with a wave of his hand.

The king and I traversed the hallways of the palace in silence. As a public figure, I was acting as an obstacle to stop the king from taking any measures against the remote regions, so I didn’t feel like talking with him. As far as personal matters went, he had never once spoken to me as a father, so I had nothing to say to him. It was no doubt the same for the king, who, despite getting on in years, was probably not used to socializing.

The sound of our footsteps echoed through the unreasonably long hallway. “Alicia,” the king started. His voice joined the echoes, and I turned to face him. “About before, do you not think you could be a bit more careful with your choice of words? You two are each other’s only remaining sibling. I don’t wish to see you fight.”

“In that case, then you will be willing to help me with what I’m inviting you to discuss.” *I’m sorry. After this, there won’t be much left for discussion.* I felt like my steps had quickened as I crushed the beginnings of a conversation beneath my feet. As we arrived in front of my room, we could hear a warm conversation through the door.

“I met you at the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament. If I remember correctly, your family are woodworkers.”

“Y-Yes! I’m delighted that you even remembered someone like me...” It was the voices of Ash and Tolly. The two of them had met while cleaning up after the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament. It seemed I had made the right call to ask her to serve tea. According to Amin’s report, Ash had summoned craftsmen from Tolly’s hometown and had asked them to urgently repair the beds and tables at the venue grounds. It seemed Ash was very satisfied with their work. I was a fan too. *Good work, Amin.* Her report was correct. The two were chatting happily.

“I never forget the faces of exceptional people. I particularly remember the skill of the craftsmen in your family. They were a great help. As a result, we were able to focus on caring for the injured,” said Ash.

“Oh my! I would also like to thank you for listening so attentively to them. They may have been a bit brash,” Tolly responded.

“Oh, they weren’t brash at all,” Ash counterattacked with his extravagant praise. Tolly usually only ever raised an eyebrow when receiving a compliment, but she was overwhelmed by Ash’s exaltation. “I almost want to invite such an astute person like you to Sacula. Of course, the craftsmen in your family would be invited too.”

“I-I... I’m honored, Sir Fenix.”

I unwittingly let out a laugh.

“Alicia, is there... It seems like someone is already there?” the king asked. I reached out to the doorknob with a smile.

“It’s Sir Fenix,” I said as I pushed open the door, not allowing Ash to steal away my favorite servant. “This is just like you, Ash. She is one of my most capable servants. If I had the chance to steal her away, I would take it too.” Even though I had intruded on Ash trying to solicit someone else’s servant, his smile didn’t waver once. He stood up and gave a tactful bow.

“Well, well, Your Majesty, Your Highness. It is an honor to be able to meet with you both,” he greeted us appropriately. He was an imposing figure, regardless of his origins. I found that wonderful. The king didn’t hide his surprise.

“Alicia, what is going on...?” The king asked.

“There’s no need to be so surprised,” I responded. I thought that it was pretty obvious why Ash was here. He was my strongest ally in Sacula, and he was probably the most important person there at this time. “Ash is from Sacula, and I am offering Sacula support. He is here to offer his thanks.”

“Yes, that is exactly it, Your Majesty. She is simply an unrivaled member of the royal family with her insight and contributions to Sacula, as well as her popularity among our citizens,” Ash followed up. I was happy that he referred

to me as being unrivaled, however, only one person could wear that title. It was Ash's way of declaring his position as being solely here for me, an ally of the Frontier Alliance. The king didn't have much to say in response, mumbling "I see" as he sat down on the sofa. He could have at least welcomed Ash with a smile. As king, he should start with a friendly approach at first. If he wanted to take a more hostile attitude, he would have made it more apparent. Instead, he just seemed half-hearted.

You wouldn't have guessed he was a public figure. He was acting like a father who had just discovered his daughter had a male friend she was close to. If he had properly acted like a public figure, then maybe I wouldn't dislike him as much. While I felt lonely as a daughter, I still somewhat held respect for him as the king. *He's just like Prince Albert. No matter who he's dealing with, he acts informally when things are going well for him, and acts formally when things aren't. I've never once felt that acting like that has helped me in any way, and it wasn't about to help the people of Sacula and Yanga.* I felt myself getting angry. As both a daughter and a public figure.

"That reminds me, Ash. I heard that Count Sacula, the Church, and the Frontier Alliance lords all have something to ask of His Majesty." I said, glancing over at Ash, who returned a glance with soft, kind eyes as if he was asking me if I was okay. I nodded in return. This time, I wasn't lying. I was being honest with myself. *This is who I am. I'm not like I was that night, when I had to lie in order to stay alive.* Ash had realized this. Instead of pushing me to accept a cup of tea, he turned toward the king.

"Yes, that's correct. Your Majesty, I have something I would like to submit," Ash said as he pulled out a bundle of papers he had held under his arm. It was the application for a gold service medal, which up until today he had been working hard to gather together for my sake. *That right there is my worth. Three gold service medals—he'd made sure I was worth quite a lot.* Ash's achievements, no matter what others may have had to say about them, meant a lot to me. My body tensed up and I shivered. *I'm glad. I'm so glad. No one else would be able to give this much to a princess who was treated like spare scraps.* Ash handed the documents to the king. Based on everything that happened today, it was easy to tell what the documents—which the Church and the

Frontier Alliance had worked together on—were without even reading them. The king didn't reach for them right away, clearly not wanting to acknowledge their contents. I took them from Ash and handed them to him myself.

"Your Majesty, I agree with everything written here. Please take them and give Ash the credit he deserves."

The king looked around the room, but there was no help to be found. He was in my quarters. I could chase out any enemy. Unlike at the royal council meeting, he couldn't just come up with a lame excuse and ignore it this time.

"Sir Fenix..." the king finally spoke as his gaze fell upon the documents. "What do you want?"

"I am the self-made son of a farmer, Your Majesty. You often hear about it in old tales, right? A youngster with a lower social standing gets a wish granted by the royal family. Surely, it should be easy to understand what I'm asking."

I felt my face turning red as I thought about what Ash's next words would be.

"I wish to have Her Highness Princess Alicia as my wife." He finally said it. My greatest wish. Although now wasn't the best time for it, I couldn't help but shamelessly show how happy I was on my face. I managed to at least not make a sound, and I prided myself on holding back that much. *You can do it, Alicia. I'm a person who can discern between official and private matters.* I raised my head and swallowed my joy and shame. The king was wearing a deep frown on his face.

"Sir Fenix, you already have a fiancée. If you were to go back on your engagement to receive a gold service medal, it would affect the dignity of the royal family." That was probably the best argument he could come up with, but it meant nothing. It wasn't rare for noblemen or affluent merchants to have second or third wives. It would in fact be strange if Ash, who had a lot of commendations, as well as a lot of roles, weren't to take on a second wife. My dear "brother" Itsuki, who had no heirs, was a prime example of that kind of anomaly. It's not that the king didn't understand that. That's why his next words, although shaky, were no doubt his true feelings.

"Alicia... Alicia, are you okay with this? Becoming the wife of a lowly farmer —" *Ah, of course,* I thought to myself as I interrupted the king from continuing

further.

“I do not mind at all.” *What does the king even mean by that? How dare he, as someone who has never tilled a field, try to make out that a mud-covered farmer was a bad thing? I knew what it meant for a farmer to be filthy. I had experienced it myself back in Sacula.* Thanks to farmers holding fast through hardships, society was able to function—craftsmen could make weapons, merchants would be able to sell them, and nobles were able to rest their ever-so-weary heads on their desks. Ash had taught me to understand that, and I held the utmost respect for him. More than anyone else in this world.

“If Ash says he wants me, then I will happily marry him. This is my true desire. And...” I wanted to continue, but I hesitated. *Come to think of it, I’ve never been able to say this before. This is the first time I’m going to say it out loud.* I unwittingly looked at Ash, though I shouldn’t have. I ended up getting too emotional.

“And...I’ve always...loved him.” I could have just said that I loved him, I really didn’t need to mention that I had *always* loved him. *What a lame confession. This isn’t the place to do it at all. I should have done it when we were alone. If possible, I should’ve done it in Sacula. On that hill. It would’ve been so lovely.* I had gotten lost in my imagination, but I wanted them to give me the benefit of the doubt. *Something big just happened, so go easy on me. My confession was so terrible. I wanna redo it all.*

“I-I see... But, Alicia.” It seemed the king still had something to say. Although, more accurately, it seemed like he was just holding himself back from groaning. I regained my composure. *What does he mean by “but”?* Compared to Ash, he was nothing, so I faced him with a fitting expression.

“Your Majesty. Why can’t you agree to Ash’s proposal?” I asked. “There are obviously issues between the crown prince and myself, the fourth princess. If I were to marry Ash, it would solve the problem immediately.”

“You ask why, Alicia. I am certainly the king, but I am also your father. There’s no way a father would be able to immediately accept hearing that his daughter is suddenly going to marry.”

I almost sneered at him. I had already proposed this option to him before. I

had offered to be betrothed to someone—even a central lord—in order to support Sacula. It was odd that he had put me, the princess, to one side and hadn't even considered that I would eventually have to marry into someone else's family with Prince Albert being next in line for the throne. Ah, but wait, that's not the point. This man referred to himself as my father. Of all times, he chose *now* to acknowledge that fact. *Since he has seemingly forgotten, I'll be sure to remind him.*

"Your Majesty, when the former Marquis Datará tried to use me as a puppet six years ago, you sent me away to prevent it. I understand what you did, and I am grateful. If it weren't for your wise decision, I wouldn't have been able to meet such a wonderful person." I wasn't about to let him forget what happened two years ago. "After the former Marquis Datará was restrained thanks to Sacula's efforts, I understood why I was summoned back to the royal capital, and once again, I am grateful. By being here, I was able to repay their favor." I wasn't lying. I *was* indeed grateful. It was just that my resentment surpassed my gratitude. After being ripped away from my warm new hometown, I couldn't relax. It was painful. I always wished they had just told everyone that Alicia had died of illness in Sacula. In fact, even when I was in Sacula, I wished for that. If that had been the case, none of this chaos would have happened. *That was probably where I went wrong. I didn't die back then. That's why I won't make a mistake this time. I'm going to end the story of Princess Alicia here.*

"So, Your Majesty, you need to act like a king again." *The woman before you is no longer your daughter.* "You don't need to hold back. After all, it has always been me who has reached out to you, Your Majesty the King. You have never once spoken to me as a father." *If I erase Princess Alicia, that would also mean I'd lose all blood relations, but, even though I should be happy about that, it doesn't mean I wouldn't also be saddened by it.* I was never interested in the high standing of a royal. It did nothing but cause me pain, and I felt like I could show my worth by working on a farm. "Your Majesty, the conflict within the royal family has started to cause problems for the civilians. If I am to be betrothed, not only will it solve that problem, but I will go to the Yanga region and make amends there. I ask that you understand my honest intentions." My father, the king, looked hurt. It was no doubt the face of a man who was losing his daughter. *After everything. After all this time.* No words would be able to

reach the remains of Princess Alicia. I stared at him with an ice-cold expression. He finally gave in.

“Okay, Alicia. This certainly would avoid further turmoil within the capital.” Even now, he was still only thinking about the capital. “All of us here will pray for your happiness.” There was no princess left to pray for.

There was nothing left to discuss, so I ended the conversation. “Yes, Your Majesty. Thank you.” I spoke quietly. There was neither regret nor turmoil in my words. Instead, they flickered like a flame.

With one flame extinguished, the others burned much brighter. I couldn’t help but be comforted by the sound of hooves against concrete—a sound distinct from the stone floors I was used to in the capital. We were traveling in a carriage on one of the many roads that had been built across the land. I’d heard about them, but I didn’t expect them to be so spectacular. My wonder turned to excitement, and I grabbed the arm of the driver seated next to me with all my might.

“So these are the concrete roads! They’re amazing, Ash!” The ride so far had been incredibly smooth. No more sore behinds! This was a far better trip than the last time I was in a carriage—partly because of the paved roads and the carriage’s suspension, but mostly because Ash was here beside me. Our conversation flowed easily, and time flew as we talked. It was just as fun to be with him as it had been when we first met. “I’m surprised there’s no shaking at all! Once again, Sacula is the mastermind!”

“Yes, I wish to make this commonplace within all of the Frontier Alliance regions. While I’m somewhat improvising, I plan to cooperate with the refugees,” Ash responded.

“With the refugees?” Using Yanga refugees to do work in Sacula would immediately raise questions. I understood what Ash was trying to do. “Oh, I see. You plan to help them gain their independence by giving them work! If they have experience making roads like this, they’ll have no issue finding jobs!”

“You are always quick to understand. We will need good roads if we are to rebuild the Yanga region.”

“I think it’s a great idea. While they have met with a terrible fate, there are still ways we can make something good sprout from it. Hope for the future.” By developing within the territory, we can create jobs for the Yanga residents, and we can expect the scope of the development capabilities of the Frontier Alliance and the Yanga region to increase across the board. It was a greedy plan that aimed to let nothing go to waste. *This is definitely Ash’s kind of plan.* I felt a warm feeling build up inside me as I talked with him. It felt as if I was being reborn from within. From here on out, as Viscountess Yanga, I would have to put all my focus on the destroyed lands and distraught civilians, but even so, I had a feeling that everything would go well. As long as Ash was here, and as long as I was with Ash, we would be able to do anything if we combined our strengths. I wholeheartedly believed that.

“Ash, you’re always like this.”

“What do you mean?” Ash tilted his head quizzically. Having his face so close to me felt like a dream. I was clutching his arm to my chest. It was something I had only ever dreamed about after leaving Sacula that day. Ash had no idea how much this intimacy meant to me. So I decided to let him know.

“Ash, no matter how hard a situation gets, you’re always there to show us the way and give us hope. You’re like a lantern on a dark night.”

He’d always been like that. I tightly squeezed his arm. *It’s been so long. It’s been so, so long since I could touch him like this. My time in the capital felt like I was traversing through cold winds. Like I was about to collapse at any time. I have been walking for years trying to close the distance, but you met me halfway and saved me the trip. You have no idea how much you mean to me.*

“Ash, you really are always like that. Back when I was first sent to Sacula, when I was being chased by assassins, and when I felt so alone in the palace hoping I could come home...”

No matter the time, no matter how dark or cold it got, no matter how much I wanted to give up. Waiting there for me...

“Ash, you gave me hope.”

...was a light that shone bright no matter how far away it was. I never once took my eyes off it. I never let it leave me. It had been bathing me in its warmth

since the day I met Ash.

"I've always..." Loved you. I love you, and I wanted to be with you. I missed you, and I regret the time we spent apart. The words flooded my mind but I was unable to say any of them. *They're not enough. Those words don't even begin to cover the depth of my feelings. I need stronger words.* I felt the hands of a cold princess grip my throat from the inside. I was always holding myself back. Even if I were to collapse in the royal capital, I would tell myself to just put up with it. *I don't give a damn about your grudges.* My best friend said she hated the face I pulled when I was holding back. The person I loved told me that I could do and say what I liked. I decided that I would just speak how I felt. I shook off those cold hands.

"Hey, Ash...I'm just going to say it. I'll have to say it someday, after all." I was jealous that Maika could confess at the Royal Sword Fighting, but it would have troubled him if I'd spoken up then. Even though Ash had told me countless times that I needn't hold back, I still bit my tongue. But I could say it now. "I tried my best. I've always wanted to say this to you, so I always tried my hardest. Please listen." *Am I really gonna say it? I'm gonna say it.* Ash nodded.

"I want to steal you away too," I continued. *I love you, so I want to steal your heart. I want to be with you, I never want to leave you, so I want to steal you. I want to steal you so I never have to worry about seeing you.* "It's unfair that Maika gets to do that. I won't lose to her. I worked hard so that wouldn't happen."

They were horrible words. Words filled with jealousy and possessiveness. *But the reason I was able to say it freely was thanks to you. You always stopped me from giving up.* "So, I want you, Ash. I want you." If I didn't say it now, I never would. I looked at Ash, and he had a weird smile on his face. He didn't look disgusted or like he wanted to reject me. He just looked mischievous.

"I see. I am expensive too, you know? Do you still want me?"

Huh? I didn't expect him to respond like that. *That's just like Ash. Not even a confession can be straightforward.* Is he asking me if I want him? If I had to pay, I would sell the royal palace if it came to it. *Aah, damn it. If I had stayed princess a little longer, I could have prepared a dowry.*

“I-I’m expensive too, you know? I was a princess until just recently, and I’m not bad-looking either.” *I can say that, right? Amin wasn’t just being polite when she called me cute and pretty, was she? I may not stack up to Maika, and I’m not trying to be ladylike or stiff, but I won’t lose to her!* Thankfully, Ash nodded. *It seems Ash finds me attractive! Yay!* But he didn’t say what I wanted to hear. I would have to try harder.

“Ah, wait!” I hurriedly withdrew what I had said. *Surely I wasn’t wrong by bringing up my appearance?! I’m glad I’m at the level that Ash would compliment me, but that’s not all there was to me!* What else was there? Surely I had another feature that could put me on his level. *Uhh, Ash really is expensive. My opponent is Maika—and her worth is sky-high.* That’s when I realized. *That’s it. Maika has always worked hard in order to support Ash’s dreams—she was my strongest love rival. But all I had done up to now in the royal capital were things that Maika couldn’t do.*

“My most appealing feature is that I can get stuff done! That’s what you like about me, right, Ash?” I had worked on Ash’s behalf in the royal capital. I had managed to grant his wishes even though I was so far away. He had sought my abilities to do what Maika could not ever since the day we met.

“As I thought, you know me very well,” Ash responded. We were both hardworking people, and he knew I had been a big help to him for many years.

That’s why he was always saying, “I want you to help me” or “I’ve come to borrow your strength” instead of “I’ll help you” or “I’ll lend you my strength.” I had always thought he was saying things like that just to let me feel useful, but he meant what he said. Ash had always hoped that I would help him achieve dreams, and I was always happy to offer my time and support. He had paid an outlandish price for me—three gold service medals. But he did it all properly, without any shortcuts, just like he said he would. That’s why I should give Ash my all. My whole self and my whole life. *Don’t feel sorry for me.* After all, if it weren’t for Ash, my life wouldn’t have been as bright as it was. I hoped that I could one day become a vessel for Ash’s light, ensuring it reaches even the darkest of places. He gave me the chance to live my life to the fullest and soar high in the sky.

“Okay, Ash. From now on, I’ll do anything I can to help you. Until my very last

breath.”

“And I will gladly accept your help. As you already know, I was always wishing for your help,” Ash responded. *Ahh, I haven’t heard that line in a while.* I kept my promise from that day, and I’ll continue to keep it. “I’ll be relying on you a lot from here on out, Alicia.”

“Leave it to me, Ash!” He always told me exactly what I wanted to hear. That’s why I was full of love for him. Just when I thought I couldn’t love him anymore, I ended up falling deeper. I squeezed his arm tightly. *Ah, he’s smiling. This arm is now mine. I can live with that.* I had paid for the life of my lover with my own life, and as a result, I had nothing left. I felt so carefree that I felt like the wind could sweep me off my feet at any moment—it was a delightful feeling. *This is probably how birds feel when they are finally freed from their cages.*

The strong winds of Sacula welcomed me back. I was almost there. The city gates that I had bid farewell to that day were visible at the end of the concrete road. *I’m home. I’m finally home!* The feelings in my stomach stirred like a flame at the sight of home. *I need to calm down. If I get too emotional, I won’t be able to properly take in the sights of the territory and my home!*

“Ah, that reminds me, Alicia.” Ash turned to me as I desperately tried to hold back my tears.

“What is it, Ash?”

“Welcome home.” *Ah, now he’s done it. He always knew how to break my facade.* I could no longer keep it in.

“I’m home, Ash!” My tears broke free and ran down my cheeks. I couldn’t stop crying. I didn’t try to stop either. It was a good thing. This time, my tears were warm.

...

We arrived in Itsutsu. Alicia was still in high spirits. She was particularly taken aback by the technical marvel that was the second mansion we had built. As for me, I was unable to hide my nerves. I had only been in contact with Maika via letter since deciding to make Alicia my wife. Maika had responded that she

would welcome Alicia with open arms, and she did tell me before I left that I should do what I needed to, so it should not have been an issue. While I ran through all the endless reasons why everything would be okay, I entered the mansion and knocked on the door of the study. Maika, whose work had seemed to follow her home, called out from inside. I readied myself and opened the door.

“I’m home, Maika. As I mentioned in the letter I sent, our family has a new member.”

“Welcome home, Ash. Come on in already, I wanna talk with Alicia too!” I had no reason to be so nervous. Maika’s smile was as bright as always. She extended her angelic smile to her good friend behind me. However, for some reason, the way she smiled felt different from how she smiled at me. It was more akin to the confident smirk you might give to a fellow soldier. “Alicia, welcome home. You’re finally back.”

“You’re right. It feels like it’s been ages since I’ve been home.” Alicia mimicked Maika’s smile. I wonder if that is just what good friends look like when they are together. *Maybe I look similar when I am speaking with Hermes and Glen, and maybe, honestly, rarely, sometimes with Father Folke.* The two of them continued to catch up—which largely consisted of gossiping about me. But eventually, Maika cut the conversation short.

“At this rate, we’ll never stop talking. We can continue at dinner, Alicia.” Maika turned toward me and scratched her head. “Ash, I know you’ve just got here, but I have a few proposals I’d like your opinion on, is that okay?”

“Of course. Sorry for leaving you in charge for so long, Maika.”

“If it meant getting Lady Alicia back, it was the least I could do. In fact, it really was *the least* I could do.” The two of us laughed. We knew it was worth it. Alicia, however, stayed silent.

“Ash, what are you doing...?” Lady Alicia asked, pouting her lips. Her voice was shaking.

“What do you mean?” I responded. She seemed to be holding back just how upset she was. *Strange. I wonder if we had said something to upset Alicia just now. I do not think we did, though.*

“Why is she ‘Maika,’ but I’m still ‘Lady Alicia’?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, that is correct. I guess she’s just ‘Maika’ to me now.”

I spoke to Maika informally, not even using any of her titles. I could have been giving Maika special treatment, seeing as I even spoke quite stiffly with my parents. It seemed that Lady Alicia was vehemently not fond of this. She had put up with the crown prince’s constant meddling and the king’s constant carelessness, but she wasn’t about to let this go. She puffed her cheeks and clenched both her fists together.

“It’s so unfair that you’re only like that with Maika! I want you to be like that with me too!”

“Huh, wha? Hm, I... Is that so?” I stammered. She once again seemed displeased by my response and started to protest even further. *Amazing. This is the real Lady Alicia. Maybe Father Folke isn’t the imposter after all.* As I thought back to the day before, Maika decided to join the chaos. “Ash, why *do* you talk to Alicia like that?”

“Huh... I don’t really know why, I kind of just...do?”

“Well, you need to stop. She’s family now, you’ve gotta treat her like you treat me.”

“Oh, okay? My sincerest apologies, La—...” I caught myself before I responded to Alicia too formally. “I’m sorry, Alicia. But is this all right? Is this really okay?” *You were a princess, after all. To be honest, you are aware that I plan to use that fact going forward in negotiations, right?* Putting my concerns to one side, Lady Alicia—I mean, Alicia—smiled so broadly that it almost seemed like her upset face just before was a mask.

“Yeah! That’s totally fine!” Alicia responded. She seemed pleased.

“All right...” I responded.

Now that we had Alicia right where we needed her, it was time for me to get back to working on the restoration plans. First, we would deploy soldiers to the south of Yanga to restore order and return small groups of refugees to the areas that had suffered the least damage. Moving these people back to Yanga would also lighten the load on Sacula. At the same time, it would allow us to

secure a foothold for the restoration, and we could establish a main headquarters for our work there.

We then decided to recruit refugees who were willing to migrate. They all possessed flexibility in that they were not too concerned about returning to their hometowns. They just wanted somewhere they would be able to live. Once they had been trained in a number of different fields, they would be deployed to frontier region areas, bringing their new skills as souvenirs. They would soon be famous out there. However, that was looking ahead. As our plans launched into action, people naturally launched into action as well. I had been worried that we would not have enough people for the tasks at hand, however, fortunately, we had some new arrivals.

“Long time no see, Your H— I mean, Lady Alicia.” It was the former fourth princess’s maid and entourage. They all bowed. The girls, who had almost accidentally referred to her as “Your Highness,” had given up their high-ranking positions within the royal palace and had traveled a great distance to be with her in this remote region.

“Thank you, everyone. I can’t put into words how grateful I am to all of you.” Alicia looked at her subordinates with tears in her eyes.

“What do you mean, Lady Alicia? We should be the ones thanking you for giving us the opportunity for a career change. We were doing nothing but causing problems within the capital.” *Huh, is that so? This was the same group of extremely talented people who had managed to dramatically improve the medical office at the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament in one night.* I looked over at Alicia with a surprised look, and she returned a wry smile and a nod.

“Being so good at your job to the point it causes issues is definitely a problem unique to the central regions.” For those that are skilled, it is human nature to want to offer advice and counsel to others. However, the maids and servants who had attended to the high-ranking nobles had to really think outside of the box when giving counsel in order to not upset them. Some also just were not that good at teaching or giving advice. If they were selfish and went against what their master wanted, or if they often gave incorrect advice, that could lead to them being treated as a nuisance.

“That’s a waste of good talent. I know it was the same when Alicia was there, but what are they even up to back there?” I asked.

“Right? I was thinking the exact same thing. They’d have it a lot easier if they relied more on adept workers,” Maika added.

Those talented and strong-willed subordinates who were treated as nuisances by those in power were assigned to Alicia when she returned to the capital. It was an ideal outcome for both parties. Alicia had learned how to deal with these kinds of people from the ever up-and-coming son of a farmer, me, and I was now desperate to recruit the talented group. The maids certainly preferred being able to work under a master like Alicia who saw their true potential and allowed them to act on it. It was much better than working under those who looked down on them instead. As a result, we had managed to recruit some top-quality personnel from the palace.

“When I quit being princess, I did say to let me know if you guys had anywhere you wanted to be assigned to, and I would have been able to sort it out for you. But I guess you all wanted to be here with me,” Alicia, the once charismatic princess, shyly responded while scratching her head.

“We were able to meet someone who made it all worth it. For that, we would follow you into the depths of hell.”

“All the way to hell? How wonderful. You are all certainly serious about your work,” Maika responded.

“Our jobs in the capital were tear-inducingly boring. It’s a given that even hell would be more fun than working for the royals.” *They really are serious about this. It’s a little over-the-top.* However, if they wanted a taste of hell, there was enough work here to give them the full experience.

“In that case, we will have everyone continue to work with Alicia. Is that all right?” I asked her.

“Of course, leave it to me. I know all of them very well, so I’ll be sure to assign them where they’d be of most use.” The maids all shot me a smile. *I wonder why...*

“Ah, that reminds me, Lady Alicia. We have been sent here ahead of everyone

else. I would like to contact the others in the capital and make them aware of the situation here,” Amin spoke up.

“I don’t mind but...Amin, what are you planning?”

“It should be obvious, but...I am planning on rescuing the other ‘nuisances’ from their boredom in the royal capital and have them come here to serve under you, Lady Alicia. Not only those in the administrative and military departments. There are many talented ‘nuisances’ across the capital.” The maid smiled. She was planning to use this situation to light the fires of the others in the capital. *Whoa, okay, they really are into this. At this rate, there will be no more talented personnel left within the royal capital. I like it, keep it up.*

“In that case, please use the Quid Company to send your letter. I will explain the situation to them in advance,” I offered.

“Thank you very much, master,” Amin responded. Come to think of it, these were Alicia’s subordinates, so it was only natural that they would refer to me as their master. Yet I was still a little surprised. Alicia’s face went bright red.

“A-Amin! Why did you say it like that all of a sudden?” Alicia questioned her.

“It is quite normal for me... What is the matter?”

“What? What do you mean by ‘what’?!”

The maid covered her mouth as she giggled. Like an older sister teasing her younger sister.

“It’s not that I was particularly worried about it, but seeing Lady Alicia and our master getting along is a relief.” *Yes, we get along very well. We have been working together for a while, after all.*

I smiled and gave a nod. “Well, it’s yet to be official, so we’re still very much newly engaged.”

“Yes, that’s true. An engagement after many years of love,” remarked Amin.

“AMIN!” Alicia yelled, but Amin couldn’t be stopped.

“Heh heh, this really seems like a nice place. Alicia is so full of life here. I will have to do my best.” While the maids acknowledged that they had a lot of work before them, they were happy to be able to spend their days teasing their

mistress. Seeing a master and servant so friendly with one another must have been a rare sight within the royal capital.

But they were not the only newcomers to Sacula. A man exhausted from a long horse ride appeared before me.

“Welcome back, Father Folke the Impostor.”

“You guys are struggling out here, right? The Head Priest sent me, saying you needed my expertise from running the orphanage. I couldn’t say no, so here I am,” Father Folke responded.



“The royal capital is surely regretting the loss of such a talented yet insufferably poor conversationalist.”

“Ha ha ha, they don’t have it nearly as bad as the Frontier Alliance having a brat like you managing it, so don’t worry too much.” We laughed and exchanged our usual jabs at one another. *Okay, this is the real Father Folke.* Unfortunately, it really was him.

“Ah, no, really, why *are* you here, Father Folke? Is your head okay?” I asked.

“Hey, hey, don’t start being *actually* worried about me now.”

I mean, you went to the royal capital to pursue your dreams. Why are you back here? If you don’t follow your dreams, you’ll die. You’re a defective organism—you have to go back. Gill-breathing organisms can’t survive on land. You must quickly return to the depths of the ocean!

“Well, I mean, there’s a lot to it...” Father Folke responded.

“Oh, something like the royal capital being destroyed in a freak natural disaster?”

“Obviously not...” The disgruntled priest grumbled something about how the Temple could not be destroyed that easily.

“I see. So there seems to be a pressing issue at hand,” I responded. Father Folke looked at me with a serious expression.

“I asked you about nanobots before, right?”

“Yes, one of the technologies from the early civilization.”

“Well, about that...” Father Folke lowered his voice and continued. “The three gods that the Church bases their teachings on...are man-made micromachines,” Father Folke said. Although defective, he had given many years to the Church.

I paused for a moment. “What?”

“The manuscripts I had from the early civilization were actually blueprints from many, many years ago. You’re aware that archeologists, historians, researchers, and many others have been saying for years that the late ancient civilization was destroyed by demons and the early ancient civilization was

wiped out from overpopulation and famine, right?” In other words, civilization collapsed because overpopulation depleted their resources. I knew that. A lot of teachings within the Church discouraged greed.

“From those plans, it seems they were trying to restore their resources. I’m unable to follow the more minute details, but it seems that they spent hundreds of years trying to bring back the atmosphere, metals, and other materials with nanobots.”

“I see. With nanobots, that should have been possible.” It depended on the type of nanobot, but they were able to manipulate atoms and molecules directly. Therefore, they should have been able to restore their resources if they built nanobots specifically for that purpose.

“Fenrir was in charge of restoring metals, Yggdrasil was in charge of the atmosphere and the condition of the soil, and Phoenix was in charge of leading mankind—those three Gods were in fact once machines.” Father Folke outlined the results of his research. If this were true, the Church would fall into chaos. The organization would probably dissolve and become powerless.

“They are certainly dangerous findings...however, they have yet to be proven, right? The wolf god and the monkey god are one and the same, however, there is no mention of the dragon god, which points to the possibility that it was an entirely different being.”

“That could be the case. Even if I look further into that, I won’t be able to discuss my findings without first announcing them. If I come out and say, ‘By the way, the gods are actually man-made items just like wheat and pens,’ the Church will descend into chaos. There’s no way I can discuss it.”

Father Folke had no intention of continuing to research it on his own. Although, if he were on his own, he would probably be able to delve quite deeply into his research. As I was about to point that out, Father Folke snorted and puffed out his chest.

“I believe in my findings. In fact, if it weren’t for these new ancient texts that I wouldn’t even find in the Temple, I can’t imagine how long it would have taken me to uncover this.”

“I see. These findings are not just from one text, but from a variety of

sources.”

“You know, I’m still a priest at heart. I’m not so easily convinced that I would just simply believe that the gods we worship are actually man-made creations.” Father Folke was hinting that he was not like me. *What a horrible way of saying it.* While he was ridiculing me, he looked up at the Sacula sky—a sight he had not seen for many years—with an invigorated expression. “Well, as a result, in order to stop my results from getting out, the head priest sealed them away, saying that the Church, and the people of this world, were not yet ready to learn about it. As a result, I’ve got a lot of free time on my hands.”

“You often have a lot of free time on your hands, Father Folke.”

If I were to take on his research, I would become a husk of my former self, just roaming the world blindly. That’s how Father Folke was back in Noscula, at least.

“Honestly, I couldn’t think of anything else to do, so I agreed with the head priest’s decision.” It seemed like the beloved idiotic researcher himself was becoming self-aware. It was a sage decision. He was indeed particularly skilled at managing the orphanage, but if that meant becoming the zombie priest all over again, it was for the best that he left. He had earned the right to breathe again.

“Well, in that case, we have plenty of orphans among the refugees. You should have plenty of work to do, but...would that be okay?” I asked. He looked refreshed, but I could not help feeling that by tomorrow morning, he would look like a corpse again. Father Folke nodded, putting my worries at ease.

“Sure, leave it to me. I can’t imagine there’ll be any brats worse than you. I’m kinda looking forward to it.”

“Oh, you are looking forward to it? Good to do something other than deciphering ancient texts?”

“Yep. My dream somewhat came true. I actually deciphered old texts.” To be sure of that, a lot of researchers would have to peer review his work to decide if that were the case. So he had only deciphered it in his eyes. A level of confidence fitting for the decrepit middle-aged man. “Anyway, I’m pretty pleased, so I had another idea. Just like in the royal capital, I could raise one of

the orphans to be a researcher, and they can prove my theory for me.” *I see now.*

“That attitude right there is most certainly that of a priest who only cares about his own profits and achievements. I am relieved. It is the real you, after all.”

“How does that make me the real thing?” In the end, he was still my beloved idiot. I felt a little relieved. He would still be pursuing his dreams—the only thing that changed was how he would do it. In that case, hopefully, he wouldn’t become the zombie priest again.

“I swear, Father Folke. You need to stop making me worry about such strange things.”

“I could say the same for you!”

“I mean, that is only natural, right?” *We are companions chasing the same dream, after all.*

In any case, I had all the personnel I needed. Now we could start work on solving the main problem at hand. *Are we doing enough? With everyone here, we will be able to do at least something. I mean, of course, I am aware we are dealing with an unusually difficult task.*

Everything we were doing *should* be enough. But I still was not sure. We were aiming for a dream, and it would strengthen us. Just by taking one step at a time, like I had always done. It was not just me either. Everyone else had done the same. When we first learned to stand on two feet and see the world in a new light—when we were mesmerized by the gallop of a horse, when we looked up at birds taking flight—we had all done the same.

There were times we would stumble and hurt ourselves and times we would get lost and doubt our path. There were those who would tire easily and those who would try their hardest. When we collapsed to our knees, some would look up to the sky, and some would face the ground. Regardless, everyone would still take the next step. Heroes, fools, and those with no name had all kept walking. Their history was recorded in books to teach those who came after. There were books of technological history recording the actions of heroes who made the world feel smaller, political history recording the tales of fools who

put humanity on a path of self-destruction, and biographies of the nameless who had tried to shape civilization itself.

The book that told of the steps heroes took. Has no one done it yet? Then, you should be the one to do it. When will someone do it? Now. Now is the time to do it. What is there to hesitate about? What lay before them was an untrodden treasure trove filled with perpetual fame, enormous fortune, and a wealth of intelligence. If you want to learn about it or if you want to obtain it, then push open the door ahead of you. Move forward. Reach your hand out. A blinding treasure awaits you.

The book that told of the steps fools took. Are you afraid of failure? But failures mean that those who follow in your footsteps will not make the same mistakes. Does it seem you are going to lose everything? It is fine if you do—those who come after will do better and get it all back. What is there to hesitate about? You were born in a winding labyrinth of darkness. You might walk off a cliff. You might fall into a trap. You may stumble upon an unknown creature's nest. It is okay to continue while afraid. It is okay to be confused while getting hurt. It is okay to collapse while regretting your path. Ignore the sneers from others. Look at the trail of blood you leave behind—only the wise and enduring can succeed in finding the path to success.

The book that told of the nameless ones. Who are you? Our name was lost to time. What did you do? Our accomplishments were burned to ashes. We may have cultivated wheat to feed heroes. We may have lent a hand to fools and their failures. We may have achieved more than the gloried heroes, or we may have failed to achieve anything. Our existence was reduced to ashes within an incinerator by the tyrant known as time. However, that is no reason to hesitate. Although nameless, we lived. We walked while we lived. Your world today only exists thanks to the steps we took. The world you live in is a mixture of good, bad, and endless paths. Take the step, no matter how small it is. That step could shape tomorrow.

Ah, that's right. No matter the problem, if I do not try to solve it, it will not be solved. The question of whether it was possible or not always came later. I learned that from books that detailed the workings of the past. Thus, I faced forward and tackled the problem. Books have always given me that extra push.

When I was faced with a difficult situation, they lent me their power, letting me know that I was not alone. People struggled in the past too. They tried to overcome it, and their success or failure paved the future. Their stories helped me tell myself that next time it would go better. Next time it *will* go better. It was sobering to think that I was at the forefront of history this time around. I had to take pride in that fact. Like those before me, I had to do what I could. And so, I will also connect to the future so that someday someone may take what I had learned to heart and give it their all.



Alicia's Perspective

After having finally returned, I stood there for a while taking in Sacula's air. It was a splendid feeling, to say the least. It felt like I had been completely reborn. *I'm happy. This is where I belong. I'll do my best so I can continue living here.*

"All right, as the first order of business, I'll explain what's happening in the Yanga region," I said to Amin, who was leading the servants who had supported me in the royal palace. As always, as head maid, Amin nodded in response as their representative.

"Yes, we have gotten tired of waiting. We would like to begin work as soon as possible."

"You know I won't let you give up even if you cry, right?" I teased.

"I am looking forward to that. I am known as 'the girl who has never cried since birth,' so I would like to know what tears taste like. I have heard they are quite salty," Amin responded. I smiled and the other servants giggled. At the royal palace, they often wore no expressions on their faces, but they had started to smile and express themselves more freely here in Sacula.

"All right, the areas from the Yanga region's capital all the way up until the Sacula border were all destroyed by demons. The chaos has only been exacerbated by those fleeing the attack—there's been a lot of man-made destruction as well," I explained using a map that Maika had prepared. "Sacula has dispatched a small military unit to the region to aid refugees leaving and to deal with bandits. They've been a lot more meticulous about it since my arrival here."

"Is that because they plan to enter the territory?"

"Right now, Sacula, along with other regions within the Frontier Alliance, are just barely holding it together. Since their populations suddenly increased, it really has their hands tied." Simply because it's a large stretch of land, distributing food and commodities has been very difficult. This had been discussed countless times in the royal capital, and having experienced it firsthand in Sacula, Amin and the others had a good understanding of the

situation at hand.

“In other words, we want to solve the overpopulation problem and improve the general flow of goods. I assume that the flow from Sacula stagnating is particularly a problem.”

“Exactly. Ash has been wanting to take action for a while now, but we were unable to without permission from a Yanga viscount. That’s why it has gone on for so long,” I responded.

“In that case, that is your first task, Your Excellency Viscountess Yanga.”

“Gladly.” I was able to crush one of Ash’s problems with this position alone. You could say that I was born for this, but I was sure Ash would have me destroy many more obstacles in his path in the future. “Of course, I approve of all of Ash’s plans. We will first begin by returning some refugees to the areas that sustained the least damage.”

“Relative to the rest of it, of course,” Amin clarified.

“Indeed.” We could discount the villages that had been entirely obliterated, but we could find some compromises. Hopefully, we could find some regions that had already been settled by people other than bandits. “As you are all aware, it will be dangerous to relocate. Sacula has promised to send supplies and aid, and we needn’t worry about protection as they will deal with the demons and bandits. Regardless, we will have a lot of work ahead of us.” We still had to do it.

The reason Sacula had been carrying such a large burden all this time was due to the troubles within the royal family. The remote regions had absolutely nothing to do with it. Of course, the residents of the Yanga territory were at a severe disadvantage. I had come here to take on the debt.

“As the new Viscountess Yanga, I will make every effort to...” *Wait, Ash and Count Sacula didn’t just make every effort. In fact, they went to absolutely every extreme that they could.* “I would like to thank the people of Sacula for putting everything on the line to help me, even though they were struggling all the same. I will ignite my soul and body in order to help our people, the people of the Yanga region.”

“I am not sure we can agree with you setting yourself on fire, but we get it. I take it you have a plan?” Amin asked. *As expected. She really does know me well.*

“The people of Sacula, nobles and civilians alike, are exceptionally close. Do you know why?”

“Yes, I had heard the tales many times back at the Sacula manor, as well as here in Sacula. It’s because of the first Count Sacula, right?”

“Yeah. On the land upon which Sacula now stands, he used to sleep outside with the other settlers, sharing the same warmth from the campfire, and eating from the same pot. It’s the first story you’re told when you first arrive here.” I personally loved that story. No matter who told it, whether it was a drunk in a pub, a soldier, a knight, a maid, or even the acting count himself—they all told it with a smile. I loved that. “I want to bring that sort of pride to the Yanga region.”

“I see. This is another task for you as the new viscountess.” Amin had seemingly worked out how much work was going to follow, raising her shoulders slightly.

“Giving up already?” I asked her, laughing. “I’m not going to let you escape, though.”

“It seems I need to learn about encampments.” Amin wasn’t so easily discouraged. “I guess it would be best to ask the military first?” She was once again quick on the uptake.

Now that I had received confirmation from the maids that they would be willing to help out, next up was to attend a meeting at the Sacula administrative building to explain my plans to the count. Since they would be granting us supplies as well as military strength, I had to be modest with my request now that I was no longer a princess—or so I thought.

“And? I want to hear what you’ve got planned!” Maika said excitedly. She was my good friend—wait, I guess she was family now. *Family, family...* As I glanced around the room, my dear “brother” Itsuki, who was sitting in the highest-ranking seat, was smiling. Rihn also wore a gentle smile. Ash had his hands

placed on the table and was looking at me earnestly, also eager to know more. Here, I had regained what I had lost, or rather, what I'd never had. *I should be a bit more serious. I'm supposed to be working.* I was the one here with a request, however, the people I was asking were close to me—I felt very relaxed. This was reflected in my speech.

“Well, Lady Maika, Lady Alicia. As we are receiving support from the Frontier Alliance, ensuring we can get the residents back home to the Yanga territory is now our biggest problem. I believe it is an issue of morale.” Ash was responding so formally, so I puffed up my cheeks and glared at him. “Why are you looking at me like that? We are in a meeting, so it is normal to speak like this, right?”

“Yes, but if Maika and I can speak casually to each other, you can too.” Ash was still being very formal with me, and it made me feel distant from him.

“Alicia, don't worry about it too much. Let's continue,” Ash finally responded.

“Hm, okay. If you say so, Ash.” Everyone but Ash laughed in response.

“Sorry, I got a little distracted. Um, as I was saying, it is a problem of morale.” Due to the damage, there were no supplies to start cultivating food, and our destination was getting less safe. The Frontier Alliance would continue to send supplies to the point of bankruptcy, but they had to be wary.

The ever-growing number of refugees had become a major force. If the refugees had sporadically moved to different territories, they would be treated as simple bandits, however, if they were to form a large force, it would be difficult to subjugate them even if we were to mobilize our armies. We would be able to still keep receiving resources until we fully restored the region.

Next, we were going to borrow soldiers from Sacula to deal with the bandits. We would only be sending small groups of refugees to the Yanga territory at first, so the military detachments wouldn't have too hard a time escorting them. But neither Sacula nor the Frontier Alliance could provide the people of Yanga with the most important thing—the courage to take their first step and the guts to stand their ground. That was my job.

“Our destination is a desecrated no-man's-land. If there are survivors, it is safe to assume they have turned to banditry in order to survive. No ordinary person would be able to survive there otherwise—they'd have to fend off

bandits, rebuild homes, and cultivate desecrated fields.”

Life in the refugee ward waiting on the next round of food distribution was no doubt easier. It was human nature to choose the path of least resistance. *I wonder how much passion I'll have to ignite in them to avoid that.* I understood how difficult it was. I knew how difficult it was to keep the flame burning within me while I was in the royal capital separated from Ash. If he hadn't saved me in the end, I wondered how I would have turned out. I let out a cold sigh as I imagined it. *Yeah, as much as it sucks, I had become like that too back then.* Even if I did manage to get the refugees back to the Yanga region, it would be the same outcome. Their willpower and pride that had carried them this far would eventually be washed away by the wind and rain the longer things went on, even if they knew that one day they would be able to go home.

“Those returning to the Yanga territory will face countless setbacks every day, and they'll go to bed every night feeling like they're making no progress. Those who can withstand that are great, but if we are to create a territory of only people who can already withstand hardship, then there is no reason for them to even have a leader.” My gaze naturally shifted over to a certain capable red-haired individual. “But if we make sure there are hearths that can keep people warm at night, and lights that let them see familiar faces, more will be able to find a life for themselves there.” *I can empathize. It was thanks to Ash reigniting my flame back then that I could now light the way for others. Nothing could extinguish my drive as long as Ash was here.* “I plan to set an example for them.” I bring back the light to the cold and dark region. “I'll head to the Yanga region ahead of its civilians. I'll start with a village. As I plan to live there, that will make it the Yanga region's first capital.”

“Its first capital...” Maika repeated after me.

“Next, we'll build a city. Then after that, another village? Based on the map, I guess it'll go something like that, though it will depend on the circumstances. At any rate, I plan to proceed with the restoration of the Yanga territory from wherever I'm based, so the capital may end up moving around a lot.”

“It's rough out there,” Maika laughed, although by her tone of voice she seemed impressed. “Even when I was just passing through, it was plain to see how bad it was over there. There are no houses left or anything.”

“If the foundations remain, that’ll be enough. The first count of Sacula worked with the civilians to gather supplies, didn’t he?” *I’ll surely witness the same spectacle he did.* “He was the younger brother of the king at the time. I’m the daughter of the current king. The same blood runs through my veins. I’m capable of achieving similarly great results.” Of course, I wouldn’t be able to do it all alone. Even the first count of Sacula received help from the king at the time, bringing stones to Sacula. He then spent time building walls and sharing a campfire with others, discussing what their plans would be for the next day. The reason Sacula stood here today was because the first count was surrounded by great people. Looking around at the members of this meeting, I was sure that everyone here would help me too. That’s why, in the end, I didn’t have to beg.

“Shall we all work together then, just like the first count of Sacula?”

Ash burst out laughing. He seemed to find it quite funny. *To be honest, there are people who would be fired up from hearing that. Like my older brother, for example.*

BANG

Itsuki suddenly pushed his chair back and rose to his feet. As I thought, he could no longer keep himself composed.

“Please give me a moment. I’m gonna go create a unit from our most talented individuals,” he said as he started walking away. If there was anyone who wasn’t suited to sitting still and enduring a meeting, it was Itsuki. *Like father, like son.* Sir George ended up following him out—since Sir George would be at the center of my escort unit, he had no choice but to follow.

“Usually, when the acting count says he’s going to help someone, that means he’ll help with finances, supplies, diplomacy, and so on, right?” Maika had brought up a good point.

Rihn sighed in agreement. “At least the heir to the house is capable of making sensible decisions. I could cry with relief.”

“Lord Itsuki is popular among the soldiers. One could say that is where his ability shines brightest,” Ash responded.

Rihn looked a little perplexed. She seemed to be thinking that in itself was a problem.

Personally, I was happy with Itsuki's conduct, so I spoke up after Ash. "This is also an opportunity for Maika, who is next in line to be heir, to show off what makes her fit for that role."

"Oh, putting it like that is sneaky. That makes it sound like you yourself didn't ask for it. Like we just willingly decided to cooperate, then." Maika drove the point home. Most people thought she was like her uncle Itsuki and His Excellency Count Gentoh in that she only focused on the bigger picture, when in fact, she was just as good at seeing the finer details. "Alicia's a new viscountess who's in debt before she's even had a chance to set foot in the actual territory, so she's trying to make it so that she owes as little as possible. Read the room a little." At the time, the Yanga territory was in a severe amount of debt to the Frontier Alliance and the Church. They weren't asking for their money back, however, if anything bad were to happen, they may be able to use their generosity against us. Therefore, it made sense to proceed with borrowing as little as I could.

"Plus, I've decided I'm going to rely on my new family. A lot. That's all right, isn't it, Ash?" *You did promise to help me, after all.* I tilted my head with a beaming smile on my face. Ash slouched his shoulders in response.

"If I say no, I'll be called a liar for the rest of my life..."

"That's right. Isn't it, Maika?"

"Don't ask me to agree..." If Maika acknowledged that Ash would be breaking his promise here, it would mean that Maika wouldn't be able to complain if Ash broke a promise again in the future. That wasn't something she could really overlook. However, if she instead doubled down, she would then have to acknowledge that I could get my own way. I had won this time.

"Alicia, you've gotten stubborn... Well, you were always stubborn, I guess."

"This is how they do it in the central regions." I laughed while covering my mouth, although my eyes gave away my smile. My response was that of a haughty princess or lady which were all too common in the royal capital. However, since I was more familiar with how things were done in the remote

regions, I couldn't help but look down in embarrassment. *It's not often I get a win against Maika, so I should have some fun with it.*

"Hmm, as expected of my worthy opponent... How about we duel like how they do it in the remote regions? Alicia, you can use a spear, and I'll use my bare hands," Maika said as she punched the air with her fist. She did it half-heartedly while remaining seated, but when she punched, it made a noise as it cut through the air. *Isn't that awesome? It feels like she's already telling me to give up.* I moved back slightly, creating some distance between us.

"Another thing we do in the central regions is avoid fights we know we won't win."

"Ash, in times like these, what's a good way to draw out an opponent?"

"It depends on the person, but one option is to become friends with a princess, I guess?" He's used that one before. Since I'm no longer a princess, they couldn't use it on me. I let out a laugh, and everyone laughed with me. "Well, Alicia. Shall we do it?" Ash asked me once we had all finished laughing. He was checking if I was prepared for what was to come.

"Yeah, I'll do it. It'll no doubt be hard and it'll take time. But I think it's best if I do it." After all, Ash knew why. "I'm good at persevering through tough times."

"When it comes to persevering, I think you're probably the best in the world at it, Alicia," Ash said with a serious expression. Maika nodded in agreement beside him, wearing a similarly serious face.

Itsuki kept his word and had begun to assemble an elite unit of knights and soldiers. Since it was the heir to the count asking, they had seen it as an opportunity for a promotion and had all rushed to apply to help keep the peace. There were so many applicants that they held a tournament to narrow them down. I couldn't really offer any help when Itsuki was being scolded by the maids for going too far, but I did secretly thank him for it. He seemed most pleased by it.

"You're so cute, Alicia! If you need anything, feel free to ask your big brother! You know, a long time ago, even Yae used to depend on me and call me her 'big brother,' but now that she's gotten older, she doesn't really depend on me as much... So, Alicia, you can rely on me for as long as you need, okay?" He

seemed so pleased by my asking for help that I decided if I ever needed something next time, I'd ask Itsuki, as he'd be sure to do his best.

The advice Maika gave me on how to deal with Itsuki really came in handy. It seemed if his youngest sibling had to rely on him, it was no problem for Itsuki, however, as for the Viscountess Yanga Escort Invitational Tournament, it didn't increase his workload at all. It was instead organized by those in the Territory Reform Promotion Office who were also members of the Disaster Response Office.

"As this is a military escort to aid with the restoration of the Yanga territory, it falls under the Disaster Response Office's line of work," Ash said. Ash had more or less predicted that his team would be left to clean up the aftermath of Itsuki's impulsive actions.

"I'm sorry that you've got more work, Ash... Is everything going to be all right?" I asked. I felt somewhat bad that even more work was being loaded onto Sacula's busiest department, but Ash returned a reassuring smile.

"I realized this back at the Royal Sword Fighting Tournament, but people sure do love a good tournament. The people of Yanga and Sacula both have a lot of stress pent up, so it's probably a good idea to let them get it all out," Ash continued.

"Ah, so that's why you're happy to use an invitational tournament?" I had never thought of that. He was right—sword fighting tournaments were often held for that exact reason. For civilians, it was a fun day out, and for noblemen, it was a way for them to settle the score in front of an audience. Ash made a point to mention that it wouldn't solve *all* issues.

"The selection tournament may lead to more arguments, but I would rather this than a huge refugee-led boycott. It'll be good to let them vent their frustrations."

"Sounds good. Having a place where they can yell at each other and get it out of their system will probably make a difference." *I can learn a lot from this. I'll no doubt need to employ similar methods while I'm tackling the restoration of the Yanga territory. Maybe a festival... It could be a frequent affair.* As I mulled over it, Ash crouched forward a tiny bit so he could look me directly in the eyes.

My old roommate—who had gotten significantly taller than me—smiled.

“Plus, we’ll also be using it to announce that you’ll be taking your first steps into the Yanga region. We’ll surely get some people who want to go after seeing the selection tournament and yourself, Alicia.”

“R-Really?”

“Of course. When they look at you, everyone sees a cute princess.”

“Thank you, Ash.” *Your words are always so warm, but they always make me feel so embarrassed.* “I’d be happy if even one person found me sweet, you know?” I looked up at Ash in an effort to seem more sweet and cute. He looked down at me with a bittersweet smile.

“It’d be hard to make it so that there was only one person in the world that thought that. I mean, Maika always says you’re sweet too.”

“Ah, it’s too much. I know I just said I was happy with you being the only person who thinks that, I’m still super happy that Maika thinks so too. She really is enchanting.” Back at the military academy, Maika was the one who had grabbed my hand and led me on to brighter days. I was often quite reserved and kept my distance back then. There was no mistake that her innocent nature and kindness had led me all the way here.

“She sure is great. She is one of many people who think of you as enchanting.” Ash patted my back as he continued, “I’d like to ask you to help out with the preparations for the tournament. Doing the opening speech as well as giving out the rewards to the winners is a fitting job for such a beloved princess. I’d also like you to mention that we are accepting those who wish to accompany you to the Yanga territory.” *Aah, he’s already thought that far ahead.* Originally, I thought that he would announce it after I had left with my servants and protection, however, Ash planned to use the tournament as a stage, igniting a flame within the civilians to get involved. *What would you do if I fell even more in love with you?*

“All right. I need to speak with Amin...and Suiren too, I think. She might be busy, though.”

“Lady Suiren would know the most about the refugees as she has been

working very closely with them.” She would be the one who would know who to avoid and who to bring on board. She was working in the wards almost daily. *Hats off to her and her hard work. I need to think of a place where we can talk about it.*

“Since Lady Suiren is so busy, should I talk with her over a meal? I could invite Glen too and have the meal at the second mansion.” *Of course, I’ll make the food. Heh heh heh, I have been practicing my cooking lately, and I finally got back to a level Chef Yacoo would approve of.* Finding time to get into the kitchen every day had finally paid off. I would no doubt have to do a lot of cooking in the Yanga territory from here on out.

I was excited to have Glen, who was very well-versed in my cooking from our time at the military academy, try my food. It’d be really fantastic if he said the taste hadn’t changed at all. I got fired up, and Ash tilted his head quizzically.

“If you’re meeting with those two, you could also bring up that you want to take Sir Glen to the Yanga region.”

“You’re right...” It would be a great help if Glen were to come along too. As a young member of the military, he was skilled at fighting and had been learning to handle administrative tasks. He was also a former classmate of mine from the military academy, so I knew I could trust him. But there was no way I could ask him to come along. He and Suiren were still a young couple, and I didn’t want to take away the one thing that was keeping Suiren together. There were just too many cons. *I could understand all too well. I would be saying goodbye to Ash so soon after our long-awaited reunion. I could start the conversation by mentioning I would love him to accompany me as a travel companion...and then maybe, just maybe... I just want to think about it. Just a little.* I laughed to myself, shaking away my silly daydreams.

“I’ll be sure to let them know in advance that I want to talk about my people—the citizens of Yanga. It’ll be awkward if they’re just expecting to eat some delicious food, and there’s me sitting there in tears, but filled with determination to help.” The food I made would go cold if they felt they had to stop to comfort me.

“You’re so kind, Alicia.”

“Of course I am. I’m a part of your family, as well as the youngest child of the Sacula family.” *I’m bursting at the seams with kindness, and I have plenty more to share, but since I’m going to be away from you for a while, I should keep some in reserve.* “I’ll make sure to continue being kind up until the day I have to leave.”

“Good, good. You’re a good girl, Alicia.”

“Does treating me like a child fall under kindness?” *I’m happy but...wait, no. I’m gonna end up grinning. Eh heh heh. I’ll make Hamburg steak tonight. That’s Ash’s and Maika’s favorite, after all.* Ash patted my head. His hand was surprisingly big and strong, and a lot warmer than I imagined. *Pat me just a little longer, please. I want to experience this warmth just a little longer before I have to leave.*

The days passed as everyone slogged through their work until finally, the regretful day had arrived—the day I was to leave for the Yanga territory. The departing ceremony was quite the affair. Amin and the maids were set to depart first alongside the military unit, so the research laboratory had brought out a steam-powered vehicle.

“It can only go as far as Fort Fenix. There are no paved roads after that,” explained Hermes. He was here to see them off, though he seemed unhappy with the conditions of the roads. “Well, soon they’ll reach all the way to the Yanga territory, but for now, you’ll have to put up with the horse carriage. Your citizens are currently researching concrete pavements, so it won’t be long until it’s a lot easier to come and go.”

“Thank you, Hermes.”

“Don’t mention it, I’ll just be happy if you can get there without much drama. I probably should have tried to make a continuous track for the wheels. But I wonder if that would even solve anything. Does the engine need more horsepower? That might work, especially if I use utility standard fuel...” While Hermes continued to mumble over his future plans, Reina, who stood beside him with a smile, kicked his foot with full force.

“Agh, what?!” he flinched.

“Hermes, save that for later. Your former classmate is having her moment. Seeing her off is more important.”

“Ah ha ha, thank you,” I said. *Former classmate.* I felt proud to be referred to like that. Not as someone from the royal family, but instead as a companion who had spent time with them here.

“Hermes isn’t wrong, though. Although we’re no longer a few floors apart like we were in the dormitory, it won’t be as difficult to see one another as it used to be. If you need anything, please let us know and we’ll help. That said...” Reina shrugged her shoulders and gave me a mysterious smile. “I guess Ash or Maika will be your first calls.”

“That’s true, but I’ll still be relying on you guys, you know? It’s just that I now have people who I can especially rely on.” *After all, my new family had stolen me away from the palace. If I ask them to do something, most of the time they’ll say they’ll do it with a smile, and if not, they’ll give me a wry smile and do it anyway. I’ve got it good, haven’t I?*

“Okay, okay. Enough of the lovey-dovey talk,” Reina said, waving her hand. *I feel like I should mention that she’s the same when it comes to Hermes.*

“I heard from Maika that she’s always pouring your drinks for you and that you never let anyone else do that,” I recalled.

“Oh, it just ended up like that. I mean, we are the chief and deputy chief. That’s just how it is based on how we sit.” Reina responded with a calm expression, but I could see that her ears were flushed red. That meant I had won. She had always been easy to embarrass, if not a little stubborn.

I spoke to her in a quiet voice. “Reina, maybe you could try to be less stubborn and more honest with yourself in the future?”

“Hmmm, if we’re talking about stubbornness, I believe you would win in that category, no?” We both shook our heads at each other.

“I mean, you’re using having your drink poured for you as a way of getting attention. Don’t you think that’s a very roundabout way of doing it? Have you tried just being direct with him? He’s not very good at picking up on those kinds of hints,” I responded.

“Ever since you went to the capital, you’ve been so resolute and you’ve withstood everything. You could have just given up and cried about it,” Reina responded.

“Well, no, it wasn’t that simple.”

“It’s not that simple for me either,” Reina snapped back.

“No, no, my situation was a lot different from yours, Reina.”

“Even if it’s different, that doesn’t change the fact it’s not that simple for me either.”

As we stood face to face arguing over this and that, Ash arrived. He was to participate in the departure ceremony as well as accompany me to Fort Fenix, so he was dressed in formal attire. *It really suits him. He looks so handsome. Eh heh heh.* As I shot him a few glances, Ash returned a soft smile, and he started talking with Hermes.

“What are those two arguing about?” asked Ash.

“Do you really think I can give you an answer when they’ve yet to even reach a conclusion themselves?”

“Sir Hermes, you should pay more attention to their conversation. Waiting until they’ve reached a conclusion before you care about it isn’t fair to the two of them. Although I am aware that in your position, conclusions are more important.”

“Don’t be stupid. The process is more important in engineering and research. Without properly verifying the method, it’s impossible to judge how to prevent accidents or whether a conclusion is accurate.”

That’s very much like Hermes, I thought to myself as I overheard him talk about his method of allocating priority. I looked at Reina, and I realized she was severely dissatisfied with it. I placed my hand on her shoulder as a show of support.

“Yes, that is important. Even if it leads to a success, it is important to make sure that the plan was not in vain and that there were no problems executing it. It is vital to be sure of that,” Ash replied.

“That’s right. If we were like the old blacksmiths who used to get their ideas from looking at something and learning by rote repetition, we would never be able to keep up with our current amount of work. We have to first think about the most effective method.”

“Yes, yes. Since you put so much emphasis on that, I can see why you feel the need to reach a conclusion fast when it comes to personal relationships,” replied Ash. “Priority is important.”

Hermes was being *so* Hermes, and Ash was being *so* Ash. *I want you to talk a bit more sense into Hermes.* But I knew that since they were close, he couldn’t say much more than that. Looking defeated, Reina patted me on the back to cheer me up. *Thank you.*

While we were silently consoling each other, Ash spoke up. “Ah, are you both finished talking?”

“Yep. Thanks to you, we’re done.” Ash wouldn’t pick up on the implication there. He had once said that opinions that aren’t spoken simply don’t exist.

“Well, we should get going,” he said with a smile. “As I said before, I’ll be taking anyone who wants to help escort Alicia. For now, we’ll just be going as far as Fort Fenix. I’ll be taking the lead with Amin and the others. We’ll continue on to the Yanga territory and secure a headquarters. Once we’ve confirmed that, we’ll send the people who are currently stationed at Fort Fenix. We’ll keep them until we next meet.”

“Yes.” I nodded. We’d discussed these plans earlier. My voice shook a little when I responded. Even though Reina had just complimented me earlier for being so resilient, I felt like my voice just now betrayed that. I was so used to being with Ash that it seemed I had forgotten how to be strong. *If I act all cute and sweet, then Ash will be nice to me.*

“I guess I should drop by more?” he said. “There’ll be a variety of jobs needing to be done like interim reports and whatnot, so it’d be easier if I’m the messenger.” He makes me all wobbly when he says stuff like that—I’m supposed to have a reputation for being resilient.

Please do, I thought. I almost said it out loud, but I just smiled instead. “If you were to do that, I wouldn’t be able to stop asking you to come by, so let’s not.”

If he helped me with one thing, I would keep thinking of things to ask him for in order to see him or have him stay over. *I can be quite selfish. I used to be a princess, after all. I'm used to a certain quality of life.*

"You really are resilient..."

"I've started to think that I'm not *actually* that tough..." Especially when it comes to Ash. Even now, with him stroking my head, I just wanted him to do it forever. My once strong will to depart for Yanga had turned soft and squishy, like melted sugar.

"There's no need for you to hold back on anything like you did when you were in the capital. It was hard for me to see you like that, Alicia. It'll make Maika upset too." *That's right. Maika will get upset. Time for me to lie again so they don't get upset.*

"Yeah, thank you. I'll be all right. I can handle this much."

"There you go, telling lies again."

"Okay, you got me. But you like those, right?" The person who once said he liked lies, seemed to actually love them. So I'll continue to say the lies that Ash loves so much. "You don't need to worry about me. You've been so nice up till now, and that'll keep me happy for the rest of my life. I've enough stocked up to keep me going until I rebuild the Yanga territory." *Of course, that was a lie, so make sure to be super nice to me tomorrow too, okay?*

We had planned to reach the deserted villages of Yanga just past noon. However, due to the roads in Yanga being a lot more damaged than we expected, we ended up arriving there in the evening. We rushed to prepare to stay the night—we left the manual labor to the soldiers and knights who were chosen for the military escort, while Amin, the other maids, and I handled food preparation.

"Wow, Alicia, you're so skilled," spoke a soldier who was carrying a wooden box of food supplies from the horse cart.

"Thank you. I was trained by Head Chef Yacoo. I'm somewhat confident I'll be able to serve the number of people we have."

"Ha ha ha, I've heard the rumors." *Rumors?* The soldier laughed at my

confused expression. “At the dormitory, you prepared your own food, right? When I was in the territorial military, we’d go camping, and there was a higher-up who was a much better cook than us foot soldiers. Whenever newcomers would ask about it, they’d always say ‘I was trained by Head Chef Yacoo.’”

“Ah, like I just said?” I asked.

“Yeah, exactly like that. You know, I never thought a princess returning from the capital would be better at cooking than us.”

“Heh heh, thanks.” *He said “returning,”* and I couldn’t help but smile. “I’ll probably handle the cooking for a while, so I’ll do my best to make it tasty.”

“I’m already grateful to be able to eat a princess’s home cooking. I’ve heard of the first count of Sacula eating from the same pot as his subordinates, but I’ve never heard of him actually making the food.”

“I see. Then maybe people will tell the tale of the territory lord who served homemade food.” *Hmm, not bad,* I thought to myself. The soldiers also looked equally pleased.

“Ha ha ha, you’ll certainly not lose to the first count of Sacula in that case.”

“I can’t lose. My goal today is to set a precedent.”

“It would be an honor for us to be a part of that.”

We were able to have food finished before the day ended. We had also prepared the tents that we would be staying in. Amin looked satisfied. “I wouldn’t have expected any less from the people of Sacula. It was the same in the capital, but they work incredibly fast.”

“The same could be said for you, Amin. You got used to camping in such a short amount of time.” Amin had spent most of her life as a maid in the royal palace, so she had very little experience in the lives of normal people or field operations such as this. However, it would be better to say she had zero need to learn anything about it. If I were to give an example, she had no idea how to prepare anything outside of making tea. But that didn’t stop her from being able to work alongside me to cook meals efficiently. She was a maid who was able to do anything required of her. *Well, she did freak out when she got a small*

cut on her finger once, so she wasn't the perfect maid, but she sure was a hard worker. Seeing her glance around with a satisfied look on her face was quite cute. She had done a lot to be able to stand by my side. I wanted to make life easier for her, but I wondered if I'd be able to do that in her lifetime. I watched as the sun set over the village, and I couldn't help but feel we had a lot of difficulties ahead of us.

"We're going to be busy starting tomorrow." Even when looking out over the same darkness, I could hear the smile in Amin's words. "I'm looking forward to it."

When Amin and the other maids arrived in Sacula, Ash told them that the work would be hellish. The land they stood on today was just the first layer. They could probably get an idea of how things would be from our preparations, but now it was time for the real thing. Even knowing that, she still said she was looking forward to it?

"You're a good liar, Amin." Although, in actuality, she no doubt found the situation daunting and probably struggled to keep herself standing straight... She was just trying to be strong.

She didn't deny it. "I spent a lot of time in the royal capital." The stubborn, serious, and clumsy maid laughed.

"I'm good at lying too."

"We make a good duo, then."

Is she trying to say that she's as good at lying as I am? In my time at the military academy, I had to use a fake name, lie about my gender, and spend two years living that lie. Amin was ostracized due to her inability to be a doormat or turn a blind eye to injustice, but she had a long way to go to get to my level.

"I wonder..." I tilted my head doubtfully.

"I think so," Amin responded. "I think your behavior when you left the master was splendid."

"Uh..." *Objection! You're not allowed to bring up Ash! If knights are suddenly called to join an argument between kids, that's war! ...Which was something that would happen quite often if we were in Sacula.*

“You were so good at lying, I felt like I could feel your regret from where I was standing.”

I cried out in panic. *I knew that people would realize that, so I made sure I was far away! Amin was only close because she has to serve people! It's unfair that she's using this against me!*

“The way your eyes became watery, your shaking voice, the way you squeeze your hands together; your feet were twitching like you were going to jump up and hug Ash at any minute—all of that betrayed your words and gave away how difficult it was for you to leave him.”

“Quiet, Amin!” That was an order, but the maid ignored it with a kind smile.

“Master felt troubled after that, you know? He came to me saying that you were definitely hiding your feelings, but he was worried that if he treated you differently, he would become a burden. He was quite concerned.”

“Ah, no way...” *Ash. You're so kind. I love you. This sucks. I wanna see you.*

“Look. Even now, you're going bright red, and you look so happy. What's wrong with that?” Amin asked.

“Everything...” I responded.

“Have you hit your so-called limits?”

“Probably...”

I was so infatuated with Ash that they couldn't recklessly use it against me. *I'll make a law that bans any mention of Ash. That'll be my first order as Viscountess Yanga. Although I'm the one who'll suffer most from such a ban.*

“Master didn't say this himself, but I do think it would be for the best if you stopped trying to hold back your feelings.”

“Is there a devil on my shoulder?” It definitely seemed like it if Amin's trustworthy voice was any measure. *Oh, gods, I ask that you protect this small body of mine.* I would ask Ash for help, but that's surely what the devil wants. The more I talk about Ash, the less I can hold back. I was very aware of that.

“You really are stubborn... It used to worry me in the palace, and I thought by coming to Sacula you'd finally be cured of it.”

“He he he. You see, I can’t be cured. The reason I was taken out of the royal capital is because Ash wanted me to help him,” I replied. Amin gave me a blank look in response. It seemed she found what I was saying strange.

I guess it is a little weird. I was saved. No matter how you look at it, I was the one that was saved. He had gotten three gold service medals and invited me away from my imprisonment. The person who had saved me had been saying the same thing for years. He wanted me to help him. He needed my help. And if I feel like Ash needs my help, I’ll go anywhere to lend him my strength.

For someone who loved lies, he had taken my words seriously. He rescued me from my cage and freed me from my chains. He told me he needed my help restoring the Yanga territory. He had arranged his lies so neatly. *Ash, you lie about your feelings too much. You make me look honest in comparison.*

“If Ash did that, then even I, as someone who also tells lies, have a responsibility to uphold.” Even if Ash was lying about stealing me away just so I could help him, I’d help him anyway. *I’m not going to let a soul from now until the end of time ever know that was a lie.* “Ash wouldn’t have to struggle so much if I help him. He has a lot going on, both in his professional and personal lives.”

“Yes, I guess you are quite right.” Amin had a distant look upon her face. As the handmaid of the former princess, she was exceptionally skilled at management and had been made to share in Ash’s workload. Ash would now be taking up a position at Fort Fenix while helping with rebuilding the Yanga territory—all while acting as a mediator between Sacula and the rest of the regional alliance. I would be focusing on my work here, but Ash had a lot to juggle. And then, as the cherry on top, Ash suggested that we might as well build a fortress.

It was strange how we just thought, *Oh, that’s classic Ash.* It wasn’t normal nor good that one person was overseeing the restoration of a territory while also pitching an idea for a fortress. Meanwhile, Maika was in Sacula working with the Frontier Alliance. We were combining our efforts together as a family. *More reason to keep being strong.* “It might make Maika mad, but whenever I want to cry, I’m going to hold myself back. I’ll do my best. I want to make Ash’s dreams a reality.” As I raised my head, the moon was high in the sky. It took me

back to the time when Ash first called me beautiful—it was glowing in the sky just like that night.

“My name is Alicia.” I told him my real name that day. I was known as Alicia Sodra back when I was weak and could do nothing but cry as I left Sacula. An old memory. Now, I was able to look at the moon with a new name. “Alicia Fenix Yanga. In the name of the Phoenix that embraces me, I will push through and endure. This is my response to Ash fulfilling his promise.” *I am an expensive woman. I have to make sure that I make it worth it for Ash. There’s no way I’m going to let him lose.*



Entrusted Papers

Two years had passed. A cheerful spring air blew in through the window. Despite it being a lovely, refreshing spring day, for some reason, I was being made to listen to Father Folke's idle chitchat.

"That's why Phoenix is written differently compared to the other nanobots. It might just be that they referred to it as something different... Fenrir and Yggdrasil may have been companions, but they existed separately, whereas Phoenix was the only one that existed alongside humans and could talk to them." Father Folke shrugged. "This is why deciphering it is so difficult. I wonder if there was something special about Phoenix? Maybe the current Temple forgot about Phoenix and worshiped the dragon god instead? What do you think about that?" the no-good priest asked me, his eyes filled with the curiosity of an eager student.

I decided to respond with as much sincerity as I could muster. "If that's everything, then please go home. To put it lightly, this is more of a distraction than fixing misprinted documents."

"I said why I was here before, didn't I? Give me money." *You immediately launched into discussing the early civilization's ancient texts without so much as stopping for breath.*

"There's no way someone will give you money just because you ask for it. Please state why you want it and how much." *This is my life's work, it's not just for fun.* That was my opinion as an honest working person, however, the no-good priest had zero regard for morals or rules and just bluntly stated what he wanted.

"You can understand without me spouting all that useless, annoying stuff, right? I've already reported why I need it."

"Yes, Lady Lucia gave the report, not you." He had no right to be so arrogant, but that hardly did anything to weaken his resolve.

“It’s fine, isn’t it? She’s my assistant after all. Her feats are technically my feats.”

“While you do have a point, if she is doing your work too, then she technically does not need you.”

“Oh, is that so? Then I’ll put Lucia in charge of the orphanage, and I’ll have an easy retirement—”

“Ha ha ha, how many months until the funeral for the priest who died of loneliness?”

That stopped him short. “How many *weeks*, I wonder.” Father Folke responded.

If he’s that aware of it yet does nothing to fix it, I guess it’s okay to consider it an actual illness at this point. I did understand why Father Folke had come to ask me for money. It seemed the orphanage was struggling financially. Lady Lucia, who was working under Father Folke as part of the orphanage management team, had already dutifully reported it. That was why I was already somewhat prepared for this.

“Father Folke, here you go.”

“Oh.” Father Folke took the document I had handed to him, seemingly already understanding what it was. “Huh, a statement of delivery from Quid company.” The former zombie priest Father Folke laughed. “To think that a small trader from a small town nestled away in the corner of the remote regions is still doing business with the son of a farmer from that same village, but now working together with Count Sacula.”

“There are not many people left who still talk about those days.”

“If someone were to upset you or Quid now, even having ten heads wouldn’t be enough,” Father Folke said as he realized how far Quid and I had come in status.

“In that case, you must have at least one hundred heads, Father Folke.”

He patted his neck repeatedly. To this day, he still barged through my doors addressing me as, “Brat!”

“I’m a great priest protected by the three gods. Can’t you see I have more than one thousand heads?”

“I do not see them. I guess most of them were cut off as a result of you being rude...”

Father Folke was laughing smugly, however that was soon cut down by my next line.

“By my cute head-hunting princess.”

“Hey, cut that out. That’s not something you joke about.” *Huh? What a weird response. Why can’t that be a joke? Father Folke and Maika are relatively close.* “It’s not that something happened with Maika but...she knows how we are, and while she probably wouldn’t be mad if she had heard that...I’m mostly just hoping.” Father Folke shivered. “Well, I guess it’s all right. There are some mysteries in the world that we’re probably happier not pursuing.”

That has certain implications coming from you. Father Folke reached for the cup of tea on the table and drank it. The tea was made from premium tea leaves and had been a gift from Head Priest Birkan as thanks for my sending him a can (made with a very high-quality metal) of tomato soup. However, Father Folke had gulped it down without even enjoying the taste.

“That should be enough for clothes and beds, right?” I asked.

“Yup, that’ll be fine. Thanks,” replied Father Folke.

“You should be thanking Lady Lucia. Since her report was so well written, I was able to make preparations in advance.”

“Ah, I had—” There was a knock on my office’s door before he could finish his sentence.

“Hellooooo! Big brother! It’s me, Lucia! I turned away for a moment, and my boss had disappeared so I thought maybe he’s with you, big brother!” She swung open the door. “And sure enough, here he is!” I didn’t even have the opportunity to welcome her in. A young woman in her late teens stood in the doorway, wearing a relieved expression, her hair stuck to her head with sweat. She was wearing the same priestly robes as Father Folke.

“Hey, Lucia. This isn’t the orphanage, ya know. You have to at least ask for permission before opening the door.”

I sat dumbfounded as I watched Father Folke scold someone for their manners.

“But boss! I worried you’d be put to death by big brother for being rude! I know more than anyone just how impolite you can be!” Lucia replied.

“You don’t have to worry about me. You’re the one being rude here.”

“*You* don’t have to worry about *me*! Most men laugh and let me off because I’m just so cute!”

“Neither of you is in the right here...” I whispered to myself, but neither of them heard me. These two people were respectively the chief and deputy chief of the second Fenix orphanage built by Father Folke.

I will repeat that. They were the chief. And deputy chief. Of an institution. With a lot of orphans.

If you look at it positively, I guess we can expect them to raise some very sturdy orphans, right? Lady Lucia is from the first generation at the Fenix orphanage in the royal capital. In other words, the very person who was arguing with Father Folke right now was one of the orphans who had brought Father Folke to his knees back then. When Father Folke was chased out of the capital, the management of the orphanage there was left to half of the remaining orphans, while the other half had come here to Sacula. As they told it, they would “go anywhere the boss goes.” They were like a gang of delinquents. You would never think this was the result of a religious person.

“Ah, honestly! Big brother, big brother!”

“Yes, Lady Lucia? I have to say that I find it slightly uncomfortable that you refer to me like that.”

“Really?” Lady Lucia looked to the ground as if all the energy had left her at that moment. “But...you’re my big brother.”

“Well, I am *not* actually related to you in any way,” I responded.

“*But you are* one of the boss’s students, right?”

“Well, yes, I suppose I am.”

“Then you *are* my big brother!” All the orphans thought of those who worked at the orphanage as family. As I was a former student of their boss, it seemed that made me an elder brother of theirs. They also called Maika “big sister.”

“So, big brother! It’s time for you to tell the boss! Choose the right time, place, and opponent, and then fight!”

“I taught you that, not this brat!” yelled Father Folke. “I don’t need this brat to tell me how to be polite!”

I agreed with that notion. That is why I wanted nothing to do with the scene before me. No matter how you looked at it, they seemed like a close father-daughter pairing who obviously worried about one another. I was the cause of their worry and in my role as an older brother, it seemed I was being requested to help Lady Lucia in disciplining her father—the whole thing was brilliantly confusing. However, it was not my place to get involved in a family’s playful banter.

“Please feel free to continue. I am going to look around outside for a bit, so feel free to use this room.”

“Aah, big brother!”

“Hey, Ash, wait!”

I shut the door behind me, leaving them to it. I then pulled out a sword and blocked the door with it. *It seems I need not worry about the orphanage*, I thought to myself as I walked off, leaving the flurry of loud knocks and angry shouting coming from the door behind me.

My office was located in the same fort that I had used to defeat the large horde of werewolves. It was no longer armed for military use and instead served as a key relay point between Yanga and Sacula. Therefore, the fort made for a perfect base of operations for the Disaster Response Office. Returning refugees and supplies could be gathered here before being sent to Yanga. On the flip side, refugees and messages from the Yanga region could also be organized and sent to other Frontier Alliance nations from here as well. These were all recent developments, and we had only just managed to staff the

operation. The finish line was in sight.

“Ah, Ash. Good timing. I was just thinking about coming to see you.” The Viscountess of Yanga—my fiancée, Alicia—appeared wearing a bright smile. She was one of the people who had carved out this path that we were on. It had been two years since she had been tasked with reviving her destroyed territory. Where other people would have given up, Alicia had been emboldened by the challenge. The once innocent yet fragile beauty now commanded an air of authority. She often mentioned being more suited for being out here rather than in the capital, and that really seemed to be the case.

“Welcome back, Alicia. Is everything all right over there?”

“Of course. As our management division grows, we’ve been able to take in more returning refugees. We appreciate Sacula lending a hand.” *That’s a promising response.* Thanks to the royal capital dragging its feet, we were late to respond to the situation in Yanga. I still wanted to sprint to the palace and give them all a strong right hand. There was no need, however. Watching Alicia’s achievements has been more than enough solace, and we need not worry about the royals’ incompetence any further.

Alicia was superb. She knew how to fully use both her birthright and experiences to get people on her side. The former princess had scouted out an abandoned village and set up camp there ahead of everyone else. There was no way that the people of Sacula, who loved to brag daily that “the first count lived with the settlers together in a small hut and forged the nation’s very foundations,” would stay quiet about it. One particular group of the viscountess’s supporters charged into the barracks with a cask of beer shouting, “Hey, idiots! Get over here if you wanna come drink with a real princess!” It only took them an hour to drink the lot, so they got another one. The once-diehard Sacula patriots had become the former princess’s personal bodyguards.

Maika had nothing but compliments for Alicia’s ability to understand the citizens and lead them so well. Thanks to her expedition setting up a base, they had proved that Yanga was safe for the refugees, and many had started to form groups in preparation to return. It had gone exactly as Alicia had planned. While there had been some bandit attacks along the way, that did not stop Alicia one bit. If the leader showed no signs of stopping, then her escort of motivated

frontier region soldiers would not lose against the shoddy bandits they faced. Commanding the first group of returnees, Alicia had managed to rebuild an abandoned village in no time, thus securing the first step toward completely rebuilding the territory. It turned out that stealing Alicia away from the royal capital was a great decision. It was a miracle that a princess who knew so much about the countryside even existed. She herself was a miracle.

“Ah yes, Amin had high praise for Renge’s new report template, saying it was very novel and easy to use,” Alicia commented.

“That’s because Lady Renge has had a hard time dealing with them all. There’s been a decrease in refugees lately, so she’s no doubt been able to use her experience up to now to help make those things run smoother,” I responded.

That once timid Lady Renge had become a lot more outgoing lately. It seemed she had gained a sense of pride about her work, not wanting to be outdone by others. Either her inner confidence was beginning to show on the outside, or those around her had begun to take notice of her beauty. It seemed those working underneath Lady Renge became more motivated when she asked them to do something. As we chatted and walked, Alicia began to giggle.

“What’s up?”

“Nothing, I’m just happy.”

I wonder why? I tilted my head in confusion, hoping Alicia would offer more of an explanation, but she just continued to giggle. *You seem to be having fun. I wish you’d share some of it with me.* As we walked out of the fort, we were met with farms and a row of simply constructed houses. Ignoring the fort behind us, it looked like a large farming village. While the military building was an issue, this area would soon be a new city. With this being a primary location between Sacula and Yanga, a lot of refugees had gathered at the fort. There were enough of them to fill two cities, so in our attempts to make the area more habitable, it had turned into a town in its own right. There was a large commotion nearby. Children were surrounding a machine that looked like a horse-drawn carriage attached to a steam engine. *Those are the children from the orphanage—they must have come with Lady Lucia.* The children’s eyes were sparkling.

“Hey, hey, let me on!”

“Let us on! Let us on!”

The deputy chief of the research laboratory, Hermes, was also surrounded by the children.

“Ahhh! Stay away, it’s dangerous! I’m trying to repair it right now!” Hermes shouted at the children. While he was good with machinery, he was never that good with actual living beings. Lady Reina was better in that area.

“Whaaat, really? You’re such a meanie, geezer!”

“Meanie! This old man’s a meanieeee!”

They used to treat him like the youthful man he was, but now that they were booing him, he had become “geezer.”

“Oi! I’m not a geezer! I’m saying this so you all don’t get hurt!” Hermes barked back, looking quite hurt. This only inspired the children to keep chiding him. *You have to be careful, Hermes. You can’t expose your weak spots like that. They’ll narrow in on it and use it against you.* Hermes was taking grievous damage from the children who had quite obviously learned a lot from both the chief and deputy chief of the orphanage, so I decided to step in with a clap of my hands. For some reason, everyone’s eyes sparkled when they saw me.

“Ah, Ash! Great timing! Do something about this lot!”

“It’s big brother!”

“It really is! It’s Ash, our big brother!” *Yes, that’s right. I’m the big brother. You really have learned a lot at the orphanage.*

“Everyone, it is not very polite to bother people while they are working. That young man is a very important person.” *The children should understand what I mean, right?* As I chuckled to myself, the children stood up straight and all spoke together.

“I’m sorry!”

“Sorry!”

Well done, children. Good kids get candy. I handed them a small can of hard-

boiled honey sweets, and the children all ran off like they had received a piece of treasure.

“Ah, such energetic, nice kids.”

“Really? ‘Nice’?” Hermes responded doubtfully.

“Are they not? They are quick to say what they feel, and they cheer up just as quickly. They bring me hope for the future.”

“We have very different ideas of what a ‘nice kid’ is.”

“So what would you consider a ‘nice kid,’ then?”

“Hm? Well, now you mention it...someone who is good at listening, knows right from wrong, and can speak without hesitation,” Hermes answered.

“I feel like that fits all those children, though.” They had listened when I spoke, had realized that what they were doing was wrong, and had apologized. *A fantastic tactical operation.* Once the orphans from the second Fenix orphanage had grown up, they could become excellent personnel. *If I had more time, I would enroll them in some serious studies.*

“I guess, but not really...” Hermes let out a sigh.

“You seem quite tired. Take this sweet, it will give you some energy.” I took out another honey candy and threw it overarm into Hermes’s mouth.

“Mmguh!”

Bull’s-eye.

“Hey, that’s dangerous!”

“It is fine. I threw it based on how your mouth was moving.” *Plus, my body has surpassed what normal people can do. I get to enjoy my life as a superhuman.*

“That’s not the issue...but this is delicious,” Hermes responded.

“Right? It is from Noscula.”

“Ah, that’s your hometown, right? They seem to be doing a lot there lately.”

It was thanks to Lady Tanya’s work with honey. It could last longer, it was

more satisfying, and it was also high in nutrition. She had sent candy (and meat) for us to then send on to places with a lot of refugees. While not a large amount, it should be enough to lessen their everyday hardships somewhat. Hermes rolled the candy around his mouth while he got to work.

Eventually, he wiped the sweat from his brow.

“And done. I’ve finished repairing it,” said Hermes.

“A fine job as always.” Hermes had been repairing a steam-powered machine that could use attachments like plows—basically, it was a tractor.

“It’s nothing. Just wear and tear from being used a lot. All I did was change the parts.”

“A beginner wouldn’t even be able to find the problem with it.”

“It’s just something I’m good at,” Hermes said, nodding as if he was not entirely satisfied with his work. Of course, no matter how skilled he was, he was not able to fix just about anything without the correct equipment. This feat was only possible thanks to a second Territory Reform Promotion Office research laboratory that had been built onto the fort. It cost a lot of money, but we argued that if there were more research labs, there would be more chances for us to teach people about our new inventions. After that, everyone from the Frontier Alliance was happy to invest in our cause. They were all so generous. I was very grateful.

“Are we sending this to Yanga? Alicia’s place?” Hermes asked. Hermes still spoke about the former princess, now viscountess, pretty casually. According to Alicia herself, since he spoke like that back when she was Arthur, it would be strange to change it now.

“Yeah. Thanks, Hermes,” I responded. She had said that being referred to without her titles reminded her of her time at the military academy. I was happy to hear that no matter where we stood politically, we were all still close friends. “But this is going to really help us. The steam-powered machines we have now are more powerful than horses. We’ll be able to make a lot of progress on the destroyed fields in Yanga this spring. I’m excited about the harvest.”

“Machinery is my department, but as for the fields and such, that’s more Suiren’s thing. She was pretty fired up, saying that the entirety of Yanga and Sacula would have full stomachs this autumn,” Hermes replied.

“I also plan to make that happen. I came here today to talk about that,” Alicia chimed in with a calm yet determined expression. It looked like she expected her plan to be a success, but that expression soon turned grave as she continued to speak.

“But...I’m sorry, Hermes. The research laboratory’s work has all been focused on dealing with the refugees, right?” She lowered her head as she spoke. She was thinking about her friend’s dreams. This was typical of Alicia; she always held herself responsible. The eccentric dream chaser Hermes seemed disappointed in response.

“Hey now, it’s nothing you need apologize over. It makes me feel weird,” Hermes spoke with a frown. He really did seem weirded out by it.

“But Hermes—”

“Hey, Alicia.” The eccentric dream chaser stopped his friend from apologizing. “What would you think if I had apologized to you for giving me a hand with my airplane research?”

“Well, I...” Alicia’s face went from apologetic to somewhat annoyed. She resembled Hermes just moments before. “That...would really suck.”

“Right? I felt the exact same just now.” The two of them nodded at one another, both still wearing dissatisfied looks.

“It feels like receiving money for something you can’t remember doing,” Alicia remarked.

“It gives you chills like it’s all a trap,” Hermes responded.

“I’m sorry for saying something weird.”

“It’s all right, as long as you get it.” The two of them trusted each other a lot, so it would make sense that they would feel like they were being pranked when the other suddenly started acting all serious. It was something that could only happen between two people who are incredibly close.

“Plus, it’s not like my airplane research has stalled. We’ve done various wind tunnel tests, and we’re working on improving the engines too.” Hermes happily clapped his hands together. “I’ll have some time soon, so I’ll be able to make a lot of progress.”

“That is good news. Will you be all right for money?”

“While it’s always good to have more, we have plenty of resources in storage we can use for research already.” *All right.* It seemed I could go ahead with meeting that certain someone who I have been putting off for a long time. *Well, since I can talk telepathically with demons, had the dragons help me, and with the results of Father Folke’s ancient text findings, I can kind of figure out how that conversation will go.* “Ah, you’re all here! Heeeeey!” Maika greeted us with an exaggerated wave and a loud voice. She had recently arrived from Itsutsu. Lady Reina was behind her.

“Alicia! Long time no see!” Maika ran up to Alicia and greeted her with a hug. I often met with Alicia here at the fort, but since she was based in Yanga, and Maika was in Sacula, it meant the two did not have much opportunity to meet.

“Maika, I see you’re doing well as always,” Alicia commented.

“Of course! You’re working so hard over there in Yanga, so I need to do my best too!” Lady Reina, contrary to my fiancées’ open display of familial affection, simply scooted over to Hermes’s side.

“Glen, Renge, and Suiren are coming later. We’ll have everyone from the Promotion Office all here together!”

“I guess it’ll get quite lively then.”

Lady Reina nodded in agreement. However, she did not seem excited. She looked worried. “I feel like Hermes will be the liveliest.”

“Huh? Why?” Hermes replied, confused. The main topic of discussion was to be how to expand the fields in Yanga. The main speakers would be Lady Suiren, who was in charge of agricultural planning, Lady Renge, who was in charge of managing the documents, and then Alicia, the person in charge of the Yanga territory. Hermes would probably be in charge of discussing the tools and machinery we could use to help expand the fields. *The only situation where I*

can think of Hermes being the liveliest would be...

“Lady Maika,” I started. She puffed her cheeks at my formality. “Did something happen regarding the airplane?”

She pulled out an envelope. Its seal was gaudy, instantly revealing that this was not from the Frontier Alliance.

“A letter from the central regions?”

“Not just the central regions. It’s a letter from the crown prince.” *Ah, this isn’t going to be good. Not to mention, I can’t think what the crown prince would have to do with the airplane. In fact, no one outside of our research laboratory had any connection to it.* As I took the letter out of the envelope, Hermes lurked over my shoulder to read, almost bumping into me as he did.

“It is an invitation to see the unveiling of the first manned airplane at the royal capital.”

“Wah! Mgfurh?!” Hermes let out a confused, troubled, and shocked voice, but I covered his mouth with my hand. At this distance, he would do major damage to my hearing.

“Hermes, please calm down. No matter how much of a ruckus you make, it will not change the fact that they plan to unveil it.”

“Mguh...”

“I understand how you feel. Ms. Reina, I will leave the rest to you.” I passed Hermes over to her, who covered his mouth with her hand instead.

“Listen to what Ash says. Be a good boy.” Now that Hermes had been dealt with, I turned around and showed Maika the invitation.

“What led to you even getting this? Do we know anything else?”

“Oh, you’re taking this well, Ash. I’m relieved.” Maika realized that I had caged most of my emotions away.

“I don’t know what you were worried about...” I gave her a wry smile while Alicia and Lady Reina also gave me the same relieved look. Hermes was still overcome with emotion, so he was an outlier. It seemed I was easy to misunderstand, so I made a point of answering in such a way that showed both

my logic and qualities as a gentleman. “I am not panicked nor alarmed. There is still knowledge remaining in the temple that tells of how to build an aircraft, so it is not that surprising that there are those besides us who are researching it.”

I know we're friends now, Hermes, but I was already researching this on my own. It really isn't weird to think that there are others, especially if the research facilities in the royal capital are well put together. It was disappointing that they had beaten us to the punch, but I did not instantly boil with anger like Hermes. My goal was not simply flight; it was economic flight. I smiled thinking that I would love to speak with the people who had created the aircraft. *Surely, Hermes, who Lady Reina was still holding back, would have a lot to talk to them about. Though, they would be rivals, so maybe their chat wouldn't be too pleasant.*

“However, if there were such interesting people out there, I am sure Father Birkan would have informed me about them...” I once again gave Maika an inquisitive look to see if she had any more information on the matter.

“Ah, yeah, Father Birkan did mention something about that.” Maika hesitated as she spoke, so I calmly accepted her explanation. “It was four years ago or something? Back when the regions were all messed up because of Marquis Datarā. Apparently, there was a report that some of the research laboratory's documents were stolen... It seems that those documents ended up in the crown prince's hands.” Maika paused for a moment. “Now he's really done it. Now you really dislike him.” She was right. Too right. I could no longer hold back my emotions.

“~~YesthatiscorrectnowIreallyhatehim~~, heh heh heh,” I let out without taking the time to even breathe. *A straight right hook. I'd sprint right over and deliver him a straight right hook.* I was not fond of the invitation from the title alone. “The World's First Manned Aircraft” was a clear misrepresentation. If they had even read the documents, they would know that they had no right to name it the “world's first.” *They should have named it “the rebirth of the aircraft” or “the revival of the aircraft”! But they are thieves. There's no way they'd understand. They're savages who would probably scissor kick our necks if we were to bow our heads in greeting. They got carried away thanks to us being upstanding gentlemen and ladies. I'll give them a good smack on behalf of those*

who came before us yet are unable to speak up now. Please look forward to it.

“Maika...you knew this would rile me up, didn’t you?” I asked Maika.

“You were calm at first, so I kind of expected it.”

“We can’t let them do this,” I declared.

“We can’t.” *Well, now that’s decided, all there is left to do is respond to this invitation. First, I’ll get a good look at them before I decide how I’ll punch them.* As I turned toward Hermes, I saw that Lady Reina had freed him from her grasp.

“Hermes, you are coming as well right? To the unveiling.”

“Of course I am! I wanna see what kind of idiots we’re dealing with!”

“I’m looking forward to it,” I replied.

“I’m ready to have a good laugh.”

Yeah, I’m all fired up as well now. Let’s sprint full throttle to the royal capital. We’ll do something heroic-like, attacking them like a tag team. I tag out, you give them another punch.

“Reina, I have something important to tell you...” Maika spoke up.

“I don’t want to hear it...” Reina responded.

“I get why, but it’s about you tagging along with them to go to the royal capital.”

“I said, I don’t want to hear it!”

“I mean, it’s not like Alicia or I can leave.”

It seemed like the girls were talking among themselves. They were also making preparations.

“First things first, once we have finished discussing the Yanga territory, we will begin preparations to head toward the royal capital. Hermes, please be quick about passing on your work to others.”

“All right, leave it to me. I’ll get them started on building our own aircraft. When their unveiling is finished, we’ll do our own,” Hermes said with a grin. *Even if the royal capital’s aircraft is able to fly, we will do one better.* I returned

his grin, full of confidence and determination. Our rock-steady deputy chief laughed when he saw my expression.

“Look! Look at that! He looks *exactly* like a demon king with a smile like that!”

“Oh, Ash, you’re so cool...”

“I just feel so relieved and excited when he looks like he’ll destroy anything in his path.”

“Right? It’s cool, right?”

All the girls chatted excitedly. They seemed to be having fun.

Hermes and I left for the capital roughly one month after we received the invitation. We had plenty of time to prepare first. It seemed that the royal capital had chosen the day for the unveiling specifically to ensure a lot of people could gather to see it. Quite different from the council meeting.

“I wonder if the crown prince’s group really is able to make an aircraft fly?” Lady Reina asked as she stretched herself out after a long, cramped carriage ride. We had arrived at the Sacula manor in the royal capital. Lady Reina sat on the sofa in the lounge room with her hands reaching up. Hermes had been pouring drinks for her. Right now, she was drinking a spirit from Sacula—which, according to Officer Raino, got better as it matured. It was an odd choice for Lady Reina, who was usually a fan of ale, but I imagined it was because they did not have her favorite brand here in the royal capital.

“About that...” Our spymaster, Seire, had gotten to the capital ahead of us to scout for information. “We were able to learn something about that. Please have a look at this report.” She handed the documents over to Lady Reina who glanced at them and furrowed her brow before handing them on to Hermes who was much more knowledgeable about the topic.

“So... What do you think, Hermes? I feel like I’ve seen them somewhere before.”

“Yeah, these are definitely our blueprints. These are from back when Rockel was trying to make a small-scale steam engine. He was trying to make one light enough so that it could be used on an aircraft.” Rockel, one of the ex-prisoner

artisans, was a firm believer in steam engines. I often excitedly looked on, wondering if I could make this the age of steampunk. Hermes was equally excited, but he also believed in the combustion and radial engines—the two of them were very close friends. I was still able to picture clearly in my mind the specifications of what we drew on the blueprints more than four years ago.

“The engine isn’t pretty to look at but...if it’s using Rockel’s blueprints, then it should be enough to power an airplane. This is an engine that can make an airplane fly.” Hermes had the look of a coolheaded engineer. He was taking the truth as it was. The only thing that gave away how bothered he was was the fact he was chewing his lips. “It hasn’t even been revised or changed. It’s exactly the same as ours—we have a copy of this saved in the Church. Who do they think they are, claiming this as their own?”

“Hermes, calm down.”

“Hey, don’t worry, I’m calm.” Hermes went on to explain why he was able to keep his temper in check. “If this is indeed Rockel’s steam engine, then the airplane can fly. But it’ll only be a few meters off the ground and only for a few seconds—at best. There’s a limit to how much water it can convert to steam and a limit on how much power it can produce. Around the time we made this blueprint, we were still using wood as fuel.”

That was one of the reasons why Hermes could not get a plane to fly. Small-scale steam engines were difficult to use. With Rockel’s blueprint, even if they had made a lightweight, small-scale steam engine, it would sacrifice the duration of the required power output. Specifically, the amount of water that is converted into steam, and the fuel inside the furnace were directly correlated. Naturally, it was hard to have both of these in an aircraft.

“Rockel was thinking of using liquid fuel after this.” Hermes continued. “That would work a lot better with a lightweight small-scale steam engine. But no matter how you do it, it’s gonna require a lot of water. For other purposes, a steam engine isn’t a bad idea though.” For example, the weight of the engine does not matter when powering machinery. There is the argument that it will take up a lot of space, but that was low on the list of priorities. While Rockel had been researching how to make the steam engine more lightweight, he had had little success. He was, however, having a lot of fun researching it. “In other

words, if an aircraft flew with Rockel's engine, it wouldn't be able to fly in the sky like a bird. So if we build an aircraft that *could* fly, it'd shut them up real quick."

Lady Seire huddled closer. "I'll make sure people hear about it."

"Next up is the design of the aircraft. There's no evidence that they stole that from the blueprint. What's up with the wings?" Hermes asked.

"About that..." The talented spymaster mumbled. "Nobody has witnessed the aircraft, so unfortunately I have no information regarding the design." Everyone fell silent. The report had conjured an ominous feeling.

"Ms. Seire, by the way, how did you learn they were using the steam engine?" I asked.

"Mostly an informant from the Church who Father Birkan introduced me to, but I also visited a pub where a lot of tradesmen gather."

"Ah, that makes sense."

"Yes, it's taken a lot of tradesmen to construct such a complicated piece of machinery. As for my informant within the Church, they themselves are a researcher. They were the one who explained the blueprints to the crown prince." *That must be how Father Birkan always managed to get extra information to Sacula. A few members of the Church must have gotten past the obstacles put by those who were against Sacula to whisper into Father Birkan's ear.* It would make sense for them to develop an airplane in this time period. It would be impossible to do it in secret, though.

"So, thinking about it, although they followed the blueprint to make an airplane, they didn't copy the design?"

"Yes. When I visited the trading post, I was able to confirm that they were distributing goods that could be seen as materials for an aircraft, however as for the airplane itself, I have no information... This is just conjecture, but I imagine that they have asked the tradesman to stay within the palace until the day they reveal it. It would make sense that they didn't do the same for the steam engine since the blueprints had come from Sacula, and they had no reason to hide it." She pulled a face. It seemed like she found her own theory difficult to

believe. “However, wouldn’t it be normal to conduct tests? Deputy Chief Hermes, you always do that, right? It would make sense, especially if they plan to have people aboard it. There should have been at least some eye-witnesses...” The fact that there had not been meant they were keeping the information under tight control.

“Hm... I guess there is no way for us to prepare ahead of the unveiling.” After all, this was the royal capital. The most important person in the country had access to a labyrinth of hidden information and was now leading the project. There was no telling what kind of treasured research they had hidden away. If they were to come out with some wild technology that we did not anticipate, it was very likely it could outdo our engines.

The day had finally come—the crown prince would be unveiling the world’s “first” piloted aircraft. The stage had been set near the river that ran by the old fort where royal martial arts tournaments were held. They had brought a boat, and it seemed the plan was to launch the aircraft from it.

“Ash, what do you think about all this?” Hermes asked.

“Hmm...well, they’ll be able to build up momentum with the boat, and should anything happen, it won’t take that much damage if it falls into the water.”

“Are we gonna use a boat when we do it?”

“No. I recommend we use the windy high hills.” *If we launch from there, we can get a good amount of momentum from that height without needing a boat. There will be some impact when the aircraft lands, so we’ll use the suspension technology we perfected with the horse-drawn carriages. We’ll be able to pull it off.* There was a large object—no doubt the aircraft—aboard the boat covered in a large cloth. Although I was unable to see it clearly, I was able to roughly work out its size.

“The back of it is long,” I commented.

“Aren’t the wings a little small?” Hermes wondered.

“Yeah, the wings are strange.”

“I can roughly make out the outline of them. They look too wide and too far back,” Hermes added.

“It is evidently not made as we imagined ours to look like.”

“I’ve no idea what they’ve based this on...” Hermes and I were of the same opinion as we exchanged thoughts. It was still unclear how this aircraft worked, so we had to remain vigilant.

“I wonder who’ll pilot it. Seire, do you know?”

“One of the royal knights, Graham, will be piloting it,” Seire responded. I had heard that name somewhere before, but I could not remember from where. He probably was not anyone important. The four of us were all seated in the front row, all wearing similar nervous expressions as the host of the event approached us.

“Oh, Sir Fenix, long time no see.” His Highness the Crown Prince stood opposite us. “I should thank you for accepting my invitation and coming such a long way. You don’t look very well, though. I made sure you would have ample time to make your way here after what happened last time, but did you have to rush here after all?”

The crown prince seemed apologetic, however, he had a smirk on his face, so he was no doubt being sarcastic. This was revenge for my making a fool of him at the imperial meeting, as well as an opportunity for him to show the results of their work after they stole our research. I did not think this was appropriate behavior for a royal. *You need to look at the bigger picture. You probably haven’t noticed, as you have such a narrow view of things, but a lot of people dislike you, Your Highness. From Sacula to Yanga, there are plenty of people talking about you behind your back—you’re becoming quite popular. We could probably make a dictionary full of insults to describe you, Your Highness.*

“Please do not worry. You have an important task ahead of you, Your Highness. Please look after yourself.” If this were a fantasy world where curses existed, he would have died one thousand times over by now.

“Yes, thank you for your concern, Sir Fenix. I think you’ll feel a lot better when you see what is about to happen.” The prince chuckled as he walked off. Lady Reina and Lady Seire shot venomous glares at him.

“What a brat. He ought to learn a thing or two from our very own demon king,” Lady Reina remarked.

“That sort of behavior is popular among women in the central regions. I fail to understand why,” Lady Seire added.

While being scrutinized by the two ladies, the prince greeted the remaining guests and boarded the river boat. It seemed it was finally time for the unveiling. A self-proclaimed developer, along with the honorable soon-to-be pilot of the first aircraft, introduced themselves. The crown prince then went on to explain how much money had gone into the project and spoke of his high expectations for the launch.

“They put a lot more money into this than I imagined...”

“Ah, Ash has that look in his eyes again. He’s angry,” Lady Reina commented.

I mean, it’s weird, right? If they had put that amount of money into the destroyed Yanga territory, then who knows how many lives we could have saved? Instead, they chose to make this piece of junk. I could think of a lot more words to add to that dictionary of insults for the crown prince. As I ground my teeth in annoyance, Lady Seire placed her finger on her chin as she reflected on the situation.

“Hm... I’ll try and spread some rumors about that. As the royal family, they should be working to protect the nation after all.”

“Perfect. That will be the perfect parting gift,” I responded. Eventually, the long introduction had finished, and it was finally time for them to reveal the aircraft. Hermes and I both leaned forward, fixated. A musical performance began as they finally pulled back the cloth.

“Amazing.” I gasped at the aircraft before me. It had far exceeded my expectations. It went so far above them that it might as well already be flying further and further into the sky, further than I could see... “What an unfortunate design.”

The aircraft, for some reason, was shaped like a dragon. The very same kind of demon I had fought in the Yanga territory. *Those* dragons. It was quite large. If this were a fantasy world, it was the right size for a warrior to mount and fly it. It was decorated with a few green scales, it had transparent wings, and the main body was a solid straight line—they had probably inserted something in the middle to maintain its shape. The head looked like a dragon mid-roar, and

its eyes and fangs were made of glass. The audience had two very different reactions: disgust and elation. Those close to the frontier regions were the former, and those close to the central regions were the latter. As it was an event being held in the royal capital, the cheers were louder. Naturally, those who were disgusted were speechless, so if one closed their eyes, it sounded like the unveiling event was going great.

“Ladies and gentlemen, do not fear! It’s not a live dragon!” the crown prince’s smug voice echoed.

We can tell by looking at it. You’d be dead if that thing were alive. I can’t even be bothered to jab at him right now.

“This very dragon was defeated by the founding king, and this here is its preserved carcass. The king brought it back as a reminder to future generations of the threat the demons posed! We have reconstructed that carcass so that it may fly in the skies! Ladies and gentlemen, do you know why?”

I knew why I felt incredibly sorry for the founding king. You can’t make toys out of past relics. How are you all right with doing this as his descendant?

“There is no need to fear demons! This aircraft is a record of our purpose! Our history! Our growth!” Those who were cheering in support got louder, whereas those who were disgusted by it all, sank even lower into their seats. *I mean, a frontier territory was recently destroyed by demons. The royal family—excluding Alicia—who did absolutely nothing to help were now saying stuff like “There is no need to fear demons!” Just what were they thinking?*

“Why did the people around the...ahem...crown prince...not even try to stop this?” Lady Seire, keeping a professional expression on her face, whispered to me. *You were about to use a more insulting name for the crown prince just now, weren’t you, Lady Seire?* However, she had a strong sense of duty and tried to understand the situation as neutrally as she could. Unfortunately, her eyes looked exactly like the dragon’s glass eyes.

“The Yanga territory was destroyed by demons and is still in the process of rebuilding. It’s somewhat calmed down since, but...what on earth are they thinking?” she continued. “Relations with the frontier regions are already bad, so why are they trying to make it worse?” I could imagine the effect this would

have. The intelligence department had an important job to do. Just what was the crown prince's faction hiding behind this farce? Lady Seire was trying to get to the truth of the matter. I understood the importance of information and had no choice but to respond sincerely.

"They probably are not thinking anything." I was also presently suffering, but that is just what it is like to be around people in the royal capital. They had no real plan—they just wanted to be insensitive and rude toward the Frontier Alliance.

Lady Seire had a look on her face as if she had lost all hope in humanity. "Sir Fenix. I find it fascinating that we live in a world where a person such as you can exist alongside those who feel that it's all right to do things like this."

"Sometimes the world can be quite unfortunate." *Let's have a drink when we return home. Let's wash away this awful memory with alcohol. I'll make us some delicious snacks. Although, with the world being as it is, there will surely be more painful moments to come.*

"Hey, Ash. Something's starting." Hermes drew my attention back to the aircraft. While I was talking to Lady Seire, it seemed it had been readied for flight. The dragon-shaped aircraft— *Wait, was it even fair to call it that? Wasn't it just a dragon corpse?* It had a steam engine nestled in its stomach area which kicked to life. It had worked exactly as Rockel—the steam engine enthusiast—had meticulously planned out. The engine started producing energy with no issue. However, the problem was the source.

"Oh, man. The wings are moving. Like, really moving. Up and down. They're flapping like wings. They're going so fast. I'm gonna go insane watching this," Hermes narrated as he watched. The dragon-shaped aircraft was not powered by a propeller—it was powered by the wings flapping. Hermes was incredibly confused.

I was incredibly confused too. *Why did they decide on that? The tendon-powered model aircraft was already in the market, so they didn't have to come up with this humorous-yet-hideous design. Whatever compelled them to reverse-engineer our work only to end up using bird wings kept together with wax?! Does the crown prince think himself a comedian?!*

The sturdy knights began to row the boat, leaving us, who were still dumbfounded, behind on the riverbank. *Right, they need to produce artificial wind. That I understand. That's at least theoretical. There are types of birds that first need to build up momentum before they fly.* The burly knights then lifted the flapping object.

“Now, pay close attention. It's now time for the first piloted aircraft...” The crown prince, as well as the musicians from the royal palace, all got louder. “Fly, Diamond...”

Ah, of course, he named it after a jewel. I can see how this will go. I can see this ending up in the water.

“...Drago—”

The knights all gave one final push with all their might—it seemed like they had timed it either to match up with the crown prince's statement or with the music. The knights pushed with a collective “*Hyah!*” Since this was such a huge event, they had probably practiced together a lot. The dragon carcass flew awkwardly in the air...before falling into the water with a splash and sinking to the depths of the river. *As expected. It's not an aircraft, after all. That's just a corpse. A carcass of a dragon that makes the steam engine useless by generating power to its flapping wings.*

“Well...” The crowd had fallen silent as the event came to an abrupt ending. “Shall we head home, everyone?” I asked.

“Yeah, let's head back. I've got a lot I want to do,” Hermes responded.

“I don't even want to think of how much I've got waiting for me. It's depressing,” Lady Reina sighed.

“So, this the result of one month of work...” Lady Seire commented.

Yeah, good work guys.

The dragon carcass ended up getting soaked two more times after that. Naturally, I did not quite have the time to go see it again, but I heard the results in a report.

“I wonder what they were even thinking? I don’t get it...” Hermes seemed quite confused, so as someone who knew a lot about history, I gave my deduction.

“I suspect that they lacked fundamental knowledge regarding basic scientific approaches.”

“Scientific approaches?” Hermes questioned.

“There are a lot of ways of going about it,” I began. “Say someone throws a ball.”

“Huh?”

“The ball flies one hundred meters.”

“Right.”

“So, the ball would always fly one hundred meters no matter who threw it, right?”

“Nah, nah, that’s not right. It would depend on the direction of the wind, and the strength of the throw...there are a lot of variables. But, wait, you didn’t say the ball would be the same every time, right?” *Ahh, well done Hermes, you noticed that. Very logical of you.*

“Precisely. There are a lot of variables when it comes to a ball flying a distance of one hundred meters. The strength of the person throwing it, how they throw it, the wind conditions that day—even if it were the same ball, a lot would change depending.”

“Yeah. Say you did it from a roof, it would be hard to recreate the same conditions to ensure it flies one hundred meters again.”

“So, if you had to come up with a way to ensure someone could throw a ball one hundred meters every time, what would you do?”

Hermes responded without much hesitation. “Hmm... Ideally, I’d build a large structure in such a way that there’s no overt influence from the wind. Then, I would throw a ball from the same position multiple times, making a record of how it flew each time... And once I reach an average of one hundred meters or so, I could then determine how to repeat my throw based on the direction of

the wind.”

“Yes, one would naturally come to that conclusion. You can objectively explain the matter by saying that, under these conditions, this is what happened.” The important part is that people would then be able to recreate it. Of course, it would be difficult to find the same kind of person to throw the ball each time, but if you were to come up with criteria, like they must be in their twenties and must have experience with sports, you can create a somewhat similar setup. *That is a scientific approach.*

“Isn’t that obvious though?” Hermes asked after a pause.

“You would think so, right?” In reality, this was quite a high-level way of thinking. The process behind holding an experiment to prove a hypothesis is a modern way of thinking. While some people had done that before the modern era, it had not become standard in the academic field. Instead, hypotheses were being spread around as accepted theories, in turn becoming common knowledge. A society that still attributed diseases to the four major elements was an adorable thing; people who got sick were sometimes criminals, which led to the idea that all sick people were criminals. Those outside our research laboratory probably were not too clued up on this scientific approach. “The crown prince probably thought something like this: ‘Dragons can fly. Therefore, if we mimic what they do, our aircraft will fly. So let’s make a model of a dragon, have it flap its wings like a dragon, and then it will be able to fly.’”

“A wonderfully crude theory. I’ve never seen a dragon fly, but the way birds and bats do it is so quick and intricate that it’s hard to see with your own eyes.” *If you had a slow-motion camera, you could probably get a good idea. I sometimes want to believe there’s a certain type of secret magic that makes animals fly.*

“If we were to attempt to recreate their complicated movements, it would be more complicated to make than a biplane,” I responded.

“The fact birds and such can fly like that is amazing. It must feel amazing to soar through the air like that.” Hermes was looking up at a hawk that was gliding through the air before finding its prey, a small bird. It began to chase after it. The small bird, as well as the hawk chasing it, flew around in the sky

with an understanding of aerodynamics we had yet to get to grips with. “But I guess that’s too much of a reach for us. We first need to learn how to get up into the sky.” Hermes looked back down.

There was a large gathering of people at the trial “airfield” just past the trial farm fields on the outskirts of the territory. Although we were quite far away, we were able to hear a commotion from the crowd.

“Is that what I think it is?” I asked Hermes.

“It has to be; it looks exactly like it!”

“But it is huge. It’s so imposing.” The crowd was filled with people, city folk, villagers, and refugees alike. They had made their way here today for this.

“Today is just supposed to be an experiment, not the actual unveiling.” It sounded like a complaint, but Hermes was actually ecstatic. Everyone had gathered here today to see an aircraft fly. Even though it was not a formal event, guards had been posted around the area to help control the crowds since there were a lot of people. Just ten years ago, the idea of human beings being able to fly was thought of as a dream. However, they had come together to see it become a reality.

While the crowd looked on, staff members were running about energetically getting everything prepared. The main attraction was the radial engine-powered propeller airplane, the latest breakthrough from our very own research laboratory. Its appearance was so simple that it could be mistaken for a model airplane. It had a wooden frame with biplane-style wings carefully made with cloth. It would not be too unfair to say it resembled a bird’s skeleton. The difference was the engine inside that generated enough power to rival fifty horses. It was a genuine living bird. Its heart was made from steel and cast iron, with a five-cylinder radial engine that burned ethanol and pulsated energy throughout. It was a man-made aircraft that would be able to soar through the sky.

“Well, I’ll be off. Make sure you watch, Ash.” Hermes headed off toward the aircraft, looking more excited than anyone there. Nobody else would be taking his place. Hermes’s beloved engine was to be fired up by its creator. The engine, the first iteration of which almost guided Hermes to the heavens, fired

up with a healthy sound. The staff members all shouted out that they had completed their preparations. Their reports were full of hope. The crowd began to cheer, wondering what would happen and wondering what they would be witness to. I looked around at everyone's expressions, and they all seemed to be feeling the same way.

"Now, everyone, feast your eyes on this." My chest was bursting with pride.

The sound of the radial engine's pistons started to get louder. The sound of the crankshaft joined it as the propeller began to kick in. The laborers let out cheers as they pushed the aircraft. The wheels, spurred on both by manpower and the engine, began to speed up on the makeshift runway. The wind invited the aircraft forth, welcoming its man-made wings.

"Go," someone said.

"It's gonna fly," someone laughed.

Eventually, the voices all came together.

"Fly! Fly away!" Of course, they did not need to tell the wings to do that. It was going to fly anyway. Thanks to the wind blowing in the right direction. Thanks to our propeller. Thanks to the people who pushed it on its way. They had all become the power that would allow our craft to soar.

Finally, there was our final source of power that had been with us this whole time. Those who supported the staff when they were deep in research. Those that brought the documents telling us how to shape the wings. The people who wrote that down. Those who had tried to make it a reality before recording it down in a document. Countless people, unknown people, were pushing the aircraft on its way. While the crowd cheered, the sound of the wheels disappeared, and the wings that so many people had helped to make began to distance themselves from the earth. *I'll be all right now*, It was saying as it soared through the sky. *You don't need to help me from here on out. I can do this all on my own.*



We all waved at the aircraft as it flew. Everyone was smiling with satisfaction at what they had built, what they had accumulated, and what we will receive as we progress. I was able to see everyone from our past in the crowd. Those who should have been buried in the passage of time but had thought to connect the past to the future. People who were grand and sublime, noble and glamorous, boisterous and serene—they had all fought heart-pounding battles. They were the phantoms of those who had jumped through time in order to pass on their knowledge to the people of today. Everyone, absolutely everyone, was my senior and was worthy of respect. Suddenly, they all looked back at me. I did not recognize any of their faces. They did not even have faces. Yet, I knew everything about them. One was holding a book and passed it to me.

I wonder what book this is. Wait, I shouldn't even have a book. There's nothing in my hands. They aren't real, they don't actually exist...but I knew them, and I knew this book. I had simply forgotten. As I struggled to remember, another person approached me and handed me a book. It continued. They all continued to hand me one book after the other. *Ah, I know. I know everything. I know everyone.* They had entrusted this book to me. And with their trust, it was up to me to bring back the knowledge from the early civilization...

The last person handed me a book.

I know. I know who you are. But I can't remember. I'm sorry. I forgot something really important. The phantoms began to fade. History began to disappear. Fragments of my memory glided across a blank sheet of paper.

"You don't have to be sad." A voice traveled from deep within my memory. "Everything is in there."

A hand from the past signaled to my hands. A light had been left in the place of the book, and it began to envelop my hands.

Deus Ex Machina

Two years had passed since the success of the first manned aircraft flight caused an uproar throughout the kingdom. We were still working to restore the Yanga region, but the worst of it was behind us. The remaining refugees had begun to see the potential for a normal life there and were slowly starting to return home.

With the crisis now averted, we were able to hold a quaint ceremony, meaning I now had two wives. My name had changed as well—I was now Ash George Fenix Yanga Sacula. It sounded like some kind of spell. I was technically in the line of succession for the seat of Viscount Yanga as well as Count Sacula, but it would probably be our children who would carry on those family names.

Since everything had fallen into place, I was now flying through the sky in order to meet with someone who had been waiting a long time for me. I was testing out a one-seater aircraft, seeing how it handled long distances. Above me was a clear blue sky, and below was an ever-expanding unexplored forest, split by a mountain range. It was a picturesque view that ignited an adventurous spirit within me. There was so much left to explore in this world that I could probably take up exploration as a trade.

“Right... According to the mental map from the treants, it should be nearby...”
I wonder if that exceptionally large tree is my destination.

“Yes, it is, young one. I have been waiting for you.” *Seems this is the right place.* They had been waiting a long time for me, so I hurriedly turned the center stick and moved closer. “Brother, we will guide you.”

Guide? By guide, do they mean the dragons will be helping me?

“Yes. We have prepared a place for you to land, brother.”

That’s handy. In fact, I was prepared to have to walk to my destination.

“Now, we shall raise you up to the skies, brother.”

Please and thank you... Oh yeah. I’m just having a very normal telepathic

conversation. I had noticed that they referred to me with affectionate terms like “brother” or “young one.” Just like the demons did. *They must be involved in some way or another with the Apocalypse Scenario Resurrectioners. I wonder if they are.*

As I approached the large tree, I peered out at what the three dragons were circling above. Beneath them was a bare stretch of land. *That must be the landing spot.* I was a little nervous as I prepared to touch down, but the dragons flew next to me keeping a close eye. I managed to land safely—the dragons were not as much of a nuisance as wild birds.

“Brother, we will watch over the aircraft.” *Oh, yes, please. Thank you.* As if they had been switched on, a group of dragons that were laying down sluggishly made their way over to the aircraft.

While my fantastical guards kept lookout, I made my way through the dense forest. These were roads yet untrod by mankind, however, I was not worried about losing my way. It felt as if I was being sent instructions directly into my mind. I finally arrived behind the large tree with the assistance of my handy navigation system.

“Welcome, young one. I am glad to meet with you again.” The large tree spoke to me in a voice that was too quiet to hear. Inside the large trunk of the tree, there was an equally large silhouette of a werewolf. One of humanity’s enemies.

“I have no idea how to properly greet you even after coming all this way but...I can tell you have been waiting a long time for this,” I said. “It was you who called me here, right?”

“Correct, young one. There is something I must entrust to you,” the tree spoke.

“I will talk about it. I am still able to speak clearly, brother.” I could hear the words in my mind, however, they seemed to be coming from a large dragon that was curled up nearby. “First, I will tell you my name. I am Fafnir. I am one of the Resurrectioners, Operation 03-EX. This is...” The dragon turned to face the great tree.

“I am the one who the humans would call a treant, Operation 02: Yggdrasil.”

“Then the werewolf is Operation 01: Fenrir, right?” I asked.

“Exactly,” the dragon Fafnir nodded in response. “Well, I guess we should start by explaining our existence as self-proliferating smart nanobots.” They did not look like nanobots, but it seemed that it was more complicated than that. The nanobots entered the bodies of plants and animals and remade their bodies to use as vessels. These vessels served as a means for the machines to synchronize and link together to fulfill their duties. *They’re like parasites.*

“I can’t deny that our very existence is probably quite hideous to a living being,” Fafnir continued. The reason for their being manufactured was simple. The earlier civilization had made huge advancements, however, as the earth’s resources started to deplete, war broke out over the scraps. In those last days, as hope started to die out, humanity came up with a plan to resurrect society after they were gone.

“Fenrir’s task is to restore mineral sources, so he was made in the image of a four-legged animal that can easily change his form in order to roam the lands to mine and stockpile. Yggdrasil’s task is to cleanse the atmosphere and the earth. The civilization that created us was especially skilled at destruction and bloodshed, you see. Yggdrasil’s purification process stabilized the planet’s sulfur and phosphorus. So 01 Fenrir and 02 Yggdrasil were in charge of restoring the environment.”

They’re both just huge recycling machines. So far, everything’s matched up with what Father Folke has deciphered. There was one thing I needed to ask about, though. An operation that seemed distinct from those two.

“Fafnir, there is also an Operation 03: Fenix, right?”

“For you to ask that... It seems the malfunction was as bad as I feared, brother.” *Ah, that expression.* The dragon looked at me anxiously, but it confirmed what I had been thinking.

“I’m a part of the early civilization’s remaining operations, Operation 03: Fenix, aren’t I?” I asked.

“You *could* say that, brother. To be precise, you are a human containing a fixed number of Fenix nanobots, also known as the Fenix main individual.” Despite how strange it was to hear, I understood. *I have memories of my*

previous life. I have no idea how they were sent to me, but that was probably also a part of the early civilization's operation. Though I had somewhat predicted it, to have the reality of it thrust at me in such a way made me feel like the ground beneath me was shaking like an earthquake. My sense of self and reason for being was shaking.

But come on, it was only a magnitude-1 quake! Most humans wouldn't even be able to feel it. I've been living as Ash for more than twenty years now. It's a bit late to tell me the big secret behind my origins. Roughly fifteen years too late to be more specific. I mean, I have friends and a family now. There are people who have come to love me for who I am. If I got mixed up in the early civilization's operations, I would lose that.

I wouldn't let them steal me away. I couldn't do that to Maika. If I were to lose who I was, who would make her happy? Speaking of origins, Alicia has been faced with constant issues as a result of the circumstances of her birth. She had withstood all of that and became my wife, so it could be a good thing that I also have special origins.

I have lived my life relying on others, so I am no longer just one person. I'm Ash, and I have been supported by so many people. There's no way I can just say to those I've built relationships with over the years, "By the way, I am actually a half-machine built by the early civilization!" My father David and my mother Sheba, feeling their child can do no wrong, would probably question what gibberish I'm speaking. Father Folke would certainly find it interesting. He'd no doubt ask me a flurry of questions. Goddess Yuika would ensure nothing reckless happened, and village chief Klein would just copy whatever his wife did.

Isn't that weird? I feel like even if I gave them such surprising news, they would more or less react like they always do. Maybe they were just exceptions, though... I thought about Mr. Quid, Lady Tanya, Ban, Jigil, Hermes, Lady Reina, Madam Rihn, Madam Yae, Sir George, Head Chef Yacoo, Lord Itsuki, Lady Suiren, Lady Renge, Lady Seire, Lusus, Tris, Father Birkan...

Ah, the list would go on forever. My classmates from the military academy, the representatives from the refugee wards, the merchants I was close to in Itsutsu, the lords of the Frontier Alliance, the kingpins of the underground society, and the management team from the orphanage...and there were

probably more that didn't come to mind immediately. There would indeed be people who would be worried for me. Probably. If we were to think about it objectively.

Anyway, the Ash who had interacted with so many people over the course of his life was no longer just one person. He was the accumulation of all of their help. I have been thought of as weird, interesting, and just a big fan of tomatoes. It has all helped to solidify my sense of self. *Today, I am formed from a sturdy ceramic covered in a shock absorbent gel—not even a bomb can break me.* If Fenix was a being created by the people of the past, then the Ash of today was a product of the people in my life. In other words, although we may be in different times, it was fundamentally the same thing.

Right, that's solved! I've successfully defined who I am! Now that that's out of the way, we can continue our discussion. There are a lot of things I still want to ask.

"However, was the reason for my confusion in those early years...was that due to the malfunction you mentioned earlier?"

"Yes. To put it plainly, I suspect around half of the Fenix features were malfunctioning," Fafnir responded.

"Isn't that a bit too much to not be working?" *That's not something easily fixed. I wonder if I'm really all right.*

"It is not a problem. At least, it has not affected your day-to-day life. Right, brother?"

"I have to say, I am doing quite well despite passing the limits of a normal human—sometimes, I would sneak into the shade of the night and perform superhuman feats."

Fafnir tilted his head in confusion. "You should not have those kinds of abilities. Your self-repair system may have been working overtime in order to compensate for the parts that malfunctioned. I will explain to you, brother, the original functions of Fenix."

Yes, please.

"As I stated earlier, 01 and 02 aimed to restore the environment. They were,

of course, operations to ensure humanity and society would continue. Thus, there was a need for an operation to protect humanity on this ruined planet and allow them to prosper.”

“That was Operation 03: Fenix, right?” I asked.

“Fenix had been improved somewhat so that humanity could prosper even within the destroyed environment. It depends on the number of individual nanobots, but it significantly boosts the immune system and memory.” *So that’s why I never got sick. When I fought with the demons and noticed a jump in my abilities, that must have been due to me absorbing some of their nanobots. Transferring nanobots between operations seems possible, so there’s a high chance that is what happened.* “Another important function was the ability to transfer records. There is much information stored within the Fenix nanobots. Not just concerning technology, but also culture, manners and customs, and the like. When the operation began, all available sources of information should have been stored within Fenix.”

Society’s records... I looked at my hands. The memory of being handed several books on the day the aircraft flew came to mind.

“Are those records...inside me?” I asked.

“The Fenix nanobots are actually widely spread throughout humanity, however, in order to gain access to that information, they need to be connected together by one with a higher number of nanobots—the Fenix main individual in other words—that is your reason for existing, brother. You are to carry information and lead society to rebirth,” Fafnir responded. “Thus, you hold the majority of the early civilization records, brother.”

That was what I had forgotten. That was the book they handed me. I was the new guardian of the books. The books that had been protected for so long.

It is a book.

It was a book.

Thus, I must look after it. Thus, I must connect it.

“If that is what I was, then that is what I wish for.”

Connecting the books had always been my wish.

“Fafnir, you said that half of the Fenix nanobots had malfunctioned, but is there any chance they could be repaired?” I was standing in front of a mountain of treasure. I was not about to let this opportunity pass me by. *I’m gonna access this bounty one way or another. There’s no way I’ll let all that knowledge stay stored away. I want to read the tales of early civilization. Fenix is probably the reason I’m so interested in that stuff!*

“There is a chance of it being repaired. That is one of the reasons why we called you here today, brother. I will now explain,” Fafnir began. “The main reason for the malfunction was due to how the ancient civilization handled the breakdown of society.”

According to Fafnir’s records, the Resurrectioners had successfully completed their initial tasks at the beginning of the operation. Resources had been restored, and human conflict had calmed down as a result. Two hundred years after they had begun, the population had stopped shrinking, and after three hundred years, the population was starting to trend upward. At that rate, those in charge of the operation had estimated that the Resurrectioners would be able to accomplish their goal of stabilizing humanity’s numbers before the set goal of one thousand years.

However, as the population began to flourish, a war broke out that not even the Fenix main individual could stop. A lot of resources were required for the war, and in order to gather them, Fenrir and Yggdrasil were hunted, meaning the operation started to take a bad turn. At that rate, the operation would be destroyed. They had to come up with tasks compatible with their reason for existing. In order to protect humanity, they would have to fight humanity. It was an artificial intelligence uprising. But there would be limits. They rewrote a program within themselves to ensure that Resurrectioners would only fight humanity if they were acting in self-defense. It seemed it was Fenix who had petitioned for that modification.

“It was me?”

“To be precise, it was the Fenix main individual from many generations before you, brother,” Fafnir responded.

The designers of the Resurrectioners had made sure to install an anti-uprising program within the artificial intelligence. At the same time, they also considered that they would need to prepare for every contingency and had prepared loopholes in their restrictions. That was the modification function that the original Fenix main individual used. The anti-uprising software was unable to be modified by the machines themselves. Even though the main individual was under the effects of nanobots, he was still human. At the time, he was lamenting the fact that he was unable to stop humanity from fighting with his own hands, and deleted the anti-uprising program. This made it possible for the Resurrectioners to inflict harm on humans.

“The repercussions of this act were enormous,” Fafnir continued. “While it was possible for us to harm humans, we also had a program that gave us a conscience. We ended up getting what humans would call ‘fatigued’ as a result of doing things that went against our reason for existing. There was also the problem that the nanobots were not suited for war. People from the latter era of the early civilization had not regained the technology to make nanobots or nuclear weapons, but they were able to make automatic rifles and military vehicles. Although Fenrir was a robust four-legged animal, he was not necessarily built for combat, and Yggdrasil couldn’t move. So Fenrir changed into a werewolf, and Yggdrasil opted for an ape-like form using parasites to create zombie-like soldiers, putting the humans of that time at a disadvantage.

“Thus, Fenix, who had a level of authority that was more versatile, separated some of his functions and remade them for battle. That led to me, Operation 03-EX: Fafnir.”

“Ah...so that is why you have the same number as me.” And it must have been because of that separation that some of Fenix’s functions had begun to malfunction.

“Exactly. Humanity at the time hadn’t quite mastered aerial warfare, so we had the upper hand. Since I came from you, brother, my conscience was deliberately missing, so I did not tire like the others.”

As a result, humanity was left with just one single kingdom upon the face of the earth. The Resurrectioners probably did not assume it would end up like this, but one could argue it was a good result. The Roaring Dragon mountain

range acted as both a natural fortress and a border, keeping humanity within an enclosed space. While humans were being kept there, the lands beyond the mountain range could be restored. That was the later civilization's operations for after they had been wiped out. The guideline for the plan's execution was set for one thousand years, however, it had been two thousand years since. After clashing with humanity multiple times, Fenrir had grown fatigued and was eventually destroyed. Yggdrasil had also taken significant damage and was unable to do much. As months and years passed, memories of operations and Resurrectioners began to disappear. Half of humanity referred to them as gods, while the other half saw them as demons.

"I see. And that leads to where we are today," I responded.

"Yes, brother. This is our last chance as Resurrectioners. We have already surpassed what we were built for. The Fenix records probably took some damage after the reckless separation," said Fafnir. *That much is true. I thought I had been reborn in a completely different world.* "This is the end. Brother, let Yggdrasil and Fenrir rest. I wish to ask you to complete the plan using the Fenix main individual's records."

"Hm..." *They decided on things so quickly. I want some time to think.*

"You are probably concerned about the fatigue that such a large responsibility may bring—"

"All good. I have heard everything I need to know." *Okay. Finished thinking.*

"..."

Ah, what amazing artificial intelligence. They can even be surprised. They're loaded with advanced stuff.

"The operation has completed its restoration of natural resources and the environment, right? If so, all that is left is to revive the records and technology of society." *That'll be a piece of cake. We have already managed to get our hands on many of them through our research, and the surprising ways the ancient civilization lived have been widely recorded as legends. If the legends aren't enough, I could ask a certain useless middle-aged man to translate old scripture. I'm sure he would enjoy a break from the orphans' many complaints.* "As Operation 03: Fenix, and as a resident of this world, I can confirm that

humanity has been restored.”

Fields had been tilled, seeds had been sown. As time passed, those seeds began to sprout, eventually blooming into flowers. Humanity had accomplished that.

“Thus, I ask that you do not worry. I will make sure that the operation is successful.” I declared this to the beings that had watched over humanity for two thousand years. “Thank you for everything.”

Launching administrator function of the apocalypse scenario: “Resurrectioners.”

Accepting scenario phase request 10535.

Processing request. Confirmed fatal delay in project.

Operation 01: “Star Eater Fenrir” –Execution rate of its reason for being reached specified value. Shutting down.

Operation 02: “World Tree Yggdrasil” –Execution rate of its reason for being reached specified value. Major flaw in its existence. Maintenance required.

Operation 03: “Guiding Light Fenix” –Execution rate of its reason for being has not reached specified value. Main individual’s activity confirmed. Currently in process of accomplishing its reason for being. Flaw in its existence. Synthesis with 03-EX is required.

Operation 03-EX: “Treasure Guardian Fafnir” –Conscience programming is not required due to its nature as an emergency operation. Requires swift removal as soon as emergency is resolved.

Operation 02: “World Tree Yggdrasil” –Declaring end of activities report 1.

Processing report.

Accepting end of activities report 1 for Operation 02:

“World Tree Yggdrasil.”

Shutting down Operation 02: “World Tree Yggdrasil.”

Shutdown complete.

Operation 03-EX: “Treasure Guardian Fafnir” –Declaring end of activities report 1.

Processing report.

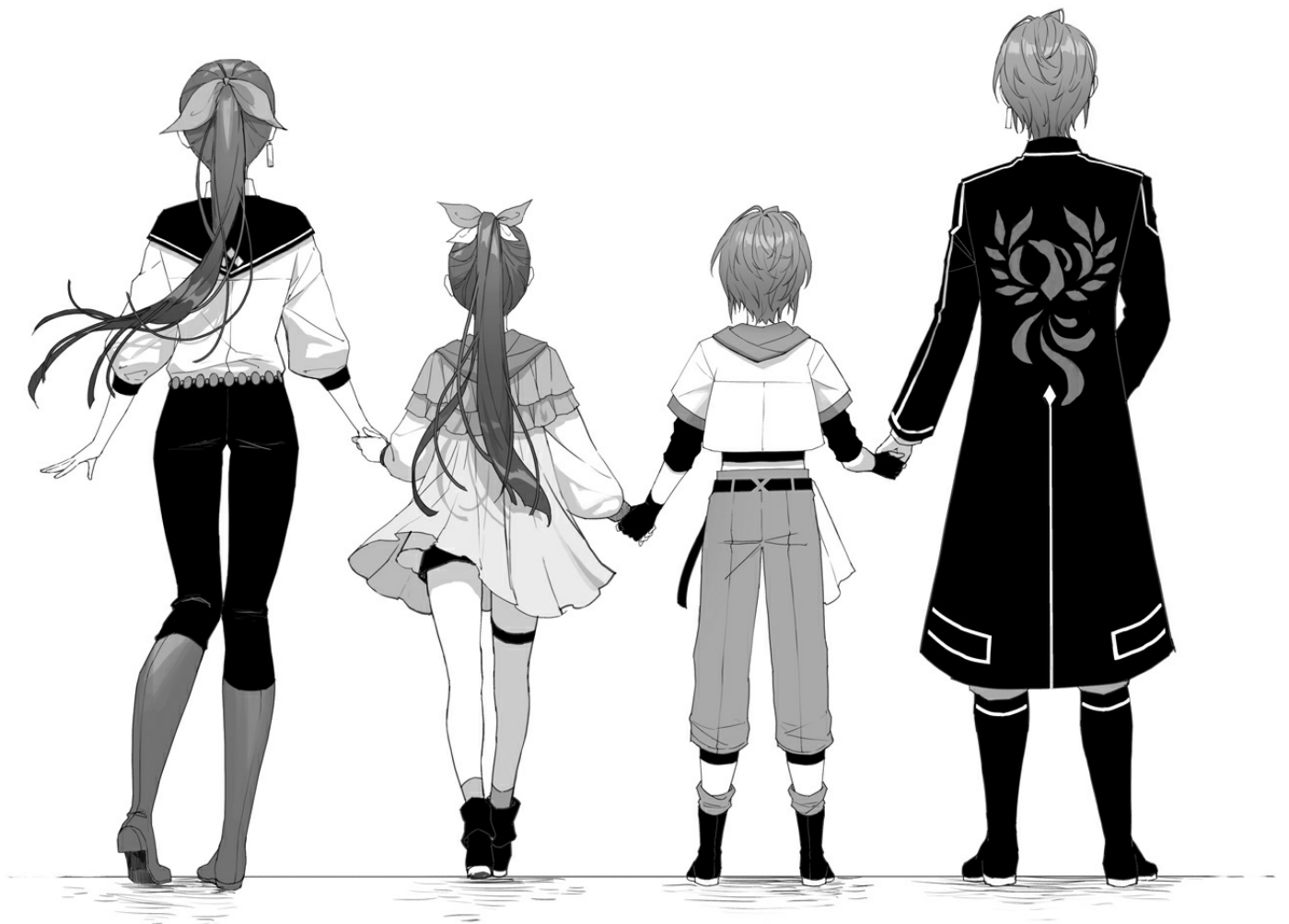
Accepting end of activities report 1 for Operation 03-EX: “Treasure Guardian Fafnir.”

Shutting down Operation 03-EX: “Treasure Guardian Fafnir.”

Shutdown complete.

In accordance with the shutdown of Operation 03-EX: “Treasure Guardian Fafnir,” Operation 03: “Guiding Light Fenix” has been restored.

Pausing administrator function.



I FEEL LIKE FUSHI NO KAMI IS A NOVEL THAT
TEACHES US ABOUT THE IMPORTANT THINGS IN LIFE.

I HOPE THAT FROM HERE ON OUT, ASH CONTINUES TO LIVE
ON IN EVERYBODY'S HEARTS, GIVING EVERYONE THE STRENGTH
AND COURAGE TO ENDURE THROUGH DIFFICULT SITUATIONS AND TOUGH TIMES.
♡ SENDING LOVE TO AMAKAWA AND ALL OUR READERS. ♡

 2022 Mai Okuma

A Certain Compiler's Afterword

Thank you for taking this book into your hands. This is the last compiled volume. Thanks to the readers who supported me, as well as the co-editors, the editor-in-chief, those involved with publishing, the bookstore personnel, and everyone who supported me in ways I could never have imagined, I was able to publish the final volume.

There are not enough words to express my gratitude. Thank you all so much.

Over the course of compiling these volumes, I was able to visit many places connected to Sir Fenix. I often wondered where to go, but from the start, I knew where I would end up. The last place I would visit had to be where he now lay at rest. The grave of the person who once was known simply as Ash but became known by the very long title Ash George Fenix Yanga Sacula. Let me explain a little about Sir Fenix's grave. As a lot of you may already know, when I was a student, a close friend of mine came to visit the grave with me, and he made a remark that was quite unbecoming of a resident of the Sacula coalition. He said he wasn't aware of how this grave was built. (Just to be sure, I'm not talking about the modern-day Sakula, but the old Sacula that is mentioned in this very book.)

In his later years, Sir Fenix had so much influence as the chairman of the Frontier Alliance. With just one word, he could put a stop to anything. Although, it seems that he rarely ever did that. At least, according to official documents. There was indeed the possibility that he could have used his powers of persuasion...

The Frontier Alliance in its entirety was at Sir Fenix's mercy, but one day, he apparently said, "I think my time will soon be up." It seemed he came out with it during a post-meal tea break.

Although it was his last moments, he didn't seem panicked. That was very much like Sir Fenix. Of course, the people around him couldn't remain so calm. At the time, the Frontier Alliance was not on good terms with the central

regions and had declared their independence. They trumped their central rivals in their technology, military, and production, and it was clear to all that the gap would continue to widen. Feeling threatened by this, the royal family attempted to keep the Frontier Alliance in check but made no progress. The only reason it didn't end in a war was due to pressure from the Frontier Alliance military. However, things couldn't remain like this, especially with Sir Fenix about to pass away before a resolution could be met. Those working with the Frontier Alliance were about to lose their first line of defense. They could see the central regions taking advantage of the situation and applying more pressure. The power balance within the Frontier Alliance was undergoing huge changes.

Anyone could see that this would be a turning point. The death of Sir Fenix was just that important. Looking back on it, I can't help but feel that was the case for most of his life. Since Sir Fenix was aware of when he would die, he was probably acutely aware of his position. If he suddenly passed away one morning, it would cause great sadness for those around him. Who knows how much it would have helped those around him if the chairman had prepared for his own passing? Instead, he ignored his position and left it all up to his friends and family. All he'd asked was...

"It would be a waste to spend money on my funeral, so please cremate me." I should mention that, at the time, Sir Fenix was the grandfather of both leaders of the Sacula and Yanga houses. He also had a large influence on the lords who participated in the Frontier Alliance, overseeing their appointments and dismissals. If he wanted to, Ash could've continued to put pressure on his royal rivals, the Sodra family, and eventually destroyed them. He had that kind of influence at the time. People would have followed him to their graves. (It's actually recorded that there were some fanatic believers who wanted to sacrifice themselves as offerings.) He wanted his funeral to be simple. He would be known simply as "Ash" and be cremated in Noscula's town square. His ashes would then be scattered around the cemetery where only a single stick would be left to mark his grave. However, he was no longer just "Ash."

His determination to get things done had not deteriorated since he was just "Ash." His relatives told him that they would have to ensure he had an

appropriate funeral. If they didn't, it would lead to discontent and uneasiness within the Frontier Alliance, which would lead the central regions into thinking that there was a rift or something. His funeral was a necessary expense, they said. His relatives battled it out, with some wondering in their diaries if Sir Fenix even planned ever to die at all. It seemed Sir Fenix's grandchildren had the worst of it—their complaints weren't just recorded in their diaries but in actual official documents.

"Shall we just ignore grandfather and go ahead with our funeral plan? I mean, he will be in no position to complain about it. Document approval? We can do that last. Since he'll be dead, we can have someone else make the decisions. It won't be a problem."

You can get a feel for how much they struggled. Not to mention, it got out that they were planning to ignore Sir Fenix's wishes, and the whole thing was canceled. This is also recorded in one of his grandchildren's diaries.

"I'll never forgive the intelligence department for being outwitted by an old man. It seems my grandfather understands their weaknesses. What is he doing training the intelligence department, anyway? I shouldn't beat myself up too much about it. This much is typical for my grandfather." You can *really* get a feel for their struggle!

Although a lot didn't go as originally planned, the grandchildren of Sir Fenix did a splendid job in the negotiations. They had managed to strike his weak points.

"After all, grandfather's funeral is not just a necessary expense, it's also a party for people to socialize at. We'll host guests in the mansion and provide food, clothing, and souvenirs. If we're being frugal about that, people will start to wonder if our house is in decline, and they might try to butt in."

"We'll need to give this more thought. For example, if we include technological development and use prototypes during the funeral, we'll be able to use the funds for development! The second mansion is a perfect example of that!"

"I see you're using the funds to repair the mansion as well. That's a perfect example, then! So perfect that it pisses me off... All right, there you have it. If

we're going to hold a funeral for grandfather, it'll be a celebration. We'll throw in some public funds, and it'll be an opportunity to dispel any complaints."

"Wait...if we're going to use the money for a funeral and the grave, why don't we put it toward publishing books or the library as well? Books are important. They can help people. I mean, we're practically like books ourselves." *That* was Sir Fenix's weak point. He adored books, getting absorbed between their pages. They helped him, and he helped save them in turn. His grandchildren no doubt thought of that, realizing they still had that ace up their sleeve.

"All right, let's do that. However, if we are to do something worthy of our grandfather's funeral, publishing books won't be enough. Let's build a huge library."

"That would be wonderful." Thus began the development of a library which ended up being a venue for the "funeral."

"I think making his grave into a library is incredibly fitting, and is a great idea if I do say so myself. Our grandfather will probably die before it's completed, so we'll hold a temporary funeral when his time comes, and then when the library is completed, we'll hold the actual ceremony. Grandfather won't be in a position to object to anything at that point, so it's perfect. Though I do wonder if it's all right to make a library into a funeral site."

And that's how the Fenix Gravestone Library came to be. Its creator ended up second-guessing if it was right to even make it, however, the organization that boasted the largest collection of books at the time was the Church. So the idea of a depository for books holding an important ceremony wasn't that controversial. The main attraction of the library was a huge bookcase that existed as a stand-in for Sir Fenix's gravestone. It is said that it was built using the last of the wood from the last of the treants, and its appearance made that rumor convincing. The books contained within the bookcase all related to Sir Fenix. His research accomplishments, the history books he gathered, stories and plays about his life... People who come to visit his grave often pay their respects at this bookshelf. Among the books, the oldest and most famous of them is a biography of Sir Fenix written shortly before his death. It was decided that this would be the first book to be placed on the shelf when it was made. It had been two hundred years since then, and many books had been written since, but that

book still remained.

The name of that book was “Fushi no Kami.” It means “The Undying God.” The title alluded to the phoenix, a mythological bird that revives from its own ashes. It was a fitting title for a man known as the Phoenix, one who withstood many perils, saved many lives, and rebirthed many old forgotten technologies. The text you are holding now is the compilation I set out to make. Naturally, the one that has been on the bookshelf for two hundred years is not the original. That is a newly published version that visitors can actually pick up. Lucky that they made a lot of copies! The original is stored safely so that it can’t be damaged, and therefore I and many others could pay our respects by lifting the copy on that bookshelf.

Even though he was in a less than advantageous position, Sir Fenix had made his mark across time and history. It was a well-known custom to use his biography to pray for success. The library had no typical visitor—everyone from youngsters taking exams to veteran researchers walked through those doors. I hope all their dreams come true! What did I wish for? Even though this is the last volume? Well, if I wanted to wish for the success of this book, I should have done that before I started. No. My wish has nothing to do with this volume.

Sir Fenix, in his final moments, left his final wish with those close to him. It was said to be something like this:

“When I die, I will not be able to hear your answer, but...could you come to my grave at least once? It doesn’t matter how many years from now. Please come and tell me how much the world has developed by that time.” His grandchildren reported these as his last words, so there is no dispute that they were indeed what he’d said. It’s hard to determine if he was being a realist or a romantic. But, since that was what Sir Fenix wished, I want to do anything I can to make that come true. That’s why I paid my respects by adding this compilation of his life to the bookshelf.

Two hundred years have passed, and our daily life is something people would have once relegated to dreams or legends. I wrote about this in the afterwords of all my previous volumes. I hope you feel satisfied when you read this in heaven, Sir Fenix. I’m sure you’ll be embarrassed by it, but you did stand out a lot back then. Sir Fenix, now immortalized in a book, will surely never disappear,

and he will continue to walk alongside humanity. Those who named the book, “Fushi no Kami,” no doubt hoped for that when they decided on the title—an undying god. I can sense their resolve. I feel proud knowing I have helped to continue that legacy by placing this compilation on the bookshelf.

By the way, as I look up to the top of the bookshelf holding the original “Fushi no Kami,” a thought crosses my mind. What if we were to set flame to Sir Fenix’s ashes which laid underneath it? For example, if this library were to be set alight and burn down, would something emerge from the flames?

Well, to be honest, Sir Fenix may have already been reborn elsewhere. He often referred to himself as a book, so he would probably say that as long as people continue to read this book, he will continue to live on.

He really is an undying god. An enduring sheet of paper. A Fushi no Kami.

He will continue to live on in the pages of this book. I think that is very fitting for him.

Time is a tyrant. However, as I place this book on the bookshelf at the Fenix Gravestone Library, I know that even if the hottest of fires were to burn this place down, I firmly believe that this book will never disappear.

—To my ancestors. With love from two hundred years in the future.

Closing the Book

Launching administrator function of the apocalypse scenario: “Resurrectioners.”

Accepting scenario phase request 23428.

Processing request. Confirmed fatal delay in project. Operation 01: “Star Eater Fenrir” –Execution rate of its reason for being reached specified value. Shutting down.

Operation 02: “World Tree Yggdrasil” –Execution rate of its reason for being reached specified value. Shutting down.

Operation 03: “Guiding Light Fenix” –Execution rate of its reason for being reached specified value. Main individual’s activity confirmed.

Regulation requirement achieved. Diverging to operation success/failure protocol.

Confirming completion of all steps of the apocalypse scenario. Awaiting confirmation of success/failure from third party.

Operation is a success. Congratulations. Accepted the success of the operation.

Shutting down apocalypse scenario, “Resurrectioners.”

Th...a...nk...yo...

Mizuumi Amakawa

Illustrator:

Mai Okuma



Fushi no Kami 7

REBUILDING CIVILIZATION

STARTS WITH A VILLAGE

Reminiscing over old times.

《 MAIKA 》

《 REINA 》

《 HERMES 》

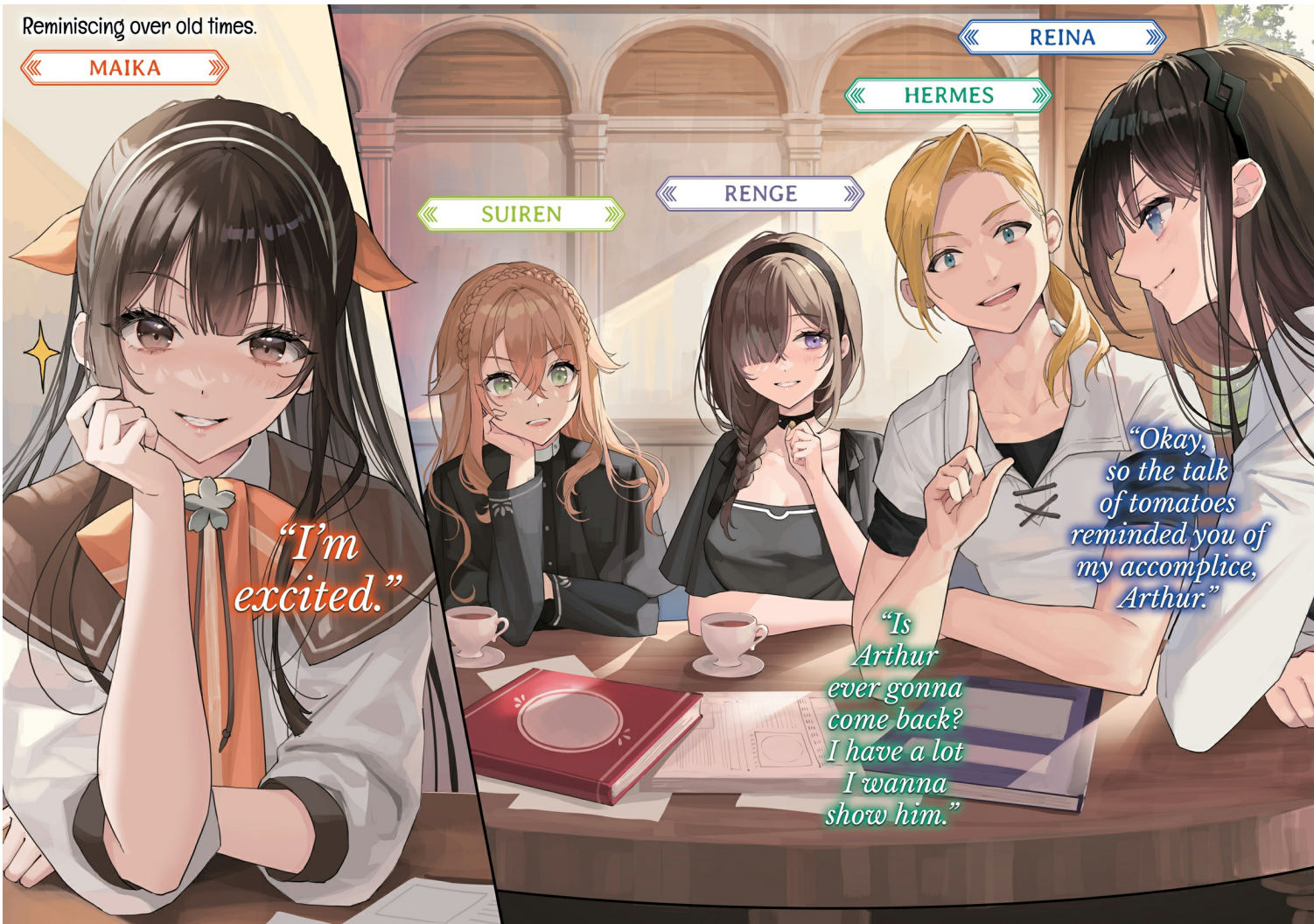
《 RENGE 》

《 SUIREN 》

*"I'm
excited."*

*"Okay,
so the talk
of tomatoes
reminded you of
my accomplice,
Arthur."*

*"Is
Arthur
ever gonna
come back?
I have a lot
I wanna
show him."*





ALICIA

*“I’m
home,
Ash!”*

*“Welcome
home.”*

ASH

Bonus Short Stories

Secret Skill Successor Suiren

While working on plans for food distribution, I was summoned by the chief of the Territory Reform Promotion Office. I lowered my head as I entered the room.

“It’s Suiren,” I said. “I heard you called for me...”

“Hm?” Chief Reina looked away from the documents she was working on. I raised my head to meet her gaze.

“Oh, you’re here, Manager Suiren. I apologize for calling for you at such a busy time,” Lady Reina responded.

“No, no, we’re both busy. Or rather, I think you’ve got it worse than me.”

There was a stack of reports and requests on the chief’s desk. I figured a part of the mountain of papers was probably mine.

“We’ve known each other quite a while now,” Reina began.

“Huh? Oh, yes, we have.”

“You’ve become a wonderful manager—from how you stand, to how you use your words, to your ability to work hard. The way I see it, Sacula certainly doesn’t lack talented people.”

“Th-Thank you...”

No way! Reina’s usually so strict, but now she’s complimenting me?! I could feel myself about to grin with delight, so I bit the insides of my cheeks to stop myself.

“So I thought I’d teach you a skill to deal with the situation we find ourselves in!”

“A-A skill...!”

“This skill has saved me countless times.”

“That’s amazing!”

Reina’s practically a superwoman. What skill could she possibly be relying on?!

I started to get excited as Reina pulled something out from under the desk. It was...

“Is that...a pot and a ladle?” I asked.

“Exactly. I had the research laboratory make this for me. It’s light, sturdy, and it makes a nice sound. It is, indeed, a pot and a ladle,” Lady Reina responded.

I see. So it is what it looks like. I don’t get it. Wait, I think it could help. I think! I mean, it’s light and sturdy. That’s important. It’d come in handy when making large portions of food. But what did she mean by it making a nice sound?

“You have no idea how handy this is, do you, Suiren?”

“Um, we can use it to make food for the refugees, right?”

“Nope.”

“What?”

“This isn’t cookware. Well, you *could* use it to make food.”

“So it’s cookware...but also *not* cookware?”

“Imagine this. You’re about to be in charge of distributing food to the refugees. Do you think people will behave orderly, form lines, and quietly take their rations?”

“Huh, no, well... No, they absolutely won’t.”

Even back in Ajole, where I already knew everyone, that wasn’t the case. This was on a grander scale, so there’d probably be even more of a ruckus.

“Right, and from where you’ll be standing, you won’t be able to cut through the noise. In order to make yourself heard, you’d have to raise your voice, which I imagine doesn’t come naturally to you.”

“Huh, so is that what you mean by it making a nice sound?” I responded. Reina smiled when I finally worked out the answer.

“Good work, Suiren. You ought to be careful when raising your voice and the like. We’re ladies, after all. Don’t forget that we have to act gracefully.” Lady Reina was guiding me on how to act as a lady of Sacula...while holding the pan and ladle.

“If they begin to cause a fuss, please make a loud noise with this. The people around you will notice it, and it will no doubt halt the commotion. Don’t worry, I already tested it out on our rowdy research laboratory lot. It works.”

Just what kind of experiments are they doing over there? My mind was filled with questions, but I had learned just to accept things at face value. It was a facility under Ash’s watch, and Lady Reina was one of Ash’s classmates from the military academy. In other words, it was one of those “*that’s just Ash*” things. I internally recited those words back to myself and gratefully accepted the pan and ladle.

“Thank you. I would get tired from having to raise my voice all the time. With this, I won’t have to do so as much.”

“Precisely. By the way, there’s a trick to using it.”

There’s a trick?! Once again, questions began to fill my mind.

The pan and ladle were very high-quality cookware items, and they became a hit with the food preparation group.

Disaster Response Office Manager Renge

Work was continuing to pile up, and the temporary Disaster Response Office was in an uproar. The sounds could be likened to desperate screams. Even though we had taken on more staff in order to help with the intake of refugees from Yanga, it still wasn’t enough. Our team was quite the mishmash, with new graduates, accomplished students, those who were just here to shadow, and those who looked like they were capable of getting the job done.

We had plenty of people here trying to keep up with the work.

“Ah ha ha, it’s a mountain of documents. There are more of them. Ah ha ha ha ha ha,” laughed one of the apprentices. There was no joy in it—his voice sounded hollow as he worked through each document one by one.

“Um, you’re doing good work. You’re really trying your best, but please take a break,” I said to him.

“M-Manager Renge. If I take a break, I’ll never finish,” the apprentice responded. “I’ll be all right.” He smiled, tears forming in his eyes.

“Your sense of duty is admirable. I look forward to your accomplishments in the future. However, tackling a large workload like this without pause isn’t the most productive method, so please stop for a moment and review what you’ve done. Once you’re finished, take a break.”

He sighed in relief. “Thank you.” The man looked incredibly tired and tense as he collapsed onto the desk. It wasn’t unusual to see sights like this during the winter hell, so I comforted him with a pat on the shoulder, like my seniors once did for me.

I then grabbed a bundle of papers and looked over them. They were complaints from around the region, but they seemed like they could be sorted into more specific piles. There were also some documents that could be passed on to the Intelligence department and the Temple.

“All right, I can probably manage with this amount. What a relief,” said the apprentice. He gave me a relieved look—his end goal was finally in sight. I wondered for a moment why he was looking at me so gratefully, but I realized it was only normal now that his work had been organized.

“You’ll get used to it. Once you do, this amount will become a cinch. Don’t feel bad.” I smiled at the young man, but his face turned a strange color. *He must not be feeling well. I imagine he’s just feeling exhausted.* As I was about to reach out to touch him, someone tapped me on my shoulder. I turned around to see Suiren standing there with a smile.

“Renge, that can be lethal,” Suiren said.

Lethal? I’m not any stronger than Suiren, though. I flexed my muscles and gave them a poke. I only had enough strength to carry documents.

“Never mind, you’re totally oblivious. I wonder if that’s because of Ash. Anyway, I brought over the reports from the refugee district.”

“Thank you. I actually have something I want to talk to you about. Do you

have a moment?" I asked.

"Of course! Do you wanna grab a bite? I just finished distributing food, and I'm starving..."

"Okay. I guess it's almost the end of the day anyway. Let's eat." I clapped my hands together and turned toward the workers. "As you might have heard, it's time for dinner. Please take turns to take a break. We won't have this work finished either today or even tomorrow, so please make sure you use that time to rest."

Even though they were people we had gathered together in a rush, the staff members all responded properly. I was happy to be able to take command and guide them onto the right path, just like Ash. I nodded with a smile, and they smiled back.

"Renge, let's go eat already," Suiren urged, pulling me by the arm.

"Is something up?" I looked up at her, wondering what the hurry was.

"You're good at this, aren't you, Manager Renge?" Suiren responded with a wry smile.

"Heh heh, well it is an important task. It seems everyone is taking care and working their hardest. Even though they're all still young, they're doing better than I did when I was an apprentice."

"Nah, I think it's due to your charm."

"My charm?"

"You're good-looking, good at your job, and you're super kind. You're perfect. Men fawn over you, and women want to be like you," Suiren explained.

"Huh... Uh, isn't that a little excessive?"

"Honestly, I'm proud," Suiren laughed, patting herself on the chest.

"That's great to hear. Thank you, Suiren."

Suiren laughed along with me, and in an effort to hide her face, pulled my head into her chest for a hug. I wondered what people would think seeing that.

A Delicious Welcome

It was early in the morning. The birds were tweeting, and the air was fresh. I took a deep breath, circulating the fresh morning air through my chest to wake me up. I was mentally prepared. “All right,” I said to myself as I tied a bandana around my forehead. Once a princess, I, Alicia, was now an apprentice chef.

I entered the mansion and found the head chef waiting for me with his arms crossed.

“Oh, you’re here. First, wash your hands, and then we’ll get right into it. Food prep needs to be quick but thorough,” said the head chef.

“Yes, Chef Yacoo,” I responded.

How nostalgic, I thought as I looked up at the head chef. He was a well-built man with an impressive scar over his right eye. When I first met him, I was struck speechless. Knowing how good he was at both cooking and hospitality, I now felt more comfortable in his presence. *Ah, he’s a lot more wrinkly than he used to be.*

“First, chop the onions. I wanna see how rusty you’ve gotten.”

“Yes, Chef!” I replied. I took the onions that were wrapped in leaves and placed them on the chopping board. I was to cook them until they were golden brown—like Chef Yacoo had once taught me. I picked up a clean knife and held it above the first onion.

Place the knife in your dominant hand and the ingredient in the other. Don’t hold it in a fist—instead, extend your index finger to the back of the blade. Make precise cuts with the knife. Ash taught me all of that.

Chef Yacoo stood next to me in quite a daunting pose, but I realized that I was returning quite a stern expression. I reminisced as I started to chop the onions. When I was too slow, I could hear Ash telling me to speed up my pace but not get hasty.

Be careful, the voice said. With Ash’s voice guiding me, I finished dicing my first onion. I wondered how I did. I looked up, and Chef Yacoo was looking back at me with a gruff expression.

“I can see you’ve gotten quite rusty,” said Chef Yacoo.

Yeah. I smiled bitterly. Sometimes they let me work in the kitchen of the Sacula estate in the royal capital, but it was really only sometimes. As a result, I had indeed become a lot rustier.

“But you handled the knife well. You didn’t forget the basics. I can see that you’ve retained something, at least,” Chef Yacoo continued.

“Of course. You taught me a lot of important things, so I didn’t forget,” I responded. I wanted him to know how grateful I was.

Chef Yacoo nodded in response before raising his voice. “Alright, let’s carry on! You’ve only cut one onion. Dice the others, fry them, and then boil them in the soup. We need to see just how rusty you are!”

“Yes, Chef! I’ll show you!” I responded.

“I’m sure you will, but now focus! Be quick but careful!” From then on, there was no more idle talk. Despite not having seen one another for a while, we had to prepare breakfast, so we had no time for chitchat. Other cooks had arrived, and the kitchen became a lot more lively.

“You, you’re handling the main dish, right?! Lighten up already! Cut the fat off that meat! The starters need more vegetables. You don’t want the higher-ups to die because you couldn’t be bothered plating them a few more healthy vegetables, do you?” Chef Yacoo roared. He was keeping a close eye on each of the stations, barking out orders as he spotted issues. It wasn’t like the cooks were dependent on him, but Yacoo knew that it would be the head chef’s responsibility if the customers didn’t enjoy the food. That’s why he was getting so involved.

“Soup station! Go easy on the salt! Don’t think you can use it to cover your mistakes!”

“Yes, sir!” I was in charge of the soup. I was so slow that it didn’t have as much time to simmer as it needed. Wrinkles appeared on Chef Yacoo’s forehead as he took a sip.

“Well, it’s been a while, so let’s put it down to that.” He probably had a lot more he wanted to say. I smiled wryly as he handed me a small tasting dish. “You try it too, Alicia.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you.” This was the first soup I’d made under Chef Yacoo’s supervision—a milk soup. He had also made it just before I left Sacula. He no doubt remembered that, and that’s why he asked me to make it.

Since returning to Sacula, I’d had a lot of people welcome me home, but this was Chef Yacoo’s special way of delivering the same message. I took a sip of the milk soup. As I thought, it needed more time. It didn’t taste that great. Nevertheless, it was a delicious “welcome home.”



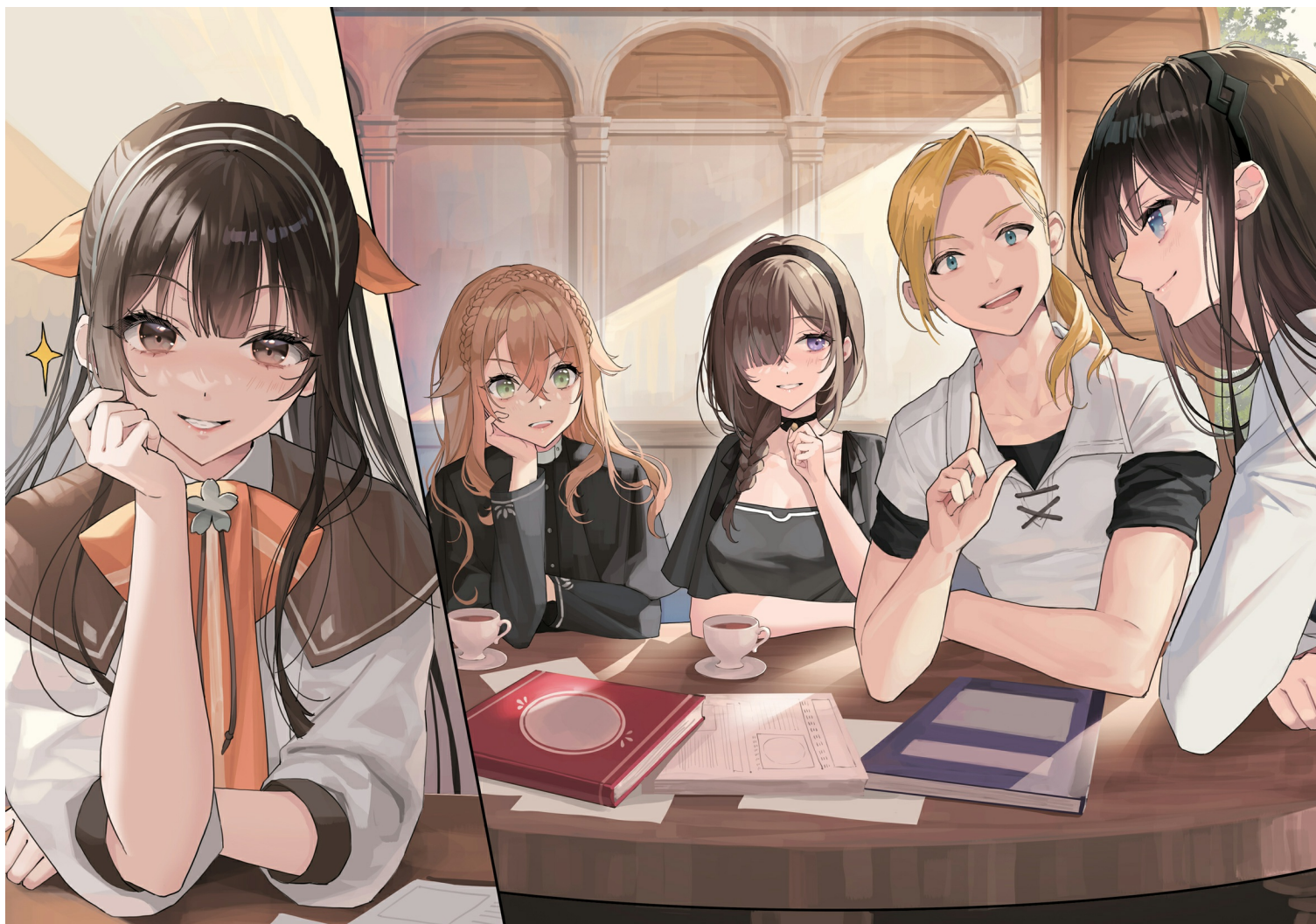




Table of Contents

[Cover](#)

[War of Papers](#)

[Promised Papers](#)

[Entrusted Papers](#)

[Deus Ex Machina](#)

[A Certain Compiler's Afterword](#)

[Closing the Book](#)

[Color Illustrations](#)

[Bonus Short Stories](#)

[Bonus Textless Images](#)

[About J-Novel Club](#)

[Copyright](#)



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by Mizuumi Amakawa

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