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The Reincarnated Prince and Felvolk's Greatest Treasure

The Epic Tale of the Reincarnated Prince Herscherik



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*Felvolk's
Greatest Treasure,
Alterisse Danvir,
is hereby declared
dead.*



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Prologue: The Flames, the Despair, and the Nightmare

The flames that burst forth from the trees danced like red petals as they colored the night sky a deep crimson. Normally, this usually quiet forest would have been home to many animals who slept peacefully through the night—now, however, the trees had turned into pillars of fire, staining everything red as far as the eye could see.

Witnessing this sight was a woman who kneeled on the ground surrounded by her comrades, overcome with despair.

“Why?!”

Her question was not directed at her comrades, but at her commanding officer, her motherland, and herself. Her deep crimson hair fluttered in the hot wind as her eyes, dark as the night sky, reflected the roaring flames.

What did I do wrong...? She repeated the question to herself again and again in her mind.

The woman had not suffered a single defeat ever since she graduated from the military academy. Even in a society as patriarchal as her home country, she had distinguished herself in one battle after another, devoting herself to advancing her country.

She had not done all this just out of patriotism, though. At first, she'd intended to clear the name of her own disgraced house and restore it to its former glory. When she was still a young girl not even ten years of age, her country had suffered a crushing defeat. Her father, who had served as chief tactician during the battle, had volunteered to take command of the retreating army's rear guard, and he fell in battle alongside his trusted men. Her mother, who had already been ill for some time, grew even weaker both mentally and physically upon the news of her husband's death; soon, she succumbed to her illness, as if following after her husband.

By the time the young girl even knew what was happening, all the blame for this catastrophic loss had been placed on the chief tactician. Her proud house, once famous for its long line of tacticians, had fallen to ruin. Relatives who had previously done everything they could to suck up to her family instead distanced themselves, and her house's assets were confiscated by the state. She had lost her beloved family, her childhood home, her status as the daughter of a proud noble house—everything.

Any other noble girl would have lamented her misfortune and perhaps even ended her own life. She, however, did not allow herself to wallow in despair. It may seem as though the war, her country, and even her relatives had stolen everything she had—but she still possessed her intellect and talents, as well as the knowledge and understanding of tactics instilled in her by her father.

Eventually, she graduated from the military academy with nothing but the clothes on her back. She was one of only a handful of women who had graduated from the academy over the course of its long history, and she had done so while skipping multiple grades, finally graduating at the top of her class at the young age of fourteen.

After graduating, she served her country as a tactician while she worked to restore her house. With time, though, her goal changed. She found something even more important to her than her house—namely, the comrades she came to know on the battlefield. She wanted to use her talents on behalf of her comrades who were just as—if not more—unfortunate as her.

With her comrades at her side, she emerged victorious from any battle, no matter how hopeless it seemed. They endured ridicule and scorn together, performing better than any other unit in one battle after the next. Now, if only they could distinguish themselves during this battle, all their hard work would be rewarded, as she and her comrades would finally be recognized by the country.

“How could this happen?!”

She slammed her fist into the ground as she screamed. Her comrades jumped at this action, so unlike her usual self—the sight of her so shaken filled them with a sense of danger. Even now as the flames approached them, she did not

move—she *could* not move.

Drops of water fell onto the back of her hand—drops that fell from her own eyes. Even she could not tell whether her tears were born of anger, frustration, or sadness.

“Is this...” She muttered to herself, her tears continuing to flow as she looked up at the sky turned red by the flames. “...this—? Is this—? ...answer you’re giving...?!”

The crash of a tree falling to the ground as the flames burned through it drowned out her words so they were impossible to make out. She slammed both fists into the ground again, wailing. Then, her vision turned black.

She opened her eyes to the sensation of someone rocking her body. Her dark eyes met a pair of azure ones looking down on her. She blinked a few times as she tried to process the situation before she finally remembered what had happened. She then gave a warm, gentle smile as she sat up.

“It’s late. Is something the matter?” the woman said in a quiet voice, gently criticizing the man who had woken her for not sleeping himself.

The two of them were in the forest next to a road that led to the capital of Gracis. The woman glanced around to find a campfire a short distance away; next to it, the person who had saved them had dozed off in a sitting position. She turned her gaze back to find the man in the process of sitting down next to her, his dark blue hair swaying as he did.

“Are you okay?” the man said with a worried glance, ignoring the woman’s question as he pulled her closer to him.

The woman entrusted herself to the man and sat between his legs. She rested her head on his shoulder and leaned into his chest breathing a sigh of relief at the warmth of his body. It was only the beginning of fall, but the chill air had robbed them of more body heat than she’d realized.

The blanket on the ground and the outer garments they were wearing were all thin and did little to protect them from the cold. But her frozen body and the man’s warmth brought her back to reality.

He stroked the woman's deep crimson hair, which reached down to her waist, as he leaned down to speak close to her ear.

"Did you have another one?" he asked in a quiet, calm voice—not sweet enough to give the impression of lovers' talk, but simply expressing genuine concern.

The woman's smile froze over for just a brief moment, but having been close to her for many years, that was still enough of an answer for him.

"Forget it," he said in an admonishing voice.

The man knew that she was haunted by that scene every night in her sleep, and that even as she gave her usual smile, those flames still raged on within her. Each night, he would admonish her in the same way, but her answer was always the same.

"I refuse," she responded curtly, while still maintaining her smile.

The man let out a deep sigh at the usual answer. The woman gave him a concerned look as he shrugged his shoulders. Her gaze was fixed at the man's back—or rather, the unnatural hump on his back, clearly not an ordinary human feature, but something that was worth more to the man than his life.

"Does it hurt? Does it... move?"

The man fell silent. That was his only response.

"I'm sorry."

As she apologized with a sorrowful expression, the woman buried her face in the man's sturdy chest, her mind once again turning to her nightmare.

A carriage traveled down a road that led to the capital of the oldest and largest country on the continent of Grandinal—Gracis Kingdom. The coachman could already make out the city on the horizon, as could the passengers of the carriage.

"Master, our destination approaches," a man said, looking out of the carriage's small window.

The man seemed to be in his mid-thirties, with a fierce-looking face, long

black hair which he had tied back, and black eyes. He wore a kimono, an unusual sight for this continent, and close at hand a sword with a black sheath. Unlike the swords common in this country, his sword was narrow, thin, and long.

The man turned his gaze back from the window and toward his master who was lying down, occupying two seats in an ill-mannered way.

“Oh, finally!”

The master was too young to call a “man,” yet too old for “child” to seem right—at fifteen years of age, he possessed chestnut-colored eyes and a gentle, graceful face. He yawned as he ruffled his slightly reddish blonde hair, not quite long enough to reach his shoulders, after which he stretched his arms upward to relieve his stiff shoulders. He then casually gathered his hair at the back of his head with his hands, tied it back with a string offered to him by his follower, and stared out the window to observe his old home town as he rubbed his shoulders.

“Upon thy arrival, what is thy intention?”

“Good question...”

His retainer spoke in a very unusual way. Most people of status would have either ridiculed him or reprimanded him, had they heard him speak, but his master simply ignored it as he scratched his cheeks thoughtfully. He had a lot of things to report, and even more he wanted to ask. He had to catch up on everything that had happened while he was away.

His eyes happened to land on the pile of boxes, large and small, that were stacked in one corner of the carriage. They contained souvenirs from his trips.

“First, I want to see my family again,” he said with a soft smile.

This boy was actually a member of the royal family. He was none other than the Sixth Prince of Gracis, Tessily Gracis. Those who knew him referred to him as the Prodigal Prince.

Chapter One: The Prince, the Fall Sky, and the Chance Meeting

The season of plentiful rain, animals fattening up for the winter, and giving thanks for the bounties of nature had come to Gracis. The castle town was busy with people preparing for the harvest festival, which was two weeks away. Everyone worked with smiles on their faces—and not only because they looked forward to the festival. The Gracis Kingdom, situated on the continent of Grandinal, had been known to the neighboring countries as the Kingdom in Woe. Despite being the most powerful country on the continent, its king had been a mere puppet of the nobility and officials led by the corrupt minister Barbosse, who had oppressed the people and jeopardized the entire nation.

However, all of this was already a thing of the past. At the end of this year's spring, the Atrad empire had attempted to invade Gracis. The kingdom had sent a military expedition to meet the enemy, but it had been annihilated by one of the empire's schemes. The imperial army, a hundred thousand strong, had surrounded the Gracis border fort where a mere five thousand soldiers were stationed. But just as the kingdom's loss seemed inevitable, that same army of twenty thousand that had supposedly been annihilated arrived, led by the seventh and youngest prince of Gracis. They managed to capture the enemy supreme commander and put an end to the border conflict once and for all.

But that was not the end of the prince's achievements. After he returned to the capital, he had exposed the misdeeds of the wicked minister who had been taking advantage of his position to line his own pockets. In doing so, the so-called "Tragedy of the Royal Family"—an event where the previous king and the current king's two older brothers had died from illness—had been revealed to be an assassination plot planned by the minister, shocking the populace. The prince had brought with him irrefutable evidence of the minister's guilt. But when the minister realized he had been backed into a corner, he'd taken the prince hostage and attempted to flee the country. While on the run, the minister had been attacked by a violent madman and ultimately lost his life.

With the minister gone, all those who had supported his evil deeds for their own profit had been forced to face the full force of the law, with the help of evidence that the prince had collected on his own.

The country was changing for the better. The people had not only the festival to look forward to, but also the bright future that lay in store after. That was what was on everyone's minds as they worked hard to prepare for the festival, unable to keep their joy from showing.

All who knew of the prince would say the same thing: it was all thanks to the Seventh Prince. As long as Prince Herscherik was there for them, they would be safe.

A vast, cloudless autumn sky could be seen through the window. A young boy was distantly observing the beautiful sight. His light blonde hair, which looked as if it was spun from rays of spring sunshine, was cut just short enough to hide his ears. On his left ear he wore a copper-colored ear cuff which glistened in the light from the window. His androgynous, even slightly girlish face featured green eyes reminiscent of bright emeralds.

The young child was sitting on a sofa, resting his head on his desk with both arms thrown in front of him. The top of the desk felt cool on his cheek, and he gazed out through the window while stifling a yawn. Had anyone actually seen him act so ill-mannered they would have admonished him on the spot, but fortunately—or unfortunately—he was all alone in the room.

“Ah, what beautiful weather...” he muttered to himself.

He was the Seventh Prince of Gracis, Herscherik Gracis. Still only the tender age of seven, he was the very prince responsible for ending the recent conflict between Gracis and Atrad. The people on the streets secretly referred to him as the “Prince of Light” or even the “Hero of Light,” but upon hearing about this from his men of service, his reaction had been, “Are they really calling me that? You can’t be serious... I’m too embarrassed to go *anywhere* now...” while burying his face in his hand. Of course, the very next day he had snuck out on one of his usual trips to the castle town.

Herscherik was currently cooped up in his study, and his surroundings could

not even charitably be described as “orderly.” With the exception of the space where he’d rested his head, he was surrounded by paper stacks of various heights, and the wood beneath his inkwell was stained with blotches of ink. His porcelain cup, hiding among the mountains of paperwork, was already empty, indicating just how long he had been imprisoned in the room.

Herscherik sighed repeatedly as he looked up at the clear, blue sky.

Oh, the weather really is beautiful... I bet it would feel great to go out for a walk on a day like this.

With the piles of paperwork in the corner of his eye, he vacantly gazed up at the sky while his thoughts drifted to recent events. It was an attempt to escape reality.

Almost three months had passed since the death of the minister who had controlled the kingdom from the shadows, Marquis Wolf Barbosse. The post-war arrangements with Atrad had mostly calmed down for now, and those in Barbosse’s faction and others who had supported him were being sentenced in rapid succession. This process had taken some time, as they had all been given a thorough trial regardless of the extent of their crimes, but that too was now mostly over.

But now a new problem had arisen: with many nobles and officials having been dismissed, suspended, or confined to their homes as a result of their crimes, there were now enormous gaps in the government’s staff list, as though it had been chewed up by worms. The king served as head of state, but the bulk of the day-to-day work had always been to nobles, officials, knights, and constables. In order to save the country, they had been forced to cut away all the rot—and Herscherik was prepared to have to spend a significant amount of time to help the country recover.

His prediction turned out to be incorrect, although better than he anticipated. His father, who until now had been forced to walk a dangerous tightrope in his negotiations with the minister, was now able to actually run the government in a manner that would have surprised anyone who once called him a fool. Despite his gentle appearance, he was tremendously capable—but perhaps that was only to be expected of someone who had made it as far as Solye had in the

shadow of the sly and wicked minister without ever succumbing to his schemes. Solye had left Herscherik stunned by assembling all the staff needed to fill the empty posts in as little as two weeks.

“These are just provisional measures, mind you. After things have calmed down a bit, we will need to reevaluate all of our choices. Even if an individual is capable on paper, it’s difficult to tell if they’re really fit for a position of leadership. This is just a temporary arrangement to prevent unnecessary confusion. Besides, there are still many people who are far too concerned about their social standing...” Solye said as he sighed with a troubled look on his face.

Not everyone who worked at the castle was a noble. A not insignificant number of officials were commoners who had graduated from the academy, and almost all soldiers were commoners. Some nobles did not take kindly to commoners making their way too high up the ranks. Conversely, many commoners considered nobles to be nothing but intolerable snobs. Such prejudice made it difficult for people of varying social class to work together, which proved to be a hindrance.

Herscherik found all of this completely ridiculous.

Elitism meets inferiority complexes, I guess...

Everyone short of saints had thoughts like these—it was only natural. But Herscherik did not look favorably upon those who let those thoughts hold them back to the point of neglecting their own duties.

Herscherik thought back to his past—to before he was even born.

In his past life, he had been Ryoko Hayakawa, a soon-to-be thirty-five otaku spinster from a country called Japan who had worked at the headquarters of a certain publicly traded company. Being a large company, it had employed a large number of people from all kinds of backgrounds and with all kinds of values. There were elitist employees from prestigious universities, those who had merely graduated from high school or a trade school and worked their way up, as well as people poached from rival companies. There were also different categories of employees, working in the sales department, the systems department, the administrative department, and so on; beyond that, there were apparently also various cliques that would quarrel on occasion.

Incidentally, Ryoko was a junior college graduate who, perhaps because of being assigned to the general affairs department, had never gotten involved in drama like that. Her natural disposition had certainly helped, but as various circumstances at the company had forced her to slave away at her work, she had internally been screaming, “If you have time to do something this pointless, just do your goddamn job instead! In fact, if work is that slow for you, let me switch places!”

Having spent all her time on work from the moment she joined the company, she never ended up in any of the cliques, instead freely bothering any department when something was unclear about her work and contacting branch offices without hesitation like a veteran. For someone who had so recently joined the company, she was familiar to a surprisingly large number of employees.

Once her overwhelming work finally came to an end, her meddling and caring nature caused her to approach everyone equally without regard for departments and cliques—or rather, without even knowing about their *existence*—and as a result, everyone from managers to new hires came to rely on her.

As a simple employee who disliked groups, Ryoko had managed to stay out of trouble by telling herself none of it concerned her. Once she’d been reborn as Herscherik, though, things weren’t quite as easy. While Herscherik didn’t quite have it in him to play best friends with everyone, he had everything to lose by allowing capable people to be crushed or lose their way like Barbosse had. Some nobles were competent because of their upbringing, but the opposite was also true—some were satisfied with their privilege and made no effort to prove themselves.

We need to discard our old ways of thinking...

Social standing had no bearing on skill, and Herscherik believed that hard work should always be rewarded. The circumstances of your birth were only the starting point; you determined the rest of your life’s path yourself.

Well, this is one thing that won’t be solved overnight. I’ll just have to be patient, Herscherik concluded to himself, as he sat up straight and moved his

head left and right to relieve his stiff shoulders. *First I need to deal with what's in front of me...but...*

Herscherik let out yet another deep sigh at the sight of the mountains of paperwork.

"There's just no end to it..."

But it was no wonder that Herscherik was complaining. In front of him was thirty whole years' worth of paperwork—everything that Barbosse had a hand in as regent after Solye's coronation as a young child, and later as minister after Solye came of age... Or more specifically, a very small part of it.

It just keeps on coming and coming...

So Herscherik had intentionally changed his focus to get his mind off the massive amount of paperwork—not that doing so would make the paperwork disappear.

After Barbosse's death, his crimes and those of his followers had finally come to light. Thanks to Herscherik having collected all the evidence in advance, they had everything they needed to sentence them. However, unlike in fiction where the villains were punished and everyone lives happily ever after, reality wasn't so simple. The very fact that there was so much corruption meant that government policies had never been properly enacted. For example, if funds had been allocated for flood control in a given area—what happened if those funds were embezzled? If construction never happened, or they cut corners, the next flood could result in tremendous damage and death.

Thus everything needed to be looked over as quickly as possible, but the government of Gracis was currently in a state of confusion, with other nations ready to seize any opportunities that presented themselves while the kingdom was weakened. Herscherik's father and brothers were all busy putting the government back in order and had no time to deal with thirty years' worth of paperwork.

Herscherik had then considered putting the relevant departments to work, but he reconsidered upon realizing that few people would voluntarily submit accurate reports on their own failings. They might even cover it up in fear of punishment. Besides, every department already had its hands full due to the

recent restructuring.

Still, someone had to do it. Herscherik hadn't even started attending the academy yet, but he had accidentally showcased his past-life office worker skills during the previous battle. As a result, he now found himself sifting through endless amounts of decades-old documents while investigating anything that looked out of place.

In spite of all his grumbling, it was not as though he was being forced to do this—he truly did want to. In between his royal studies, he had always spent any spare time he had sorting through paperwork.

As voluntary as it was, though, he could still feel the stress and fatigue piling up. The seemingly endless work was more than enough to wear down his concentration and make him start looking for an escape from reality. Not to mention that thirty years was just an estimate—depending on the results of his investigation, he might end up having to go even further back.

It goes without saying, I guess, but not having a computer makes this so much harder...

In Herscherik's previous life, he'd worked at a large company where all data had been managed by computers. Any information could be found with a simple search and then printed if need be. In this world, magic existed, but computers did not. The paper documents were recorded with magical items and sorted by date, but he still needed to find *where* the documents were actually stored.

Had everything been perfectly organized there wouldn't have been much of an issue; however, depending on the department, documents hadn't been recorded properly or sorted correctly and were sometimes missing completely—either by accident or deliberately. As a certified workaholic, the state of the organization here was enough to drive Herscherik crazy.

Living in this foreign world, Herscherik found himself with a renewed appreciation for the tools of an advanced civilization.

“What is this tense sensation in the pit of my stomach? I remember feeling it more times than I could count in the past...”

Ryoko had never been able to turn down anyone who asked her for help, a disposition that had stuck with her even after being reincarnated. The downfall was that she had just barely enough talent to actually pull it off if she just pushed herself hard enough, so she'd always had a habit of taking on more work than was healthy.

Even though she was just reaping what she'd sowed, the stress would always go straight to her stomach. For a while, she'd had a serious antacid habit. To relieve stress, she would go to solo karaoke, play games, and the like—but in a world without such forms of entertainment, there were limited options for stress relief.

Well, at least I'm done with my work for today...

Herscherik had no studies nor practice today, so he'd been glaring at the stacks of paperwork since morning. As a result of his hard work, all documents he had been planning on going through were now signed and stamped.

Herscherik remembered how his father and siblings had warned him time and time again not to work himself too hard. His overprotective men of service were also not around to force him to stop.

He took his antique silver pocket watch out of his inside pocket and checked the time. It was almost three o'clock in the afternoon.

“Kay, I know what I’m doing now.”

Herscherik grinned as he leapt off his sofa.

At just past three o'clock, a careful knock could be heard from the door. The owner of the room did not respond, even after a second knock. After giving up any hope of a response, the person simply entered the room. It was a man with striking deep-ruby eyes and black hair, clad in a well-tailored butler's suit. His name was Schwarz Zweig. Also called Kuro by his master, he was Herscherik's butler of service.

Having been with Herscherik since his master was only four years old, he did not serve the country of Gracis—only Herscherik himself. Due to his extraordinary skills and the way he always followed his master like a shadow, people would quietly refer to him as the “Shadow-Fanged Butler.”

This retainer was currently holding his young master's tea service, along with cookies to go with the tea. The master himself was nowhere to be found. On his desk was a note informing anyone who read it of his plans to go on an outing along with a list of documents he needed. Kuro understood the situation in an instant.

"He ran away, huh?" he muttered as a hint of exhaustion appeared on his chiseled, shadowy face.

The castle town was bustling with people merrily preparing for the coming harvest festival. Weaving its way through the crowds was a small figure wearing a hooded poncho. Whenever one of the townspeople spotted the figure, they would wave, and the figure would respond in kind. The figure belonged to none other than Herscherik, who had escaped the castle and made his way into town.

As he had used his trusty secret passage rather than the main gate, there had been no one to scold him, and as a result he was in a great mood. He felt like all his stress had fled from his body and dispersed into the air as he enjoyed his first secret trip to town in quite a while.

On a day like this, there's nothing like a nice walk!

Herscherik trotted along in high spirits while giving those around him a radiant, infectious smile. Stress relief wasn't the only reason for his good mood, though. Before the battle with the empire, he had lied about his identity as a member of the royal family while spending time with the people of the castle town, but on the day of the departure ceremony his deception had been revealed. Herscherik had been prepared to never again interact with the townspeople like he had before—but contrary to his expectations, they did not fault him for lying about his identity. Instead they accepted him—a member of the very royal family that, in a way, was the root of their suffering—just as they had before.

Herscherik was so happy about this that he was on the verge of tears. His small excursions to the castle town were worth the world to him. And as his life was no longer in danger, his overprotective butler had less objection to his trips.

A different problem had arisen now—the source of which was his very own

men of service who had made themselves well-known through their exploits during the battle with the empire.

After the battle, his men had continued to accompany and protect him on his excursions—though they now functioned less as his bodyguards and more as chaperones, preventing him from getting into too much trouble.

When Herscherik had managed to make time for it after returning from the expedition, he had taken his men to visit the castle town. The moment he had taken his first step outside the castle, though, he had been surrounded by townspeople—particularly women—and had been unable to go any further. They had formed a human wall around him, like the idol fans Herscherik remembered from his previous life.

So that's what idols have to go through... Herscherik thought back to that day with an awkward smile.

His men of service were young, talented, and good-looking, and they all had promising futures ahead of them. On top of that, they were all single, so no wonder the women of the town would not leave them alone—even if not all of them were serious about it. They still seized the opportunity as the men accompanied Herscherik for his town visits and swarmed them, involving Herscherik himself in the process and ruining what should have been a pleasant excursion.

That said, it did not feel right to simply disregard the earnest feelings of all of those women, and his men could hardly disrespect them in front of their master. The butler put up layers upon layers of facades as he entertained the ladies with a charming smile; the knight smiled awkwardly while trying to calm them down; the Spellcaster, on the other hand, was distrustful of all people regardless of gender, and started acting like a cornered cat upon being surrounded. Some women just didn't get the hint, though; they persisted in their advances, and Herscherik had to soothe their victim before he went berserk. As a result, Shiro came to spend most of his time cooped up in the castle, which troubled Herscherik in and of itself.

Thus, having learned his lesson after bringing his men the first time around, Herscherik would now instead sneak out alone whenever his men weren't

watching. His poncho, which hid his face, also helped convey to the townspeople that he didn't want unnecessary attention. However, his men—especially Kuro—would still frown at the mention of him going alone. Every time he returned home from an excursion, he would receive a lecture from his butler; still, Herscherik did not stop.

I left some work behind for him today, so he won't be able to chase after me too quickly! Herscherik chuckled internally. Had Kuro been able to hear his thoughts, a smack to his head would have been the least of Herscherik's worries.

Herscherik continued strolling down the castle town. In the middle of his walk he came across the wife of the candy store owner, who gave him a cookie that Herscherik stuffed into his mouth while continuing toward his usual destination.

At his destination, he found a healthily tanned woman who was just about to lift a box filled with fruit.

"Hello, Louise!" he said from behind, as the woman in question turned around and greeted him with a smile.

"Oh my, Ryoko! Welcome!"

Herscherik smiled at being called Ryoko. Even after the townspeople had learned of his true identity, they had continued to refer to him the same way as always—"Ryoko," "young man," "young master," and so on. That made Herscherik happy. It felt like proof that he hadn't lost his place here.

Herscherik turned his gaze from Louise and toward the inside of the fruit shop. A baby was sleeping comfortably in a basket next to some boxes of fruit.

"Hello, Risch." Herscherik greeted the baby, careful not to wake her up.

The baby was the firstborn daughter of the couple who ran the fruit shop. Herscherik had by chance ended up being present for the childbirth, and on the parents' request the newborn girl had been named after Herscherik.

Herscherik thought back to when his niece from his previous life had been a baby, a gentle smile surfacing on his lips. He poked the baby's cheek with his index finger, and it turned out to be even softer than he had expected; his grin widened further.

Babies sure are cute...

Herscherik watched the small child almost obsessively, even though all she did was sleep. He did not notice the people around him smiling as they observed the pair. Just when it looked as though Herscherik would watch the baby until sunset, Louise spoke to him.

“Ryoko, are you alone today too?”

Herscherik poked the baby’s cheek once more before turning toward Louise.

“Yes, I had some spare time so I decided to stop by.”

Louise let out a small sigh in response.

“Don’t blame me if you get in trouble with them again.”

Herscherik averted his gaze and tried to laugh it off. This was not his first time visiting the town alone, and each time he did, either his butler or his knight would come searching for him and give him an earful.

He could tolerate the knight, who seemed to have partly given up when it came to Herscherik’s excursions. His overprotective butler, though, only grew fiercer each time, and his lectures would grow longer and longer. The knight would try to intervene, only to have the butler turn his attention to him instead, and in the end he would end up sitting on the floor receiving a lecture alongside Herscherik.

Herscherik’s Spellcaster, meanwhile, was wholly uninterested in the entire process.

“By the way, is your husband back yet?” Herscherik asked to change the subject. He had known Louise’s husband, the fruit shop’s taciturn, bear-like owner, just as long as Louise herself.

The husband had gone off to a remote town on a delivery and was supposed to return soon. Though as expressionless as ever, to Herscherik he had seemed worried about leaving his wife and child behind, and that had been at the back of his mind every time he visited the castle town.

“He came home before noon today. Now that you mention it, he opened his mouth for once earlier today, only to say that he had something to ask you.”

“Me?” Herscherik gave a confused look in response.

What could it be? Herscherik tried to think of what Louise’s husband could possibly want to ask him, but came up with nothing.

“Oh, welcome home, honey. Ryoko is here,” Louise said suddenly, interrupting Herscherik’s thoughts.

Herscherik turned around to find a large man approaching them, easily carrying two wooden crates that were large enough to fit three Herscheriks each.

“Welcome back, owner!” Herscherik said as he ran over to the man, but he stopped in his tracks upon noticing a pair behind him clad in traveler’s garb.

One was a tall man with azure eyes reminiscent of the deep sea. His dark blue hair was cut short everywhere with the exception of the nape of his neck, where he had a long ponytail. A red feather decorated the string tying his hair back, swaying in the wind. He wore a slightly worn overcoat and seemed to be carrying something on his back, as it seemed unusually large.

The other person was a woman. She wore a hooded cloak, and it was difficult to make out her face, but her shoulders were narrow, and her body was curved in all the expected places, making it easy to guess her gender. The deep red color of her hair definitely grabbed Herscherik’s attention.

Herscherik had a number of redheads around him, including his crown prince brother and his knight of service. They both had light red hair, and the crown prince Marx’s hair in particular looked as if someone had melted down the finest polished rubies. This woman’s hair, however, was different. It was a darker red, best described as a deep crimson.

The woman slowly removed her hood and revealed her face. Herscherik guessed that she was in her twenties. Her downturned dark eyes smiled gently, giving her the impression of a quiet woman. Her eyes met Herscherik’s, and she greeted him with a graceful bow. Herscherik returned her greeting with a quick bow of his own before returning his gaze to the owner of the fruit shop.

“Who are these two?” Herscherik asked the owner. This was all giving him a bad feeling.

The owner put the wooden boxes down on the ground and hesitated for a moment before opening and closing his mouth a number of times, seemingly having trouble finding the right words. He then slowly crouched down until he was on the same eye level as Herscherik.

“Prince... I have something to ask you,” the usually silent owner spoke in a voice so low only Herscherik could hear him. Herscherik’s expression changed upon hearing him.

“I take it it’s something that would be difficult to discuss here?”

The owner nodded in response, and Herscherik exhaled heavily.

He had always referred to Herscherik as Ryoko, but just now he had called him “Prince.” Herscherik understood that this meant that it was a matter that could only be solved using his position as a member of the royal family.

“Very well,” Herscherik agreed without asking further, as he threw the seemingly worried Louise a bright smile. “Louise, I need to borrow your husband for a little bit. Oh, if someone comes by to get me, tell him I went to look at butterflies. He’ll understand.”

Louise nodded in response, while Herscherik started walking with the three others in tow. He glanced back every now and then to make sure the others were keeping up as he quietly sighed to himself.

It seems my second life won’t be calming down anytime soon, he thought to himself as he walked on.

Chapter Two: The Butterfly, Beastmen, and Trust

Herscherik made his way to the red-light district. Behind him walked the owner of the fruit shop, along with the red-haired woman and the blue-haired man. The man seemed to be wary of something, as he would occasionally glance behind him or from side to side. Seeing this, Herscherik surmised that this man might be some kind of warrior, instead of an ordinary traveler.

The man's wariness turned out to be unwarranted, as they arrived safely in the red-light district—a place usually full of life at night, but almost deserted now in broad daylight. Even so, it wasn't the kind of place that Herscherik—a child not yet school age—should be in the first place.

After a bit more walking, the party arrived at what was considered the finest brothel in the entire city, where only select customers were permitted entry: the Night Butterfly. An evening at the Night Butterfly cost the equivalent of an average person's monthly earnings, and even then, they didn't just let in anyone who could pay. First-time visitors were rejected unless they were introduced by an existing customer. Ill-mannered customers would be banned, regardless of how rich they were, and the person who introduced them would be banned as well. Here, the prostitutes had the power, not their customers.

Of course, the men and women of the brothel were beautiful, sociable, and good at enticing customers. The food and drink was high quality and the furnishings were some of the finest available, making the visit worth the price. As a result, the brothel was fully booked every night, and reservations needed to be made a month in advance at the very least.

Putting aside what went on later at night, Herscherik thought talking to the pretty ladies and gentlemen of the brothel while enjoying good food seemed pretty fun. Incidentally, Herscherik was a sucker for a pretty face, a trait he'd also possessed in his previous life—though back then he had been an otaku spinster only attracted to 2D characters.

Just as Herscherik arrived at the Night Butterfly, an establishment that could

put the mansions of many wealthy aristocrats to shame, a man appeared from inside the building.

“Oh, hello!” Herscherik called out to the man, who turned around in response.

Despite his fair, delicate looks, the man was not one of the Night Butterfly’s courtesans, but the brothel’s bouncer. His main job was to throw out any unruly customers, but he also took care of cleaning, shopping, and other miscellaneous tasks. Herscherik would see him on occasion while shopping in the town, and they were close enough for him to say hello and stop to chat.

“Hey there, young man. What brings you here? I see your usual entourage isn’t with you today.”

The man approached Herscherik with one hand raised in greeting, but upon noticing the people behind the boy he furrowed his brow in suspicion. Though he knew the fruit shop owner, the other two were unfamiliar to him.

Herscherik, though, spoke to the man in his usual tone, completely devoid of tension.

“I left them behind today!”

“Now *that’s* unfortunate. The girls are all begging for a chance to entertain your attendants.”

Herscherik smiled awkwardly at the man’s light teasing, which could very well have been serious. The prostitutes of the Night Butterfly had taken a liking to his men of service after a particular series of events. While Herscherik himself would never get any offers, considering his age, his men would sometimes receive half-joking invitations to spend the night.

“Tell that to them, not me. Sorry for asking so early in the day, but is Helena awake?” Herscherik lowered his voice to a whisper. “I’d like to borrow a room.”

At the sight of Herscherik’s serious gaze, the man straightened his posture.

“The madam is currently getting ready. However, we have been instructed to accommodate you at all times, sir. Please, right this way.”

With both his mannerisms and speech a good few notches politer, the man

opened the door and showed Herscherik and his party into the luxurious brothel, with its stone façade and interior of polished marble only surpassed by the royal castle itself. As it was still not yet evening, it was quiet inside. The men and women of the brothel would start to wake up in another hour or so, at which point the cooks and the servers would start preparing to open as well.

Herscherik traversed the marble halls as the delicate-looking man led his party to a room in the back—the finest room that the Night Butterfly had to offer. The carpet felt like walking on clouds; the table, sofa, and other furnishings were very finely made with gilt edges; paintings, likely by famous artists, adorned the walls; and a magnificent fireplace warmed the spacious room. In the back was another door that led to a bedchamber.

Herscherik entered the room as he gave his thanks to the man who stopped outside the room.

“Thank you. Also...”

“You can trust me to keep people away,” the man quickly replied, giving Herscherik a deep bow as he closed the door.

This was the reason Herscherik had chosen this brothel.

Sometime prior to the attempted act of terrorism by the church, Herscherik had ended up helping the people of the Night Butterfly by sheer coincidence. As far as Herscherik was concerned, all he had done was stick his nose in someone else’s business, but everyone at the brothel felt grateful and would try to help him in any way they could. They would offer any information that customers let slip while drunk or during pillow talk, offer locations to hold secret discussions, and so on. Herscherik in turn was careful not to abuse their goodwill, making sure never to leak the source of his information and always gathering additional evidence to support anything they said, further instilling trust in the people of the brothel.

This room at the very back of the brothel had no windows and was soundproof, making it the perfect place to hold conversations that he didn’t want anyone to hear. Whenever he had something confidential to discuss, he would always pick either his own room in the castle or this room—outside of business hours, of course.

“Now, we have a married man with us here, so let’s get this over with quickly before any rumors start to fly,” Herscherik said as he sat down on a sofa that was as comfortable as any found in the castle and crossed his legs. He invited the other three to sit down as well, but they all remained standing, making Herscherik feel a little awkward.

The owner of the fruit shop seemed a bit remorseful for having dragged Herscherik into all this. He hunched his large body down and hesitantly opened his mouth.

“I want you to help these two,” the owner said, looking at the couple.

The man’s expression remained unchanged while the woman continued to smile, quietly observing the events unfolding.

Herscherik gave them a perplexed look. It seemed strange to him that the owner would ask for his help like this while the two who supposedly needed it seemed oddly calm.

First of all, however, Herscherik needed to confirm something.

“Owner, am I right in assuming that this is something only I could help with?”

The owner nodded quietly in response—confirming to Herscherik that this spelled trouble, though he did not let this show on his face.

“I can’t say whether I’ll be able to help or not, but I’d like to at least get the full picture first. Are they friends of yours?” It was plain as day that they weren’t family. Herscherik’s other theory for why the owner would be so desperate to help them also fell flat as the owner shook his head.

“I barely know them. I met them in the town I delivered some fruit to earlier.”

In other words, they were strangers who had only met each other very recently. Then why was he so desperate to help them? And how did Herscherik himself fit into all this? One question after another welled up inside Herscherik’s mind. The next thing the owner said, though, cleared up any doubts Herscherik had.

“They’re... *He* is a beastman.”

“Huh?” Herscherik uttered, dumbstruck. “Really?”

Herscherik looked back and forth between the owner and the strange man.

“Yes,” the owner replied with a heavy nod.

The man then turned his gaze to the woman standing beside him, and upon seeing her give a quiet nod, he removed the coat he was wearing.

Beneath the coat was a muscular, well-trained physique—as well as a pair of wings, the same color as his hair, growing from his back.



As he stared in surprise, Herscherik's emerald eyes widened so much it seemed like they might fall right out of their sockets.

Oh... Now this is trouble.

Before him was a person—nay, an entire *kind* of person—that should not be in this country at all.

There were a great many peoples in this world. One was the race Herscherik himself belonged to—humans. Next were mystics, who possessed more Magic Within than humans. It was said that they had lost a war against the other peoples during the New Dawn Era and fled Grandinal for a new continent. There were also demihumans such as elves and dwarves—those who had intermingled with fairies.

Then there were beastmen. Just as the name implies, they possessed animal-like traits. Some had animal ears and tails, others wings like this man, and others had skin covered with scales. They also possessed abilities beyond those of humans, like heightened agility, immense strength, or even the power of flight.

There were also a handful of other non-human peoples that were much less common, like magical beasts.

Most beastmen, demihumans, and magical beasts lived in the southern Lustian Confederation. Mystics, demihumans, and beastmen also all lived much longer than ordinary humans. Mystics and demihumans in particular could live more than five times as long as humans, and beastmen twice as long. By contrast, they reproduced much more slowly. Additionally, each people had their own inherent strengths and weaknesses when it came to magic.

Herscherik had learned all of this from books after being reincarnated into this world, but this was his first time actually seeing a non-human in person. When he had first learned of their existence, he had been elated at having been reborn in a true fantasy world; however, his joy did not last long, and he soon found himself once again in despair at the current state of Gracis.

This is something only a royal can help with—or rather, this might be a situation where even royalty can't help.

It was only natural for Herscherik to think this way. Currently, Gracis did not allow any non-humans within their borders. Additionally, trafficking and slavery were also forbidden.

It had all started with the king of two generations ago. At that time, beastmen and demihumans still lived within the borders of Gracis—not as citizens, but as slaves. Beastmen and demihumans were valued for their robust bodies, immense strength, and beautiful looks. After being forced into slavery, they were treated as objects.

But one day, by decree from the king, all slavery was abolished, and at the same time trafficking was made illegal. Every single former slave, including children, was disposed of, and all non-humans were forbidden from entering the country from then on. Those who broke the law would be executed without trial. As a result, there were now no slaves in Gracis, nor were there any peoples other than humans.

Consequently, the fruit shop owner, this mysterious couple—as well as Herscherik himself, who was now involved too—were, as far as the law was concerned, deserving of being executed without trial.

“For starters...can you just tell me how all this came about?” Herscherik asked. In order to decide on a course of action, first he needed to ascertain the truth.

“I met them in the town that received my shipment of fruit,” the usually quiet fruit shop owner explained solemnly.

After receiving payment for his goods, he had noticed a commotion. The town was a relatively large one close to the border between Gracis and Felvolk, about a ten days’ journey by wagon from the capital. Since he’d left his wife and newborn daughter behind in the capital, though, the fruit shop owner had traveled as quickly as he could and ended up arriving two days early. What little sociability he already had went out the window as he rushed to get back to his family, and combined with his fierce appearance, his attitude spooked the merchant he was negotiating with. In a stroke of good fortune, the nervous merchant ended up paying him extra for his labor.

On the way back, he would be able to travel even quicker without the cargo. But just as he was thinking about buying a souvenir for his family with the extra money, he heard the shouting of constables.

Did something happen?

Though hardly the size of the capital, this town still had a sizable population. It must have its share of problems, he reasoned, as he quickly made his way back to his wagon.

Just as he was about to set off, however, he heard a noise from his supposedly empty wagon. He sighed as he looked inside, figuring it was either a stray cat or a mischievous child. Instead he found himself looking at two figures hiding behind the empty crates. One was a woman with crimson-colored hair. Her overcoat was sooty and her expression looked exhausted, but her dark eyes still seemed to brim with an intense light. In front of the woman, as if to protect her, was a blue-haired man with his azure eyes fixed on the fruit shop owner.

The man wore a sooty overcoat just like the woman; what caught the owner's attention the most was not him, but what was growing on his back.

"A...beastman?"

The man jerked at the words that escaped the taciturn owner's lips. He held up a small knife. The air was as tense as a thread stretched to the breaking point, neither party daring to move.

Suddenly, a voice broke the tension.

"Is someone there?!"

The voice spurred the owner into action. He instinctively grabbed a blanket he had used when camping outside and threw it over the pair.

"Don't move," he told them in a quiet voice.

Without waiting for a reply, he turned his back and looked out from the wagon, blocking the line of sight of two men wearing constable uniforms who were just about to have a look inside. The two constables jumped back at the large man's sudden appearance but quickly cleared their throats, trying to appear unfazed as they asked the owner if he had seen anyone suspicious.

The couple inside the wagon crossed the owner's mind, but because he was so unsociable, nothing showed on his face. Instead, he merely shook his head, and the constables quickly left, almost as if they were intimidated by him.

Without saying another word, he set off with the wagon. Once he was well outside the borders of the town, he stopped to ask the pair about their circumstances, but they remained silent, and the inarticulate owner was unable to get any more information out of them. It was easy to conclude, though, that they had crossed the border from Felvolk to arrive here. While there was a chance that they had come from the Lustian Confederation, they would have had to pass through many countries on the way to do so, and based on their outfits they did not seem to have traveled far.

The military nation of Felvolk, located on the east side of the continent, was a country ruled by humans, but beastmen and demihumans also lived there—not as citizens, but as slaves, with few exceptions. Felvolk had a history of exercising its military might to expand its borders by occupying smaller neighboring nations. The people of these occupied countries were given two choices: pay a hefty tax and become citizens of Felvolk, or become slaves. Non-humans in particular were forced to pay outrageous taxes; most were unable to pay them, forcing the beastmen and demihumans of the occupied territories into slavery.

Unable to endure the oppression of Felvolk, many beastmen would flee the country; however, most would flee to Lustia. No one would flee to Gracis, where their very existence was against the law.

No one, except for the man in front of him.

"I couldn't leave them alone," the inarticulate owner concluded as Herscherik listened intently.

He couldn't bring himself to hand them over to the constables, nor abandon them. A few years prior, he might have left them behind for fear of his own safety, but after meeting the young child in front of him, who would always prioritize others over himself, he had absorbed a bit of the prince's meddlesome nature. The owner was actually embarrassed that he'd prioritized himself over others.

He also had one other reason.

“I also have beastman blood in my veins.”

“What?” Herscherik said with even greater surprise than before.

Herscherik instinctively examined the owner from head to toe, but everything about him seemed human.

“My great-grandfather was a bearman.”

“A...bearman?” Herscherik asked, perplexed. He knew little about other peoples, as there were few available texts about them.

According to the owner, there were many different kinds of beastmen—bearfolk, who had the features and strength of bears, birdfolk like the blue-haired man with wings on their back, and so on.

“Though the probability is low, it’s possible for humans and beastmen to have children together. The child inherits the appearance of his mother’s people, but in rare cases it takes on the abilities and lifespan of the father. My great-grandfather’s physique and strength skipped two generations.” The owner paused for a moment before hesitantly continuing. “But anyone who is obviously a beastman cannot live in this country.”

If what he says is true, there may be more people with beastmen blood than I ever would have thought right here in Gracis, Herscherik thought.

Though their lifespan was different from a human’s, in a world without DNA tests, it would be possible to hide your identity as long as you didn’t reveal it yourself. The owner himself was proof of that, as until he revealed his secret, Herscherik had only thought of him as simply larger and stronger than the average man.

As the couple had attempted to leave, the owner had convinced them to stay, telling them they ought to come with him if they had any gratitude for his help—surprisingly well said for someone as clumsy with words as him. They had then returned to the capital, being careful to avoid attention on the way.

Had they parted ways, the two travelers would without a doubt have been captured by the constables or knights and sentenced to death. The owner

thought that Herscherik was his only chance at saving them.

“So I had no choice but to rely on you. I’m sorry,” the owner continued before closing his mouth and hanging his head.

Herscherik barely even needed any time to think before deciding what to say.

“All right, I get the gist. Don’t hang your head like that. You can leave the rest to me,” Herscherik stated confidently to the owner, who had gone back to his usual stoic demeanor.

Herscherik wasn’t worried about whether or not to save them. Abandoning someone was never an option to begin with. He was only worried about *how* to save them.

While silently pondering what to do now, Herscherik gave the frowning owner a bright smile to reassure him.

“Owner, thank you for trusting me and explaining everything.”

While perhaps it wasn’t something Herscherik should be excited about, the fact that the owner had revealed his secret to him made him happy. If word got out about that he’d not only harbored a beastman but had beastman blood himself, he was sure to be executed. Even so, he had trusted Herscherik enough to tell him the truth.

Now the question was how to repay the owner’s trust in him. As Herscherik racked his brain, he heard a female voice.

“I’m sorry for interrupting the conversation.”

There was only one woman in the room, so Herscherik turned his gaze toward the crimson-haired stranger. She took a step forward as he did, her hair swaying. She maintained her persistent smile, but her watchful dark eyes seemed to pierce right through him.

“How come you’ve decided to help us?” the woman said—a strange objection for someone receiving an offer of assistance.

Herscherik, however, did not criticize her, instead only looking perplexed as he wondered, “Why do you ask?”

“The two of us are clearly suspicious individuals. What’s to say that we aren’t

simply pretending to have come here by chance, as part of a plot to get close to you and do you harm? Either way, there's no benefit to you helping us."

Herscherik looked slightly troubled upon hearing her sound argument. Had his overprotective butler been here, he would most certainly have agreed with her. In addition to being overprotective and a worrywart, his butler also tended to make a point of considering every pro and con of a given decision. He would likely have stated that it would be foolish to expose yourself to danger to no advantage.

"Yes, you're right on all counts," Herscherik agreed. The woman's smile seemed to stiffen slightly in response.

"Then why?"

Her words and her dark eyes seemed to have a tint of wariness to them. The sight of her eyes made Herscherik understand the reason she acted this way.

She's level-headed... She has to be in order to survive.

Initially, she had seemed calm, but she was likely trying to assess Herscherik's character. Even if they did not admit to it, it was clear that they'd come from Felvolk just like the owner had said. Not to mention the man was a beastman. They couldn't trust just anyone they met in this country. Putting their faith in the wrong person could mean death.

The two of them were very short on options in this country, though, so she showed them a smile to appear confident, while at the same time assessing the character of those around her in order to determine the best chance of survival.

She's quite the bold one.

Despite only just having met her, Herscherik took a liking to the woman and how she was attempting to find a way out of such a seemingly hopeless situation—and to the man who seemed to trust her with his life.

Before showing his wings, the man had looked toward the woman. That must have been him silently asking if it was all right to let Herscherik see them—to reveal the fact that he was a beastman. In a country where being a beastman was a death sentence, he must have been incredibly wary of doing so. Thus, the fact that he agreed to do so after simply asking the woman with his eyes was

proof of just how much he trusted her.

And while it was only his intuition, the two of them didn't seem like bad people to Herscherik.

Still, I doubt they'll fully trust me so easily.

Herscherik was not so arrogant as to expect them to have full confidence in his intentions right away. So instead of coming up with a cheap justification, he decided to say what he really thought.

"The owner asked me to help you. What other reason do I need?" Herscherik said as if it was the most natural thing in the world. The woman's smile faded for a moment, but it quickly returned.

"But according to the law of this country..."

"Yes, the law here is very brutal toward beastmen," Herscherik interrupted her. "But in my opinion, legal isn't always the same thing as moral."

Herscherik understood that it was important to uphold the law. However, in the end it was nothing more than a system of rules invented by human beings. The law was always changed and revised in response to all kinds of factors—the era, the society, the people, and so on. No legal system was infallible. He also couldn't understand why his country was so exclusionary toward other peoples to begin with.

I guess I should look that up too.

Whenever something interested Herscherik, he made a mental note to research it. Such was his nature.

As Herscherik became absorbed in his thoughts, he failed to notice that the woman was observing him.

"Oh, right—I never introduced myself, did I?"

Pulling himself back to reality, Herscherik stood up from the sofa and walked over to the pair.

"My name is Herscherik Gracis. I'm the Seventh Prince of this kingdom."

Herscherik offered the woman his hand, paying no heed to how her eyes

were widened in surprise. The woman instinctively reached out her hand in response, and Herscherik took it as he gave her a broad business-like smile.

He then offered the man his hand, but he did not take it—though it seemed less that the man was refusing him than he simply had no idea what to do. Bewilderment showed on the man's previously expressionless face.

“So you’re...” the woman said quietly while observing her hand, still warm from Herscherik’s palm.

She had never expected the boy in front of her to be a member of the royal family. The shock had rocked her to the core.

Herscherik’s stretched-out hand hung awkwardly in the air for a few seconds before he retracted it. Then he suddenly realized something important.

“What are your names?” he asked inquisitively.

Upon hearing that, her expression stiffened and fell silent, and she hesitated for a moment before replying.

“I’m afraid...I can’t answer that.”

Her hesitation did not escape Herscherik. Soon after, the woman too realized her mistake—she should have simply given him an alias instead. While the man next to her, who had known her for many years, may have noticed the slight change to her expression, the detail would normally fly right over the head of someone she’d just met.

But Herscherik did, in fact, notice. Realizing this, alarm bells started to sound in her head—but Herscherik did not press the issue further.

“But if you don’t have a name, I won’t know what to call you... Let’s see... Crimson hair and blue hair... Scarlet, Azure, Ruby... Something about those just doesn’t sound right...”

Had any of his men of service been here, they would likely have been dreading what was coming. Herscherik’s choice of names tended to be on the simplistic side—or put another way, he had absolutely zero creativity when it came to names. Right now, though, no one was around to stop him.

Suddenly Herscherik clapped his hands together with a satisfied smile on his

face.

“In that case, I’ll call you Kurenai and Ao!” Herscherik said, once again electing to simply describe their hair color in the language he’d spoken in his previous life. “And it looks like it’s just about time,” Herscherik added at the sound of footsteps, turning his gaze toward the door. A knocking sound echoed through the room.

Once Herscherik told the person knocking to come in, the door opened slowly and a number of figures entered the room. First was the delicate-looking man who had shown them to the room. Next to him was a bewitchingly beautiful woman—the Night Butterfly’s madam, Helena.

“I am delighted to see you, Young Master,” Helena said in an alluring voice that felt like a gentle caress that sent shivers down your spine. She gave Herscherik a deep bow. Her long hair, lightly curled and pale purple in color, cascaded down from her shoulders. As she glanced, Herscherik could see her violet eyes looking at him.

She must have come to speak to him in the middle of her preparations for the night. She wore only light makeup, a long dress that accentuated her curves, and a thin robe over top. Even so, she looked seductive enough to make any man stare.

Herscherik, however, was still young, and had in his previous life been a woman—one with no serious interest in romance at that—and was not enticed by her overwhelming allure.

“Helena, I am very grateful that you lent us this room. It was of tremendous help.”

“Oh, there is no need to be so formal around me, Young Master,” Helena replied with a flirtatious smile, laying her hand on her cheek. The beauty mark by her mouth only added to her seductiveness. “I will endeavor to do anything in my power to help you, Young Master. The people of the Night Butterfly will stop at nothing to ensure that you leave satisfied.”

Herscherik gave a slightly apologetic smile in response to the madam’s bewitching smile and cultured way of speaking.

"I appreciate you saying that when I'm taking advantage of your kindness. I'll be sure to thank you properly later."

"I assure you, Young Master, that shan't be necessary. Of course, if you insist..." Helena spoke with a smile that somehow reminded Herscherik of a carnivore sizing up its prey. "My dear girls are all terribly eager for the chance to attend those fine men of yours. If you could convince them to pay us a visit, I would be *ever* so happy."

"Haha... Well...that would be up to them, I suppose..." Herscherik replied evasively as he shot a glance at someone standing behind the madam. "Well, you heard her, Oran. What do you say?"

"Hersch, I'm here to pick you up," the figure replied after a moment's pause.

The person who had just ignored Herscherik's question and instead simply stated his business with an awkward look on his face was a man with messy orange hair streaked with gold. His blue eyes were slightly downturned, giving him a gentle impression. His name was Octavian Aldis, the third son of the prestigious Aldis house of knights and Herscherik's knight of service. Having received the nickname Oránge from Herscherik as proof of his trust, he had only recently displayed his tremendous skill with the sword during a battle with the imperial forces. As a result he was now famous both within and outside the kingdom of Gracis. The color of his hair and the way he snuffed the light out of his enemies' eyes like the sun sinking below the horizon had earned him the name of "Twilight Knight."

"How about you, Shiro? Want some tea before you leave?" Herscherik asked the beautiful woman next to Oran.

In response, the woman with braided white hair and amber eyes frowned even more deeply. Though possessing beauty that outclassed even the ladies of the Night Butterfly, this person was actually very much a man.

His name was Weiss, and he served as Herscherik's Spellcaster of service. His surname was unknown, as a lingering consequence of the brainwashing and memory-altering magic that had once been used on him. The name Weiss was one Herscherik thought up, though Herscherik would usually call him Shiro.

He was a magical expert of unparalleled skill. As a result of a former plot by

his adoptive father, Shiro now did not age, and he had vastly more Magic Within than other people. He also possessed the unique ability to absorb Floating Magic and make it his own. When it came to magic there were few in this country—or even the entire continent—who could put up a good fight against him.

Whenever he used magic, his hair would shine the colors of the rainbow in accordance with the element of the spell. The sight of this earned him the nickname of the “Haloed Spellcaster,” as well as envy from anyone who saw, though he himself thought nothing of it.

As a result of his upbringing, he tended to be distrustful of others, so Herscherik had gotten the idea to let him drink tea with the pretty ladies at the brothel in an attempt to rehabilitate him—but his plan seemed to have failed.

“If we don’t get back soon, the black dog’s gonna start barking.”

“Kuro was that angry, huh...?”

Seeing Oran nod in response, Herscherik started to imagine how long of a lecture he was in for. Though he was only reaping what he’d sowed—having not only snuck out in secret but also left behind extra work for his butler to prevent him from following—he could not help but hang his head.

I’d better just resign myself to my fate... Herscherik steeled his nerves like a samurai preparing to disembowel himself.

“Well, in either case, thanks for coming to get me—Oran, Shiro,” Herscherik said before giving his supposedly recluse of a Spellcaster an inquisitive look. “Oh, and Shiro, well done coming all this way.”

Ever since Shiro found himself mobbed by not only women but men as well every time he visited the castle town, the resulting trauma had seemingly given him a light case of social anxiety. As a result, he’d taken to cooping up inside the castle—not that there was any lack of people who were after his fair looks there either.

“He dragged me out here,” Shiro said as he gave the knight standing next to him a menacing glare. Oran shrugged in response.

Herscherik guessed that Oran, worried about Shiro’s recent habit of locking

himself up indoors, had taken him out for a change of pace on his way to fetch their master. Oran was very caring by nature.

“So more trouble, then.” Shiro said as he turned his glance from Oran to the pair of strangers in the room.

Herscherik bringing home trouble was an everyday occurrence by now. Since the prince refused to listen to anyone once he’d made up his mind, his men of service had all but given up. Even so, his worried butler would continue to complain like an anxious mother—but in the end they all shared the common trait of being soft on Herscherik.

“No, we’re *helping* people!” Herscherik corrected Shiro before turning to the pair—newly christened Ao and Kurenai. “Ao, Kurenai. If you stay with the owner, I won’t be able to help in case something happens, and it’ll be difficult for him and his wife. I’m sure you have your apprehensions, but would you mind coming with me instead? I’ll ensure your safety.”

Herscherik turned to face the others in the room.

“All right, let’s get going then. Helena, thank you so much again. I hate to ask you for another favor, but would you mind keeping the fact that we were here a secret?”

“Of course. No one was here—neither you or your friends,” Helena responded with her usual alluring smile. The wings growing from the man’s back briefly caught her attention, but her expression remained unchanged.

The delicate-looking man behind her gave a perfect bow, as though to affirm what the madam had said. Herscherik once again thanked the two and started walking toward the door, when he suddenly stopped and turned around.

“Oh, before we leave...”

Herscherik gleefully walked up to Ao.

“Um... Well...”

In an unusual display of hesitation from Herscherik, he started to fidget with his hands behind his back, his eyes wandering around the room. After a significant pause, he finally steeled himself and looked up at Ao.

"Would you mind if I touched your wings?"

He blushed slightly, putting on a puppy dog face as he begged.

A former otaku had just met a beastman straight out of a fantasy tale. Herscherik couldn't keep his heart from racing with excitement.

Chapter Three: The Youngest Prince, the Prodigal Prince, and the Souvenirs

After returning home from the castle town, Herscherik made straight for a private lounge in the royal quarters. His brother, the Sixth Prince of Gracis, had finally come home from his stay abroad. He had wanted to join the others as soon as possible, but he ended up having to attend to a particular matter for longer than expected.

I guess there's bureaucratic red tape in this world too...

Herscherik let out an exasperated sigh as he thought back to all the running around he'd done before finally coming here. However, the most exasperated person here wasn't Herscherik, but the gatekeepers on duty, who had found themselves having to deal with the youngest prince suddenly showing up with a pair of suspicious characters.

Herscherik would proclaim that he'd accept responsibility for the two, while the guards would explain that they couldn't let two strangers into the castle. Had Herscherik seen this situation as an outside observer, it would have been clear that the gatekeepers were in the right, but even so he couldn't simply leave the pair behind in the castle town. At the same time, if he'd brought them to the castle using his own secret passageway, it would have been a complicated situation if they'd been found out.

So Herscherik decided to try going into the castle through the gate—and as expected, it didn't go as easily as he'd hoped. In the end Oran had stepped in between the gatekeepers and Herscherik and reassured them that he and the prince's butler would take responsibility for the duo and keep a close eye on them, to which the gatekeepers tentatively agreed. Herscherik had then been instructed to formally request permission for their stay, and Herscherik had racked his brain to figure out a way around that before deciding to leave it be for now.

One thing had bothered Herscherik about the whole ordeal though: why were

the gatekeepers so reluctant to trust him, a royal, but they so readily accepted Oran's proposal? Herscherik felt like he ought to spend an hour or so questioning them about that.

"They're all just worried, Hersch. It wouldn't be your first offense," Oran explained to the discontented prince as they walked toward the castle.

Herscherik shrugged his shoulders.

At the same time that the minister's crimes had come to light, so too had everything that Herscherik had done in the past. When word had gotten out that he'd spent his nights patrolling the castle for his investigative journalism, the soldiers had been dumbstruck that the prince, who was so meek-looking and young, would dive headfirst into danger and perform deeds that would put an adult to shame. Not just his family and men of service, but anyone who was fond of Herscherik had been beside themselves with worry—as had certain people who still had things to hide, though for a different reason.

Herscherik's young age, dainty appearance, and delicate physique, even compared to other children his age, just seemed to activate the protective instincts of everyone around him. It's not that they didn't trust him—they were just worried.

Possessing memories from his past life, Herscherik would sometimes forget how he appeared to others. Even as an adult, Ryoko's little sister had described her as "a composed wild boar" after spending some time in her clutches. "Once she starts running," her sister had said, "she'll stubbornly keep going in the same direction without ever slowing down, and the fact that she pays attention to her surroundings just makes it easier for her to evade obstacles. That means nobody can stop her. She's vicious too."

As this composed wild boar returned to his room, his butler came to meet him, greeting him with a smile while simultaneously popping a vein in his temple. But just as Herscherik was preparing himself for an hour-long lecture, he was instead informed that his siblings had asked for him. Herscherik jumped at the opportunity, quickly explaining the situation and leaving the duo he had brought with him in the care of his butler before hurriedly changing clothes and setting off for the lounge.

The prince took a deep breath and knocked on the door to the lounge.

“I’m sorry for—” Herscherik started to say, but before he could finish apologizing for his tardiness he felt someone put their hands under his arms and lift him high up into the air, his legs dangling as they left the ground.

“Herscherik!”

Herscherik saw a cheerful face looking up at him, paying no heed to how he was utterly paralyzed with surprise.



He'd been lifted up by a boy with tied-back hair that was slightly reddish, perhaps light pink, and good looks on par with his siblings—although the pink-haired boy had a gentle face that made him seem more approachable. He was Tessily, the Sixth Prince of Gracis and the youngest out of Herscherik's siblings—although still a good seven years older than Herscherik himself. His light pink hair and equally light brown eyes reminded Herscherik of the cherry blossoms in his previous life that would bloom beautifully only to quickly scatter, making him feel just a bit sad.

He did not let any of that show on his face, however, as he smiled at his recently returned older brother.

"Tessily, welcome ba—"

"Did you grow any taller? Did you put on any weight?" Tessily asked with a worried expression, still paying no attention to what Herscherik had to say as he held him up into the air. "Hmm, it doesn't seem like you're much heavier than before. Are you eating properly?"

Tessily's words, although containing no hint of malice, pierced Herscherik's eardrums on a level much deeper than sound. Though part of him had already started to notice it, he did not want to accept it—the fact that even as he grew older, ate the very nutritious meals prepared by his butler every day, and exercised regularly, he still remained weak and spindly. The sad reality was that Herscherik had not one ounce of athleticism in him, nor a shred of magical talent, and on top of that he was by far the least beautiful person in his family.

I think I'll cry... I am a girl after all—wait, no you're not! Herscherik retorted to himself as a visibly sad expression appeared on his face.

"Tessily, put him down already," Marx interrupted the dejected Herscherik and his genuinely concerned brother.

Marx possessed hair and eyes the color of the finest polished rubies, and every year that passed only seemed to add allure and dignity to his already beautiful face. After the battle with the empire and the death of Barbosse, he had been busy with not only matters relating to his royal duties and National Defense, where he was stationed, but also assisting his father in restructuring the government. Still, no hint of his exhaustion showed on his face.

Hearing his oldest brother's voice spurred Herscherik to take a look around the room, and he noticed that all the siblings presently in the castle had gathered. Herscherik felt guilty for being the last one to arrive.

"Oh, sorry about that, Hersch."

Tessily put Herscherik down on the floor, and after taking a moment to readjust himself, Herscherik once again greeted his brother.

"Welcome back, Tessily. I'm sorry for being late," Herscherik apologized as he lowered his head.

"Thanks, Hersch. It's good to be back. Now, then..."

With a radiant smile on his face, Tessily knocked his fist against the top of Herscherik's head. The sound of the impact echoed through the room, and each of the siblings looked on with either a worried expression or an unfazed look, as though this was just what he deserved.

"Ow! Tessily?!" Herscherik rubbed his head as he looked up at the person responsible for his aching noggin.

As he did, he found Tessily looking at him with an angry expression wholly unlike his usual smile.

"That's your punishment for doing something so crazy. I'm just happy it all worked out in the end..."

Tessily then quickly softened his expression again as he laid his hand on top of Herscherik's, which was still rubbing the top of his head.

"I'm so glad you're okay," Tessily said, sounding immensely relieved.

Herscherik was unable to say anything in return.

As a young child, Herscherik had been closer to Tessily than anyone else aside from his father. Even so, that would mostly amount to Tessily sending people to deliver Herscherik sweets every now and then, and by the time Herscherik had learned about the truth of the country and become preoccupied with his own investigations, Tessily had already left to study abroad. Thus, much like with his other siblings, they had never been all that close.

Tessily would occasionally return from abroad and hand over foreign sweets

and souvenirs, only to immediately depart for his next country. While he was away, mountains of love letters from foreign princesses and noble daughters would pile up, and the way he would run around from one country to the next doing whatever he pleased had earned the nickname of the “Prodigal Prince.”

Of course, when it came to doing whatever one pleased, Herscherik could have given Tessily a good run for his money.

“Thank you...” Herscherik said, slightly embarrassed from Tessily’s warm hand resting on his head. Seemingly satisfied, Tessily gripped Herscherik’s hand and pulled it closer to him.

“And that’s the end of my lecture. Look, Herscherik, I bought you souvenirs.”

Spread out on the table in the lounge were sweets and other knick-knacks that couldn’t be found in Gracis. Herscherik’s siblings were sitting by the table, inspecting the unusual items with great interest.

Tessily handed Herscherik a fountain pen, a book, and some chocolate candy. The fountain pen was carved from wood, making it lighter than the one Herscherik usually used. The book was the next volume of a novel series that Tessily had brought him previously. The series was always out of stock and impossible to get a hold of domestically, and Herscherik had already given up on getting to read it. The chocolate came in bite-sized pieces, which were beautifully laid out in an expensive-looking box. Each piece was shaped differently, and based on the differences in color and luster, Herscherik deduced that they must all taste differently too. The little prince broke into a smile at all of these thoughtful gifts. Each one showed a great understanding of his tastes.

On the table were also unusual flowers, a board game set similar to chess, cookies, tea, and more.

“So how did it go, Tessily?” the second son, William, asked as Tessily finished handing out the souvenirs.

William’s loosely braided hair was the same platinum blonde hair as his father’s, and his deep-blue eyes were fixed on Tessily. His facial muscles saw little work outside of diplomatic events, and combined with his blue eyes he could often come off as cold, but that did not pose much of a problem around

his family.

“Oh, you’re so impatient, Will. That’s my most important souvenir, so I was planning on giving it out last!” Tessily replied, shrugging his shoulders theatrically. He removed a bundle of letters from his inside pocket and handed them to William.

“Here you go—positive responses from various neighboring countries. Even more should be arriving soon.”

“I appreciate it,” William replied, taking the letters and looking them over one by one. He then handed them to Marx, who similarly flipped through each letter.

“What are those?” Herscherik asked, curious.

Herscherik realized that he had been too preoccupied with digging up the past to pay any attention to current events—not that he ever involved himself with diplomacy to begin with, as that was the job of the Foreign Relations department. The Second Prince, who worked for Foreign Relations, and the First Prince, who belonged to National Defense, were both young but highly skilled—and the same was true of the officials who had not been sentenced and remained at their respective departments as a result. There was no reason for Herscherik to interfere. Of course, Herscherik did still know the general gist of what went on.

“They’re love letters from princesses,” said Tessily, with a salacious wink—thus proving that an attractive person can look good doing something that would normally just be embarrassing.

“What?!” Herscherik replied, shocked—his low tolerance of romance rearing its head yet again.

Seeing his brother’s smirk, Herscherik realized that Tessily had been teasing him. He gave his brother a pout.

“Sorry, sorry,” Tessily apologized, patting his sulky little brother on the head. “I’m just kidding. They’re responses from various countries to invitations to the harvest festival. All of them favorable, of course.”

Oh, so that’s why the budget for the harvest festival was larger than usual this

year, Herscherik realized, remembering the budget proposal that he'd happened across—or rather, secretly gotten a look at during one of his by now regular sweeps of the castle.

The harvest festival was one of the major fall events in Gracis. On this occasion, people gave thanks to nature and the goddess of the harvest as well as praying for a bountiful crop next year. The festival itself was not nearly as solemn as it sounded, though, with the people of the country celebrating by eating, drinking, and dancing. The festivities in the capital were even more boisterous than they were elsewhere. In addition, the Games of Contest would be held at the same time this year, as well as an evening party featuring key figures and diplomats from neighboring countries.

It was common for nations on friendly terms with Gracis to be invited to the harvest festival, but this year they had additionally extended invitations to many other nearby countries that had less communication with Gracis. Since William had been in charge of the matter and nothing about the budget had looked wrong at a glance, Herscherik had not spared the event much thought.

"While Atrad would have been too much to hope for, we've also received a favorable reply from Felvolk in addition to the usual attendees," Tessily reported cheerfully as he removed his hand from Herscherik's head.

Pinning the hair clip she received as a present to her dark green hair, the oldest of the triplets—the First Princess of Gracis, Cecily—spoke up.

"I wouldn't have expected anything less from our sociable and clever youngest brother. Just how many noble daughters did you seduce this time?"

The second eldest of the triplets, the Third Prince Arya, looked up from the books on magic he was reading to correct his sister.

"He's not the youngest anymore, you know. And stop making him sound like a playboy..."

Arya looked nearly identical to Cecily, except that his green hair was long and straight, reaching all the way to his back.

"But Tessily is really popular with the girls, you know. I get noble ladies asking me about him all the time."

"Well, that happens to me too..." Arya replied with a frown.

Then the third of the triplets, the Fourth Prince Reinette, joined the other two.

"Yeah, Eutel's got a fake smile that hides how he really is, but Tessily is actually approachable and easy to talk to." Reinette praised Tessily as he nibbled on a cookie.

Reinette had short yellow-green hair, and he possessed the same face and topaz-like light brown eyes as the other two triplets. Were the triplets to wear matching wigs, it would be difficult for most people to tell them apart.

"Did you say something, brother dearest?" Eutel asked Reinette with a broad smile as he fiddled with the crystal doll that Tessily had given him.

His slightly wavy lavender hair reached to his shoulders, and his deep blue eyes indicated that he shared a mother with William. Unlike his seemingly cold brother, Eutel came off as delicate and gentle. His smile seemed brimming with affection, but it only caused a chill to run down Reinette's spine.

"A-Are you sure you didn't simply mishear, my dear Eutel?" Reinette said in a frightened voice, but quickly gave into the pressure. "I'm sorry..."

To anyone else, this would have seemed like a hostile conversation—the siblings, however, were used to Reinette's banter and Eutel's smiling threats. The triplets and Eutel were close in age, got along well, and could speak freely around each other. To them, this kind of banter was an everyday occurrence.

"How come you're inviting all those other countries to the harvest festival?" Herscherik asked.

"You know what kind of situation Gracis is in right now, don't you?" William curtly replied.

Herscherik pondered for a moment before reaching a conclusion.

"Oh... Yes, I see."

Three months had passed since Barbosse, who had secretly been controlling the kingdom from the shadows, had passed away. Now the king had regained control of the country and was carrying out extensive reforms of the previously

—perhaps even *nefariously*—tight-knit government. Though they had defeated the ringleader, unlike in fiction, that was still far from the end of their troubles. The country was still in an unstable state. To other nations, this presented a perfect opportunity.

“It’s to deter those other countries.”

“Yes, exactly,” William nodded at his astute young brother. “And thanks to recent events, we have the budget for it too.”

Having confiscated the funds that Barbosse’s faction had embezzled, the treasury was currently more full than usual. Of course, the collected money was mostly intended to fund the projects it had originally been misappropriated from, but even after that they still had enough funds left over to put on a show.

“We’ll invite key figures from various countries, make a point of how steadfast we are, and deter them from making a move on us. That will buy us the time we need to get Gracis back on its feet,” Marx said, taking a sip from his tea as he went over the letters. He seemed to enjoy the fragrance of the tea, which also was a gift from Tessily.

After the minister’s death, all of the corrupt nobles and officials had received appropriate punishment, and now the idea that corruption would never go unpunished was starting to take hold. As a result, no one even wanted to try anything. This was a very good development, but the royal family—including Herscherik—did not believe this would go on forever. After all, “Danger past, God forgotten.” as the saying goes—it’s many times easier to fall for temptation than to keep yourself in line.

For that reason, it was all the more important that they find the time to completely rework the country from the ground up. While they did so, it was vital to keep other countries from trying to take advantage of their weakened state. That said, overt displays of military force risked straining their existing relationships. Instead, they would use the harvest festival and the Games of Contest to give the other countries the impression of a stable nation that could not be taken advantage of.

Fortunately, the biggest threat—the Atrad Empire—had already agreed to a five-year non-aggression pact as a result of the recent battle, and the noble that

had served as the imperial forces' supreme commander seemed to be doing a good job at home establishing diplomatic relations between the two countries. It was at the very least unlikely that they would attempt anything before the end of the agreement.

Incidentally, Herscherik had once spotted his second oldest brother wearing a smile so pleasant he doubted his own eyes during a diplomatic meeting. He even pinched his cheeks to make sure he wasn't dreaming in the middle of the day with his eyes open.

"Of course, there's no guarantee that everything will work out as hoped, but it's better than not trying," Marx explained.

"But couldn't this be dangerous?" Herscherik asked in return.

If any country sent a spy or assassin with their emissaries, they could pose a threat to the royal family. The mere thought terrified Herscherik.

"Well, I'm afraid I can't say for sure that it won't be. But I doubt going to all that trouble to kill us would be worth the investment."

The current king was blessed with brilliant children. Even if something were to happen to Marx, William would take his place, and he had many competent siblings beside that. Marx was not worried about that part. The kind of fight for the throne you hear about in other countries would not break out in Gracis. Ironically, the presence of the minister may have been the very thing that brought the royal siblings together.

"Although," Marx continued, "if there's anyone in danger here, it's you, Hersch."

A puzzled expression appeared on Herscherik's face as he pointed at himself.

"Me?"

"Listen, the people out there are calling you the Prince of Light or the Hero or Light or what have you, and you've made yourself known both in Gracis and abroad. If something were to happen to you, the citizens would become anxious, which would most certainly affect the country negatively. So whatever you do, don't go out walking by yourself during the harvest festival."

Herscherik averted his gaze just a bit as he nodded. His siblings all threw him suspicious glares.

“Also, Hersch, I’ll be borrowing your knight for the showcase match in the Games of Contest. If possible, I’d like to borrow your Spellcaster too,” William said as he finished reading through Tessily’s letters.

“What do you need them for?”

“They’ve both made quite a name for themselves after the battle with the empire. I hate to parade your men around like this, but we need to do what we can.” William looked as though he was frowning in anger as he spoke, but he was actually being apologetic. He must have sensed that Herscherik didn’t like his men being used like this.

Oran is probably fine with it, but I bet Shiro won’t be very happy... Herscherik thought as he agreed on the condition that they themselves said yes.

“But the real issue is who to pit Octa against,” Marx said as he racked his brain.

Oran had both fame and the skill to live up to it, as he’d proved in the recent battle. On top of that, he was also the victor of last year’s Games of Contest, where he had won by barely breaking a sweat. It was hard to say how many people there were in the capital who *wouldn’t* be intimidated by him, but were also skilled enough to be worth showcasing.

“Mark, how about General Blaydes? His combat skill goes without saying, and his impressive performance in the battle against the empire has made him well known. Not to mention it would serve as a great lesson for those incompetents who are used to favorable treatment just because of their social status,” Eutel suggested, smiling as he nonchalantly insulted an entire category of people.

General Blaydes—Heath Blaydes—was a commoner and a mercenary-turned-general, which was a rare sight in Gracis. Also known as the “Undefeated General,” he had demonstrated his excellent skill as a commander during the recent battle. Even in a kingdom that valued social rank so highly and where someone like him hardly ever became a knight, let alone a general, there was no lack of nobles who envied him.

He would indeed have been a good pick in order to show those who had until now relied on their bloodline and status that things were about to change—although Heath himself would have despised the suggestion. However, William rejected Eutel's idea.

"No, General Blaydes is currently working to ensure the safety of the roads outside the capital, as there have been more sightings of monsters as of late. He's busy enough already, and we can't exactly hold a match without taking the time to prepare first."

Monsters tended to become more active during the fall. Any normal year, the state would have sent a request to the mercenary guild and sent knights to take care of the monsters during summer. This summer, though, National Defense had been far too busy with restructuring the government to deal with the problem. As a result, monsters had started to show up even on major roads. Since it would be bad if a key figure from another country fell victim to a monster attack, General Blaydes had been put in charge of dealing with them.

"Okay, what about the knights of the Aldis house? The siblings there are all skilled with the sword, aren't they?" Reinette suggested next. This proposal, too, was rejected by William.

"I'd prefer to avoid relatives if I can. Besides, we don't want people to get the idea that we're giving the Aldis house preferential treatment."

"I can't imagine that would bother the Aldis family much..." Cecily said, to which Herscherik agreed.

Herscherik himself had met Oran's family a number of times, and they were all extraordinarily musclebrained—or rather, a very *pleasant* family. They cared more about their position as knights who protected their country than their status as nobles, and they took great pride in their service.

"I suppose the 'Blazing General' is out too then, even though he's well known." Arya mentioned the nickname of the most famous general in the country, at which Marx, William, and Herscherik all nodded in unison—not in agreement with his skill or fame, but out of concern that he, as the biggest musclebrain of the entire family, would single-handedly ruin the competition. There was a nontrivial risk of him going along just because it seemed fun, only

to go all out with no care for the audience or political circumstances.

“Oh, Mark!” Tessily raised his hand. “How about having my knight fight Hersch’s, in that case?”

“You have a knight?” Herscherik asked, confused. He only remembered his brother having a butler of service, a man he’d known from childhood.

“My knight’s originally from the Land of the Sun,” Tessily explained. “Apparently he was a ‘samurai’—that’s what we’d call a knight or a warrior. I found him wandering the continent and made him my knight of service.”

The Land of the Sun was an island country located beyond the sea to the far east of Gracis. Their ruler was known as the Divine Princess and the nation was governed by the twelve noble lineages that served her. Herscherik only knew about it from texts, but an island country with its own culture and customs reminded him of historical Japan.

The country was mostly isolationist with the exception of Gracis, with which it had established relations. Solye’s Fifth Queen was a daughter of one of the twelve lineages that ruled the Land of the Sun. She was currently attending her daughter, the Second Princess, who was receiving treatment away from the capital.

As Herscherik went over what he knew about the Land of the Sun, Tessily threw him a smirk.

“He’s pretty good, you know. He might even win against that Twilight Knight of yours.”

“I don’t particularly care who wins, but I’ll have you know that Oran is really strong,” Herscherik replied with a slight pout. A silent staring contest broke out between the two.

As he observed his two youngest brothers, Marx let out a small sigh and clapped his hands to signal the end of the gathering.

“It’s time we started packing up. Will, make a note of the key figures in Tessily’s letters, adjust the schedule as needed and go over the plans to welcome the guests.”

“Understood,” William replied, at which Marx stood up from his seat.

Each of the siblings left for their own chambers, and Herscherik too stood up and started walking toward his room.

“Oh, Hersch—”

“Yes?”

Herscherik turned around to find the youngest of his older brothers, his mocking smirk replaced with a serious expression.

“Be careful with the two people you brought here today.”

“Tessily?”

Herscherik observed his brother’s face, unable to grasp the meaning behind what he’d said. How did he know about them? Why did Herscherik have to be careful with them?

Tessily, however, simply smiled at him and remained silent. It was clear that he had no intention of clarifying further, and Herscherik did not possess the means to force an answer out of him.

On top of a bed in a spacious bedroom, Kurenai was tossing and turning. Hearing the rustling of sheets, Ao, who was sitting with his back turned toward the bed, spoke to her.

“Relax already.”

“It’s been so long since I slept in a bed. I can’t sleep.”

The bed wasn’t the only thing she had gone without—the same went for warm meals and a hot bath. Until just a few hours ago they had spent every day sleeping outside, without enough food to fill their stomachs, and it had been far too cold to bathe. With such a drastic change in their lifestyles, it would have been more surprising if she *had* been able to sleep easily.

At least, that was how she tried to justify it. But having spent a decade together with her, Ao was not fooled.

“Are you worried?” he asked in his usual curt way, so brief that one might not

even understand what or who she would be worried about.

Kurenai, though, had been with him just as long, and she understood what he was referring to.

“He’s a strange boy, isn’t he?”

Kurenai thought back to how she had been shown to where they would be staying. First, Herscherik had actually brought them to his own room. To Kurenai’s surprise, he never even tried to inspect their belongings. They had then been greeted by an enraged butler who was practically all-black with the exception of his red eyes. After hearing that he had been summoned by his siblings, Herscherik had thrown the pair a glance before letting out a sigh without even attempting to hide it.

“So, what trouble did you get yourself into this time?”

“It’s not like that...”

The butler had spoken in an inconceivably blunt manner for a servant, but his master had simply shrugged his shoulders. Herscherik had introduced the butler as Kuro, and the pair as Kurenai and Ao. Kuro had turned his eyes toward the pair before fixing his gaze on Ao, a small frown visible on his face.

“A beastman, huh...”

Even covered with a coat, it was impossible to hide the unnatural hump on his back. The butler’s expression indicated that he was now utterly convinced that this spelled trouble.

The butler then let out a very, very deep sigh.

“Kuro, would you mind just finding them two rooms for now?”

The outer quarters had rooms for the royals’ men of service to live in, and many currently stood empty. Herscherik figured that they could let the duo live there for the time being.

“All right.”

Kuro must have had the same thought. He was about to leave the room when Ao stopped him.

“One is enough. I don’t need my own.”

“Ao, we have more than enough rooms to spare. You don’t have to worry,” Herscherik replied, but Ao shook his head.

“It’s fine.”

“Very well,” Herscherik gave up at Ao’s insistence. “Kuro, you heard him. Oh, and get them some food too. And could you see to anything they need so they’ll have an easy time—”

“Yes, I know. You can leave all that to me. Just hurry to the lounge already.”

Kuro gave his worried master a confident look as he left the room.

“All right, I’ll just be away for a little bit. If you need anything at all, just let Kuro or Oran know, okay?”

“Your Highness, why are you doing so much for us?” Kurenai asked as Herscherik was finally suitably dressed and ready to leave.

“Huh?” Herscherik stopped and turned around.

“We haven’t told you anything about us. And there’s nothing in it for you. If anything, we’re a danger.”

“Kurenai—you’re an honest person, aren’t you?”

“I’m sorry?” Kurenai threw Herscherik a puzzled glance, unable to understand what about her came off as honest.

“I mean, you said that you couldn’t talk about yourself even without me asking, and you haven’t lied to me yet. And you’re feeling guilty right now, aren’t you? A dishonest person wouldn’t think that way,” Herscherik explained. “You and Ao were always forced to make calculated decisions in your past, weren’t you?”

Kurenai did not move, but she quietly gasped in response. The prince in front of her was observing people much more closely than she would ever have thought.

Herscherik did not wait for Kurenai to answer.

“I don’t think it’s bad to be careful. It’s a necessary tool to survive,” he said

with a smile. “It’s not as if I’m doing this only for your sake. I’m doing it because I want to. So go ahead and take advantage of me.”

“But...” Kurenai said anxiously.

Where she had once lived, any act of kindness had been a calculated move. Thus, Herscherik’s kindness made her anxious, and her inability to tell what he was thinking only further added to her anxiety.

Suddenly, Herscherik’s men of service interjected to give Kurenai their advice.

“Just give up on arguing.”

“You won’t believe how stubborn Hersch is. Once he sets his mind on something, there’s no changing it.”

Herscherik’s Spellcaster and knight, whom Herscherik had introduced as Shiro and Oran, spoke in a resigned manner before Kurenai had a chance to argue back.

“Our master is far too foolish and softhearted for someone who only thinks in terms of advantages and disadvantages to understand,” Oran said.

“That’s...a compliment, right?” Herscherik replied in a dejected tone.

“Well, considering the three of us always go along with what you want, we must be pretty softhearted ourselves.”

Herscherik looked on as his men of service shrugged and began to laugh, waving as he left the room.

Kurenai had never met someone like Herscherik before. That’s why she had trouble making a decision when it came to him.

“What do you think?”

“He...didn’t seem like a bad person to me,” Ao replied honestly.

To Ao, everyone but Kurenai was his enemy. That’s what he’d always thought. But the people he had met in this country had looked at him in a manner that seemed neither hostile nor disparaging. This had left him rather bewildered.

“I see...”

“It’s late. Go to sleep,” Ao said to Kurenai as she sunk deeper into the

labyrinth of her own thoughts.

Kurenai seemed hesitant at first, but finally agreed.

“Could you hold my hand?” Kurenai spoke in an unusually weak voice. Initially surprised, Ao stood up and sat down on the bed, taking Kurenai’s hand.

Her hand was rough for a woman’s. It spoke volumes of what kind of life this former noble girl had led. Ao wrapped his hands around hers.

“If you wish for it,” Ao whispered, as Kurenai smiled.

“Thank you...”

Kurenai spoke his real name in a voice so quiet only the two of them could hear.

As she fell into slumber, she did not hear the raging fire that usually haunted her sleep. Instead she felt as though the prince was calling her new name in a gentle voice.

Chapter Four: The Mad King, the Decree, and the Secret Arrangement

Herscherik sat in his study, letting out a sigh as he closed a book much thicker than any normal seven-year-old could be expected to read. Sadly, the volume had not contained the information he was looking for, so he'd wasted his time reading it.

Three days had passed since he'd invited Kurenai and Ao to the castle. Since then, Herscherik had locked himself up in his study to perform some research.

It's not here either...

Dejected, he carelessly tossed the book onto his desk. Its cover proclaimed that it was a complete compilation of texts related to the laws of Gracis.

"I've pored over every book that looked relevant, but still nothing..." the prince sighed, leaning backwards in his chair and staring up at the ceiling.

Herscherik was looking for records from the time when slavery was first abolished, trafficking was outlawed, and non-humans were forbidden entry into the country. All he could find were itemized lists noting what year each law was enacted; the circumstances surrounding the actual enactment of these laws were nowhere to be found. All these texts said was that these legal changes had been enacted by the king's official decree two generations ago.

Something just feels off here...

Herscherik looked up at the ceiling, then back down at the book, frowning as he sat cross-legged on the sofa and groaned.

What had prompted him to research these laws in the first place was the appearance of Kurenai and the beastman Ao. Herscherik had reached that conclusion that he could possibly help them escape the country. All he had to do was transport them past the Gracis border before anyone discovered Ao was a beastman.

During Herscherik's travels to right wrongs in Gracis, he had forged many connections—not just in the castle town, but all over the country. If he just waited until the time was right, he felt it was possible he could help the couple flee.

However, as he pondered the solution to the current problem, something still felt wrong to Herscherik. What had prompted Gracis to abolish slavery in the first place? Why had trafficking been outlawed? Why did the country so stubbornly refuse entry to non-humans? The more Herscherik read, the more questions he had.

He'd also tried asking his history teacher, who had just dodged the question and not given Herscherik any relevant information. In the end, the teacher had even wrapped up class early in order to drop the subject. Herscherik hadn't found a satisfactory answer in any books, either.

"I guess I'll just have to ask directly."

Herscherik was out of leads he could pursue himself, so the only option he had left was to simply ask someone who *did* know. Having made his decision, he leapt up from his sofa and left the room in order to secure an audience.

After dinner that same day, Herscherik carefully knocked on the door of a particular room in the royal quarters. Upon hearing the owner of the room respond, he entered and bowed in greeting.

"I'm sorry for disturbing you this late, Father. I'm sure you must be tired."

Herscherik raised his head to find a man relaxing on a sofa in front of a fireplace, greeting the young prince with a smile. The man had fair skin and straight platinum hair that looked as though it had been spun from moonlight. He was even more handsome than Herscherik's beautiful siblings.

The man's name was Solye Gracis—the 23rd King of Gracis and Herscherik's father. The one feature he had in common with Herscherik was his emerald eyes. He could easily have been mistaken for someone in his twenties, but he was actually over forty years old, and despite looking quite young he was the father of almost ten children.

For as long as Herscherik could remember, his father had never shown any signs of aging. If anyone asked him for the secret to his youthful appearance, he would only answer with a puzzled look and an insistence that he hadn't done anything special. Any woman who overheard this was sure to go mad with rage. Herscherik had concluded that his father's butler of service, Rook, must have been the one maintaining the king's youth—at least, he hoped that was the case.

Herscherik's effortlessly ageless father greeted his favorite young son with a radiant smile and gestured at him to come closer.

“Don’t worry about it. Come here, Hersch.”

Hersch did as his father asked, and Solye easily lifted his son onto his lap. Herscherik—secretly an adult woman on the inside—started blushing in embarrassment, but Solye failed to notice as he stroked his son’s smooth, light blonde hair.



“Rook has been insisting I take a break anyway, and in any case, all of my fatigue vanished the moment I saw you,” Solye said. The hand he’d laid on his son’s head suddenly stopped moving as he continued, his voice sad but resolute. “But right now I want to do everything I can to regain the trust of my citizens. I want to—I *have* to—make it so every single person in this country can live in peace. That’s the only thing I can do to atone for all that I’ve done.”

“Father...”

Herscherik understood the weight of his father’s words. Solye had erred as a king—he had chosen his family over his country and failed to stop the rampaging tyranny of Minister Barbosse and his allies. As a result, the country had grown unstable and the people had suffered.

Now that the minister was gone, however, Solye had started to take an active part in governing the country. He handled not only the allocation of personnel, but also an overhaul of the tax system, a revision of the budgets put together by corrupt nobles, diplomatic strategies, restructuring of the military, and much more.

While he had been busy during the reign of the minister and his minions, the king’s workload now seemed even higher. The only reason he hadn’t succumbed to overwork was his butler of service. Rook had a good grasp of his master’s personality and capabilities, made sure he ate well and took frequent breaks, and also adjusted his workload.

“I’m all right,” Solye said.

“Father, you’re not alone anymore,” Herscherik responded, who yet again seemed to want to shoulder everything by himself.

Herscherik’s two oldest brothers, who were of age, had volunteered as their father’s assistants in order to do what they could do to ease his burden. Herscherik, too, was going over old paperwork in the hopes of helping his father, and his other siblings were also doing their part. Even the queens were supporting the king.

“You have the queens and my siblings. I’m also doing whatever I can, even if it’s not much.”

“Thank you, Hersch...”

Solye’s expression softened and he patted his son on the head just one more time.

“Now then, Hersch—what was it you wanted to talk about?”

“Well...”

Herscherik trailed off, apparently not knowing what to say. Solye gave a small chuckle before putting his son’s unspoken thoughts into words.

“Could it be related to the couple you brought to the castle? The man, in particular?”

Herscherik’s eyes widened in surprise.

“You knew about them?”

“I have a dependable butler of my own, of course.”

When it came to keeping track of the goings-on inside the castle, Rook had no equal—though Solye chose not to mention the fact that rumors also tended to spread like wildfire through the castle whenever Herscherik was up to no good again.

Herscherik steeled himself as he looked straight into his father’s eyes, the same color as his own.

“Father, why doesn’t Gracis permit non-humans to enter the country? Why are we so desperate to eliminate other peoples?”

“Oh, where to begin...”

Solye recalled that this was not the first time he’d sat with his son on his lap like this to discuss something important. His son was heavier than he had been back then. Herscherik had grown—not just in stature, but in his very presence.

As they’d sat together on the green fields back then, his son had wept over his powerlessness, and Solye had been unable to find any words of comfort. As a mere puppet of the nobility, there was nothing he could say. All he could do was stay by his son’s side until he had finished crying. But Herscherik had overcome his weakness and saved the country. Unlike Solye, who had given up

in the face of his own helplessness, Herscherik had fought on unrelentingly.

Normally, Herscherik would have been too young for this discussion, but Solye knew that there was no evading his son's questions. And unlike that day, he now possessed the words to answer him.

"Hersch, how much do you know about how non-humans were treated in this country, as well as about the slavery and trafficking that used to take place here?"

Herscherik thought back to the book he had read earlier that day.

"I've learned that the king of two generations ago—my great-grandfather—outlawed trafficking, abolished slavery, and had every non-human shipped to the countryside in order to be disposed of."

His history teacher and every book he'd read had all said the same thing.

Solye nodded in response.

"And you thought something seemed strange about all that, didn't you?"

Herscherik thought quietly for a moment before responding.

"I don't understand why my great-grandfather would make such a drastic royal decree. Slaves were an important source of labor as well as a personal asset. Forcibly getting rid of them must have been a significant blow to the economy. Besides, there must have been opposition from nobles who owned slaves."

As a result of the values instilled in him during his previous life, Herscherik himself did not want to accept the existence of slaves. Though they may look slightly different, humans and non-humans alike were all people with their own personalities and feelings. Herscherik felt an intense reluctance—even disgust—at the thought of treating them like objects.

At the same time, though, he understood that slaves were a valuable asset. Having many slaves in your possession also meant having to provide them with food and clothing in return for their labor. Thus, the wealthier you were, the more slaves you could own—slaves whose labor you could use for your own profit. Having all that labor taken away by decree of the king must have sparked

much discontent and confusion.

“It’s also strange that he went to the trouble of rounding them all up in the countryside,” Herscherik continued.

Why did they have to gather every slave in the kingdom in one place before executing them? From a utilitarian point of view, it would have been much cheaper to simply kill them all on the spot. Herscherik couldn’t understand why they would spend all that money needlessly.

“You’re absolutely right, Hersch,” Solye said, agreeing with Herscherik’s opinion. “Now, to change the subject for a moment... my father was known as the ‘Wise King.’ Had he not been assassinated by Minister Barbosse, this country would likely have developed in a way that befitting its standing on the continent. Meanwhile, the king before him—my grandfather—was known as the ‘Mad King.’ I’m sure you’ve seen him referred to that way in some history books.”

“But why?”

Herscherik remembered seeing that name in a book that he had needed to request permission to read. While killing off every slave in the country could certainly have been considered an act of madness, at the same time it had resulted in the abolition of slavery. If one ruthlessly considered only the ends and disregarded the means, one could view this act as a necessary evil. So why was he known as the Mad King in every history book? Herscherik suddenly found himself grappling with a newfound question.

“I’m told that, to put it kindly, my grandfather had a gentle nature—put more bluntly, he was a coward.”

While Barbosse’s faction had dominated during Solye’s rule, during the time of Herscherik’s great-grandfather there had been several different factions of nobles who fought for power. Being so conflict-averse, Herscherik’s great-grandfather had let the nobles do as they pleased and took a passive approach to governing.

“However, there was one issue on which he would not yield—he did not take any consorts beyond his beloved First Queen.”

As timid as he was, he refused any nobles who tried to force him to marry their daughters. He had two children, a boy and a girl. It was a tight-knit family.

And suddenly, tragedy had struck.

“One day, his queen was killed by a beastman.”

Herscherik fell speechless as he waited for his father to continue.

“Well, that isn’t quite accurate. The child of a slave ran out in front of my grandmother’s carriage, startling the horses and causing the carriage to fall over. My grandmother hit her head during the accident and subsequently died.”

Upon losing his beloved wife, the king went mad. He enforced the abolition of slavery specifically to exterminate the beastmen who had stolen his queen from him, ending with him executing every slave in the country. Having eliminated all non-humans and forbidden any more from entering Gracis, he also outlawed trafficking. Any who broke the law would be executed—and if necessary, the king himself would wield his sword to strike them down.

“Some nobles did object, but my grandfather sentenced them all to death without mercy. The once timid king became mad after losing his wife, obsessed with removing all non-humans from the country.”

Back then, the king had been asked, “O, My Liege—have you lost your mind at the loss of your queen?”

The king had responded, “Having lost my beloved wife, how could I not? As long as I can eradicate every last one of those filthy creatures, I care not if I go down in history as a madman.”

“That is why people started referring to him as the Mad King behind his back, as the death of his wife drove him to kill every slave,” Solye continued.

This was a dark moment in the history of the Gracis family. Herscherik now understood why his history teacher had refused to tell him about it. At the same time, a feeling that could be described as both anger and sadness welled up inside him.

“I can’t believe it...”

Herscherik knew full well the pain of losing someone dear to you—that

impulse to destroy everything, your whole world turning black with despair, a rage intense enough to burn you alive... As well as the feeling of her blood on his hands. He still remembered it all vividly. This profound sense of loss still remained like a hole in his chest, as though someone had ripped out his very heart.

Jeanne... He spoke her name in his mind. Any time he remembered Jeanne, the first thing that came to mind was her final smile.

Herscherik felt his great-grandfather's loss as if it were his own. Even so, he had never thought to fill that void with something else.

Seeing his son's expression turn dark, Solye laid a reassuring hand on Herscherik's head.

"At least, that's the story the public knows," Solye said.

"Huh?"

His dark expression gone, Herscherik stared at his father with confusion in his emerald eyes.

"What I'm going to tell you now is something that's been passed down orally to members of the royal family once they reach a certain age. I was actually planning on telling you when you were older, but now that it's come to this, I don't have much of a choice." Then, Solye shrugged before continuing. "You're aware of the Lustian Confederation, yes?"

"It's a union of countries populated by beastmen and demihumans located in the south of Grandinal."

Many countries, large and small, existed on the continent of Grandinal. Out of those, four particularly large countries—one in each cardinal direction—served to keep each other in check. Herscherik's own kingdom of Gracis occupied the north, while the empire of Atrad commanded the west. In the east was the military nation of Felvolk, and finally the Lustian Confederation lay to the south.

Solye nodded at Herscherik's answer.

"The confederation is large, but historically speaking it's still a very new country. It only took on its current form very recently—during my grandfather's

reign, in fact. Before then, the southern continent was covered in a number of smaller countries. They formed an alliance to be able to oppose other, larger countries. Upon founding the Lustian Confederation, they also called for the liberation of all beastmen and demihumans around the continent. As you know, many of the non-humans who live in human-populated countries are slaves. That was especially true for the other three major powers on the continent—including Gracis, where most slaves were beastmen or demihumans.”

However, the liberation of beastmen and demihumans was not the only purpose of the proclamation. As a newly founded country, Lustia was still vulnerable, and were another country to interfere it would endanger the alliance’s existence. This proclamation served to destabilize other countries so they could not take advantage of Lustia’s position.

Just as the confederation had hoped, the call for liberation soon had an effect on the countries that employed beastmen and demihumans as slaves. Gracis was no different—the slaves were thrilled by the possibility of freedom.

Though slaves were guaranteed food, shelter, and clothing, their treatment varied widely depending on their owner. While some would give their slaves clean clothes and as much food and rest as they needed, many would only give them the bare minimum to survive as they worked their slaves to the limit—and there were far more of the latter than the former.

It was no surprise that the Lustian proclamation resulted in much conflict between humans and non-humans in Gracis, just as it did in other countries. As the slaves pleaded to be liberated and to live free of oppression just like citizens, the humans feared the loss of valuable labor. As time went on, conflicts between humans and non-human slaves became more and more common.

“That’s when the king lost his queen in an accident,” Solye explained.

The queen was brought to the castle, barely clinging to life, and the royal doctor informed the king that there was nothing he could do. The queen wished to spend her last moments alone with the king, telling him of her final wish before drawing her last breath.

“Final wish?” Herscherik asked.

“She wished for the king not to detest the slaves—the beastmen—and

instead, to liberate them from their bondage.”

Herscherik suddenly understood everything—what his great-grandfather had done, and why he had become the Mad King. Solye continued, with the air of a teacher examining a student’s answer to a problem.

“Even if the king decreed that slavery was now ended, the humans would never accept having to treat as equals people who had been their possession only the day before.”

It was plain as daylight that those rifts already present in society would simply continue to grow before spiraling out of control. There were even slaves who were bound by magic and whose owners could take their lives on a mere whim. Even if every slave joined forces to revolt, humans would have snuffed them out as easily as blowing out a candle.

So the king made his move before it came to that.

“As a last resort, the king announced the mass execution of all slaves. In reality, he had ordered his most trusted servants to help everyone they could to flee the country.”

The records stated that all slaves in the country were gathered in one place and disposed of. In truth, the gathered beastmen and demihumans were secretly transported out of the country to the Lustian Confederation, after which the two countries severed all contact.

Solye had learned of all this from his aunt, who had married a noble outside of the capital. Upon ascending the throne as a young boy, he had been taught the royal customs by his father’s younger sister, since he’d lost his immediate family to the minister’s plot. She also told Solye the secrets of the royal family that not even the minister knew about.

As they conversed, Solye observed Herscherik. His son’s expression had stiffened, and given his intellect as well as his unfathomable empathy, it was clear that he had understood everything.

“For the sake of the slaves and my great-grandmother’s wish, my great-grandfather voluntarily chose to go down in history as the Mad King,” Herscherik said after a moment’s silence.

Herscherik found it hard to believe that this had truly been the best solution. At the same time, though, perhaps the king had not had many other options available to him at the time.

Solye nodded.

“My grandfather made sweeping changes to the country, knowing that he would go down in history as a terrible ruler. Thanks to him, slavery was abolished in our kingdom, and trafficking is now a thing of the past.”

Though it meant distancing Gracis from the non-human population, it was still the right direction for the kingdom. It was not the best option, but it was also not the worst. Only the king and the queen had to suffer for it; Gracis itself remained stable, allowing it to survive until the present day.

“Does this resolve your doubts about the situation, Herscherik?”

Seeing his son nod, Solye finally moved on to the meat of the matter after this long preface.

“Despite that, there have been several instances of beastmen entering the country—by no fault of their own. Even if you outlaw something, there will always be people who break the law, you see. Especially since beastmen are now a rarity in Gracis.”

Solye was, in other words, implying that there were those who would illegally smuggle beastmen into the country to sell on the black market as slaves. It was easy to imagine how these now-rare beastmen would be treated.

“Whenever we discover something like that, we immediately shelter the victim and send them to Lustia in secret. Of course, during my entire reign there have barely been any instances of this happening at all.”

Around the time the law was first enacted, some cruel nobles still continued to buy slaves, but the two kings before Solye had executed these nobles one after another, all but eradicating the problem. As word of how anyone involved in trafficking was treated spread to neighboring countries, slave traders decided that the danger wasn’t worth the potential profit and began to avoid Gracis altogether.

While there were still those in the kingdom who had beastman blood, they

appeared as humans to the untrained eye and thus posed no problem. Even in the rare event that their lineage was discovered, they would be sheltered and transported out of the country in secret or sent to live somewhere far away where no one recognized them. The people responsible for managing all of this was Rook's family—the Febvre house, who were sometimes ridiculed behind their backs as the “royal family's guard dogs.”

“Hersch, make sure you protect that beastman.”

“I will!” Herscherik responded with a bright smile, the very opposite of the expression on his face when he had first entered the room.

“Just to be sure—the woman traveling with the man is human, right?”

“Yes, she is. Also, I think the two of them are lovers.” This last part, though, was only Herscherik's guess.

If they had actually fled from Felvolk, they were likely to be master and slave. Almost all beastmen in Felvolk were former inhabitants of territories conquered by the militaristic nation. Most of them ended up enslaved. Kurenai was most likely Ao's owner.

However, they didn't behave like master and slave. Kurenai always prioritized Ao's life, while Ao tried to protect Kurenai. They preferred to stay in the same room, and over the past three days Herscherik had never seen them apart. In fact, they seemed to always want to be as physically close to each other as possible, sheltering together like a pair of birds. They really did seem more like lovers than master and slave.

“I think the only way to get them out of the country is to send them together,” Herscherik explained.

“I understand,” Solye replied. “It's still too early, though.”

Herscherik agreed with Solye. The whole country was currently busy preparing for the upcoming harvest festival, with many visiting from abroad. Someone instead *leaving* the country at a time like this would attract unwanted attention. Even if they tried to smuggle them across the border stealthily, it wasn't as though you could make them completely invisible. They had to figure out a way to get the pair out of the country in a way that didn't attract

attention.

“It would be better to wait until after the festival and have them leave together with the tourists returning home,” Herscherik suggested, at which Solye nodded.

“We’ll wait for the harvest festival to end and send them off alongside all of the merchants returning from the capital. They can pass through the Principality of Parche and then travel to Lustia from there. Humans live in Lustia as well, though they are few in number. I’m sure they would welcome the woman too.”

“Yes. Thank you so much, Father,” Herscherik said. He looked up at his father from his place on his lap.

“It’s not you who should be thanking me, Hersch.” With a slightly bewildered expression, Solye looked at his son. The boy couldn’t have looked happier if *he* was the one who had just been saved.

“Even so... Thank you.”

At his son’s insistence on thanking him, Solye couldn’t help but stroke the prince’s light blonde hair once more before setting him back down on the floor.

“Now then, it’s quite late. You should get some sleep.”

“I will. Good night.”

Herscherik bowed before turning around and approaching the door. As he did, Solye called out to the prince’s back.

“Herscherik.”

Herscherik stopped and looked behind him with a puzzled expression. The action seemed so endearing to Solye that he broke into a gentle smile as he continued speaking.

“Thank you for trusting me enough to talk to me.”

Herscherik first seemed surprised at hearing this from his father, but his expression quickly changed into a smile. Until he learned of the secret agreement concerning beastmen in Gracis, Herscherik had thought that what he was doing amounted to breaking the law—as unjust as that law might have seemed—and that he may be facing execution, even as a royal. And even

though it might have been his only option, Herscherik hadn't been sure that consulting his father was truly the right thing to do. At the same time, however, he trusted that his father would never do something so unjust.

"Father, there is one more thing I'd like to ask." Herscherik's question was something he had hesitated to say. "Do you think this country should stay the way it is?"

Gracis was exclusionary toward non-humans. While this may have been for the best until now, with the minister gone, the country now stood at a crossroads—to change or stay the same. Herscherik, therefore, posed this question to his father.

Solye closed his eyes for a moment before opening them again and replying boldly.

"I feel this country may need to change. The will of the people has evolved with time, and I think Gracis must evolve as well."

No hint of hesitation could be seen in Solye's eyes.

"Thank you, Father."

After expressing his gratitude once more, Herscherik turned and left the room.

After closing the door, Herscherik took a deep breath. What his father had told him had gone beyond Herscherik's wildest expectations—about his country's treatment of beastmen, its royal secrets, and even his own father's character.

Well, it looks like I am going to be able to do something for those two.

Herscherik breathed a sigh of relief at the realization that he would be able to transport the couple outside the country without even needing to make use of his own contacts. However, another question came to mind.

Is getting them out of the country really the best way to help them?

It would mean risking their lives. But was that truly the help they needed? Why had they fled from Felvolk to begin with?

A human and beastman couple... Did they elope? Is that why they fled from their home country?

Based on her demeanor, Kurenai must have come from a rather respectable family. Meanwhile, being a beastman, Ao must have been a slave. The two of them perhaps fell in love and abandoned their country to be together. It was like something straight out of a romance novel.

As a plot outline it doesn't sound too bad, but there's just something strange about all of this...

Something wasn't adding up to Herscherik. If they were just eloping, why had the two of them come to Gracis at all? It would have made far more sense to flee to Lustia in the south instead of Gracis in the north. Herscherik couldn't get that part out of his mind, and he had a bad feeling about it. Unfortunately, Herscherik's hunches had a habit of being right.

Could they be spies from Felvolk?

The likelihood of that was low. The series of events that had led them to Herscherik was far too coincidental—the chances of them ending up here had been one in a million. It was well known in the town that Herscherik was close to the fruit shop couple, but for Felvolk to have somehow discovered this fact and made a move on such short notice seemed unlikely. The owner only visited the border town to deliver fruit once every few months at irregular intervals. Even Kuro would have found it difficult to gather information like that on such ordinary people. Additionally, Gracis was—at least outwardly—refusing entry to any beastmen. It would make no sense to send a beastman as a spy to such a country.

In other words, the possibility of the two of them being spies was basically nonexistent, Herscherik concluded. Even so, their situation also seemed more complicated than a pair of romantic runaways.

When they first met, Kurenai's dark eyes had examined Herscherik with a piercing gaze even as she maintained her soft smile and calm, unfazed demeanor. Oran had told him in private that the beastman Ao was likely a trained warrior, judging from his bearing. Herscherik himself had gotten the same impression. All in all, the couple did not seem at all like ordinary people.

It was likely true that they had fled, but *why* had they been forced to flee Felvolk? Who or what was chasing them? Why had they chosen Gracis as their destination? Herscherik groaned, racking his brain.

The two of them were not the only thing on his mind. He also couldn't stop thinking about what Tessily had told him. Tessily must have come across information about them, or at least had a good guess at who they might be.

Be careful with the two people you brought here today. Herscherik found himself forced to agree with his brother. The two of them had to be hiding something. If they were neither spies nor an eloping couple, then they might be in even deeper trouble than Herscherik had realized. In the worst case scenario, their problems might bring great misfortune upon the kingdom of Gracis.

But even so, I want to save them. I want to be there for them. The option of *not* saving them simply did not exist in Herscherik's mind.

Herscherik took a deep breath, as if trying to fill every bit of his body with air, before rapidly exhaling. He'd made up his mind.

"Hersch?"

"Wha—" Herscherik jumped and let out an undignified yelp as a voice suddenly called out to him from behind. He turned around to find Kuro looking down at him inquisitively.

That's what I get for employing a former master spy. Wow, he scared me. It felt like my heart was going to jump out of my throat to say hello—or I guess good evening, considering how late it is. As he quipped at himself in his mind, Herscherik stared at his butler of service.

"Kuro..." Herscherik said in a resentful tone, making Kuro shoot him a confused look—but that only lasted a moment.

"So, what do I need to do?" Kuro said, completely deadpan.

Herscherik was surprised at first, but then broke into a smile. His butler truly did understand him. Kuro knew what Herscherik wanted to do without his master even having to say it out loud.

I'll just do whatever I can—the same as I've always done.

Herscherik would extend a helping hand to anyone who was in trouble—it didn't matter who. Of course his family and his country were all dear to him, but Herscherik had absolutely no intention of ignoring someone's pleas for help just because they came from another country or they weren't human.

All that mattered was what he himself wanted to do. Herscherik did what he did not for the sake of others, but for himself—and what he wanted to do right now was to save the two of them. No matter what anyone told him, he would continue to believe in himself and the path he had chosen. That's just the kind of person he was.

If I'm going to help them, I'll have to go all the way.

They did not seem like bad people to Herscherik, even if that was just another one of his unfounded hunches. All that was left was to do what he wanted to do—and what he had to do.

So Herscherik asked a favor of his butler just like always.

“Kuro, I need you to do something,” he said, giving his loyal butler a bright smile.

Chapter Five: Ryoko, Kurenai, and Ao

The people of the castle town were busy preparing for the harvest festival that would be held in a few days. Herscherik walked down the bustling main thoroughfare dressed in his usual green and blue poncho with golden embroidery. As he walked and occasionally waved to the people around him, he looked up at the sky.

“The weather is great today... I hope it’ll be just as sunny during the festival.”

Up above was a clear, blue fall sky. It would be awful if it were to rain during the festival, Herscherik thought; that would ruin the day for the townspeople.

“I don’t think you need to worry about that.”

It was Kurenai who spoke, showing Herscherik a gentle smile. Her crimson hair, reminiscent of autumn leaves, was loosely tied back. Ten days had passed since Herscherik had invited her to stay in the castle, and she looked much healthier than when they first met.

Herscherik returned Kurenai’s confident sounding statement with a confused glance.

“Festivals are generally planned with the weather of past years in mind. Of course, we can’t know for sure,” Kurenai explained.

“You sure know a lot, Kurenai,” Herscherik said, impressed. His mood was light as he walked along.

Kurenai followed behind the prince with a smile, though still with a hint of bewilderment on her face.

“Thank you for the compliment. But...are you sure about this, Your Highness?”

“Huh?” Herscherik glanced back at Kurenai behind him.

“Well, should you really be going out alone like this?”

“I’m not alone. *You’re* here, aren’t you?” Herscherik replied matter-of-factly.

Kurenai tried to explain that that wasn't what she meant, but seeing Herscherik's expression she realized he *had* understood, but intentionally dodged the question.

Herscherik flashed Kurenai a smile as he continued talking.

"Don't worry—it'll be fine! Besides, today's outing is also my way of thanking you, Kurenai."

One week prior, Herscherik had informed Kurenai and Ao that their prospects of escape looked bright—although he left out the part regarding the secret agreement concerning beastmen in Gracis. With nothing to do until the end of the harvest festival, Kurenai and Ao had spent all their time in the castle. They had agreed to bring one of Herscherik's men of service along whenever they needed to go somewhere other than their own room in the outer quarters and Herscherik's chambers. Herscherik himself had returned to his usual tasks—his studies, training, and of course the constant battle against the mountain of paperwork on his desk.

"Your Highness, what are you doing?" a confused Kurenai asked when she visited Herscherik's study to swap a book she'd borrowed for a new one.

Her confusion was only natural, as she was watching a child not yet of school age dealing with a workload that could put most adults to shame. With the book she had come to return in one hand, she looked at Herscherik not with her usual placid expression, but with her downturned eyes slightly widened in surprise. Herscherik gave her a vague smile.

"Oh, Kurenai. Well, it's, uh...work, I guess?"

"Forgive me, that was an impertinent question. I'm sorry for disturbing you."

Seeing the usually energetic Herscherik so hesitant, Kurenai gathered that it was something he couldn't talk about; she quickly returned the book and attempted to leave, but Herscherik gestured at her to wait.

"No, it's not that I can't tell you, it's just that it's a bit embarrassing," Herscherik explained, wincing slightly.

He then explained the gist of what had been going on, sighing as he poked at a pile of documents.

“And that’s why I’m going over old paperwork now.”

As other countries had already gotten word of what had been happening in Gracis, there was no need to hide anything.

He reached to grab a document, but with his attention fixed on Kurenai, he accidentally knocked over one of the piles, spilling everything to the floor.

“Oh, now I’ve done it...”

Herscherik hung his head, standing up from the sofa to collect the scattered documents.

“Just when I’d gone through the trouble of sorting them all chronologically... Now it’s all a mess...” he moaned, on the verge of tears.

Kurenai picked up a document that lay by her feet. It was heavily annotated with colored ink. She instinctively ran her eyes over the paperwork before averting her gaze, but after a moment’s hesitation she handed it back to Herscherik.

“I’m sorry for reading this, but... Doesn’t this part seem strange to you?”

“Huh?”

The document Kurenai had handed him had come from the pile of paperwork that Herscherik had already gone over and found no problem with. Herscherik always went over documents three times, a habit he’d carried over from his past life. If time permitted he would go over it once more later on, as taking a break often made it easier to spot mistakes one might otherwise miss.

Kurenai had handed him a document containing a particular lord’s request for funding. The cover page showed an itemized summary of all of these requests.

“It looks like the contents of these two applications overlap.”

Herscherik looked at the parts Kurenai indicated. They were requests for funds to construct a new bridge; however, only a few months later the lord had requested funding for the very same location—and he’d asked for quite a bit more too.

Herscherik had only looked at each request in isolation and concluded that they seemed legitimate, but just as Kurenai had pointed out, it was certainly

strange that multiple funding requests for the same project had been approved in such a short span of time. The format of the documents was also not standardized, and the budget listings extended across multiple pages, making it difficult to notice that they concerned the same project.

After heading down to the relevant department to run the problem by them, Herscherik had been informed that the bridge had gone over budget and the second request had been a request for *additional* funds. The requested amount included the original budget, which is why the total had increased. Herscherik also double-checked with the treasury, confirming that they had not allocated the same funds twice, and breathed a sigh of relief.

We really need to standardize the format...

As each department used its own format, it could be difficult to understand a document even if nothing was wrong with it. That made going through them take much longer than necessary. If they standardized everything, everything would go much faster, and they would be easier to manage in the future. As Ryoko, he had ordered his subordinates to format their documents so even a monkey could understand them. Of course, that was only a figure of speech since monkeys can't actually read, but if you set out to make your documentation that easy to understand, it made everything that much more efficient.

I guess I should run the idea by Father some other day. What I wouldn't do for a computer...

"Thank you for the help, Kurenai," Herscherik finally said, putting his internal grumbling aside. Kurenai had stayed with him for the whole investigation.

Kurenai gave a vague smile in return as she shook her head.

"No, no, I'm sorry for speaking out of line."

"What are you talking about? You helped me out a lot." Herscherik rejected Kurenai's humility out of hand. "Kuro is always busy researching, and Oran and Shiro aren't very good with this type of work..."

Kuro was the only one among his men who had any skill at this sort of thing. He would always find Herscherik exactly the kinds of documents he was after

without his master even having to give him detailed instructions. However, as he also had his duties as a butler of service, Herscherik was often left to sort through the results of Kuro's research on his own.

It was not as though Oran and Shiro were completely incapable of office work, but they were simply not as skilled as Herscherik and Kuro. They also currently had their hands full with other preparations for the upcoming harvest festival. Thus, Herscherik found himself facing the piles of paperwork all alone in his study.

I could really use more people... But at the same time, I can't really steal any officials for this... Oh! Herscherik had a sudden realization. There was someone right in front of him who excelled at bureaucracy and currently had nothing to do.

"Kurenai... I'm really sorry to ask this of you, but would you mind helping me with this while you're here? I'll even pay you!" Herscherik pleaded.

There was a limit to how much Herscherik could do by himself, and some mistakes were inevitable. While his father and oldest brothers would go over the documents and his reports as well, he wanted his work to be as perfect as possible. Herscherik had always been a perfectionist, even in his previous life.

Kurenai was also on the run, making it unlikely that she would leak information. As long as Herscherik only gave her older or less important documents, security wouldn't be a problem. Not to mention that she would need money when leaving the country.

After a moment's hesitation, Kurenai accepted the offer. Ao, who had nothing else to do but to sit in his room, joined them as well. For a while after that, Herscherik's study was filled with the rustle of paper, the scratch of fountain pens, and occasional chatter.

Kurenai was just as talented as Herscherik had thought, if not more so. She was quick on the uptake, incredibly efficient, and accurate to boot. The mountains of paperwork reduced in elevation quicker than expected, and finally the end was in sight.

That was when Herscherik decided to bring Kurenai for a walk in the bustling town as a token of gratitude for her help—although it also served as a change

of pace for Herscherik himself.

"I knew you'd done office work in the past," Herscherik asked Kurenai as he observed the townspeople preparing for the festival.

Kurenai's shoulders twitched in response, but as Herscherik was walking in front of her, he did not notice.

"You...knew? What made you think that?" Kurenai asked, her tone slightly suspicious.

"When I first shook your hand, I noticed your writer's callus."

Surprised, Kurenai looked down at her hands—at the middle finger of her dominant hand in particular. Just as the prince had said, it sported a prominent hard bump from many years of pen use.

"You'd have to do a lot of writing to get a callus like that. Besides, only someone who's done a lot of bureaucratic work would notice a mistake like that," Herscherik continued.

It was a skill that came with experience. Herscherik's previous lifetime had taught him how to glance over a document and get a sense of whether or not there was an error somewhere in it. It was only a hunch, though, and at times it could be wrong.

Kurenai fell silent upon hearing Herscherik's answer. The prince continued, sounding a little regretful.

"It's too bad Ao couldn't join us..."

Herscherik's thoughts turned to the tall beastman they had left behind in the castle. Despite how much Ao had helped him, there was no way he could accompany Herscherik outside.

I'll buy something for him with my allowance, Herscherik promised himself.

The allowance in question was something his oldest two brothers had given to their hardworking youngest brother. It was not much more than a commoner child could expect, but as a prince, most of his expenses were paid for with tax money, so he could afford to use the money as he pleased.

At first he had turned his brothers down, but his brothers had felt guilty for

letting Herscherik work so hard without a reward—though more importantly, they had been beside themselves with the urge to dote on their adorable youngest brother a little. After much back and forth, they eventually managed to convince him to accept. Because Herscherik found himself showered with small gifts whenever he went for a walk around town, though, he never had the opportunity to actually spend it. Now, finally, the time had come.

“Your Highness, what do you usually talk about with him?”

When Ao first arrived at the castle, he had always been on his guard, never leaving Kurenai’s side for a moment. With time, though, he found himself bewildered by the kindness of the prince and his men; after watching the prince desperately grappling with his work, most of his wariness had finally disappeared.

Kurenai had then noticed Ao and Herscherik leaving by themselves on a number of occasions. While they were gone, Kuro and Oran would remain with Kurenai as bodyguards—or perhaps simply guards. Whenever Ao returned she would ask him what they had done, but the taciturn Ao would never explain exactly what they discussed—only curtly replying, “We talked.”

“Mostly stuff about beastmen, I guess. He’s told me a lot of interesting and valuable things about them,” Herscherik responded with a satisfied expression.

Herscherik knew Ao must be uncomfortable cooped up in a stuffy castle and wanted to bring him outside. He couldn’t very well take him into town, so instead he had opted to take him to the woodlands that extended to the north of the castle. As only the king and those given the king’s permission were allowed to set foot there, Ao would be able to spread his wings as much as he wished.

That was only Herscherik’s pretext, however. In truth, he simply wanted to get a glimpse of Ao as he flew high above.

Thus, with ulterior motives, he had brought Ao to his favorite hill, with a beautiful view of the town and the castle. But although Ao would remove the coat hiding his wings, whose feathers were the same deep blue color as his hair, all he would do was move them about. He never made any attempt to leave the ground.

“Ao, aren’t you flying? You can fly all you want here.”

In fact, I want to see you fly, Herscherik had thought, looking at Ao with expectant eyes.

Ao only furrowed his brow for a moment, after which he turned his head away as if to escape Herscherik’s glance.

“I hurt my wings. I can’t fly anymore,” Ao muttered in a calm, low voice, stating only the bare facts and nothing more. He spoke monotonously, and it was difficult to detect any emotion in his voice.

Upon hearing this, Herscherik’s face twisted in a despairing frown, and he bent down to apologize.

“I’m so sorry!”

Herscherik had figured that, since Ao was a birdman with wings, flying must have been part of his nature, and furthermore that it must have been suffocating to be prevented from doing so. That was why he had brought Ao here, where he could fly to his heart’s content, but his plan had backfired. Herscherik had only ended up forcing Ao to explain that he *couldn’t* fly, no matter how much he might want to. Imagining how Ao must have felt, all Herscherik had been able to do was apologize.

At the sight of the prince, Ao became flustered—though it barely registered on his face. A member of the royal family had lowered his head without any hesitation; it would have been impossible *not* to be surprised.

“Don’t apologize,” Ao forced himself to say after a brief pause, at which Herscherik slowly looked up. They both then turned their gazes and quietly observed the scenery together.

The first person to break the silence was Herscherik.

“Ao, if you don’t mind, could you tell me about beastmen—and about yourself, to whatever extent you can?”

“Why?”

Herscherik looked straight into Ao’s eyes as he replied.

“I want to know.”

Until now he had been entirely preoccupied with his own country. With the evil that infested the country gone, however, the country was proceeding in a positive direction, if still on unsteady legs. Herscherik's father and brothers were all excellent statesmen, and he didn't just think that because they were relatives.

Herscherik had then started pondering what he could do now, and if there was anything more he could do for his country or his family. But finally, he had come to the realization that the goal of taking down the minister was what had driven him all this time. He had accomplished his goal, but at the same time he had lost his purpose.

He did have things to do—he wanted to improve the country. But that objective was far too abstract for him to tackle. But then the prince realized that he only knew about a very tiny portion of the world. If there was something he didn't know, he could always learn it.

“What’s it like outside of Gracis? How big is the world? What kind of people live there? I want to learn about life outside my country too,” Herscherik explained to Ao.

Of course, Herscherik did read books. But books weren’t enough to truly understand the world. He had been reincarnated, given a rare chance at a second life, and he had to use this chance to its fullest. As a naturally curious person, there was so much he wanted to learn. By gaining knowledge, he could understand what path he ought to take, which in turn would lead to protecting his family and the country itself.

“So—please, Ao.”

As Herscherik once again lowered his head, Ao’s eyes widened slightly in surprise, though the rest of his face remained as impassive as ever. An autumn breeze blew past as what felt like an eternity passed in silence.

In the end, Ao capitulated.

“I’m...not very good.”

“Not good?” Herscherik looked up at Ao with a puzzled expression.

“At talking,” Ao clarified.

Ao then started unbuttoning his shirt.

“Huh? What?” Herscherik was flabbergasted as Ao started stripping with no forewarning, opening and closing his mouth like a fish out of water.

With no idea how to react, Herscherik awkwardly waved his hands as Ao finished unbuttoning his shirt and opened it to reveal the skin beneath. Due to their height difference, what first caught Herscherik’s eye was Ao’s abs, cleanly chiseled into perfect rows. Had his former identity Ryoko been present, she might have let out a shrill scream at the sight. That was just how impressive his perfectly toned physique was.

Herscherik raised his gaze to find what looked like a fist-sized tattoo on Ao’s chest.



Ao moved his finger along the outline of the marking as he spoke in an even quieter voice.

“I’m a slave... A battle slave.”

Herscherik fell speechless as he processed what Ao had said.

A battle slave was just that—a slave who was sent into battle. Much like soldiers, their job was to fight off the enemy. That was where the similarities ended, though. As slaves, they received no pay and were always sent into the most dangerous situations. If need be, they would be sacrificed without a second thought. A slave too injured to fight would almost always be executed instead of treated. They had no rights and were treated as objects.

Slaves would be engraved with their owner’s mark in the form of a spell imbued with Magic that could effortlessly kill the slave at their owner’s whim—the Brand of Servitude. In this way, it was ensured that a slave could never disobey their master.

“If I ever spoke, I would be beaten... Though I’d get hit even if I kept quiet.”

As time passed, Ao had done his best not to speak and to keep his emotions from showing. His lack of skill at conversation was a reflection of the life he had led so far.

On a closer inspection, he had countless scars—though they had mostly faded—all over his body. There were not only scars from being cut and stabbed, but from being beaten with sticks and whipped as well. It was obvious at a glance what kind of treatment he had suffered until now.

Herscherik suddenly noticed that he’d curled his hand into a tight fist. This was a stark reminder of the difference between the world he had once lived in and his new one. He had a newfound appreciation for how blessed that old world was, and a newfound disgust at the inhumanity of the new one. That kind of thinking, however, only came from having lived his first life in a peaceful country.

Yet when I was listening to Father talk, I was able to put my own emotions aside...

When listening to his father, he had been able to accept that slavery was a fact of life in this world, as much as he hated it. But he was not so good at hiding his feelings that he could keep his calm when faced with someone who had actually had to suffer that treatment.

“She was the only one who wouldn’t hit me,” Ao added quietly, as Herscherik was unable to find any words. His tone made it clear who he was talking about. “I don’t have many happy stories to share. Do you still want to hear?”

Herscherik nodded. It wasn’t just happy stories that he was after.

“Thank you, Ao.”

Ao nodded in return as he put his shirt back on.

After that, Herscherik would make as much time as he could to talk to Ao. Most of their sessions would consist of Herscherik asking questions, while Ao responded with few words.

“Your stories are very interesting, Ao,” Herscherik said as he thought back to what Ao had told him.

What had surprised Herscherik the most was the fact that while Ao looked to be in his twenties, he was actually over sixty years old. Beastmen lived much longer than humans, and while they would mature at the same speed as humans until they became adults, their aging slowed down after that. With each passing day, Herscherik’s lust for knowledge was slowly satisfied as he learned about the differences between humans and beastmen, such as how birdmen flew by unconsciously using wind magic.

“You’re a curious person, Your Highness,” Kurenai said as Herscherik gleefully related how he had spent his time with Ao.

Kurenai had sensed a slight change in Ao. He had always been a man of few expressions, but upon entering this country, he had grown tense. His face might as well have been made of stone. As he had spent more time with Herscherik, though, his expression had softened ever so slightly—albeit without Ao himself being aware of it.

And the fact that this prince does it without even realizing... Although perhaps it was the very fact that he did it unintentionally that made it possible in the

first place.

Kurenai had spent her time in the castle observing both Herscherik and the people around him. In particular, it had taken her no more than a few days to see that the three people who served the prince directly were immensely capable. She had heard rumors about the exploits of his knight and Spellcaster during the recent battle between Gracis and Atrad, and she had become convinced that they were true. Meanwhile, his butler not only carried out all his work flawlessly, he also excelled at gathering information. It was not hard to conclude that he must have had contacts in the underground.

With their skill also came strong personalities and egos—yet the prince seemed to have them in the palm of his hand. The prince himself, however, seemed to have no idea what an accomplishment any of this was. He was simply looking up at her in confusion.

“Curious? Well, I *am* often told that I’m a bit strange...”

Kurenai smiled at Herscherik’s response. This innocent nature of his was exactly what made people want to help him and protect him. As much as his men complained, in the end they accepted everything about him.

I’ve never met someone so curious before.

Suddenly, the neighing of horses could be heard. Kurenai raised her gaze to find a carriage riding past—and broke her stride at the sight of the coat of arms emblazoned upon it. Herscherik stopped walking and looked behind him.

“Is there something about the carriage, Kurenai?”

Kurenai jerked slightly at Herscherik’s question, but Herscherik failed to notice as his attention was focused on the vehicle.

“Is it from some other country, perhaps?” Herscherik pondered, as he had never seen the coat of arms before. “My brothers mentioned that we’re inviting people from other countries to the—Kurenai?”

Herscherik called out to the unresponsive Kurenai, but she was smiling as usual when he turned back to look at her.

“Oh, I’m sorry, the heat had me in a bit of a daze.”

"Are you all right? Should we take a break?" Herscherik threw Kurenai a worried look, but she simply maintained her smile.

"Yes, I'm quite fine. By the way, Your Highness, where are we going next?"

"Um... We're stopping by the fruit store. I'm a bit worried about the two of them, you see."

Herscherik found the sudden change of subject strange, but unable to figure out why Kurenai had been so quick to drop the subject, he'd simply decided to answer her question instead.

Chapter Six: The Festival Preparations, the Kidnapping, and the Curious Prince

It was another busy day at the fruit shop. Herscherik looked on from a distance for some time before the crowd thinned for a moment, and he took the opportunity to drag Kurenai in to talk to the owner and his wife. Though as unsociable as ever, the owner seemed relieved upon hearing that they had a plan to get Ao and Kurenai out of the country. It even seemed to Herscherik that the corners of the owner's mouth raised up ever so slightly. Louise was delighted as well.

The conversation then turned to the approaching harvest festival.

"Will you two be opening a stand during the festival?" Herscherik asked.

"Yes, of course. It's an important source of income for us—though I do wish we could do something special for the occasion..." Louise sighed.

While playing with the couple's infant daughter Risch, Herscherik took a look around the store. It was full of fresh fruit like apples and grapes; Herscherik picked up a red apple and started to think.

"Do you just sell your fruit like always during the harvest festival?"

Seeing Louise nod, Herscherik put the fruit back.

"How about selling pieces stuck onto toothpicks so you can eat them on the go? Or maybe selling containers filled with bite-sized bits of fruit..."

Herscherik was reminded of a program he had seen on TV in his previous life. It had featured the owner of a fruit shop in the corner of a shopping district who would cut expensive fruit like melons and pineapples into small pieces and sell them cheaply to people passing by in the evenings on the way home from work. The sweet scent would fill the nostrils of the hungry passersby, inspiring them to stop for a look, only to buy the fruit and eat it on the spot upon seeing the incredibly low price. As more and more people flocked to the store looking for a bit of sliced fruit, some of them would buy whole fruit to take home while

they were at it, resulting in profit for the owner.

Selling fruit like this would require more labor and expense, decreasing the net profit for each individual fruit sold—but at the same time, it would attract people who wanted to enjoy the festival and eat while walking around. On top of that, it would serve as an advertisement for the store.

Louise listened to Herscherik's ideas with great interest.

"Also, how about covering some fruit with hard candy?" Herscherik continued.

He thought back to the candied apples that had been a festival staple in his previous life. As a child, those big red candied apples had seemed somehow special to Ryoko, and she would always beg her parents to buy one even though she knew she wouldn't be able to finish it. "Oh, fine then," her mother would say, patting her on the head before handing her an apple. Thinking about his mother from his previous life, Herscherik became slightly sad.

"Ryoko?" Louise called out, as the little prince had suddenly fallen silent. Herscherik, though, quickly came to his senses and forced a smile.

"Chocolate-covered fruit might work too," he added.

Along with candied apples, chocolate-covered bananas had also been a favorite in his previous life. He couldn't help but smile hungrily at the thought of them.

Louise gave Herscherik's proposal some thought—but it was only for a few moments, as she quickly left her husband in charge of the store as she ran off to secure ingredients, toothpicks, and containers from other store owners she knew. Soon after that, the owner also ended up needing to leave the store to take care of some trouble with a business partner, and Herscherik volunteered to watch the store while he was away. Herscherik and Kurenai ended up looking after the store and Risch by themselves while they waited for the couple to return.

Being used to helping out at the store already, Herscherik dealt with the customers while taking care of Risch. Kurenai handed him change, all the while watching in astonishment as a member of royalty handled this humble task with

ease. Louise and her husband, on the other hand, were taking quite a while to return. As the sun started to set and the line of customers shrank, Kurenai left for a quick visit to the restroom. After borrowing a restroom at a nearby store, she returned to find Herscherik dealing with two boorish men.

“Your Highness?” Kurenai called out to Herscherik, but due to the wind and the distance between the two of them, her voice failed to reach him. The wind did carry the conversation between Herscherik and the two men to her ears, however, and things seemed to be taking a turn for the worse.

“What do you want?” Herscherik’s voice sounded colder than Kurenai had ever heard from him before. She could scarcely imagine how someone as gentle as Herscherik could possibly produce such a voice.

Upon hearing him speak, Kurenai instinctively hid in the shadows of a nearby building.

“You’ll find out if you come with us. If you refuse...”

Kurenai looked out from behind the building and saw one of the boorish men stand right next to Risch, holding something that glinted in the light. Upon realizing that he had a knife in his hand, a shiver ran down Kurenai’s spine. Since the two men were crowding around the counter, making it difficult for anyone else to see what was happening, Kurenai was the only one who had realized what was happening besides Herscherik himself.

I need to go get someone... But Kurenai didn’t know who she would even tell. She thought about going to get a constable, but although Herscherik was protecting her, she had still entered the country illegally. If they asked who she was or how she knew the prince, she wouldn’t be able to tell them. Even worse, she might even come off as suspicious herself. The only people in Gracis she could depend on other than Herscherik were Herscherik’s men of service, but they were quite far from the castle at the moment.

As Kurenai racked her brains, trying to find a way out of the situation, she heard Herscherik speak.

“Don’t point a knife at a baby.” Herscherik sighed, shrugging his shoulders before continuing in a resigned voice. “Fine. If you promise not to hurt the child, I’ll come with you.”

Seemingly picking up on the danger, Risch started to cry from her basket. Herscherik took off his poncho and gave it to Risch, who calmed down quickly—perhaps from the familiar scent. Herscherik spoke to the baby in a gentle voice, the very opposite of how he had spoken to the men.

“Risch, don’t worry. Your mom will be back soon. And I’ll be fine too.”

Herscherik briefly turned his gaze in the direction of Kurenai before walking off with the men. Kurenai stepped out of the shadows of the building and ran over to the baby to ensure she hadn’t been harmed. After seeing that Risch was laughing happily while chewing on Herscherik’s poncho, Kurenai glanced in the direction of the men who would soon disappear from sight.

His Highness noticed me. But Kurenai wondered why, in that case, he didn’t ask for help.

Kurenai had heard stories about the prince before leaving her home country, and even more after arriving in Gracis. They had sounded almost like fairy tales—it was difficult to imagine Herscherik actually pulling off such feats. If even half of them were true, though, there was a good chance that someone had it out for him.

She only had to consider her next move a short moment before deciding what she needed to do. Grabbing the basket Risch was lying in, Kurenai threw in some coins from today’s sales and left the baby in the care of the female shop owner across the street before setting off after the two men.

Luckily, they were still in sight, as Herscherik’s short legs slowed them down. She pursued them until they reached a block of noble mansions, and after observing which house the men entered, she quickly turned around and ran toward the castle. In her haste, she only nodded silently to greet the gatekeeper, who recognized her enough to let her inside, albeit reluctantly. Kurenai then proceeded through the castle too quickly for anyone to reproach her. Though she attracted curious glances as she ran, she had no time to worry about that now.

Kurenai was heading not for the outer quarters where she was staying, but for the training grounds in the northern part of the castle, because she knew that the person she was looking for would be there preparing for the harvest

festival. Fortunately, she came across the individual in question before even arriving at her destination.

“Kurenai?” A man in an outfit far too plain for someone who served royalty called her name.

“Sir Octavian.” Kurenai was relieved at the sight of Oran, but Oran himself only winced in return.

“You don’t need to call me ‘sir.’”

Friendly and approachable by nature, Oran didn’t care for such formalities. The same could be said for his master—though this depended on the situation, of course. Even so, the fact that Oran had a habit of being extra polite to his elders indicated his noble upbringing.

After a moment, Oran furrowed his brow.

“Weren’t you supposed to be out with Hersch?”

He remembered his master having mentioned leaving for the castle town together with Kurenai this morning. Oran had wanted to come along as a bodyguard, but his schedule had not permitted it, as he needed to prepare for the exhibition match during the Games of Contest on the first day of the harvest festival. He imagined that Herscherik must have left before Kuro could notice, as he started to look even more worried.

“Well...”

Kurenai quickly explained everything that had just happened—in a voice too quiet for anyone else to hear, of course. The further along she got in her story, the sterner Oran’s expression grew; by the time Kurenai finished, he looked as though he was about to march off to war.

“I see. Let’s stop by Hersch’s room first,” Oran replied.

Oran immediately set off for the outer quarters where Herscherik’s chambers were located. The knight on guard noticed Oran’s serious expression and tried to stop him, but Oran simply held up one hand to dismiss him before continuing on toward his destination. On the way, he entrusted some handmaidens he came across with a message.

Before even ten minutes had passed, Herscherik's men of service, Kurenai, and Ao were all gathered in Herscherik's room.

"What do we do?" Oran was the first to speak. He was often the one to lead the discussion whenever Herscherik was away.

"What do you *think* we're going to do? We have to leave right now," Kuro replied sharply. He seemed very irritated, completely unlike his usual calm self. "And what was Hersch thinking to begin with? He knew this could happen, yet..."

"There's no point in arguing about that now," Oran interrupted. "Besides, you're well aware that Hersch never does as he's told, aren't you?"

With Barbosse gone, Herscherik had far fewer enemies to fear, but they had not disappeared completely. Though Herscherik had a habit of helping people, he would often anger less reputable individuals in the process. But even though he was fully aware of this fact, Herscherik still couldn't give up on his secret excursions into town.

"I'm sorry... But I just won't budge on this," Herscherik had said apologetically, while at the same time refusing to yield.

Oran had then suggested that at the very least he could carry a knife to protect himself, but he had shook his head in response.

"That would be pointless for someone like me, right? I might even end up hurting myself instead."

Herscherik was aware of his lack of skill with the blade, and he refused to carry even a small knife for protection. Oran had suspected that he had some other underlying reason for this, but no matter how many times he asked he couldn't get a straight answer out of him.

"I'll be fine. I'm a quick runner, you know," his master had replied confidently, and not without grounds—he had, in fact, already come close to being kidnapped before while in town without his men, but with the help of his quick wits and tiny stature he had managed to hide and make his escape. He'd never told his men about this, of course.

"How do we save him? We know where he is thanks to Kurenai, but we don't

know how many people are involved. It'll be trouble if Hersch ends up being held hostage, and if we make too big of a scene it'll affect the festival."

Though Herscherik's life was of the utmost importance, they also didn't want this to become a major incident that made it difficult to hold the upcoming harvest festival. Emissaries from abroad were already present in the capital, and any issues could negatively affect the diplomatic relations between Gracis and other countries. Thus they couldn't enlist the assistance of the constabulary or the knights—they needed to handle the matter in secret.

We do have more than enough fighting power... Oran was not being complacent—Herscherik's men of service, including Oran himself, were incredibly competent warriors.

"If we know where they are, I'll handle it," Shiro said to Oran, who was busy pondering the situation.

"How are you... Wait, you don't have to tell me. The answer is no." At first, Oran couldn't believe his ears upon hearing Shiro's uncharacteristically cooperative proposal, but then he immediately turned him down. It was plain as day that Shiro wanted to use the brute force of his magic to blast everyone but Herscherik away, house and all.

Shiro's beautiful face twisted into a frown in response as he clucked his tongue resentfully. It was just as Oran had predicted.

"I'll infiltrate the place."

"We have no idea how many people there are in that house. Are you sure you'll be fine, black dog?"

"I'll be fine," Kuro replied, but the menacing look in his eyes worried Oran.

Though Kuro was normally level-headed, when it came to Herscherik he would lose all restraint. Though Oran refused to use his name out of habit, he had known Kuro for two years by now; they were close enough to exchange banter, they trusted and relied on each other, and they both had a good grasp of what the other was capable of. Nevertheless, Oran still worried about the extent of Kuro's dependence on Herscherik.

I'm sure Herscherik is aware of this too...

Oran had in the past warned Herscherik about Kuro—though it was perhaps less of an actual warning and more Oran simply being concerned about his comrade. Herscherik, for his part, had only nodded along, seemingly already aware of what Oran had been saying.

But right now we need to focus on saving Hersch. Oran put his thoughts about Kuro aside and turned his focus to the matter at hand.

The three of them would be able to overcome the kidnappers with ease—but that wouldn't be enough.

Considering the circumstances, we'll need to handle this in secret.

If they let the kidnappers escape, the same thing might happen again. They had to be thorough. Herscherik would have wanted the same, Oran thought—his master would never let someone who kidnaps children off the hook.

Still, that meant they had to handle everything covertly, without even a single person escaping. They had no idea how many they were up against or how skilled their enemies were in battle. On top of that, they had to make sure nothing got leaked to an outside party. Trapped in between a situation where they couldn't rely on brute force and two colleagues on the verge of going berserk, Oran was at his wits' end.

“Please let us help save the prince.” Kurenai suddenly extended a helping hand as Oran struggled to come up with a solution. Next to her stood Ao, with a mix of surprise and bewilderment shining through ever so slightly on his face.

Someone yelling could be heard outside the room, followed by the hurried footsteps of multiple people. Herscherik sat in a chair, frowning as he listened.

Soon after, the door was flung open with great force, and a well-dressed man entered the room with an enraged expression. Herscherik's frown deepened at the loud noise; the man hurriedly regained his composure and plastered a fake smile across his face.

“Prince Herscherik, I’m terribly sorry for leaving in the middle of our discussion. And I apologize for all the ruckus—it appears a child from the neighborhood performed some prank outside, causing a small fire in the

garden..."

The man bowed apologetically, flashing Herscherik an ingratiating look. The target of this obsequious look, however, had no hint of his usual pleasantness. Instead, he looked downright disgusted.

Herscherik had found himself in a dimly lit room inside one of the mansions in a wealthy section of the capital. There were four men in the room with him, including the one who had just spoken. All the furniture was covered in sheets to ward off dust, seemingly in preparation for sale, with the exception of the chair Herscherik was sitting on and the table in front of him, where a single piece of paper was laid.

There's a decent number of them out there...

Herscherik sighed internally. He remembered seeing at least five other people on the way to this room. While he was trying to find an opportunity to flee, Herscherik knew that even if he managed to escape this single room, once outside he would likely be caught in no time at all.

The man, showing no care for Herscherik's distress, pointed to the paper on the desk.

"Now then, Your Highness, let's continue our discussion. All you have to do is sign this document," he said with a broad smile.

"Not happening," Herscherik replied, throwing the man a piercing glance.

The document on the desk wasn't just an ordinary contract. First of all, the contents of it made no sense—it stated that the man would be absolved of all his crimes, and that he would be appointed to an important position in the government. In addition, it glowed with a strange, faintly purple light, showing that it had been imbued with a form of Manipulation Magic—a curse.

I don't have any Magic Within, so if I'm exposed to that, it's game over.

Having taken lessons from Shiro, the magic nerd, despite his own lack of affinity for magic, Herscherik could tell immediately that he mustn't sign that document no matter what.

Among the spells categorized as Manipulation Magic, those that attempted to

influence a person's mind directly had particularly low chances of success. The reason was simple: the target's own Magic Within served as protection and deflected the spell. Under normal circumstances, it was almost impossible to affect a person with such Manipulation Magic as long as they still possessed some will of their own.

Curses, on the other hand—spells which used objects as mediums—had a relatively high chance of success compared to other forms of Manipulation Magic. Here, signing the document would mean accepting the curse, and Herscherik would likely fall under the man's control immediately. While he did have his pocket watch, which still contained Shiro's barrier spell in the case of an emergency, it wouldn't be of much use against a non-physical spell like this.

Thus Herscherik had no option but to stubbornly refuse to even touch the paper. They had already spent over an hour having the same conversation, and finally, fed up with the prince's utter reluctance to do as he was told, the man dropped his façade. He glared at Herscherik with rage in his eyes, slamming his fist on the table.

“Your Highness, do you mean to forsake a suffering subject of yours?!”

“Suffering? Forsake?” Herscherik sneered mockingly at the man's arrogant remark before coldly continuing. “Someone who borrows money frivolously to serve their own greed, only to return it by pilfering money from the national treasury, is no subject of mine. Do you have any idea how many people have suffered as a direct result of your misappropriation, Viscount Galton?”

Viscount Galton had been working at the treasury until his crimes were discovered. He'd forged account books at will and lined his own pockets with the discrepancy, with part of his ill-gotten gains also going to Minister Barbosse. Obviously, Herscherik had dragged him to court and had him sentenced.

The viscount closed his mouth for a moment upon seeing the prince's cold glare—but, still determined, he drew closer to Herscherik.

“It was a negligible amount! Besides, I wasn't the only one who did it, and there were those who stole much more money than I did! It's completely unfair that I—”

“Viscount Galton, it's not a question of whether you were the only one, or

how much you misappropriated,” Herscherik said as though reprimanding a naughty child. “Even if I were to defend you now and attempt to have you pardoned, all the evidence is already there. You’ve already been sentenced. Nothing will change that fact.”

As punishment for his crimes, Viscount Galton was ordered to pay back the money he misappropriated from the treasury, as well as being sentenced to a few months’ house arrest and a demotion. From the looks of his mansion, it appeared that he had been unable to pay the amount required by the court, resulting in the seizure of his assets.

Herscherik turned his gaze to the other man who was observing them from a corner of the room. He was a thin, gloomy figure with glasses, and Herscherik recognized him from elsewhere.

“Who’d have thought you’d band together with a loan shark, huh?” Herscherik said to the viscount.

The man in the corner was indeed a loan shark with a penchant for usury. He’d lend money to poor people in need, only to turn around and demand outrageous interest rates. He belonged to the upper echelon of an underground group that probably qualified as an organized crime ring. Any attempts to sue this organization were doomed to fail, as they would bribe important individuals in the constabulary; as a result of seeking justice, the victims usually ended up in a worse place than before.

“I really hoped you’d learned your lesson, you know...” Herscherik said, which caused the thin man to frown.

During Operation Fortune Favors the Bold, which Herscherik had executed in an attempt to ensnare Barbosse, the prince had discovered and destroyed an organization that had pretended to specialize in luxury goods, but actually served to ensnare people in predatory loans—an organization managed by this man. That organization had also been indirectly connected to Barbosse through a number of officials and nobles. Herscherik had stamped it out beyond recovery, but it seemed he had still gone too easy on the leader of the operation. With Barbosse and all other influential backers out of the picture, this parasite had found a new host in the viscount.

“Perhaps I didn’t punish you enough,” Herscherik said with a fearless smile, and the man’s frown deepened.

“Keep up that snarky attitude and things won’t end well for you.”

“That’s what you said last time. Remind me—how did *that* turn out for you, hm?” The man’s threats wouldn’t work on Herscherik.

The man frowned and clenched his jaw so hard that his back teeth audibly ground together, but Herscherik just chuckled in response.

“Then why is the royal family continuing to live a life of luxury just like they always have?!” Viscount Galton suddenly roared, interrupting Herscherik’s conversation with the loan shark.

“Living a life of luxury? You sure say strange things.” Herscherik tilted his head adorably and gave the man a confused look. “The royal family isn’t living nearly as lavishly as you think.”

It was true that, compared to ordinary people, they did lead luxurious lives. However, they didn’t exactly open five bottles of expensive wine in a single evening or gamble away enormous sums of money—the kind of excess that had led to people like Viscount Galton stealing from the treasury.

“The fact of the matter is that we live in a country ruled by a king. The royal family looks after the people and protects them. Are you trying to neglect the very top of the country?” Herscherik continued.

While they clearly shouldn’t live a life of excess, the royal family was still the face of the kingdom. If the symbol of the entire country was dressed in rags, what would the common people think? Wouldn’t they become the target of ridicule from other countries? If that were to happen, the people themselves might suffer for it. That was why the royal family needed to keep up appearances to a certain extent.

Herscherik’s father—the king—had indeed made the wrong decision when he chose his family over the people. Now, though, he was doing everything in his power to make up for his mistakes. And it wasn’t just Herscherik’s father that was doing this, but the entire royal family. All of them were grateful to the citizens of Gracis, and considered it their duty to protect them.

Upon hearing this greedy man speak of the royal family—Herscherik's own beloved relatives—as though they were the same kind of greedy criminal as he was, Herscherik simply smiled. But at the same time, an intense rage burned quietly within him.

“Let me ask you this.” Passing his smiling lips was a voice cold enough to lower the temperature of the room below freezing. This seven-year-old prince had complete control of the mood. “What have *you* done for the country to deserve any such luxuries?”

When Herscherik's father was forced to take the throne, when he'd had his entire family stolen from him and found himself helpless to do anything but suffer in silence as those close to him were threatened... What had this Viscount Galton done then?

“What did you do other than hide behind Barbosse as you indulged yourself?” Herscherik's question was a condemnation. “On what grounds do you, who stole the people's hard-earned tax money while doing nothing but ingratiating yourself to those above you, disparage my father and the royal family?”

Viscount Galton turned red with anger as he stepped closer to Herscherik and raised his hand. Herscherik instinctively covered his face with his arms as he was knocked to the floor, along with his chair.

“You little brat! I try to put on my best behavior and look what I get!” the viscount yelled, looming over Herscherik on the floor. He then turned to the loan shark. “You there! Get the Spellcaster!”

“Good idea. The Seventh Prince is a failure with no magic of his own. It shouldn't prove difficult to put him under a spell. All we have to do is make sure he's unconscious.” The loan shark gave a cruel sneer, and Viscount Galton joined him.

“As long as I have this prince under my command, even I could—”

“Rule the country from the shadows like Barbosse?” Herscherik interrupted the viscount as he sat up, rubbing his arm. “You'd never be able to take Barbosse's place. He was at least...” Herscherik gave the viscount a radiant, angelic smile. “He was at least incredibly skilled, capable, and cunning. Someone like you, who lets loan sharks lead you by the nose and can't do

anything but kidnap and threaten a child... You wouldn't be able to follow in his footsteps even if you tried for ten thousand years."

The very next moment, Herscherik threw himself to the floor. At the same time, the door was flung open, and a violent gust swept through the room. Viscount Galton shielded his face. After the gust had calmed down, the viscount glanced around the room—and was left flabbergasted. The loan shark and his men were all lying unconscious on the floor, not moving a muscle. But that wasn't all—next to the loan shark was a man holding a staff as long as he was tall, and between the viscount and the prince stood a dark-haired man clad in all black.

"Wh-Who are you?!" the viscount yelled.

"Hersch, are you okay?" The black-clad man utterly ignored the viscount, turning to Herscherik instead.

"I knocked my arm on something, but I'm fine. Thanks for worrying. You got here faster than I expected. Thank you too, Ao," Herscherik said as the black-clad man—Kuro—helped him up. Ao simply nodded.

"How did you get in here?! What happened to the guards?!"

"They went to see about the fire, and I'd expect they're all having a nice rest on the grass by now," a woman's voice replied to Galton. The source of the voice then entered the room.

"Kurenai!"

"I'm relieved to see that you're safe, Your Highness," Kurenai responded with her usual smile.

While Herscherik had all sorts of things he wanted to ask, getting the situation under control came first.

"Kuro, capture the viscount... Don't kill him, okay? He won't get out of this that easily," Herscherik said to his butler, whose crimson eyes burned with bloodlust.

"Understood..." Kuro responded after a short pause.

Kuro immediately restrained Viscount Galton, although Herscherik pretended

not to see Kuro's "accidental" kick to the viscount's stomach.

"Have mercy... Please, have mercy!" the bound viscount begged, prostrating himself in front of Herscherik, who had taken a seat on the chair again. The constabulary, who had been contacted in secret to avoid a scene, had long since arrested the loan shark and his men, leaving only the viscount behind.

"Look here..." Herscherik said wearily as the middle-aged man begged for his life, tears and snot running down his face. "I already gave you one chance, didn't I?"

Even if they seized all the viscount's assets, it would still not have been enough to cover what he'd stolen. Despite this, he had been left with the minimum amount of money needed for him to lead a moderately comfortable life after Herscherik had exposed his crimes. He had even been allowed to keep his viscount title, as well as his job at the castle—albeit in a different department—ensuring him a source of income even after his house arrest ended.

Not everyone who had supported Barbosse had done so out of their own choosing; some had simply been frightened into submission. Still, a crime was a crime. For the sake of anyone who had felt they'd had no choice, Herscherik had seen to it that Galton and others had been allowed to keep enough funds to sustain themselves. That way, if they had a change of heart and worked hard enough, they could climb their way back up to their former position someday.

Of course, some of Barbosse's minions had been sentenced to capital punishment. But ultimately, the royal family were also responsible for failing to control Barbosse and his followers. So while Herscherik himself realized that he was possibly being too lenient, he still gave people who had stained their hands the chance to repent.

This man, on the other hand, had failed to grasp any of that—nor did he even attempt to do so.

"Please, my dear, kind prince. I beg of you. Have mercy!"

Some people could turn their lives around, but as unfortunate as it was, there were also those who could not. The man crawling in front of him belonged to

the latter category. This was reality, Herscherik thought, and he felt his heart ache.

“I’m not kind—not at all. I mean, just think about it.” Herscherik’s words were dispassionate, suppressing his own emotions as he spoke. “If I was the compliant, merciful prince you’re begging for, I wouldn’t have chased you all down to begin with.”

To Galton, this statement might as well have been a death sentence.

“You yourself forfeited the chance I gave you.”

Upon hearing this, the viscount threw his head onto the floor and let out a maddened scream. Herscherik watched quietly, without averting his eyes, looking as though he was trying to hold back his tears. Kurenai and Ao only observed the prince in silence from a distance.

After tying up any loose ends and receiving a scolding from his two oldest brothers—as well as a drawn-out lecture from his butler—Herscherik wearily sat in his favorite sofa by the window as evening approached.

Wow... Today sure was a long one... It's not like I planned to be kidnapped or anything, you know... Herscherik grumbled internally. I'll have to be more careful next time. Yeah... I do kinda regret how I handled that one.

Herscherik thought about how if Kuro could hear him, he would’ve gotten yet another long lecture about how he was regretting the wrong thing. Leaning back, Herscherik took a few deep breaths. He then turned his gaze to the window and looked up at the stars glittering in the night sky. Finally, he turned away from the view and gave the MVP of the day a smile.

“Thank you for coming to save me, Kurenai.”

“I didn’t do much,” Kurenai replied as she remained standing.

Currently, Kurenai was the only person in Herscherik’s room besides the prince himself. Oran had gone to report the incident to the constabulary and then headed home, and Shiro had returned to his own quarters by now. Ao had retreated to his room before anyone discovered him, and Kuro had gone to sniff out any last remnants of the loan shark’s criminal organization—just to be safe.

"But not only did you track the kidnappers, you even came up with a strategy for rescuing me. I never would have expected you could do all of that," Herscherik said in admiration, thinking back to the strategy in question that Kurenai had told him about after the fact.

First, Kurenai had shown the party to the mansion. Ao then used his investigation magic to discover how many people were in the mansion and where they were. Being an expert at wind magic, Ao was also proficient in the related field of investigation magic.

After learning how many people were inside, the party split up into two groups, with Oran and Shiro on one hand and Kuro, Kurenai and Ao on the other. Oran and Shiro headed to the back of the house, where Shiro erected a barrier covering the grounds, preventing sound from escaping and also barring anyone else from entering. He then started a small fire. Shiro proceeded to trap anyone who came to put out the fire inside soundproof barriers as Oran knocked them unconscious. In that way, they dealt with anyone who came to have a look at what was happening outside one by one

Kuro, Kurenai, and Ao infiltrated the mansion while those inside were distracted by the fire, taking out any stray guards as they headed toward the room where Herscherik was being held. In a stroke of good fortune, they came across the Spellcaster on their way there; Kuro immediately subdued him. Ao then used his wind magic to carry his voice to Herscherik and inform him of the plan.

Herscherik did as told, provoking the viscount and creating a situation where he could take cover on the floor without raising suspicion. The moment Herscherik had fallen to the floor, Ao activated his wind magic to make sure none of the viscount's men could see a thing. After that, it was simple for him and Kuro to take out the loan shark and his associates.

As a result, they'd managed to capture every single person in the mansion, all without killing anyone or allowing anyone to escape. Had it only been Herscherik's men of service there, they would likely have lacked the manpower to make everything work out so smoothly. By keeping the disturbance to a minimum, they had managed to avoid negatively affecting the harvest festival too.

Herscherik had not actually expected Kurenai to come to his aid. He figured that she would just inform his men of the kidnapping, and then he could simply stall for time while he waited for them to come and save him.

“Your Highness, may I have your permission to ask a question?” Kurenai asked the impressed Herscherik. She was not wearing her usual calm smile, instead looking at the prince with a serious expression.

“Huh? Sure, if it’s something I can answer,” Herscherik replied.

“Why did you go along with those men? When they were about to take you away, couldn’t you simply have raised your voice to protect yourself?”

“But if I did that, I might have endangered Risch and the townspeople.” Herscherik answered Kurenai’s pointed question with a sad sigh. “It’s partly my fault for being careless. I never expected someone would be stupid enough to pull something like that in broad daylight and right out in the open, with the harvest festival coming up too—even if you were being hounded by loan sharks.”

“Do you ever think about yourself, Your Highness?”

All high-ranking and powerful individuals Kurenai had known had always prioritized their own safety over everything else, and would never hesitate to use or hurt others to achieve it. The prince in front of her, she realized, was different.

“Huh? Hmm...” Herscherik thought long and hard. “To be perfectly honest, this is all pretty scary, and I don’t like getting hurt. As much as I hate to say it, I *am* weak, and I have no means of defending myself.”

Feeling pathetic about his powerlessness, Herscherik gave a sad smile.

“Then why do you keep visiting the town like that?”

Kurenai was aware that Herscherik didn’t think like other children his age, and that he was not optimistic enough to delude himself into thinking that he’d never come to any harm. So Kurenai couldn’t understand why he’d throw himself headfirst into danger like that.

Herscherik’s sad smile never wavered.

“I go outside in order to feel that what I’m doing isn’t all for nothing.”

Just seeing the townspeople smile was enough to make it all feel worthwhile for him. The sight convinced him that all he’d done hadn’t been for naught, and that those he had lost as a result of his own powerlessness hadn’t died in vain. Even if it was only for a moment, it would fill the void in his heart.

“Kuro and the others get angry with me, but I just can’t give it up. It’s thanks to everyone out there that I’m able to work as hard as I do. It might be a little selfish, but that’s the source of my motivation,” Herscherik explained breezily.

“That’s not the only reason, is it?” Kurenai probed further. While Herscherik claimed it was just for his own sake, Kurenai couldn’t help but feel there was something more.

Herscherik’s eyes widened slightly in surprise, but he quickly relaxed again.

“I can’t hide anything from you, can I?” he said as he shrugged. “If I walk around town like I always do, it helps everyone feel safe.”

Herscherik, a vulnerable young prince, would walk around all alone, without attendants or even a weapon to protect himself. This was, in other words, proof that this country was safe enough for a child to walk outside by himself. Herscherik figured this would help instill a sense of security in the townspeople. If that was enough to make *them* feel safe, exposing himself to danger was a small price to pay.

“I love this country, where everyone can have a smile on their lips, and I want to protect it,” Herscherik continued, his sad expression having turned into a gentle smile. “Kurenai—until just recently, everyone in town always looked so gloomy.”

When Barbosse still controlled the country from the shadows, the people of Gracis would spend their days in fear of what tomorrow might bring. But now, the country was starting to change.

“I’m finally able to see the people wear more cheerful expressions. It’s like everyone actually has hope for the future now.” Herscherik pictured the smiling townspeople in his head as he continued. “I’m more afraid of losing their smiles than I am of getting hurt. I’m so much more scared of *them* getting hurt. That’s

why I want to protect them with everything I've got. Well... that's what I tell myself, at least. In the end, I guess it's just for my own self-satisfaction. Does that answer your question?"

Herscherik looked inquisitively at Kurenai, who was unable to come up with an answer. The prince claimed that he was acting out of pure selfishness, but having spent the day in town with him, Kurenai knew that there was more to it than just that. Whenever he greeted the townspeople, spoke to them, or waved at them, they'd all respond with bright smiles. There was not a trace of worry on their faces.

He claims it's for himself, as he sacrifices himself for the sake of others... That's this prince's nature. Having reached a conclusion in her head, Kurenai could feel the tension in her body dissipating, and she gave her usual—no, an even gentler than usual—smile.

"You're a curious person, Your Highness."

"That's the second time you've told me that today." Seeing Kurenai back to her usual charming smile, Herscherik started laughing.

As she watched the prince, Kurenai whispered something in a voice too quiet for Herscherik to hear.

"Huh?" Herscherik threw Kurenai a curious glance, but she shook her head in response.

"No, it's nothing. Thank you for talking to me. I'll be going now."

Still looking at her quizzically, Herscherik saw her bow once before turning and leaving the room. Outside, Kurenai walked alone down the dark corridor. Once she was some distance from the prince's room, she became lost in thought.

"Perhaps he might be..."

The rest of her muttering was lost in the darkness of the corridor.

Chapter Seven: The Harvest Festival, the Exhibition Match, and the Fall Banquet

This year, the Gracis harvest festival would span an entire week across the whole country, with important guests visiting from neighboring nations. The capital in particular was very lively even on the event's very first day. The main thoroughfare was decorated with stalls on both sides, with opportunistic merchants hoping to make some easy money off festivalgoers with loosened purse strings.

The merchants were especially pushing wares imported from the Principality of Parche. As tariffs were lowered for the duration of the festival, rare specialities from Parche were being sold at a lower price than usual, attracting customers who were already in high spirits from the celebration.

Herscherik, too, was currently entranced by a handcrafted item hanging from the roof of a stall. Colorful strings were woven into a net inside a ring, and the object was decorated with feathers, detailed lace, bells, and glass. There were also more expensive versions featuring gems and crystals. They were each carefully made by hand, and Herscherik had never seen anything like this in Gracis before. The seller called it a "windcatcher of fortune," and claimed that hanging it by a window would bring the owner luck.

Herscherik was particularly taken by one windcatcher featuring crimson and blue feathers, which he bought on the spot and decided to hang in his own room. Ao would later explain with an awkward look on his face that windcatchers were traditionally made by birdmen. Herscherik was excited by the realization that, while Gracis had nominally cut off all contact with non-humans, they could still share their crafts by importing goods through Parche.

Elsewhere on the main thoroughfare and the square, street performers were attracting happy laughs from people of all ages. Foreign dancers twirled to a cheerful rhythm, while traveling troupes presented popular plays on a stone stage in the square. The festivalgoers were all enjoying the celebration in their

own ways.

The most highly anticipated event of the first day was the Games of Contest that were held in the castle training grounds. Everyone from locals to foreigners, commoners to royals had gathered in the arena as they waited for the Games to commence. As the clock struck noon, the band's lively fanfare reverberated through the arena, and the king of Gracis, Solye, announced the start of the games.

Herscherik glanced around the arena as he listened to his father's speech, which was being amplified with wind magic. The Games of Contest were held twice a year, and it was an occasion for soldiers and knights to show off the result of all their hard practice. As the public was not normally allowed inside the castle, this opportunity to see behind the palace walls had the visitors immensely excited.

In addition, this year's Games of Contest were to be held on the first day of the harvest festival, and they had invited key figures from other countries. As word on the street was that the exhibition match would feature the renowned Twilight Knight, this year's Games had attracted an even larger audience than usual.

The members of the royal family, including Herscherik, had been given seats with a good view of the center of the arena, and next to them were seats reserved for guests from other countries. The rest of the arena was open seating, and it was currently packed to the brim with people.

Meanwhile, the customary underground gambling that normally went on during the Games of Contest was strictly policed this year on an order from above, out of concern for the foreign visitors.

It's so hot... I hope no one comes down with a heat stroke...

Herscherik maintained his business smile as he suffered in the heat. Just as Kurenai had said before, it was a cloud free day, and with it came a high temperature. With how densely the arena was packed, it would have been no surprise if someone fell sick from the heat.

The opening performance, however, would put Herscherik's fears to rest. As the king's speech concluded, the master of ceremonies called four people up to

the stage. Three of them possessed faces so alike that they could only be distinguished by their different hairstyles; they were the triplets of the Gracis royal family. The fourth person to take the stage was a Spellcaster so beautiful that his master would say his beauty transcended gender—Weiss.

Wow, Shiro looks really annoyed... Herscherik thought as he observed the Spellcaster's blatantly irritated expression.

Shiro had a bad case of misanthropy—though according to Herscherik it was not distaste but fear that caused him to act so menacingly toward other people. Even his sour expression, though, couldn't disguise his goddess-like beauty, and mesmerized gasps could be heard from the audience as he came into view. Of course, this only served to worsen his mood further.

As he knew that Shiro did not appreciate being at the center of attention, Herscherik had originally planned to turn his brothers' proposal down, but Shiro himself had accepted after giving the matter a bit of thought—greatly surprising Herscherik. Still, even a forced smile was still too much to expect of the Spellcaster in a circumstance like this.

The triplets each walked out to one edge of the stage, forming an equilateral triangle. Each of them stood roughly twenty paces apart. In the center of this triangle, Shiro began to recite an incantation. His white hair started fluttering and glowing a pale blue as bands of light containing magical formulas danced around him. The audience fell speechless at the wonder unfolding before their eyes. Someone in attendance even began to whisper his moniker—the Haloed Spellcaster. Though it had been spoken quietly, the name still traveled far in the otherwise silent arena.

As the audience continued to watch, Shiro cast the spell he had been preparing, creating a barrier large enough to envelop the whole arena. At the same time, an enormous orb of water appeared in the air above the stage. The audience cheered at the impressive feat of casting two large-scale spells at once, but that was not the end of the opening performance.

Next, Cecily, Arya, and Reinette began to recite an incantation in unison. The matching bracelets—magical devices—they wore on their arms reacted to their spell, and light green bands of formulas enveloped them. When the triplets

finished reciting the incantation, it conjured a strong wind that blew around them. The wind rose up toward the orb of water, making it dance and scattering droplets through the air. The audience was greeted by the fantastical sight of a rainbow forming above their heads. The onlookers let out gasps of amazement—but that was still not the end of the show.

Shiro once again started to recite an incantation before swinging his arm as if cutting through the air horizontally, causing the droplets to transform into ice butterflies that fluttered through the air around the audience before dissipating—lowering the temperature in the area a few degrees in the process, making it much more comfortable. Since a barrier had been erected around the arena, it would maintain this cooler temperature for some time.



After the sight of water, light, and butterflies of ice dancing through the air inspired a stunned silence, an applause so thunderous that it threatened to rupture the earth broke out. The four performers took a bow before walking off the stage, but the applause continued.

There were three kinds of people who were watching them leave the stage: those who cheered out of genuine amazement; those who knew about the performance in advance and breathed a sigh of relief after it concluded without a hitch; and finally, those who were unable to hide their astonishment at the magical feat that they had just witnessed.

Anyone with any amount of magical knowledge was both astonished and full of dread after witnessing the opening performance. One single Spellcaster had erected a barrier large enough to envelop the entire arena before transforming another person's spell from water droplets to butterflies of ice—and apparently without breaking a sweat. And on top of that, there was the triplets' combination magic, which had been many times more powerful than a normal spell.

Combination magic was being researched in most countries on the continent, but it had a very low chance of success. Even the triplets, who possessed telepathy between themselves and whose Magic had very similar properties, had initially only succeeded about once in every ten attempts. After Shiro had joined their research, they had managed to nearly triple that rate.

Their performance today was made possible by the fact that they'd focused on their speciality, wind magic, and that they'd had Shiro's support. In addition, even if they had failed, they'd planned for Shiro to make it at least *look* as though they'd succeeded.

Will sure has some pretty dirty tricks up his sleeve...

Herscherik shot a glance at his siblings nearby and found his normally expressionless second oldest brother—seemingly a little more relaxed now that he was surrounded by family on all sides—looking down at the stage with feigned ignorance.

To ignorant onlookers, it must have simply looked like a marvelous stage show. But to those who had come from abroad to assess the current state of

Gracis, it must have felt like a preemptive show of force, Herscherik thought.

This performance was only possible thanks to Shiro and the triplets, but the guests had no way of knowing that. While they may not believe that Gracis was in the possession of many Spellcasters on par with Shiro, the magical devices that assisted the triplets' combination magic were a different story. Magical research was generally treated as classified information, and the more valuable the research, the harder a nation would work to ensure that it wasn't leaked. As no one would suspect that top secret research would be unveiled in a stage show like this, with so many important foreign dignitaries present, the obvious assumption would be that such devices were just that unremarkable to the people of Gracis. The minds of the guests inevitably drifted toward thoughts of what could happen if these items were to be used as weapons of war.

Of course, the audience was sitting a good distance from the stage, and it would have been impossible to recreate the devices just by observing them from afar—and knowing Shiro, the barrier magic he used at the very start must have also contained formulas that would interfere with other magic, including anything that could be used to gather information about the items.

Gracis had placed their bets on these foreign dignitaries imagining the worst, their own assumptions becoming a greater deterrent than anything Gracis could do. Besides, their magical research was progressing daily, and had only accelerated further after the magic nerd Shiro joined the effort. Perhaps the day when all Spellcasters in Gracis were equipped with magical devices for combination magic would come sooner than expected.

Herscherik applauded his brother in his head for his incredible predictions and planning.

After the show, Shiro went to stand next to Herscherik. The prince gave him a sympathetic thanks for all of his hard work, but Shiro only gave him a grouchy glance in return and mumbled that it hadn't been particularly hard at all—though Herscherik knew that he was only trying to hide his embarrassment.

The opening performance of the Games of Contest had concluded, and it was now time for the exhibition match.

"Herscherik, they're up on the stage now."

“Tessily...” Herscherik responded to his brother.

Just as Tessily had said, two knights had taken their place on the stage alongside the announcer. Herscherik and Tessily stood up.

Oran was wearing his white knights’ uniform. The white outfit paired well with his twilight-colored hair, and shrill cheers could be heard from the audience the moment he had appeared on stage.

Next to Oran was his opponent for the match—Tessily’s knight of service. He was a tall man in his thirties with his long black hair tied back and a fierce look on his face. He was also wearing a knights’ uniform, though instead of white, his clothing was an indigo blue so dark it almost looked black.

Oran almost looks kind of puny next to him...

It was perhaps inevitable for Herscherik to think so. As someone who made sure to work out every day, Oran had what Herscherik would have called an “athletic” build in his previous life. Tessily’s knight of service, on the other hand, was all muscle, so Oran couldn’t help but look weak in comparison. Additionally, Tessily’s knight had a different air about him than people from Gracis. Herscherik recalled his brother mentioning that he had come from an island nation across the sea, far to the east of Gracis.

Herscherik saw his knight of service bow toward him, waved back, and then turned to his brother.

“Tessily, where did you come across that knight of yours?” Herscherik asked.

“Huh? You mean Tatsu?”

“Tatsu?”

“Yeah, I think his full name was, uh... Tatsunojo? So I call him Tatsu.”

Tatsunojo? That name sounds like something straight out of a Japanese historical drama. Maybe the Land of the Sun is similar to Japan during the Edo period, Herscherik thought. He certainly does seem like he’d look good in traditional Japanese clothing.

Herscherik then pictured Tatsu wearing exactly that and nodded satisfactorily. When playing dating sims in his previous life, he’d often found himself going

after hot mature side characters over the primary love interest.

“I adopted Tatsu, you see,” Tessily explained, dragging Herscherik back from his fantasies.

“Huh?” Herscherik was so surprised he froze halfway through the process of sitting down. The way his brother described it, it was as if he’d adopted a stray dog. Tessily just shrugged in response.

“Yeah, in a port town I visited. I was watching him, thinking how beefy he looked and how he kind of had this air about him, when he suddenly collapsed right before my eyes. I couldn’t just leave him, and he said he was starving so I got him something to eat. Then we spoke a bit, and he told me that he didn’t have a job. I needed a temporary bodyguard, so things just came together from there... A good find, if I do say so myself,” Tessily explained cheerfully.

Herscherik collapsed onto his seat with a sigh. He’d been a bit worried about his brother, but then he realized that he’d first come across Kuro as the former spy was in the process of infiltrating the castle, so Herscherik didn’t have much room to talk.

“Oh, it looks like it’s about to start!” Tessily exclaimed.

Herscherik turned his gaze back to the arena. The announcer left the stage, and Oran and Tatsu faced each other.

“I look forward to sparring with you, Tatsu,” Oran said as he gave Tatsu a light bow, drawing his sword from his sheath. The sword was blunted to ensure that it wouldn’t inflict any fatal wounds, although it was still very much capable of breaking bones with a properly landed hit.

“Aye. Let us fight with valor, my good Sir Octa.”

Tatsu’s slightly odd way of speaking was proof that he did not come from this continent.

When the hero St. Ferris united the world in the distant past, so were the languages of the world unified. However, a few generations after the death of Ferris, the Land of the Sun turned isolationist by decree from the Divine Princess, and as a result, their language started drifting apart from the rest of the world. Though the two languages had much in common, there were many

differences in pronunciation and the meaning of certain words. Oran had been told that this had caused Tatsu a great deal of difficulty when he'd first arrived on the continent. He particularly struggled with pronouncing names, and after a few attempts at saying Oran's, he gave up on account of being unable to pronounce the "v" in "Octavian." Tatsu had even apologized profusely, ultimately frustrated by his failure.

His earnestness had left a good impression on Oran, though, who was also greatly interested in Tatsu's technique and skill. They had crossed swords a number of times in preparation for the Games of Contest, and though they had never gone all-out, it was clear that Tatsu was an accomplished warrior. Whenever he took up his sword, he would fall utterly silent, never letting his guard down—only to release a flurry of attacks that flashed like a rain of fire the moment either of them started moving. They were both fully aware that neither of them had displayed their full strength during their preparation matches.

Tatsu bowed and assumed his stance. He did not unsheathe his sword, as the style he practiced emphasized drawing your sword and attacking in one smooth motion. Neither of them moved—or rather, neither of them *could* move—even as the signal to start the fight rang out across the arena. The tense atmosphere could be felt all the way from the audience, who fell silent.

A chill ran down Oran's spine as he felt exhilaration welling up inside him. His opponent was skilled, and facing a strong fighter was the greatest joy any warrior could experience.

Oran had escaped the jaws of death on a number of occasions—his battle with the drugged templars, the charge toward the supreme commander during the confrontation with the Empire. He still vividly remembered the exhilaration and tension he had felt then. Now, his expectations exceeded even what he'd felt on those occasions, and they were all focused on the warrior in front of him.

Oran was the first one to make his move, raising his sword and charging right at Tatsu. The moment Oran drew close, Tatsu unsheathed his sword; it did not cross paths with Oran's, though, as he'd stopped the moment he saw Tatsu draw his blade. Oran swiftly evaded Tatsu's strike, which missed him by a hair's

breadth, and once again closed in on Tatsu.

Tatsu, meanwhile, raised his sword and set his sights on Oran's head before bringing the weapon down again. Oran fended off the blow with his sword and lunged for Tatsu's now unguarded torso. Tatsu calmly jumped back to dodge the attack, putting some distance between himself and his opponent.

It was a rapid series of attacks and counter-attacks that left no time for anyone to catch their breath. When the flurry of blows died down for a short moment, the audience took the opportunity to loudly cheer. Nevertheless, the two combatants were deaf to the sound, and Tatsu quickly launched his next attack at Oran, which Oran parried. The two swords clashed together with a loud clang, sending sparks flying. The pair traded blows, shifting from offense to defense as they nimbly leapt across the stage.

But just when the fight seemed as though it would go on forever, it came to an abrupt end. Oran feigned an opening in order to tempt Tatsu to attack—and Tatsu, fully aware of the ruse, thrust his sword toward Oran.

The two of them froze. Oran's sword was frozen in the air just above Tatsu's head, while Tatsu's had stopped a split second away from piercing Oran's torso. According to the rules, the match would stop if one opponent was unable to continue—for example, if either of them were disarmed—or if the referee deemed that one of the participants would have been unable to avoid a fatal blow. Of course, intentionally inflicting injury on one's opponent was also an instant disqualification.

In this case, both combatants had stopped before landing blows that would have certainly been fatal, and neither would have been able to evade the other's attack.

“This match is a draw!” the referee proclaimed as the two combatants sheathed their swords and bowed. They were then showered with cheers from the audience, who gave them a standing ovation for their performance. It had been a magnificent exhibition match.

The two of them then gave their respective masters a bow before finally exiting the stage. Some time later, they appeared by the royal family's seats.

“Well done, Oran. You were great out there,” Herscherik said.

Oran nodded in response to Herscherik's praise before turning his gaze toward Tatsu, who was talking with his master Tessily.

"Oran, what's wrong? Are you hurt?" Herscherik asked, seeing his knight's near lack of reaction. Oran quickly shook his head.

"No, I'm fine. Don't worry."

Oran gave his master a smile so as not to worry him, while he himself replayed the battle that had just unfolded in his head. They had been evenly matched, but in terms of actual fighting experience, his opponent had the upper hand; Oran had found it difficult to even come close to striking Tatsu in the second half of the fight. That was why, at the end of the match, Oran had intentionally pretended to let his guard down to invite his opponent to attack. Ultimately, though, the result had been a draw.

That, however, was only because it had been an exhibition match.

In an actual fight, I would have lost.

They had both been provided with swords for the fight, but the size and the weight of the weapons had not been much different from his own Divine Arms blessed by the Goddess of War. The so-called tachi that Tatsu wielded was narrower and longer than the swords they had used during the match. With real blades, Tatsu would have pierced his chest before Oran's own sword would have reached Tatsu's head. If the result had been a draw when Tatsu was using an unfamiliar weapon, then he would undoubtedly have won in a real fight.

"I guess I still have a lot to work on..."

He had not grown conceited, but having gained the nickname of the Twilight Knight, he may have gotten ahead of himself without realizing. In the grand scheme of things, he was inexperienced and still had much room for improvement. Were he to lose in a real battle, he would be exposing his master to danger. In the worst case scenario, Herscherik might even die.

I can't let myself lose.

Oran clenched his fist tightly, ignoring the feeling of his nails digging into his palm. The pain would serve as a warning to himself.

The first day of the harvest festival concluded without a hitch, and the rest of the event went on in a similar fashion. During the celebration, the royals had managed to entertain their foreign guests while casually showing off the kingdom's strength by steadily proceeding as planned. The Sixth Prince Tessily in particular had spent much of his time on his prodigal journeys—perhaps one might charitably call it *studying abroad*—in various countries; as a result, he was acquainted with many of the guests already. He would invite them for tea at noon, then join noble parties in the evening. Herscherik was amazed at how Tessily continued to entertain everyone with a smile, without letting a hint of his fatigue show.

Unlike his siblings, though, Herscherik was focused on enjoying the harvest festival to the fullest. During the day he would take Kurenai and Ao, as well as Kuro for protection on his brothers' orders, to the castle town to visit the different stalls and enjoy all the various performances. The large crowd made it possible for Ao to come along without drawing attention to himself. Even Ao, as stoic as he usually was, widened his eyes slightly in astonishment at what must have been his first time seeing such a festival. They stopped by the usual fruit shop along the way, where Herscherik happily enjoyed the candied apples he had suggested before offering to help out at the shop.

Since he was physically only a child, he did not have to participate in the evening parties, though he was not allowed to help out at the fruit shop in the evenings either. Instead, he spent his evenings quietly in his own quarters. Though some of the guests from abroad had asked to meet with Herscherik, his older brothers had turned them down every time. Upon asking why, Herscherik had simply been ordered to rest, as he “always worked too hard.” He felt a bit guilty for taking it easy while his father and brothers were busy establishing diplomatic relations, but he took them at their offer and tried to enjoy the harvest festival the best he could.

Then came the final day of the festival, when a massive banquet for nobles, high-ranking officials, and important foreign visitors would be held. Even Herscherik, who otherwise would reject invitations with the excuse of being too young, was unable to escape this one.

Royal banquets were always held in the castle's main hall, which was

brimming with people clad in dazzling outfits. As it was a casual standing buffet, the tables were covered with all kinds of food, with waiters carrying drinks to the guests and an orchestra playing soothing music.

Then the orchestra stopped playing, and a man's voice echoed through the hall.

"The 23rd King of Gracis, His Majesty Solye Gracis, will now make his appearance!"

Immediately after, the doors above the spiral staircase in the hall were thrown open. Someone in the hall sighed in wonder at the figure who appeared. Beneath the royal crown that had been passed down through generations was a long mane of flowing platinum hair and a face that still maintained its youthful beauty and allure, despite being past the age of forty, with kind emerald eyes. Dressed all in white with a royal red mantle on his shoulders, Solye greeted the guests with a smile.

"And next..."

After Solye came the crown prince Marx along with his mother, the First Queen Perla. Marx, who was often quietly referred to as the "Rose Prince," escorted his mother forward. They both sported eyes and glossy hair reminiscent of the finest rubies.

The rest of the royal family then appeared one after another, descending the spiral staircase. First came William, who wore a smile so radiant he looked like a completely different person, and Eutel, who had also expertly concealed his true nature, along with their mother, the Second Queen. Then came the triplets and the Third Queen, followed by Tessily accompanied by his mother—a duke's daughter, the Fourth Queen. Tessily's mother was the granddaughter of the previous king's sister. The Fifth Queen and her daughter, Meno were not present, as they were currently away from the capital while Meno underwent her treatment.

Finally, it was time for the person that all the foreign guests had been waiting for.

"The Seventh Prince, His Highness Prince Herscherik, will now make his appearance!"

Shortly after, four figures appeared. The first one to draw the crowd's attention was a beautiful Spellcaster with long white hair, standing to the right of the figure in the center. He was wearing a white and blue robe indicating that he was quite skilled in magic. With a single smile he could have captured the hearts of everyone who saw him—young and old, men and women alike. Currently, though, he was furrowing his brow and looking rather displeased. But although his expression would be considered ill-mannered coming from most people, it was easy to overlook it from someone like him. Such was the extent of his beauty, that no one would dare comment on it.

To the left was a man with twilight-colored hair tied back at the nape of his neck, clad in a white knights' uniform. With slightly downturned blue eyes, he had a gentle and sociable air. Despite his appearance, however, he had just the other day put his full strength on display during the Games of Contest. A sword hung from his hip, showing that he was the only person present other than the guards who was permitted to be armed. Someone who had a good eye for weapons might have noticed that the sword he carried was one of only ten such items that existed in the entire world.

Standing quietly behind them was a butler with carefully combed black hair, wearing a butler's suit in the same sable color. Fading into the background like a shadow, his dark crimson eyes observed his surroundings vigilantly.

The onlookers could tell that the three men were, each in their own way, no ordinary people. Walking alongside these men was the person who had won the recent battle against the Atrad Empire with only twenty thousand soldiers against the one hundred thousand strong imperial army, and who had additionally expunged the minister who had long controlled the kingdom from the shadows—the person referred to as the Prince—or even the *Hero*—of Light. With golden hair that seemed to have been spun from pure sunlight and his father's emerald eyes, he wore a fine blue outfit especially made for parties, and his mantle fluttered as he entered the hall.

“Is that the one they say defeated the empire?”

“*That's* the Hero of Light? He really is just a child... and a young one at that!”

“They say the royal family are all breathtakingly beautiful, but...”

The moment Herscherik entered the hall, the foreign visitors all started whispering what was on their minds one after another, flooding the room with a rising murmur. Even these quiet whispers traveled far in the otherwise silent hall, and the more insulting comments especially stood out.

Herscherik couldn't help but laugh internally. This was the first time the foreign guests had gotten a good look at him, and it was clear that they had built up an image of him in their heads after all this time that was far more impressive than reality.

He had defeated the Empire and saved the kingdom at the tender age of seven. It sounded like something out of a fairy tale, but it was all true, and this fact had led people to gossip about his tremendous intellect and how he was the king's favorite child out of all the beautiful members of the royal family. Anyone who had gotten a glimpse of the beauty of his father and siblings at the evening parties must have had their expectations set particularly high when it came to Herscherik. At the moment, though, the guests likely found themselves disappointed at how ordinary he looked in comparison.

Well, I guess that reaction makes sense...

Herscherik wasn't particularly bothered about the guests getting their hopes up and subsequently crushed all on their own. He had already spent years fully aware of the fact that he was not on par with the other family members in terms of looks, nor did he avert his eyes from the fact that he had no particular talent of his own. He had never cared much about what others thought of him anyway. The only thing Herscherik was proud of was his men of service, who were far more talented than he deserved.

At the same time, the outfit he was wearing today had been carefully arranged by Kuro and his siblings, and even the queens had helped put it together. It was even more dazzling than usual but managed to avoid being gaudy. At a first glance, the outfit seemed quite subdued because of its muted color, but his mantle, coat, blouse, trousers, and even shoes were all made from the finest fabric by the most skilled artisan in the country. Gold and silver embroidery glittered in the light, indicating the tailor's attention to detail. Anyone with an eye for fashion would know that the outfit was expensive enough to make your head spin.

They say the clothes make the man, and as Herscherik had put a good amount of effort into his appearance today, he had gotten his hopes up, if only a little. He couldn't help but feel a little disappointed at all that effort going to waste.

He glanced sideways to get a look at his men, only to immediately freeze up. Shiro was looking particularly irritated even for him; the normally gentle Oran was frowning; and Kuro's forced smile seemed unusually frightening. Herscherik found himself more worried about them than usual. They must have heard the guests' thinly veiled insults directed at their master.

This is why I said I wanted to make my entrance alone... Herscherik sighed at everything having gone as expected.

There were two reasons why these three, who were not members of the royal family, had appeared alongside Herscherik. The first was that there was no one else available. The king could appear alone without any issue, and Herscherik's siblings all escorted their mothers, but Herscherik's own mother had perished in childbirth. And though they couldn't very well let a seven-year-old enter the hall all by himself, having Herscherik rather than the crown prince accompany the king could lead to bothersome speculation. And so, his gorgeous men of service were chosen to make his entrance a little more dramatic.

The second reason was to act as deterrence.

"If you bring your men of service, who've all accomplished impressive feats both during the battle with the empire and at the Games of Contest, you won't have to worry about anyone even approaching you," Marx had explained when Herscherik had stubbornly refused to take his men with him.

Everyone knew how Herscherik would come across to their foreign visitors. As a young child with no patrons, he would look like an easy target to exploit, and as the king's favorite child who was wildly popular with the masses, he was, as they would say in Herscherik's old world, "easy pickings."

Of course, this was just the opportunistic thinking of people unaware of Herscherik's true nature. Had anyone approached him with such nefarious intentions, the prince would have been more than ready to exploit *them* for all they were worth in return. However, that would still have posed a danger to Herscherik, which his family wanted to avoid, so his brothers intentionally

distanced Herscherik from any diplomatic endeavors during the harvest festival. They also made sure to have his knight and Spellcaster show off their skill publicly to deter other countries from making a move.

Please, guys, just don't blow a fuse... Herscherik pleaded with his gaze as he led his men down the spiral case and joined the row of royals, with his father in the middle.

"Thank you all for joining us this evening. I am pleased to see so many visitors from so far away."

Solye began his speech. It was not intimidating in the least, instead simply expressing gratitude and sympathy for the guests, and he also conveyed his wishes for the future of his kingdom.

"Tonight is the final evening party of the harvest festival. I hope you all enjoy your time here," Solye concluded.

After Solye finished his address, the orchestra started playing again. Solye took his place on the throne placed in the hall, where he exchanged greetings with nobles and foreign visitors. Marx and William attended to their father, and the other royals busied themselves with entertaining the guests—with the exception of Herscherik.

I'm just a child. I'll just finish up what I need to and then leave. As someone not very fond of formal events, he was hoping to make his stay as short as he could get away with before excusing himself. He had no plans to establish friendships in a place like this, and leaving it all to his siblings seemed more advisable anyway. Not to mention he just found all of this a little bit tiresome.

But as much as he wished to leave, there was no lack of people who were hoping to get on his good side for their own gain. He could feel the burning gazes of the people around him as they looked for the right chance to strike up a conversation.

"Hersch, why don't you eat something?" Oran suggested. He casually walked up to Herscherik as if to shield him from the surrounding gazes and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword. Herscherik took note of this, but chose not to mention it, simply nodding instead.

“Good idea. I’m in the mood for something hearty.”

“I’ll go get some.”

“Thanks, Kuro. Oh, and could you get some cake too?”

Kuro silently nodded as he went to fetch the food. Meanwhile, Herscherik, Oran and Shiro headed for a table in the corner of the hall. A few tried to seize this opportunity to approach Herscherik, but Oran’s glare and Shiro’s below-freezing glance forced them to withdraw before even attempting to speak to him.

After returning with plates of perfectly arranged food, Kuro briskly attended to his master who was enjoying the evening’s feast. As Herscherik’s men fended off anyone trying to get their hands on this golden goose, he could enjoy the meal in peace and quiet.

There was one man, however, who walked past that barricade as though it was nothing, and started speaking to Herscherik as he happily stuffed his face with the meat dishes, salad, bread, and cakes that Kuro had brought him.

“I hope you are well, Your Highness.”

It was the head of the Aldis family—Oran’s father, Roland. Oran himself, seemingly having given up trying to understand what his father was thinking, only sighed.

Roland Aldis possessed blazing red hair and an impressive build that, though he had long since retired as a general, was apparent even through his formal dress. He placed his right hand on his chest and greeted Herscherik with a brief respectful bow. Next to him stood his wife Anne, who greeted Herscherik with a curtsey; next to her, Oran’s younger sister Lillianne followed her mother’s example.

Anne possessed blonde hair reminiscent of ripe wheat which she had tied back for the evening, and she was wearing a gown that, although not ostentatious, was made from fine fabric. Her elegant smile completed the image of a model noblewoman.

Oran’s sister, Lillianne, had straight hair the same color as her father’s, long enough to reach the middle of her back. Her dress was on the plain side for a

girl her age, but it too must have been made from fine material. Coupled with her discreet accessories, it gave her the impression of maturity beyond her years.

Meanwhile, since Oran's two brothers were knights, they were both busy with work and unable to attend the banquet.

Herscherik stood up from his chair and greeted Roland with a bow.

"Marquis Aldis, thank you for coming all the way here. Madame Aldis and Lillianne too. Oran—I mean, Octavian—is always a tremendous help."

"I'm just glad you're finding some use for my idiot son. It's not like he's useful for anything other than fighting. Feel free to work him to the bone."

"Father..."

Roland ignored his son's glare. Herscherik couldn't help but chuckle at their banter, causing Oran to shift his glare to his master instead. Herscherik quickly changed the subject to escape Oran's criticizing glance.

"Marquis Aldis, how is the orphanage coming along?"

"Everything is proceeding smoothly. We should be ready next year as planned."

Herscherik breathed a sigh of relief in response.

The Aldis house ran the Armin orphanage in the castle town. It had originally belonged to the late Baron Armin, but on Herscherik's request, the Aldis house had taken over after the baron had gotten himself involved in one of the Church's plots and was tragically killed as a result. Most of the children who lived there had no relatives, or were unable to live with their family for other reasons.

All orphans had to leave the orphanage once they reached a certain age, but if they were simply released into society with no relatives or education, all that awaited them was a life of hardship, full of people ready to exploit their miserable circumstances. Those unable to bear such a life would inevitably turn to crime.

Thus, Herscherik had asked Roland to provide the children at the orphanage

with an education—including reading, writing, mathematics, and general knowledge. If the children so wished, they could also learn about etiquette, sword fighting, and other more advanced topics.

The orphans were already keenly aware of their situation, and as such, they gave much thought to what was needed to survive and worked hard to achieve it together. They took great interest in their studies and were quick to absorb new knowledge, and Roland and Anne readily provided the children with everything they wanted, even going so far as hiring private tutors and investing in books and supplies.

This had continued for a number of seasons until Roland approached Herscherik to discuss something. The marquis had explained how the children wanted the opportunity to further their studies even more. Herscherik's idea was to give the orphans a chance to take the entrance exam for the royal academy. The academy already had a scholarship system and would waive the tuition for promising students on the condition that they worked for the government after graduating. Even those who did not become officials would have no problem finding a job and paying back their tuition as graduates from the academy.

For commoners to apply to the academy, though, not only did they need the academic skills to pass the entrance exam, they also needed the recommendation of someone with a noble rank. In addition, while the academy ostensibly had regulations demanding equal treatment for everyone regardless of background, in practice discrimination based on social status was common. Even if someone were to earn the sponsorship of a noble, pass the test, and enroll in the academy, they would have a difficult time ahead of them as a commoner—especially if they were an orphan as well.

Herscherik had no intention of rejecting the class system outright, but he thought that an obsession with social status could result in overlooking precious talent, which would be a net negative to the state.

Next year, Herscherik—whose mother was a commoner—would enroll in the academy, and he thought that this could be just the chance they needed. By making use of his own special status, he would attempt to change the minds of the people, starting with his own generation. To that end, he needed a

volunteer from the orphanage to enroll along with him. As part of that, the Aldis family became the legal guardians of the orphans there and began teaching those who wished to apply what they needed to know for the entrance exam.

Roland was explaining that it looked as though they would make it in time for the next academic year.

“Any volunteers?”

Roland responded with a number of names—among which, to Herscherik’s surprise, was one he recognized.

“Vivi... She volunteered?”

“I’ll protect you, Prince Herscherik, when I see you again!” So Vivi had said when she abandoned her status as young noble lady. She was trying to keep her promise.

But though she may have cut her ties to her family, she was still the daughter of the nefarious Wolf Barbosse. It wasn’t hard to see that she might be treated even worse than the other orphans as a result. Of course, she was smart enough to realize herself what a thorny path she had ahead of her, but even so, she was sticking to her words and relentlessly forging ahead.

Seeing Herscherik fall quiet, Roland narrowed his eyes, but he opted not to say anything more. Instead, he excused himself and left with his family in tow.

Herscherik gazed out at the hall as he finished his meal and sipped on the tea Kuro had prepared. As he did, another man approached Herscherik, ignoring the glares of the prince’s men just as Roland had. Seeing the man, Herscherik quickly glanced behind him at Kuro, who nodded as the prince stood up from his seat.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you. Thank you for coming all the way here,” Herscherik greeted the man, who respectfully bowed in response.

“It’s an honor to be given an opportunity to not only behold the Hero of Light, but to even talk to him.” The sun-weathered man, who looked like the very definition of a man of the sea, responded with a grin.

The sun had set, and stars were glittering in the sky. A man had exited the hall to a garden outside in order to rest off his drunken dizziness. He staggered through the garden alone, with no attendant to assist him. His name was Thomas Rosseholm, the second son of the Rosseholm family, one of the ten most influential houses of Felvolt. He belonged to a prestigious family, and after graduating from the military academy of Felvolt second in his class, he'd enlisted in the army. As an up-and-coming officer, he had been given the mission to visit Gracis as a representative of Felvolt in order to investigate the kingdom's internal affairs.

I'm drunk... I drank way too much...

He held his head, which throbbed with a dull pain, and massaged his temple as he continued through the garden. He already knew full well that he was a lightweight, but he had been unable to decline the offers of delicious fruit wine from the Sixth Prince who had invited him here. The combination of the prince's skillful encouragement and the high alcohol content of the wonderful wine had made him drunk in no time. He'd eventually stepped out into the garden to cool his head.

He walked down the garden path, paved with white slabs illuminated by the faint light of the streetlights, and sat down on a nearby bench with a sigh—though not because of the headache that was tormenting him.

Well, they don't call it the most powerful country on the continent for nothing. I thought things would be more unstable, but if they are, it certainly doesn't show. I guess a bit of rot isn't enough to shake the foundations of a kingdom of this size.

What had once been called the Kingdom in Woe by neighboring countries seemed to have turned over a new leaf. The minister who had controlled the country in secret was dead, and the country was back in the hands of the royal family—and the royal family was far from inept.

The magic they showed off during the opening performance of the Games of Contest, the skill of the knights and soldiers who participated in the Games, the financial power to keep such a large festival going for a week, and the close bond between the members of the royal family and their loyal subjects. Even if

it was only a temporary thing for appearance's sake, the fact that they were able to pull all this off to begin with spoke volumes about the power of this great nation.

If we make a move without being careful, it'll probably come back to bite us.

Thomas' aim had been to investigate the internal affairs of the kingdom and, if possible, sow seeds of unrest in order to sabotage the kingdom from within. But it was now the final day of the festival, and he had still not been able to execute his plan.

At this rate, I'll...

Thomas audibly ground his teeth. He had to avoid returning home to Felvolk with nothing to show for himself. This visit had been an opportunity for a promotion.

Suddenly, the rustling of leaves interrupted his train of thought. As it was a windless night, he looked in the direction and noticed a figure in the shadow of a nearby tree.

“Who goes there?”

He instinctively clutched the knife he had hidden in his clothes. Though weapons were forbidden at the party, the invited guests did not have their belongings inspected, so while anything as obvious as a sword was out of the question, it was still possible to smuggle in something small enough to hide in a pocket.

The figure slowly approached him, and when the dark shape was close enough to be illuminated by a streetlight, Thomas widened his eyes in surprise.

“You’re...!”

The figure laid one finger across lips that curled into a pleasant smile, signaling Thomas to keep quiet.

Tatsu had snuck out of the banquet and was walking down a dark, empty corridor. His master, Tessily, had dismissed him for the day. At first he had insisted that he couldn't simply leave his master and go rest by himself, but

with time the hall had filled up with the smell of liquor, and as he abstained from alcohol himself, Tatsu had felt more and more sick by the minute. Seeing this, Tessily had all but ordered him to leave.

He'd returned to his room and changed out of his knights' uniform into his usual kimono before leaving the room again. He planned to work off his sick feeling with some sword practice.

Tatsu was not particularly worried about having left his master alone in the hall. This was Tessily's own homeland, and they were inside the castle at that. No one who possessed any sense at all would even think to try and harm him here. Besides, Tessily was an expert at dealing with people. Faced with even the most antagonistic individuals, he would easily lead them by the nose with his bright smile and conversational skills, fooling them into happily divulging state secrets. By the time they realized what had happened, the festival would already be over.

But truly, the world is vast. Tatsu sighed as he compared Gracis to his own country. It was unheard of for so many people to gather in one place and directly speak to the monarch where he was from. Even the heads of the twelve noble lineages only very rarely received word directly from the Divine Princess. *The world is vast, and many a mighty warrior calleth it home. That lad is among their number.*

He thought back to the man with twilight-colored hair that he had fought during the exhibition match. He was young and supposedly inexperienced, yet he was skilled enough to force Tatsu, who had emerged victorious from many a battlefield, to bring his full strength to bear.

"Please spar with me again—or rather, teach me your ways," the red-haired man had asked, lowering his head without hesitation. Tatsu had been impressed not only by his skill, but also his drive to improve no matter what stood in his way. After that, they had met up on occasion to practice together, and the man had improved at an astounding rate.

How eager I am to see this to its conclusion.

Battles against a powerful opponent were the highlights of his warrior life, but it was also important for him to pass down his own techniques. Tatsu was very

interested to see just how strong this new pupil of his would become as he devoted himself to training and gained more and more practical experience.

Without meaning to, Tatsu found himself smiling. He then glanced behind him and noticed a black-haired man standing there. The man was carrying a tray, likely intended for his own master, on which a jug of water and drinking glasses were placed.

Is that not my master's younger brother's...

Despite young Prince Herscherik's adorable appearance, Tatsu had sensed something unfathomable in him, and the men in his service—including the man he had fought—all stood out from the crowd. The man currently in front of him had particularly caught his attention, as pure black hair was a rare sight on this continent.

“Thou art...”

The man—Kuro—turned his gaze toward Tatsu upon hearing him speak. Tatsu recognized his face from somewhere, and upon seeing his dark ruby eyes, he became convinced of his identity.

“Thou art a child of the moon and shadows, art thou not?”

Kuro froze. As expressionless as a doll, he suddenly held a number of knives in his hands as he dashed soundlessly toward Tatsu. Paying no heed to the crash of glass shattering and a tray hitting the ground behind him, Kuro thrust a knife straight toward Tatsu's face. Tatsu just barely dodged, grabbed Kuro's arm, and attempted to calm him.



“I, too, have been exiled from his lands. I will do thee no harm, nor shall I reveal thy secret. I swear thus upon my blade and my soul.”

After a moment of contemplating Tatsu’s words in silence, Kuro relaxed and lowered his knife. Tatsu in turn released Kuro.

“Nevertheless, thou must be cautious. Thy master is that very fledgling, is he not?”

Kuro’s shoulders jerked in response, but Tatsu simply continued.

“Thine eyes are precious indeed. *They* shall not let the bearer of such a treasure slip through their fingers so easily. And they care not what means they must employ to reach their ends.”

If they had to, they would take the life of a child—even a prince—without hesitation.

“Furthermore...”

Tatsu brought his mouth close to Kuro’s ear and whispered, at which Kuro’s eyes went wide.

“Now, I shall take my leave.”

With Kuro paralyzed in shock behind him, Tatsu faded into the night.

Chapter Eight: The Betrayal, the Genius, and the Revenge

The harvest festival of Gracis had concluded without incident, and all of the capital's foreign visitors were now busy with the process of returning home. Herscherik's two guests had also seized this opportunity to safely depart.

"Your Highness, thank you so much for everything you've done for us," said Kurenai, who had just finished packing. She gave Herscherik a deep bow.

"Don't mention it. If anything, you've done more to help me instead," Herscherik replied.

Thanks to Kurenai, Herscherik had made great progress on reviewing past documents, and the upcoming project proposals for each department were set to proceed without a hitch. Being so ahead of schedule, Herscherik was actually able to relax for once; he used his spare time to thoroughly scrutinize the project proposals, allowing him to make preparations in case anything went wrong. None of this would have been possible without Kurenai.

The office workers at the castle were already stretched thin due to the loss of personnel and the restructuring that had taken place since the recent battle. Working under such conditions had to be taxing, both physically and mentally. Herscherik had wanted to do anything he could to reduce the staff's workload, and he was happy to have been able to help them, if only a little.

Kurenai gave the cheerful prince her usual smile.

"Well, I'll be going to see Kurenai off then," Oran said, interrupting the gentle mood. He was dressed in simple, casual clothes.

"Thanks, Oran. I'm counting on you," Herscherik replied.

Kurenai and Ao would be departing separately before meeting up with a merchant that Herscherik had arranged to wait for them outside the capital. They had decided to split up because traveling in smaller groups would make it easier to handle any problems that may arise. Ao would leave slightly later with

Kuro, taking the less crowded backstreets.

"I'm sure you'll be fine, but do take care, Oran," Herscherik said.

"Don't worry—I've got this!" Oran replied with a smile.

As Kurenai quietly looked on, Ao approached her and took her hand.

"We'll see each other again, right?" Ao asked as he held Kurenai's hand. His voice betrayed a great deal of anxiousness for such an ordinarily stoic person.

Kurenai maintained her usual smile as she answered him with a quiet nod.

"Sorry to ruin the mood here, but it's about time to leave," Oran said, struggling to decide where he should look at the moment.

Kurenai stepped away from Ao and once again gave Herscherik a deep bow.

"I'll leave him in your care, Your Highness"

Herscherik responded with a firm nod.

At this moment, Herscherik did not give much thought to the meaning behind Kurenai's words. It was only later that he would find out what she'd really meant.

Kurenai and Oran left Herscherik's room, passed through one of the castle's back gates, and proceeded along the town's busy main thoroughfare. Oran made sure to keep a vigilant eye on their surroundings, but all of a sudden he felt someone grab his arm. He stopped walking, glancing behind him to see Kurenai, her hood shading her face as she looked down.

"Kurenai, is something wrong?"

"I'm terribly sorry, Sir Octavian, but I think the heat and crowd has gotten the better of me..." Kurenai said weakly. She was grimacing as if fighting off nausea, her hand pressed to her mouth.

It was a cloudless afternoon, as hot as a summer day, and while someone as fit as Oran might have been able to withstand it, a woman wearing a coat with a hood in this weather must have been practically suffocating.

"Let's use a shaded side road instead, shall we?" Oran suggested as they left the main thoroughfare.

They ducked into a nearly deserted alley where the surrounding buildings blocked out the sun, making it noticeably cooler than the main thoroughfare. After walking for a few minutes, Oran heard a thud behind him. Turning around, he found Kurenai leaning against a building as she slowly slid toward the ground.

“Kurenai?!”

Oran frantically ran up to Kurenai, knelt down, and reached out to support her. As he did, however, Kurenai held out her palm right in front of Oran’s face. The moment Oran saw the purple crystal pendant swaying in Kurenai’s palm, he realized his own mistake.

Before Oran had a chance to back away from her, the crystal started to shine. He attempted to shield his eyes with his arm, but it was too late—a sudden drowsiness assaulted him, and he stumbled into the wall, unable to keep his balance. Under normal circumstances, the pain from the hit would have jolted him awake, but his eyelids still felt heavy as he struggled to fight the sleepiness that had come over him.

She...got me... Oran silently bemoaned, realizing that he had fallen victim to Manipulation Magic.

Oran did not possess much Magic Within. Though, unlike Herscherik, he did have a small amount that allowed him to cast very simple spells, it was not enough to effectively guard against Manipulation Magic. Still, all he had to do as a knight was to take any enemy Spellcasters out before they had a chance to attack him. As the success of Manipulation Magic depended to a large extent on the target’s mental fortitude, his weakness to magic was not exactly a fatal one. Oran was able to fend off most normal spells using his willpower alone.

Unfortunately, this time he had been surprised by Kurenai, whom he trusted, and the spell was strong enough to ignore what little Magic Within he did possess. His drowsiness threatened to put him to sleep at any moment. Oran could feel himself starting to lose consciousness.

“Kure...nai...” he called out, keeping his heavy eyelids open with sheer willpower. Surprised that Oran was still awake, Kurenai kneeled next to him and spoke.

“I’m so sorry, Sir Octavian. Don’t worry, this spell only puts the target to sleep. It won’t harm you physically, and it has no lingering side effects.”

“What...are you...” Oran attempted to ask what she was planning, but failed to complete his sentence. Kurenai, though, understood what he was trying to say and returned his question with a troubled smile.

“Please take care of him—of Gale. I have something I need to do.”

Oran was confused at the sound of this new name he’d never heard before, but he did not have time to ponder it now. He reached out to try to grab Kurenai, but she stood up before his hand could reach her, and Oran ended up grasping at thin air.



“Wai—”

“I wish...” Kurenai interrupted Oran trying to stop her. She spoke to him with neither her usual soft smile nor her troubled expression from earlier. Instead, she was on the verge of tears.

Kurenai turned her back on Oran, and the knight could do nothing but watch her leave as his vision grew more blurry by the second. His body refused to listen to him, and he felt as though his head was being squeezed with great force. He knew that if only he closed his eyes, he would be able to escape his suffering.

Oran bit his lip, and the pain brought his consciousness back for a moment as the taste of blood filled his mouth, but the drowsiness quickly overwhelmed him yet again.

Without hesitation, Oran immediately grabbed the knife he always carried and slashed open his own arm.

After leaving Oran behind in the back alley, Kurenai quickly continued down secluded roads so as to not attract attention. After a while, she arrived at the agreed upon location, where a carriage was waiting for her. She climbed aboard and removed her hood.

“I’m sorry to have kept you waiting,” she said with a smile to the man sitting across from her. The man—Thomas Rosseholm—gave an exaggerated nod as he replied.

“Yes, you certainly did. Were you followed?”

Kurenai shook her head, maintaining her smile without any hint of offense.

“No.”

“Good. Let’s depart, then.”

Though bothered by Kurenai’s uncannily firm smile, Thomas ordered the coachman to set off.

Upon hearing the report, Herscherik became momentarily paralyzed with

shock. He then ran over to his knight of service, who had returned with the assistance of two soldiers. His arm was wrapped in a red-stained cloth that was only growing more stained with each passing moment. It was clear that the red stain was his knight's own blood.

"Oran?!"

"Sorry... I...was careless..." Oran said feebly to his master. "I need...to speak...alone..."

Kuro swung into action before Herscherik could even give the order. He dismissed the soldiers who had carried Oran here, instructing them not to tell anyone what had happened, before fetching a first aid kit and kneeling down next to Oran.

"We have to see to your wound right away!" a pale Herscherik cried, as Kuro removed the blood-soaked cloth and studied the wound.

"Did you do this yourself?" Kuro asked, looking up at Oran. He based this deduction on the wound's cleanliness, the fact that it had missed any arteries, and its location on Oran's non-dominant arm.

"Can't stay awake...without pain..." Oran said as he gasped for air at short intervals.

"It's sleep magic," Shiro said, furrowing his brow as he observed Oran's struggle before reaching out with his hand to investigate the spell that had been laid upon him.

"Can you lift it, Shiro?" Herscherik asked frantically.

"It's dangerous to forcibly lift a spell that's already affecting someone's mind. Besides, I'm not very good with Manipulation Magic..." Shiro trailed off as his beautiful face twisted into a frown.

Herscherik knew what Shiro was implying. Manipulation Magic was traumatic for him, as someone he trusted had once turned out to have been altering his memories over a long period of time in an attempt to control him. Shiro now preferred not to deal with Manipulation Magic at all if he could avoid it.

"Still, I *can* temporarily reduce the effects of the spell."

After seeing Herscherik grimace as though he was the one in pain, Shiro let out a small sigh, placed his hand on Oran's forehead, and started reciting an incantation. His white hair began to glow a faint purple color, and Oran's breathing evened out somewhat.

"I'll treat the wound now. Just deal with the pain."

"Don't...worry... I need the pain...to stay awake..."

Kuro took out a piece of cloth and wrapped it tightly around Oran's arm to stop the bleeding.

"Oran, you can hold on to my hand as hard as you like," Herscherik said, grabbing Oran's dominant hand.

Kuro tied the piece of cloth in place around Oran's upper arm to stop the flow of blood as he began to treat the wound. Shiro continued reciting his incantation, his face marked with even more frown lines than usual. Herscherik could do nothing but watch quietly as he endured the pain of Oran gripping his hand.

"Hersch..." Oran said in a strained voice, clearly still in pain despite Shiro's magic. Herscherik gripped Oran's hand in return, as if to remind him of his presence.

"Oran, you can keep it short. Explain what happened."

Kuro's treatment was just a stopgap measure. Oran needed to be treated by a doctor, and would then require rest. But he couldn't relax yet—not when he had gone this far to report what had happened to his master—or his suffering would have been for naught.

"It was...Kurenai..."

Oran explained what had happened in fragments, while intermittently furrowing his brow as he fought against his drowsiness—how Kurenai had used the sleep spell on him, how she had vanished afterward, as well as how she hadn't seemed like her usual self when they parted.

"I'm...sorry..." Ao suddenly said, having been unable to do anything but watch from a distance until now.

“Ao?” Herscherik said, still holding Oran’s hand, as he turned his eyes toward the beastman.

Ao looked down, avoiding Herscherik’s gaze.

“This magic only forces the target to sleep. As far as I’m aware, it doesn’t pose any physical threat.”

A comrade of Kurenai’s who specialized in magic had given her this item for her own protection. It could be activated by simply imbuing it with Magic, and it was renowned for its quick activation time and effectiveness.

“This ‘Gale’...she spoke of... It’s you...isn’t it...”

Ao did not deny it.

“I’m truly sorry,” Ao said, before falling silent, simply standing in place.

“Ao... Are you apologizing because she’s ‘Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure’?” Herscherik said, releasing Oran’s hand and rising to his feet.

Ao looked up in surprise at Herscherik.

“You...knew?”

“I’m sorry, but I took the liberty of researching you. There was just too much about you both that didn’t add up.”

Herscherik had been unable to shake off the strange feeling he’d had about the pair, and had asked Kuro to look into their history. Kuro had discovered that there had recently been an internal conflict in Felvolk where the unit belonging to the genius tactician known as Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure, had been wiped out. The tactician in question had gone missing.

The timeline matched up to when Kurenai and Ao had first arrived in Gracis. Furthermore, if Kurenai was the tactician in question, it explained her skills. Herscherik had managed to get a glimpse of her strategic talents when he was kidnapped, if only by accident.

The two of them must have, for one reason or another, fled Felvolk and made their way to Gracis. It was unlikely that Felvolk would let its “Greatest Treasure” escape their grasp so readily, and if they knew she was traveling with a beastman they would likely assume that they were escaping to the Lustian

Confederation and strengthen that border accordingly. But such a skilled tactician would have anticipated that move, and would instead flee somewhere Felvolk wasn't expecting—Gracis.

"If you had just quietly left this country for the Confederation without incident, I wouldn't have said anything or pressed the matter," Herscherik explained.

As long as they didn't bring it up themselves, Herscherik had planned to remain silent about their identities. He had felt that would have been the best course of action for both parties.

"But now that it's come to this, you'll explain, won't you?" Herscherik said quietly, but firmly.

Ao closed his eyes and remained silent for a few moments, before steeling himself and opening both his eyes and his mouth.

"My name is Gale. I was the captain of Felvolk's battle slave unit. She—Alterisse Danvir—served as our tactician, and was the genius known as Felvolk's Greatest Treasure. Just as you guessed, we fled here from Felvolk."

Ao—Gale—first encountered the tactician when she was fourteen years old, before she had become known as Felvolk's Greatest Treasure.

"Hello, everyone. My name is Alterisse Danvir. I'll be commanding this unit as of today. It's a pleasure to meet you all," the girl with crimson hair and dark eyes had said as she bowed to the group of men who were over twice her age and size.

On her visit to the battle slaves' barracks—a one-story structure so run-down that it barely qualified as an actual building—the girl simply smiled as she bathed in the murderous glares of the battle slaves.

"From now on, your lives will be in my hands."

Due to the Brand of Servitude, the state of Felvolk already controlled the lives of every slave that stood before her. If ordered to fight, they fought; if ordered to die, they had no choice but to die. The moment the Brand of Servitude was carved into their chests, they had lost their pride as beastmen.

Gale observed the young tactician and his hostile comrades from a distance.

So that's our new commander, huh.

Their previous commander had been replaced after suffering significant casualties during the unit's last battle. The former commander had blamed the slaves for the loss while he gleefully gossiped about his replacement.

The new commander had graduated from the military academy, a feat which normally took eight years to complete, in half the usual time. She had no actual experience in battle, though, and was the daughter of the disgraced Danvir house.

The Danvir house had once been a prestigious family that had produced many talented tacticians over the generations. But that was before the head of the house had suffered a major loss during an important battle that ultimately resulted in a crushing defeat for the army, before finally being slain himself. As a result, the heirless Danvir house had fallen to ruin. The daughter of this once distinguished house, still a mere child, had been nothing but trouble to the army. Gale understood that the girl had been forced into her current position by someone higher up.

Gale was neither excited nor dejected at this realization—in fact, he felt nothing at all.

It's not like anything will change. They would still be forced to fight until the day they died, just as always.

However, Gale's prediction turned out to be very wrong. Alterisse gave them only two orders: to always obey her command and to never give up on living.

Her strategies would lead them to victory on one battlefield after the next, almost as if she knew the outcome in advance—with so few losses that it became pointless to even try comparing her to any previous commander. After a few months had passed, not a single member of the unit still looked down on her, and their gazes had turned from hostile to bemused.

“Now, for the next battle...” Alterisse explained their current situation and predicted the enemy's location, numbers, as well as all of the moves they would make. She went on to explain the strategy she had developed to counter all of

this.

Despite being constantly outnumbered, she would use tactics such as ambushes and traps to turn the tide of battle in their favor, resulting in one victory after the other.

“The unit hiding here should attack the enemy from behind on my signal. Any questions?” she said with a smile. The slaves looked at each other before turning to their captain. Seeing their gazes, Gale slowly opened his mouth.

“Why do you always use such roundabout tactics?”

“Roundabout, you say?” Alterisse looked at him quizzically, still maintaining her smile.

“Every other commander would just send us to the front lines to fight to the death.”

They would be sent straight into battle without explanation, thinking of nothing but killing the enemies in front of them—not even knowing how many enemy soldiers they were going to face. Ever since the new tactician had shown up, though, they had been given advance information, and by fighting and coordinating according to her strategies they had managed to minimize their losses. Often, they even emerged from battle without suffering a single serious injury.

“Your former commanders were all incompetent. Fools, the lot of them,” Alterisse spat nonchalantly, all the while maintaining her smile. “You are battle slaves.”

This utterance caused the hostility of the slaves to resurface. But even as she bathed in hostile glares, her smile did not falter for a moment.

“I repeat. You are *battle* slaves. You are our most precious military assets. You will never find a unit as dependable as this one, no matter where you look.”

“Dependable...?” one of the members asked, confused, at which Alterisse nodded.

“I’m convinced that you possess the fighting prowess of a company many times the size of this one.”

Beastmen were physically stronger than humans to begin with, and there were many who excelled at magic too. Their major weakness was that their shortcomings also tended to be more extreme compared to humans. Despite this, they could easily hold their own against a regular company with the right strategy to compensate, Alterisse explained with her usual smile.

Suddenly, her expression changed, as she looked at the members of the unit with a piercing gaze.

“I have something I need to do in this country. To achieve that, I need a proven track record. You will be my means to that end.”

She went back to her normal gentle smile so quickly that her fierce expression a moment ago might as well not have existed. She looked around in the quiet room before fixing her gaze on Gale.

“Letting valuable fighting power go to waste in a battle this insignificant is out of the question.”

She was not underestimating the difficulty of the battle ahead—to her, it truly was insignificant.

“Now then, any other questions?” she said, looking around the room inquisitively once more. No one spoke up. Alterisse nodded as she gathered the documents spread out across the desk and handed out her orders. “In that case, start preparing for battle now. I hear the rain can be quite awful this time of year, so make sure you equip yourself for the weather.”

She did not receive an affirmative response from the slaves; upon asking why, they informed her that they did not actually have the needed equipment.

“So they won’t even process your requests... And the same goes for the other supplies...” Alterisse thought for a few seconds before continuing. “Very well. Please leave it to me.”

Alterisse then left the barracks. A few days later, not only did they receive the equipment they required, but also food, medical supplies, and more.

When Gale asked her what she had done to achieve all this, Alterisse simply smiled and responded, “It’s my job to ensure that you’re all in the best condition to fight. Don’t worry about it.”

Over the three years that Alterisse commanded the unit, they did not suffer a single defeat. Instead, they distinguished themselves in one battle after another. The slave unit—along with their commander, Alterisse—became famous within the army.

“You’re nothing but a girl from a fallen house!”

Gale stopped in his tracks upon hearing the insult. He peeked out from behind a building to see that two men in military uniforms had backed Alterisse up against a wall.

“You get a little bit lucky on the battlefield, and it goes straight to your head, huh? Learn your place, woman!”

The men grabbed the book she was holding out of her hands and threw it to the ground. Alterisse showed no hint of fear, though, nor was she flustered. She simply picked the book up again and gave the men a smile.

“Is that all you had to say?”

Her usually gentle and charming smile was nothing less than a direct provocation for the man who was yelling. He immediately grew enraged and raised his fist.

“Arrogant little wench!”

However, his fist instead struck the solid chest of a tall man, and he only ended up hurting his own hand. The moment it seemed like Alterisse was about to be hit, Gale had leaped in to save her without a second thought.

“Gale...?”

“You filthy slave!” the man yelled, drowning out Alterisse. He grabbed the sword hanging from his hip, and hit Gale hard in his shoulder without unsheathing it.

Gale grimaced at the merciless blow, but he never made a sound as he continued to shield Alterisse from her attackers. They would give up once they grew tired—that was the only option Gale had as a slave. Alterisse herself robbed him of that option.

"Stop! If you continue to hurt him, I'll report you to the inspector general!" Alterisse shouted as she leaped out from behind Gale. Her usual smile completely gone, she stared down the two men fearlessly.

He may have been a slave, but Gale was still her subordinate. If he was injured for no reason by someone who wasn't even his superior, the inspector general would be forced to reprimand the assailant in some way.

The men clucked their tongues and left, hurling abuse at the pair as they retreated. Once they were gone, Alterisse placed her hand on Gale's cheek, which had a visible mark from the savage blow.

"Why did you intervene, Gale?" Alterisse asked, on the verge of tears.

"I don't know," Gale replied honestly. The moment it seemed like Alterisse was in danger of being struck, his body had moved on its own. He gripped the delicate hand on his cheek and asked her in return, "Why do you go so far to protect us?"

He wasn't only referring to the incident that had just played out. Time and time again, Alterisse had worked to improve the slave unit's conditions. She would pour any rewards she received from her accomplishments into improving the barracks or compensating the families of fallen soldiers, keeping only the bare minimum for herself. As a result, the living conditions of the slaves had improved markedly compared to before she took over.

Alterisse looked away, trying to avoid Gale's eyes.

"It's the job of an officer to protect their subordinates," she explained, but her words did not quite convince Gale.

"We're slaves. You said so yourself, Commander."

Alterisse's body jerked upon hearing Gale's words; she glanced at him quickly before turning her gaze down to the ground.

"I'm...sorry..."

With each year that passed, Alterisse amassed even more victories, and before she knew it she had turned twenty years old. Having been a soldier since

she was fourteen and never losing even a single battle, she had come to be known by a different name within the army—Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure, blessed by the Goddess of War, who could reverse the tide of battle as though by divine intervention no matter how desperate the outlook. By that time, there wasn’t a single man in her unit left who would dream of belittling her—even though she was human, they had accepted her as an ally, a comrade-in-arms, and a genius tactician who always led them to victory.

While camping outside during a particular battle, though, someone noticed that Alterisse was missing. One after another, the unit members expressed their concern for her before their gazes inevitably turned to Gale. Propelled by their gazes, Gale stood up and left to search for his commander.

He found Alterisse sitting alone on top of a small hill, gazing at the stars. When Gale had first met her she had been only fourteen years of age, but with the passing of time the young girl had transformed into a grown woman.

Gale removed his coat, approached Alterisse silently, and laid it over her shoulders.

“Gale,” Alterisse said as she turned around and gave him a soft smile. Her downturned eyes emphasized her feminine beauty.

Everyone in the unit was aware that Alterisse had started receiving marriage offers. As a young, talented tactician, it was no surprise that all the leading houses of Felvolk wanted to make her theirs. However, she stubbornly refused to take any of them, which filled Gale with a strange sense of relief.

“The night breeze is cold,” Gale said brusquely, and Alterisse responded with an even brighter, happy smile. Wondering if he was the only one she smiled like that for, Gale grew a little restless; Alterisse, unaware of what was going through Gale’s head, covered herself with Gale’s coat as if embracing it.

“Thank you... Gale, I’ve made up my mind. I’m going to change this country,” Alterisse said as she looked up, as though swearing upon the stars. “At first, all of you were only a means to an end. I merely used you to climb the social ladder.”

Alterisse gave Gale a sad smile as she lamented her own callousness.

"But now, I care more about staying with all of you," she continued. "I love each and every one of you. You're the only family I have now, after losing my own, and I can't bear watching you continue to be oppressed as slaves."

Alterisse turned her gaze away from the sky and back to Gale.

"I'll force this country to recognize you. I swear," she concluded, flashing Gale a soft smile that concealed an unimaginably firm resolve.

After that, the two of them quickly grew closer. It wasn't long before Gale began to call her by her name instead of just "Commander," and soon enough, Alterisse was referred to as Felvolk's Greatest Treasure not just by the army, but throughout the country.

"We continued to fight and win for a decade after Alte first joined the army," Gale explained.

Alterisse's skills were not limited to the battlefield. As she continued to distinguish herself, she grew more and more influential within the army. She became renowned even outside the military as a genius tactician blessed by the Goddess of War herself, and with that reputation came powerful supporters.

She continued to receive offers of marriage from the ten houses, which she persistently declined; at the same time, she fought against orders from above so she could continue to command the battle slave unit. Most people would not have been able to defy orders from their army superiors, but as Felvolk's Greatest Treasure, she had too much influence in the military for her superiors to ignore—much of it as a result of her own scheming, of course. She would also allow the ten houses and her superiors to take credit for some of her achievements, and also had stockpiled plenty of blackmail material in case she ever needed it. She did it all not out of personal greed, but for the sake of her comrades, and her country as a whole.

The upper echelons of the military had likely started to catch on to what she was trying to do—something that would shake the very foundations of the country. They attempted to pull her away from the slave unit before she accomplished her goal, but she would deflect every attempt.

Suddenly, Gale hesitated for a moment before steeling himself and continuing

his story.

“Our unit had steadily risen in status within the army and became too powerful to ignore. We were promised that if we distinguished ourselves in just one more battle, we would be freed from slavery and welcomed as citizens. But then...*that* happened.”

Kurenai—or Alterisse Danvir—watched the scenery pass by on her way out of the capital. The carriage she was riding in, readied by the ten houses, was one of the most expensive money could buy, and barely shook or made any noise at all as it traveled. It was a world of difference from the fruit store owner’s wagon she had ridden to the capital.

As she looked out of the window, Thomas Rosseholm—who was sitting opposite to her—began to speak.

“I certainly never expected *you* to approach me. Didn’t you have a thing for those slaves?” he said somewhat mockingly.

“Oh, I’ve come to my senses now,” Alterisse responded with an elegant, unfazed smile. “In the end, they’re nothing but beasts, inferior to us humans. I was unable to escape him and was forced to come to this country. I was so relieved to see you here. That’s why...”

Alterisse eschewed her normal gentle smile in favor of a bewitching expression that made full use of her feminine charm as she continued.

“...I want to *repay* you. Please, let me assist you with whatever you desire,” she whispered intimately, hiding her true intentions behind the mask of her smile. Seemingly satisfied by her words, the man responded with a grin.

What a simpleton. Still forcing a smile, Alterisse finished evaluating the man’s character and had to prevent herself from chuckling out loud at how pathetic he was.

This man had been second in Alterisse’s class when she graduated, and she had also received an offer to marry him in the past. Alterisse’s first impression had been that of a pitiful man whose ambitions far exceeded his talents.

He was the second son of the Rosseholm family, one of Felfolk’s ten major

houses. He had grown up being constantly compared to his older brother, the talented heir of the family, and his personality was dominated by his sense of inferiority toward his brother and the conceited assumption that he was somehow capable of much more—and on top of that, a bloated ambition that far outstripped both. He wanted to surpass his brother, become the heir of his house, and finally become the marshal of the realm and rule over all of Felvolk. This was his grand—or laughable, if you asked Alterisse—ambition.

It was that very ambition of his that made him all the more easy to manipulate, as it clouded his judgment and made him jump at any opportunity to get what he wanted; on the other hand, he tended to ignore everything that was inconvenient to him. He was exactly what Alterisse needed. At the same time, she was astonished that the powerful Rosseholm house would produce someone so pathetic.

I can't believe my father was ever overcome by a family like this... How could they possibly ruin such a prestigious house of tacticians? Alterisse lamented internally.

Alterisse was only seven years old when she decided that she, too, would become a tactician.

“Father, I want to be a tactician too.”

What had prompted the young girl to declare such a thing was a conversation she had overheard between her father’s friends who had been invited to her birthday party. They had lamented the current state of the Danvir house, which had produced a long line of talented tacticians—but now only consisted of Alterisse’s father, whose only child was a girl.

She was also simply interested in what her father’s job was like to begin with.

“Alterisse?” her father had said, giving his beloved daughter a surprised look as he sat in front of the fireplace with a book in his hands. Alterisse gazed back at him with determined eyes.

“I want to become a tactician just like you, Father!”

“Well, that’s great to hear. But you’ll have to work very hard, you know,” her

father replied nonchalantly, not taking her declaration seriously—and with no idea how this would incite her.

Starting the very next day, Alterisse began to study like she was possessed. She voraciously read not just general textbooks, but also military treatises. Any time she came across something she didn't understand, she would ask her private tutor or her father—regardless of the time. With each passing day, her questions became more difficult to answer.

“About the battle that took place here, wouldn’t it have been better to prepare an ambush using...”

Her father had assumed that she would grow tired of her studies eventually, but the longer he watched his daughter do the very opposite, on top of displaying such tremendous talent at her young age, the more he began to worry. His beloved daughter, not even of school age yet, was explaining tactical flaws in one of the Danvir house’s past battles. She had already proven too much for her private tutor to handle, so he had finally thrown in the towel.

As the head of the house, all Alterisse’s father could do was to steel himself.

“Listen, Alterisse. A tactician must never let their emotions show on their face,” her father said, as he explained the proper mindset for a strategist. Knowledge could come later, he thought—first, he needed to ensure that she had the mental fortitude required. “If the tactician acts visibly shaken in front of their soldiers, it can affect morale. No matter how hopeless the situation seems, you need the mental fortitude to smile no matter what. Are you capable of that?”

Alterisse engraved her father’s words into her heart.

She then continued to pursue her studies, as she filled her head with knowledge. Then, despite being a girl and only ten years of age, she passed the entrance exam for the military academy with top marks.

The day before her father left for a battle, the two of them had one of their usual lively discussions about strategies. By this time, Alterisse already wore a smile that looked mature far beyond her years.

“Alterisse, you might not be cut out for this line of work.”

"Father?" Alterisse replied, puzzled.

"You are far too compassionate and idealistic for a tactician in service to this country. It makes me worried."

Unable to comprehend the intent behind her father's words, Alterisse again threw her father a puzzled look, but he only smiled as he patted her on the head.

Once the battle was over, her father did not return.

Alterisse was informed that her father had made a strategic blunder that had resulted in a devastating defeat, and he had been slain in battle. Upon hearing this, her mother fell ill; she died soon after, as if to follow after her husband. Alterisse, who had just enrolled in the military academy, was now the last remaining member of her house.

The crushing defeat led to the Danvir house being stripped of its status. As Alterisse sat dumbfounded during the funeral of her father and mother, nobles whose names she barely knew fought over what little wealth the state had not already seized from her family before cutting their ties completely.

As she now lived in the military academy's dormitory, Alterisse herself would be all right until her graduation. But the state and the nobility had completely robbed her of any possessions that might remind her of her parents. She wandered through her house one last time in a stupor, searching for any memento of her family, when she happened to stumble upon the truth. By pure coincidence, she managed to eavesdrop on an important conversation. The head of the Rosseholm house, who had attended the funeral, was talking with one of his subordinates in one of the estate's corridors, and he failed to notice Alterisse.

"Well, dead men tell no tales, as the saying goes," the head of Rosseholm family said.

"Yes, indeed. Lucky indeed that the chief tactician volunteered to join the rear guard."

"Thanks to that, we managed to lay all the blame on him. That house is ruined, which will spare us a great deal of future trouble. The daughter was in

the military academy, wasn't she? Well, if she's pretty enough, I guess I could repay her by letting her marry one of my sons."

The men left, laughing. Alterisse covered her mouth with her hands to prevent herself from making any noise, so they wouldn't discover her.

"A tactician must never let their emotions show on their face."

Yes, Father. I will never let my emotions show.

Even as tears ran down her cheeks, her mouth still maintained a smile.

I will never forgive them.

After that, Alterisse would spend all her available time studying, even sacrificing sleep to secure her position as top of the class. She managed to skip grades, as she surpassed all manner of school records. Though it usually took eight years to graduate from the academy, she completed the entire course after an unprecedented four, making her the academy's youngest graduate ever. Alterisse then enlisted in the Felvolk army as a tactician.

However, as talented as she may have been, she was still a woman in the patriarchal society of Felvolk. Furthermore, she was the daughter of the infamous Danvir house that had led the country to a crushing defeat, so no one in the army wanted anything to do with her.

Despite all of this, there were still those who didn't want her talents to go to waste. Thus, the leadership made a decision to give her command of the battle slave unit—but that turned out to be a mistake on their part. Even though the odds were stacked against her, Alterisse distinguished herself time and time again. If anything, the difficult environment ended up giving her the freedom to act as she pleased.

She ignored orders after emerging victorious from battle after battle, amassed achievements to her name, assisted her troubled superiors so they eventually ended up in her debt, and uncovered their weaknesses. Crushing someone with a few well-placed words, all the while maintaining an elegant smile and tone, was the easiest thing in the world for her.

In no time at all, Alterisse's accomplishments had begun to pile up, and there were now few people who would dare disparage her slave unit. When Alterisse

had finally become impossible to ignore, she made a demand that would shake the foundations of the country.

“What? The slave unit won the day *again*?”

“They say the next time they distinguish themselves, they’re going to grant them all citizenship...”

This would endanger the very institution of slavery, one of the cornerstones of the country. Felvolk had always expanded its borders through war. As a result, the country was in a constant state of domestic conflict, and it would attempt to direct the resulting anger toward the surrounding countries instead through invasions. The inhabitants of occupied countries were forced to pay exorbitant taxes, and beastmen in particular were taxed much more oppressively than humans. A beastman who failed to pay even once was forced into slavery. The entire system was nothing but a pretext to enslave them, as beastmen were highly prized for their natural abilities.

Alterisse was fully aware of this when she demanded freedom for the slaves under her command. But once they had gained citizenship and been liberated from the Brands of Servitude that restrained them—against whom would these newly-freed beastmen bear their fangs after Felvolk had stolen their countries, killed their families, and taken away their dignity?

The leadership of Felvolk—the ten houses—decided to eliminate her.

It was supposed to have been a normal mission to subjugate an uprising, just like the many they had undertaken in the past. Her superiors ordered Alterisse’s slave unit to divide itself up into multiple smaller squads and take up position in a forest under the cover of night. And then, suddenly, their vision turned red, the sound of explosions rang out all around them, and the forest was engulfed in a sea of flames.

“Commander! We’ve lost contact with the other squads! What are your orders?”

“Multiple enemies sighted in the area! We’re surrounded! What do we do, Commander?!”

The reports of her unit members overwhelmed Alterisse as she watched the scene unfold, dumbfounded.

How? Who leaked the information?

Without advance knowledge, it would have been impossible for anyone short of an omniscient god to know exactly where in this dark forest they were hiding. Yet the enemy had pinpointed their precise location and had prepared an attack accordingly. The only person aware of the slave unit's whereabouts should have been the leader of the main force—the head of the Rosseholm house.

It couldn't be... As much as she loathed the thought, there was no other explanation. An ally must have leaked the information on them. That was the only explanation.

While the slaves were highly capable in battle, they were fewer in number than regular soldiers, and they were currently split into even smaller groups to prepare for an ambush. If the enemy knew where they were and had them surrounded, they would all be wiped out in turn.

"Why?!" Alterisse asked herself as she listened to the reports flooding in from her subordinates. Where had she gone wrong?

Once this battle was over, both she and her comrades would be accepted by their country. Felvolk was supposed to change. How had everything gone so wrong?

"How could this happen?!"

A tactician must never let their emotions show on their face. Her father's words echoed in her head. *Alterisse, you might not be cut out for this line of work.*

Perhaps her father had known all along—Felvolk would never offer Alterisse what she desired—no matter how hard she worked, how loyal she was, or how dearly she wished for it.

"Is this... Is this...the answer that you're giving me, Felvolk?!"

Alterisse's screams disappeared into the night sky, stained red by the leaping

flames.

“What’s wrong?”

Alterisse’s thoughts shifted back to the present upon hearing Thomas speak, and she answered him with a vague smile.

“Oh, I was just lost in thought—thinking about a past I will never forget.”

That sea of flames seemed as though it had happened long ago. Surrounded by fire, her comrades had been desperate to help her and Gale escape. It was obvious that, after being unable to find their bodies, the army would block off all routes to Lustia.

Thus the only option to escape Felvolk had been to do the unexpected thing and flee to Gracis instead. At the very least, she wanted to help Gale escape.

As Alterisse stared off into the distance, Thomas scoffed.

“Don’t get sentimental. Things are only just getting started.”

“You’re right,” Alterisse responded from behind her smiling mask. Thomas’ words went in one ear and out the other.

Alterisse placed one hand on her chest, where the necklace she had been given was hidden beneath her clothes.

Yes, that’s right. My revenge upon those who betrayed me—betrayed us—is only just getting started. She swore to herself that she would avenge her father and her fallen comrades. *Even if that means having to betray him too.*

Alterisse thought back to the stoic expression of the man she loved, only barely managing to keep her sorrow from her face.

He’ll be fine. I know they’ll take good care of him. She was convinced that the kind, resolute prince would do everything in his power to help the beastman.

“I’m sorry, Gale...”

Her whisper disappeared into the noise of the carriage, and did not reach Thomas’s ears.

After he'd finished explaining how the two of them had reached Gracis, Ao took a deep breath before resolutely opening his mouth.

"Alte is trying to exact revenge on Felvolk. She wants to destroy it. That's the only explanation I can think of."

"Destroy Felvolk?" Herscherik thought that had to be far too grand a revenge plan for one single person to carry out herself.

"Alte once told me that destroying Felvolk would be child's play."

Maybe she was just tipsy, or maybe she was just in high spirits after one of her many victories, but she had explained how to do it once over drinks.

"This country is held together by a thread. If you're not careful, it can easily come loose. Everyone in the government and the ten houses think of nobody but themselves," Alterisse had said as she laughed. "If you just set your mind to it, destroying this country would be child's play. Just get the leadership and the ten houses to squabble amongst themselves—that'll weaken it from the inside. Then all you have to do is leak information to the nearby countries, and they'll devour what's left."

Even if it wasn't quite as easy as she made it sound, it did not sound like a joke coming from a genius tactician like Alterisse.

"So," she continued, "this country needs to unite. There's a limit to how much foreign territory you can conquer while suppressing any discontent. If this country is to survive, it needs to change."

And she had done all in her power to lead the way—but now that the country had betrayed her, Gale concluded that this would be Alterisse's only means of exacting revenge.

Herscherik fell silent as he processed Gale's story. Oran, whose wound was still being treated by Kuro, began to speak as the prince was still deep in thought.

"Hersch, just before Kurenai left, she said this on the verge of tears: 'I wish I could have served that prince like you.'" Oran had wanted to deliver those words to his master, even if it meant wounding himself.

Herscherik closed his eyes and clenched his fist. When his emerald eyes opened again, there was no hint of hesitation in them.

“Thank you, Oran. You can leave the rest to me.”

Upon hearing that, Oran finally allowed his heavy eyelids to slide shut. Shiro stopped casting his magic, and Kuro quickly finished treating the wound before carrying Oran to his bedroom on Herscherik’s orders. Then, just as Herscherik was about to instruct them on what to do next, an unexpected visitor appeared.

Chapter Nine: The Real Intention, the True Feelings, and the Blue Wings

The sound of a knock echoed through the room. Herscherik turned his eyes toward the entrance, and his butler immediately walked up to the door without even needing to wait for his master's instructions, opening the door and letting the visitor in. In came Tessily, wearing a stern expression and accompanied by Tatsu, his knight of service.

“Herscherik.”

Herscherik instinctively straightened his back upon hearing his full name, looking his brother straight in the eyes.

“Tessily. What are you doing here?” Herscherik asked, playing dumb even though he already had an idea what the answer would be.

In response, Tessily shot his brother a piercing glare, the very opposite of his usual gentle expression.

“Why do you think? Your knight of service came back to the castle covered in blood. The whole castle is in an uproar.”

Though Herscherik had ordered the soldiers from earlier to keep quiet, if a commotion had already broken out when they arrived, that had been a waste of time.

Seeing his younger brother tense up, Tessily let out a deep sigh before continuing in an utterly exasperated tone.

“I swear... That’s why I told you to be careful with them.”

“Did you know about them already, Tessily?” Herscherik asked almost resentfully, as it sounded like Tessily had seen it coming all along.

“Not quite. It’d be more accurate to say that I had a good guess. But I think you did too—didn’t you, Hersch?” Tessily answered, his expression changing into a regretful smile.

Herscherik fell silent. Just as his brother had said, he had actually had a good idea of the pair's true identities—but he had refrained from alluding to it, as he'd thought it irrelevant to the business of helping them escape. Though he did not consider his decision wrong, exactly, it was in part what had resulted in the current situation.

As he watched his brother furrow his brow, Tessily let out yet another sigh before continuing.

“Do you know why I’ve been visiting all these different countries?”

“I was told it’s for your studies,” Herscherik replied, perplexed, to his brother’s abrupt question. Tessily nodded.

“Yeah, that’s the cover story, anyway. Well, it did start with just wanting to learn about the rest of the world, so it’s not completely a lie. But I learned something after observing Gracis from the outside.”

At the academy, students would only learn about internal affairs. That’s why Tessily had ventured outside to broaden his horizons. With an outside perspective, he had noticed how twisted Gracis had become, and how it was referred to as the Kingdom in Woe by other countries. However, with Barbosse in power, changing the country would be no easy task.

That was what had propelled Tessily into action.

“Barbosse had contacts outside of Gracis. That’s why I started spending all my time in foreign nations, in order to make contacts of my own and to gather intelligence. I needed the means to outdo Barbosse and corner him. Of course, that ended up being wasted effort in the end—but I’m still putting my contacts to good use.”

Barbosse’s influence had extended even past the borders of Gracis, and time was needed to completely overcome him. But then Herscherik had swept in and brought an early end to the minister’s schemes, turning Tessily’s work into wasted effort. Even so, he still used the connections he had made to the kingdom’s advantage.

Among the countries invited to the harvest festival, there were those that, while not outright hostile toward Gracis, were far from being on good terms

with them. But with the help of his connections, Tessily had managed to convince them to send a delegation anyway. As a result, Gracis would likely not have to fear an attack from its neighbors for another few years.

Using his connections, Tessily had also gotten his hands on information relating to Felvolk's internal affairs. Felvolk was far from unified, and there were those who opposed the rule of the ten houses or would gladly provide information in order to hinder a rival faction.

What Tessily had learned was that the army leadership and the ten houses were all desperately trying to capture a particular tactician who was on the run. Felvolk had even secretly issued a bounty for the tactician's capture, dead or alive.

Though he had been unable to find any specific information pertaining to the tactician's appearance or name, the timing made it easy to conclude that Felvolk's missing strategist was none other than the woman Herscherik had brought to the castle.

"Knowing the truth would've made you *really* want to help them, wouldn't it, Hersch?"

"Even if I had no idea who they were, I'll help anyone as long as they need my help," Herscherik answered without hesitation.

Tessily sighed. "That's exactly why I told you to be careful," he said, furrowing his brow in response to his resolute brother. "Did it not cross your mind that if this came to light, it might very well give Felvolk a pretext to attack the kingdom?"

"Yes... It did."

Herscherik had been well aware that sheltering two people wanted in Felvolk could very well result in international strife. Even if the two of them had fled to Gracis of their own free will, Felvolk would be able to claim that the pair had been kidnapped and launch an invasion with the pretext of recovering them. Felvolk would never just stand idly by while Gracis had their hands on the genius tactician that was known as their Greatest Treasure.

Herscherik had not pressed the matter as a result of his own naivety, but also

in order to ensure some amount of plausible deniability. That way, they would be able to play ignorant even if Felvolk tried to accuse them of anything after the couple had escaped the kingdom.

“Herscherik, you’re a prince of Gracis.”

Herscherik fell silent. His men threw their master concerned glances, but he did not return them.

“I’ll say it again,” Tessily continued. “You belong to the royal family of Gracis, regardless of what anyone—including you—thinks. I don’t need to tell you what kind of responsibility comes with that title.”

As Tessily continued to emphasize his point, Herscherik could only listen. He had no idea how to respond.

“Our topmost priority must be our country’s safety. This matter could very well become a problem that would result in war between Gracis and Felvolk. You cannot endanger the whole country just for the sake of two people who aren’t even Gracis citizens. Herscherik, do you still insist on helping them?”

Tessily’s question was one Herscherik had already asked himself before, on the night he spoke with his father and predicted the worst possible outcome. He was a prince of this kingdom, and just like his brother said, he had to prioritize Gracis and its people. If this caused the relationship between Gracis and Felvolk to turn sour, he would have plunged the kingdom into turmoil with his very own hands, just as peace seemed to be on the horizon.

But despite all that, Herscherik had only one answer.

“Yes, of course. No matter what anyone says, I’m going to help them. And I’m going to protect the kingdom at the same time,” Herscherik declared, looking Tessily straight in the eye.

As royalty, he had to prioritize his own kingdom—but using that as a reason not to help the two was nothing short of an excuse. They had approached him and asked for his help. Herscherik didn’t have the heart to turn them away.

Ultimately, Herscherik was greedy. He wanted to save everyone and accomplish his every goal. He also refused to lie to himself. All of this was for the sake of his own dreams and ambitions in the end. It was something he had

sworn to himself once in the past—that he would never try to dress up his actions as being for the sake of others.

Tessily let out a deep sigh at the sight of his brother's resolute gaze. His stern expression then softened.

"I swear... You really are a greedy little kid. Okay, fine!" Tessily said as he threw up his hands to signal defeat before patting his brother's head and vigorously ruffling his bright golden hair. "Honestly, you're such a handful. I guess I'll just have to lend you a hand, then!"

"T-Tessily?"

Tessily's cheerful demeanor—a stark contrast from his seriousness only a moment ago—left Herscherik at a loss for words as his brother ruffled his hair however he pleased. Herscherik had thought he would be getting even harsher criticism, yet reality had defied all expectations.

"Hm?" Tessily's pink hair shook as he tilted his head inquisitively, looking at Herscherik with his kind, chestnut-colored eyes. Herscherik, in his confusion, couldn't seem to settle on any one expression.

"Are... Are you sure?" Herscherik asked.

"I mean..." Tessily said, shrugging his shoulders. "You're going to help them regardless, aren't you? And you're prepared to take responsibility for them, right?"

Herscherik nodded without hesitation, at which Tessily gave a conflicted smile.

"Then there's no point in me trying to convince you otherwise, is there?"

Tessily had already heard from his older siblings how, despite his gentle appearance, Herscherik was actually tremendously stubborn. If he wasn't, he wouldn't have been able to defeat Barbosse to begin with. Tessily did not possess the skill to change Herscherik's mind once it was already made up. Thus, all he could do was to help him and try to minimize the damage.

"Besides, your mother asked me to take care of you. I swear, you're just like her."

“My mother did?”

Tessily nodded as he reminisced about the woman who had been like an older sister to him. The “Sunshine of the Royal Quarters,” as the king’s favorite queen had been called, had been loved by not just the king, but the other queens and their children too. But as the youngest prince at the time, Tessily had felt like his beloved sister had been taken away from him when the queen became pregnant, and as a result he had started to rebel. Despite the admonishments of those around him, he had kept on sulking, but the queen herself had simply smiled.

“Tessily, you’ll be a big brother soon. You’ll take care of the baby, won’t you?” the queen would always say with a smile when Tessily visited her every day without fail, despite his sour mood. Perhaps she had known from the start that she might not survive the birth.

And then Herscherik was born, and the queen passed away. Tessily had then sworn to keep his promise to the queen—to protect Herscherik and support him no matter what.

In order to protect his younger brother, Tessily had traveled abroad in search of all the knowledge he could find. All for the sake of his brother and the country his brother lived in.

“So I’ll always be on your side, unconditionally. Though I’m pretty sure the rest of the family would agree with me.”

Their father and siblings were all beside themselves with worry about what the youngest son’s next enterprise might be—but even more than that, they all loved him dearly. In the end, the whole family was remarkably soft on Herscherik.

“Now then, Herscherik, I’m thinking it’s about time for me to go on another trip,” Tessily said as he clapped his hands together and gave Herscherik a bright smile. “I’ll be visiting the Principality of Parche. You talked with an emissary from Parche during the banquet, didn’t you? I was just thinking how I’d like two or so people to travel along with me... You wouldn’t happen to know anybody who might be interested?”

“Tessily!” Herscherik exclaimed, his face showing a mix of surprise and joy.

Herscherik had not met with any key figures from abroad during the harvest festival—with the exception of one: an emissary from the Principality of Parche who had approached him during the banquet.

Parche had cooperated with the royal family in secret during the recent battle with the Empire, and as a show of gratitude, Parche had received favorable treatment during the harvest festival—their merchants, for example, were allowed to pay a lower tariff. When an emissary from Parche asked to meet with Herscherik, he had taken the opportunity to make a small request.

The Principality of Parche was a maritime nation, and their trading partners included the Lustian Confederation. Herscherik had asked the emissary—who was actually the chairman of the House of Representatives—to let the couple in question pass through Parche on the way to Lustia.

Though they would likely have had no problem going by themselves, Tessily's presence would mean that their safety was all but guaranteed. Tessily knew that full well as he proposed his solution to Herscherik. Traveling with the pair also meant that they wouldn't have to worry about the border inspection.

"Thank you, Tessily."

"You're welcome," Tessily responded with a smile. "Also, I'm thinking about asking Father to help too. I think it's about time for this country to change, don't you?"

Herscherik realized what Tessily was suggesting and nodded.

"Hersch, I'm counting on you to deal with the current situation. Make sure you bring them both to me."

"I will!"

"Well, I'll be going to pay Father a visit. I'll get a doctor while I'm at it. Also, since you can't exactly take your knight with you right now, I'll let you borrow Tatsu. Are you all right with that, Tatsu?" Tessily turned to the samurai who stood behind him.

"As you command," Tatsu responded with a nod, holding his tachi.

"Okay, I'll see you later then. Make sure you introduce the two of them to me

properly when we meet again," Tessily finished.

Tessily turned around and walked up to the door, but just as he was about to put his hand on the doorknob, he stopped. With his back still turned to Herscherik, he began to speak.

"Hersch..."

"Tessily?" Herscherik asked, puzzled.

Tessily continued in a quiet, but somehow sad voice.

"I won't accept your wish."

The room fell silent. The men of service looked at each other and then to their masters, unable to understand what Tessily was referring to. Herscherik felt his heart beat ten times before he finally broke the silence.

"Even so, I..." Herscherik started to speak hesitantly, but he did not finish his sentence.

Tessily let out yet another sigh in response before shaking his head.

"Don't worry about it. We'll talk again later," Tessily said before leaving the room.

As confused gazes turned toward Herscherik, he clapped his hands together once to switch gears.

"Now then, let's go bring Kurenai back, shall we?" Herscherik said with a smile, signaling the end of the discussion.

Realizing that his master would not answer even if questioned further, Kuro lightly shrugged his shoulders before turning to the issue at hand.

"And how exactly do you intend to do that?" he asked.

Kurenai would not have left without a plan in mind. The fact that she made a move meant that she had already secured some means of returning to Felvolt.

"She must have approached someone from Felvolt during the banquet, when none of us were looking," Kuro continued.

"Ao, how did Kurenai seem that night?" Herscherik asked.

Ao thought for a moment before speaking. “I went to sleep earlier than she did that night, so I don’t know if she was in the room the whole time. But if she put me to sleep with magic...”

He had little recollection of what had happened that day. After eating, he had felt a sudden drowsiness come over him. Ao remembered that, in addition to the magical device, she also carried a variety of drugs on her person. Among them were concoctions for putting people to sleep.

Ao was speechless at the thought that Kurenai might have drugged his food.

“Well, there you have it. But that puts us in a spot. The emissary from Felvolk was supposed to depart today,” Kuro noted.

Normally when Kurenai or Ao walked around the castle, either Herscherik or one of his men would accompany them. Though that was partly to prevent anything from happening to the two of them, it also served to keep them under supervision. However, during the banquet on the last day of the harvest festival, Herscherik’s men of service had been busy accompanying their master, and they had been forced to leave the two of them to their own devices. Additionally, most of the guards had been concentrated in the main hall. It was very possible that Kurenai had evaded security and made contact with the emissary from Felvolk. If that was the case, Kurenai had likely already met up with him and was even now on her way out of the country.

“If she’s traveling by carriage, we’ll never catch her now,” Kuro said.

With how much time had passed, it would be nearly impossible to catch up, even on horseback—not to mention how crowded the castle town was currently with people returning home. It would take a significant amount of time to even exit the capital, and in that time Kurenai’s carriage would have traveled too far away to reach in time.

The room fell silent once more. After a short moment, though, one person broke the silence.

“Why don’t you just fly?” Shiro said, nonchalantly suggesting something that sounded outrageous. He spoke matter-of-factly, sparing no thought for the mood of the room.

“Shiro?” Herscherik threw him a confused look.

“You there—you can fly, can’t you?” Shiro said, turning his gaze toward Ao.

Though still remaining expressionless, a glint of bewilderment flashed in Ao’s azure eyes.

“How did you know?” Ao asked after a moment’s pause.

In response to Ao’s slightly confused tone, Shiro narrowed his eyes wearily.

“Birdmen need their wings for casting magic. If your wings were really so badly injured you couldn’t fly, then you wouldn’t have been able to use magic either.”

The reason that beastmen had more pronounced strengths and weaknesses was that their bodies were much more specialized. In the case of birdmen, they could use wind magic to fly without even having to prepare a magical formula, as naturally as humans walked. They accomplished this using their wings. So if Ao really had damaged his wings as claimed, he shouldn’t have been able to cast any spells during Herscherik’s kidnapping—yet he had successfully used both investigation magic and wind magic.

There was only one reason Herscherik could think of as to why Ao would have lied.

“Ao, did you claim you couldn’t fly in order to stop Kurenai?”

Ao turned his gaze down. With his eyes still on the floor, he opened his mouth.

“Yes. It wasn’t hard to imagine what she might do otherwise.”

Possessing not just talent and knowledge, but a strong conviction as well, Kurenai had been able to act ruthlessly on the battlefield. At the same time, she was very compassionate toward others, and she treated her soldiers as friends, not pawns. This was also why her men had been able to exercise their full capabilities and emerge victorious each time—it had all been because of her.

Her ability to be ruthless toward her enemies, while treating her comrades with compassion—these two sides of her were what made her the genius tactician that Felvolt had valued so highly.

But this compassionate tactician had lost her family to the scheming of the ten houses. She had lost her comrades, who had been like a second family to her, as a result of her country's betrayal. As devoted to her loved ones as she was, she would never let them get away with their crimes. Ao knew that she would attempt to exact revenge on Felvolk. Even if he had begged her not to go, she would still have taken the first opportunity that presented itself to return to the country of her birth. Her hopes for Felvolk, and the despair and rage that had taken their place once those hopes had been shattered, were simply too great.

"Alte could never be ruthless enough to leave me alone in a country that outlaws beastmen without my ability to fly."

She chose Ao's life over her own revenge. Even as she was tormented by guilt toward her fallen comrades, she chose and treasured him—someone who until then had only lived to fight and kill as a slave. This had filled his heart with happiness.

"I think she knew that I really could fly and use magic still."

As part of the plan to save Herscherik during his kidnapping, she had instructed Ao to use magic. Though her main objective had been to save the prince, it had likely also been an attempt to test whether Ao was telling the truth.

If he wanted to keep up his lie, he had to avoid using magic—yet he also needed to use his magic to save Herscherik. Ao, too, wanted to save the prince—and he had grown conceited, believing that Kurenai really had chosen him over her revenge, no matter what.

But that had been a mistake. For better or worse, Kurenai had come across someone who she could trust from the bottom of her heart in this country. She had entrusted Ao to him before leaving to exact her revenge.

"Ao, let's go," Herscherik said firmly.

Ao was unable to lift his eyes from the ground.

"Let's go to see Kurenai," Herscherik repeated.

"That's not what she wants," Ao said in a feeble voice. The fact that she was

gone, leaving him behind, was all the proof he needed.

Ao clenched his fist as his own powerlessness tormented him.

“I don’t think that’s true,” Herscherik said, refuting Ao’s assertion.

Hearing his words, Ao lifted his gaze in surprise to find a pair of green eyes staring straight into his.

“How...can you be sure?”

“Remember what she said? ‘I wish I could have served that prince like you.’” Herscherik’s voice brimmed with confidence.

Those weren’t the words of someone who cared only for revenge. Herscherik was convinced that it had been her true feelings slipping through.

“When I decide to help someone, I go all the way. I don’t care if Kurenai doesn’t want me to. What the other person thinks is no concern of mine,” Herscherik explained. “What about you, Ao?”

“I...”

Ao thought back to her smile. She had been special to him. She had caught his attention ever since the day they first met. Her knowledge had given him life. Her plans had saved his friends. Her smile had brought him peace. Even though he was a slave, she had accepted him.

The ten years he had spent with her flashed before his eyes. His answer was obvious.

“I don’t want to lose her.” Those were his true feelings.

Herscherik nodded at the sight of Ao’s unwavering azure eyes.

“Ao, would you be able to carry me in the air?” Seeing Ao nod, he turned to Kuro. “Kuro, fetch my sword.”

Herscherik’s request caught Kuro off guard. Though Herscherik owned a sword made for his stature—a real sword, not a practice one—he had never requested to carry it before except at ceremonies.

“All right,” Kuro replied after a moment, before going to the dressing room to fetch the sword.

Herscherik took his sword from Kuro and attached it to his hip before nodding in Ao's direction to indicate that he was ready.

Ao removed his coat and spread his wings—the same deep blue as his hair—and lifted Herscherik up with one arm.

“Hold on tight.”

“Okay,” Herscherik responded before turning his eyes to his men of service. “What are you going to do?”

“No problem,” Shiro responded.

Herscherik wondered for a second what exactly Shiro meant by that, but as they were pressed for time, he decided not to question him.

Ao walked up to the window and opened it. A wind rushed in, rattling the windcatcher of fortune that was hanging by the window and refreshing the air of the room in the blink of an eye. With Herscherik under his arm, Ao placed his free hand on the window frame.

“Hey,” Kuro said to Ao as he was about to leave. “There’s a barrier that stretches across the sky above the castle. However, it’s thinner near the east tower. You can pass through the opening there.”

“Got it,” Ao said, immediately grasping what Kuro was saying.

The castle was surrounded by a magical barrier, and were Ao to touch it, he—along with Herscherik—would find himself on a one-way trip to the ground. Thus Kuro’s advice was very welcome—though Herscherik threw his butler a glare in response.

“Kuro, make sure you report that to the department of Magic later. Oh, but you don’t need to report my secret path.” An opening in the castle barrier was a major concern, but so was losing access to his secret exit.

Kuro could do nothing but shrug in response to his calculating master.

“All right then, let’s go, Ao!”

But as they prepared to leave, Herscherik realized something important.

“Wait, hold on. If we’re going, that means we’re flying, and...”

Ever since his previous life, Herscherik had been particularly susceptible to motion sickness. He had also always been deathly afraid of thrill rides—you couldn't have paid him to ride a roller coaster.

Ao jumped down from the window in Herscherik's room, which was located on the third floor. In midair he spread his wings, activated his wind magic, and quickly soared high up into the sky without anyone spotting them. He then passed through the hole in the barrier by the east tower that Kuro had told him about, flying even higher.

It goes without saying that Herscherik was screaming with a voice too shrill for human ears to perceive for the entire duration. As they soared through the sky, he held onto Ao's clothes as tightly as he could while Ao examined their surroundings.



“H-How are y-you planning on f-finding Kurenai?” Herscherik asked in a trembling voice as he observed the capital below him.

A significant amount of time had already passed since she left, and there was more than one path to Felvolk. Being able to fly meant little if you didn’t know *where* to fly.

“All I need is the general direction,” Ao responded confidently. “I can clearly see any object, no matter how far away it is. I’d even be able to spot a single baby mouse hiding in a forest.”

Ao turned his gaze in the direction of Felvolk. His ability to see objects far away was referred to as “telescopic sight.” It was a rare ability that only manifested in one particular tribe of birdmen. It allowed him to find a single needle in a haystack, or a speck of gold on a beach. During the night, however, his eyes were no better than a human’s.

In addition, Ao also specialized in Investigation Magic. Kurenai may have been a genius, but it was in large part Ao’s ability to probe the enemy for information that allowed her plans to succeed.

After no more than ten seconds had passed, Herscherik felt the arm holding him tense up, signaling that Ao had found his target. He grabbed onto Ao to ensure he didn’t fall.

“Hold on as tight as you can.”

Without waiting for Herscherik’s reply, Ao sped through the clear, autumn sky.

Three people were left behind in Herscherik’s room. Kuro walked up to the door to his own room—the only room that was directly connected to Herscherik’s—and was about to leave when Shiro threw him a suspicious glance.

“Hey, Schwarz. How did you know where the opening in the barrier was?”

Barriers were transparent and colorless, and could not be seen by the human eye. A skilled enough Spellcaster might have been able to spot it, but Shiro

could not imagine that Kuro possessed magical abilities on par with a first-rate Spellcaster.

“Tis as I thought—thine eyes are...” Tatsu muttered.

The moment Kuro heard this, he opened the door to his room, stepped through, and closed it behind him. It was a clear refusal to answer anything.

“Hmph,” Shiro huffed as Kuro left. Just like Shiro had a past he didn’t want others to know, so too did Kuro clearly have some secrets of his own.

Shiro looked to the side to find Tatsu, who seemingly knew some of those secrets, with his eyes fixed on the closed door.

I guess it doesn’t matter. If the time ever comes when we need to know, he’ll tell us himself.

Shiro had never been very interested in people other than Herscherik, and he would never attempt to do something so boorish as to expose a past that someone wished to bury.

“We should go after Hersch,” Shiro said.

“And how dost thou propose to do that, Master Spellcaster?” Tatsu asked.

Shiro responded with the enchanting smile of a goddess.

Chapter Ten: The Prince, the Tactician, and the Slave

A sudden gale violently shook the carriage. Had that been the only thing that happened, the riders would have paid it little heed and dismissed it as a passing gust—but the carriage stopped entirely, and the yelling that subsequently broke out caused Thomas Rosseholm to furrow his brow as he stood up from his seat.

“What is this commotion?!” he yelled, opening the carriage door and stepping outside, only to be struck dumbfounded at the sight before him.

“Lord Rosseholm! You mustn’t come outsi—” a soldier attempted to say as he drew his sword, but before he could finish the powerful wind picked him up into the air and sent him flying.

The soldier was not alone. Of the less than twenty soldiers who had accompanied Thomas from Felvolk, roughly half were lying on the ground and moaning—though no blood could be seen, and the soldiers were all alive and mostly still conscious.

Turning his gaze to the front of the carriage, he saw someone who shouldn’t have been in this country—a beastman—blocking its path with an imposing stance. His deep blue wings spread, he threatened the soldiers with a rod as long as he was tall.

Thomas recognized this beastman. This was the battle slave who had previously served as the captain of the unit commanded by Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure. His battle prowess was notable even among the already skilled beastman slaves, and he was always seen by the side of Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure herself.

Thomas had been informed that this beastman had been captured by the Gracis government and was currently awaiting execution. He had also been told that the female tactician who had traveled with him had become acquainted with the royal family before seizing an opportunity to escape. So if that slave had been captured, what was he doing here? Thomas’s mind was overwhelmed by confusion and questions.

Next to the beastman was another, much smaller, figure. The figure noticed Thomas exiting the carriage and threw him a radiant smile.

"Hello! I'm so sorry for the disturbance, Lord Rosseholm," the figure said. It was someone he had only seen from a distance at the banquet—the Seventh Prince of Gracis, Herscherik.

Despite his apology, the prince's face showed not one hint of remorse. This, combined with the fact that he was standing next to the slave who had sent Thomas's soldiers flying, made it clear that he had not come with friendly intentions.

"Whatever might have prompted you to visit me, Prince Herscherik? And with a slave in tow at that," Thomas asked.

Though he was having trouble processing the situation, he still hailed from a country where slaves were a common sight, and he observed Ao as though the beastman was some kind of inferior creature.

Meanwhile, Herscherik's smile vanished. Instead, he rolled his eyes and gave an exaggerated sigh before throwing Thomas a piercing glare.

"I'm not here for a visit. Would you mind closing your mouth? I'm not interested in hearing about your superiority complex."

"What gives you the right to—"

"You do realize that we are still within Gracis's borders, right? I'd advise your men to stay put too."

The young prince's cold gaze and overpowering tone caused Thomas to fall silent. This was a prince of the most powerful country on the continent, and he had the highest status of anyone currently present. Though Thomas may have been a member of one of the ten houses of Felvolk, he could not address a prince on equal terms as a mere second son. Despite the prince's young appearance, Thomas felt as though he was looking at someone far superior to him, and it sent a chill down his spine. He could do nothing but silently do as he was told, gesturing to his men to stand down.

Seeing Thomas fall completely silent, Herscherik then started speaking to the person still inside the carriage.

“Now then, Kurenai, would you mind coming out?”

After a short pause, a woman with crimson hair—nicknamed Kurenai, though her real name was Alterisse Danvir—stepped out. She ignored the suspicious gaze of her traveling companion as she walked up to Herscherik.

“Your Highness,” she said.

Her voice was stern, and her face was devoid of her usual smile. Her gaze was fixed on the prince, intentionally avoiding looking at Ao—Gale—who was standing behind him. Her dark eyes, seemingly devoid of emotion, met the prince’s bright green eyes.

“Why, Your Highness?” Why were they here? What had they come to do? Why was the prince here at all, and with *him*? Her question carried all these different meanings.

“That’s... No, it’s not for me to say. Ao?” Herscherik said, stopping himself before answering her question and nodding in Gale’s direction.

Encouraged by Herscherik, Gale took a step forward and opened his mouth.

“Alte...”

Alterisse’s dark eyes wavered as he came into view.

“I’ve come to get you,” he continued.

“Gale...” Alterisse responded, but she quickly shook her head and averted her gaze, wrapping her arms around herself. “I don’t understand. You’re finally free. What are you doing here?”

“Alterisse.” Gale once again spoke her name in a low, calm voice. Hearing that, Alterisse clutched her arms even more forcefully as she continued to avoid Gale’s eyes.

“How dare you speak my name, you... You *slave*,” Alterisse spat—however, she did not speak in the same contemptuous tone that Thomas had used. Instead, she sounded as though she was coughing up blood.

“Won’t you come back with us?” Gale continued.

“Back where?” Alterisse responded without hesitation. She then stopped

avoiding his gaze, turning her dark eyes straight toward Gale. “The only place I have to return to is my homeland.”

As Alterisse rejected him outright, Gale was unable to respond. He was overwhelmed with the sense that he couldn’t let her go back to Felvolk no matter what, but he couldn’t bring himself to speak.

“Ao,” Herscherik said as if sensing Gale’s suffering. “The only way to convey your feelings is to put them into words.”

Hearing Herscherik’s encouragement, Gale closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He then opened them again and looked Alterisse straight in her eyes.

“Alterisse...”

Gale’s voice was even lower and gentler than before as he walked up to Alterisse. Only a few steps separated them now.

“If you won’t come back to me, then kill me instead,” he continued.

Both Herscherik and Alterisse fell silent with shock upon hearing Gale’s words. Herscherik especially was flabbergasted for a moment, wondering what Gale was thinking, but then he recalled exactly the kind of person Gale was. The beastman was a poor speaker, and whenever he did try talking to anyone, his words came out frank and unaffected. It was painfully clear just how sincere he was being right now.

“My life belongs to you, Alterisse. If you claim you don’t need me, then it has no value.” In spite of his usually emotionless and difficult-to-read demeanor, he raised the corners of his mouth slightly to form a smile. That smile confirmed that he was speaking from his heart, making Alterisse more flustered than Herscherik had ever seen before.

“What are you...?”

“My life has been yours ever since we exchanged these,” Gale interrupted her, touching the crimson feather that adorned his hair.

Gale had once told Herscherik that birdmen in love had a tradition of exchanging their feathers, which they would keep on them at all times. The feather in his hair was the same deep crimson as Alterisse’s hair.

Herscherik turned to look at Alterisse, who was clutching her shirt near her heart. It was evident that she was still carrying Gale's feather there.



“If you’re going to reject me, then please...just kill me,” Gale continued. “If I can’t be by your side, Alterisse, I’m as good as dead already. You control my Brand of Servitude. One word from you is enough. Kill me if you really want to reject me.”

“Gale, I... I....!”

A painful grimace showed on Alterisse’s face, as though her very heart was being torn in two. Seeing this, Herscherik was convinced.

“Kurenai, I understand how you feel,” Herscherik said.

“Your Highness...?”

“The feeling of losing someone dear to you,” Herscherik continued. “The feeling of being too powerless to help them, of wanting to take revenge, and even that desire to die.”

“What? To die?” Gale suddenly said, distressed. He turned to Herscherik, who nodded.

“Kurenai,” Herscherik said. “You’re leaving for Felvolk in order to die, aren’t you?”

“What...is he talking about?” Gale said as his eyes turned back to Alterisse, visibly shaken. The sight of her trying to avoid his gaze was enough proof of Herscherik’s claim.

“Ao,” Herscherik continued. “Kurenai may be a tactician skilled enough to be called Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure. But in the real world, things aren’t so simple. They never go perfectly according to plan. Surely you know how likely your revenge scheme is to succeed, Kurenai.”

In response, Alterisse shifted her gaze to the still silent Thomas. Though he remained fixed in place, he looked back at her with eyes filled with rage.

I don’t have any choice but to give up, do I? Alterisse thought.

She could no longer use Thomas as a pawn. After hearing everything that Herscherik had said, the man must now realize that Alterisse had only been taking advantage of him.

Alterisse had factored in the chances of Herscherik and his men giving chase. However, the sleep-inducing magic she had cast on Oran had been powerful, and once it took effect, it should have kept him asleep for at least half a day. That should have given her enough time to escape even Gale's telescopic sight. Alterisse realized that she had been naive, and now that Thomas had learned of her plans, it didn't matter how greedy he was for his own ambitions—there was no coming back from this.

"I suppose thirty percent would have been optimistic," Alterisse said, resigned.

"Alterisse?" Gale responded in bewilderment.

"After spending ten years dividing Felvolk, pitting faction against faction, stoking unrest, and interfering with other countries—my chances of bringing down Felvolk were, at most, thirty percent."

"Thirty percent in ten years..." Herscherik was astonished—it was actually far higher than anything he'd been expecting.

Alterisse must have already come up with an elaborate plan to destroy Felvolk—with her own death as the final step.

"Why, Alterisse?" Gale asked.

Ten years—that was the very same amount of time that had passed since she graduated from the military academy and joined the Felvolk army. She had spent the entire time destroying Felvolk from the inside, with no intention of living to see the end of her scheme.

"I...can't forgive myself," Alterisse said as she looked down at her own hands. "I sacrificed everyone in my unit... They all died because I was chasing my goals."

Even now, those red, scorching flames burned vividly in her mind—as did the sight and sound of her dying comrades and the smell of their blood.

"But here I am, still shamelessly alive. And not just me—the Felvolk leadership, the ten houses, and the people of Felvolk are too. They all still stand on the sacrifices of beastman lives."

She couldn't forget the sight of her comrades rushing to their deaths to protect her as Gale carried her to safety. They had died for Felvolk, and for her.

"Father, Mother, my comrades, my ideals, my hard work, everything I had achieved... Felvolk stole them all from me, trampling them underfoot. Why am I still alive when they're gone?!"

She despised the country that had taken everything from her—but even more than that, she despised herself.

"I can't forgive myself!"

Herscherik's heart ached as he watched Alterisse. She had borne these feelings of guilt this entire time, all the while showing a gentle smile to everyone around her.

"That...was their wish," Gale said. "You saved them, Alte."

Alterisse raised her eyes from her hands and looked at Gale.

Before Alterisse, the battle slave unit's survival rate had been about seventy percent per battle, at best. At times, reckless strategies had led to the loss of more than half the unit. Speaking with a friend one day, then seeing them dead the next, was an everyday occurrence. But after Alterisse took command, the survival rate had risen to ninety percent at worst. Often, the entire unit would return alive—and sometimes even completely unscathed.

"Our survival was always your first priority," Gale continued.

No human before Alterisse would spend their nights bringing every drop of their knowledge to bear in order to formulate the best possible plan for the sake of mere slaves. That would have been unthinkable. Yet she had claimed she wanted to truly change the country, and had brought a ray of hope to the slaves.

"So, Alte—we would gladly give our lives up for your sake."

"But... I..." Alterisse's words faltered. In the end, she had been unable to bring about the change she wanted, and had failed to protect anyone she cared about.

"We don't want you to avenge us. All we want is for you to live."

As silence fell over the pair, Herscherik stepped in.

“Kurenai, my personal belief is that if someone has entrusted you with their heart, you have to live on, no matter how painful it may be,” he said solemnly as the pair turned toward him. “I, too, failed to protect the people who told me the truth.”

He took out his silver pocket watch and gripped it tightly.

“I let someone I cared about die right before my very eyes,” he continued, gently stroking his copper ear cuff.

Herscherik then closed his eyes, conjuring up the images of everyone he had lost in his mind’s eye. He then opened his eyes and looked straight at Alterisse. She was the same as he was.

“Kurenai, even if you manage to exact your revenge, it won’t bring them back to life. And the void you feel *here* won’t be filled,” Herscherik said, placing the right hand holding his pocket watch on his chest.

He had once thought that if he defeated Barbosse, everything would be fine. But even now, with the minister gone, Herscherik’s grief still remained. All he had left was the sensation of an empty void in his heart. He had a feeling that this void would stay with him for the rest of his life.

“Do you want Ao to suffer the same way?”

Alterisse turned her eyes to Gale.

“You still haven’t lost everything,” Herscherik explained. “There must still be things you want to keep. Things you want to protect. You can’t just look away from them.”

“I... I...!” Alterisse cried as she twisted her face in pain.

“Alterisse.”

As Alterisse looked as though she would collapse at any moment, Gale closed the gap between them and embraced her as though to prevent her from falling.

“But why, Gale?” Alterisse asked as Gale’s sturdy body enveloped her. “You lost your friends. I’m the reason they died in vain. I’m the one who robbed you of your comrades.”

"No, you weren't the reason they died. They only wanted to protect you," Gale immediately responded, strengthening his embrace. "They didn't die in vain. Don't say it was for nothing."

Before they parted, Gale's comrades had told him to take care of her. Those words were what spurred him to focus not on revenge against Felvolk, but on protecting the person he loved.

Alterisse laid her hand on Gale's deep blue wings. She had always loved the sight of him soaring through the air. Though he was held as a slave on the ground, in the skies he was free. She had always wished for him to be even freer.

"You told me that flying was the joy and pride of birdmen," Alterisse said. "Why did you go so far as lying, casting away your pride, just to..."

She had known from the beginning that Gale was lying about his wings. But even the slightest possibility that he was telling the truth about not being able to use magic made it impossible for her to leave his side—and even if he could cast any spells, she hadn't wanted to leave him alone in this country regardless.

"I don't need the skies if I can be with you," Gale responded.

Just as Alterisse had chosen Gale over her own convictions, so had Gale chosen Alterisse over his pride.

Hearing this, tears started running down Alterisse's cheeks. These were the first tears she had shed since fleeing that sea of flames.

"So you were taking me for a fool this entire time!" A sudden scream rang out at the same time as a bright light flashed. Still holding Alterisse, Gale instinctively tried to jump out of the way, but his face twisted into a grimace as he felt a sharp pain in his arm.

"Gale!" Alterisse shrieked as red blood started to stream down his arm—the same blood that was now dripping from Thomas's sword.

"Why must everyone take me for a fool?!" Thomas yelled, his face red with rage. Even an imbecile would have realized how he had been taken advantage of from the conversation that had just taken place.

Gale turned his back to Alterisse and Herscherik to protect them, readying his rod in one hand.

“Kill them! Kill them all!” Thomas screamed like mad.

“But...” The soldiers who were still on their feet after the initial attack stared at Thomas as they hesitantly lifted their swords.

“None of them were here! No supposed Greatest Treasure, nor any Prince of Light! It makes no sense for a prince to have been here to begin with! Am I wrong?!”

In response to this, the soldiers, though still bewildered, nodded to each other and began to surround Herscherik and the couple. However, this turned out to be an exercise in futility, as two figures suddenly appeared from above.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

“I am here to offer mine aid.”

The two figures were Kuro and Tatsu, whom Herscherik had left behind in the capital.

“Kuro and Tatsu?! Where did you come fr—wait, Shiro?!” Herscherik said in disbelief as he turned his gaze upwards due to their unexpected entrance, where an even more unbelievable sight awaited him. “How are you *flying*?!”

Floating above them in the sky like a messenger from the heavens was none other than Shiro. He was sitting on empty air with his legs crossed, looking down on the others. His posture combined with his appearance made for a truly divine sight.

“I used that guy’s Wind Magic as a reference,” Shiro replied, glancing toward the man who was currently shielding Alterisse. Gale also seemed visibly surprised at the fact that Shiro was flying. Herscherik could do nothing but sigh at Shiro’s nonchalant gaze, which almost seemed to say, “What, is there a problem?”

After that, it was all over in an instant. Kuro used only his fists, and Tatsu his still-sheathed sword, to capture the Felvolk soldiers one by one. The soldiers got away with only a light beating.

"Ha ha ha... This means war between Felvolk and Gracis, you know!" Thomas sneered as he sat on the ground with his hands tied. Seeing Herscherik shift his eyes toward him, his sneer only widened. "Isn't that right? Not only did Gracis steal Felvolk's Greatest Treasure, they even assaulted us!"

"Your Highness..." Alterisse said as she tended to Gale, whose torn mantle was tied around his arm to stop the bleeding while he received first-aid treatment from Kuro. As Thomas had said, this could spell trouble for the kingdom.

"I'm not quite sure what you're talking about," Herscherik said as he tilted his head in feigned confusion. "Gracis doesn't allow illegal immigrants, nor does it support the slave trade. Beastmen aren't even allowed to enter the country."

"Prince?" Gale threw Herscherik a perplexed gaze.

"Kurenai, come here."

Alterisse stood up and walked up to Herscherik.

"Kuro, hold Ao down. Shiro, you too," Herscherik ordered before Gale could move.

Kuro did as commanded and quickly moved behind Ao, pinning him around the neck with one arm while restraining the beastman's uninjured arm with the other. Though Gale might have been physically larger, Kuro was a skilled martial artist, which was more than enough to make up for that. He immobilized Gale easily. Shiro waited next to them, while Tatsu stood still, confused about Herscherik's order.

"Prince?!" Gale frantically cried out, but Herscherik did not turn toward him. Instead, he kept his gaze fixed on the clearly bewildered Alterisse.

"Kneel, Alterisse Danvir," Herscherik ordered in an unusually harsh tone.

Alterisse complied with the demand, and kneeled down much like a knight would when swearing fealty.

"Alterisse Danvir," Herscherik continued after Alterisse was kneeling on the ground. "Not only did you enter this country illegally, you have also been found in possession of a slave. In accordance with the laws of this country, this merits

the death penalty.”

Gale’s eyes became wide open at the sound of the words “death penalty,” but Alterisse only nodded quietly in agreement at the prince’s charge.

“Alterisse Danvir, do you have anything to say for yourself?”

“I...do not.”

She had no argument. Herscherik was a prince. She knew that no matter how close they were, he had to protect the stability of his own country and people. He couldn’t prioritize a foreigner—eliminating them was the right choice as a member of the ruling family.

“Prince!”

Gale struggled, but Kuro’s hold was too firm to escape. He then attempted to use magic, but Shiro quickly erected a barrier that prevented Gale from casting any spells, trapping both Kuro and Gale inside. Kuro then loosened his hold on Gale, but the barrier must have been soundproof as well—though Gale forcefully pounded on the barrier wall with both hands, no sound reached Herscherik’s ears.

Herscherik slowly unsheathed the sword hanging from his hip.

“In the name of the Seventh Prince of Gracis Kingdom, Herscherik Gracis, I sentence you, Alterisse Danvir, to death on charges of illegal entry and possession of a slave.”

Alterisse simply lowered her head in response. Herscherik had saved her once already. If he now judged her to be worthy of death, then she would gladly offer up her life.

She quietly turned her eyes away to find Gale desperately shouting something from inside the barrier.

Even if I die, I’m sure the prince will save Gale. Alterisse had no regrets.

Herscherik reached out toward Alterisse and, as if it was in the way, grasped her long crimson hair. Alterisse closed her eyes as Herscherik brought his sword down.

But she felt no pain. Instead, Alterisse saw her now shorter hair flutter at the

edges of her vision.

“Huh?” Alterisse let out a confused noise. Looking up, she saw Herscherik holding his sword in one hand, a handful of her crimson hair in the other.

Shiro removed the barrier, releasing Gale and Kuro. As he watched Gale run toward them out of the corner of his eye, Herscherik turned to Thomas, still unable to process the situation, and handed him Alterisse’s hair.

“Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure, Alterisse Danvir, is hereby declared dead,” Herscherik declared.

“What are you...?” Thomas responded with a bewildered look, as his eyes turned back and forth between Herscherik and Alterisse.

Herscherik threw the crimson hair on the ground in front of Thomas.

“This woman is one of my trusted retainers, Kurenai—or rather, Alterisse di Rot,” Herscherik said with a mischievous smile. “If needed, I will gladly provide supporting documentation to prove it at a later date, showing that the wanted tactician from Felvolk entered Gracis illegally and was lawfully executed as a result. I shall attach a note expressing how very regrettable the whole situation is. I’m afraid that Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure you speak of is no longer in this world.”

Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure was dead, Herscherik had asserted, and the woman here was one of Herscherik’s retainers. Thomas spent some time turning the claim over in his mind before his face once again turned red with rage.

“That’s mere sophistry! And how do you explain the beastman who’s standing right there?!”

“What an odd claim,” Herscherik responded with an angelic smile. “He’s not a beastman. He’s another one of my retainers—Gale Blau being his name. How in the world could a beastman be present in a country that strictly refuses entry to them?”

Neither Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure nor a beastman was present—only two of Herscherik’s retainers. They were citizens of Gracis, and served to protect their prince. Of course, it was all sophistry just as Thomas claimed.

I'm not much better than Barbosse, am I? Herscherik was aware that he was using his power to twist the law in his favor. Still, he had no regrets. People had to uphold the law, but the law existed to protect people. Then what was the purpose of a law that only served to harm?

"Shouldn't you be more worried about yourself right now?" Herscherik said to Thomas, who was shaking with rage. "You just attempted to assassinate a prince within the borders of Gracis. We would be well within our right to take your head right here and now."

Thomas suddenly began to tremble with a different emotion entirely as Kuro and Shiro threw him freezing gazes over Herscherik's shoulder.

"Besides, I may or may not have heard a rumor that the Gracis countryside has been a bit unsafe as of late... It probably wouldn't be out of the question to run into some bandits around here. Oh, what a terrible accident that would be," Herscherik said with a cheerful smile.

Though Herscherik was obviously implying that if he killed Thomas, he could cover it up easily, no one attempted to stop his threat.

"But I'm a kind prince, you see, so I'm willing to let this attempted assassination slide. If you don't want your reputation to suffer, I'd advise you to keep quiet too."

"You little brat!" Thomas yelled at Herscherik, to which the little prince responded with a wide sneer.

"You're perfectly welcome to plead for your life, if you like. I'm quite fickle, I've been told, so who knows when I might change my mind."

Herscherik's sneer then suddenly turned into a cold, sober expression.

"I detest the way your country does things," the prince continued.

He glanced toward Alterisse, who intently observed Herscherik while leaning on Gale, before turning his gaze back to Thomas.

"The woman you call Felvolk's Greatest Treasure did everything according to protocol and worked hard for years as she endured unfair treatment. She never disobeyed you even as she struggled for her ideals. Yet you betrayed her."

Herscherik could not stand for such treatment, where someone was punished for honesty, and hard work went unrewarded. His feelings didn't change just because it happened in a different country—especially when someone he cared about had lost so many people dear to her as a result.

"I won't tell you how to report this to Felvolk. But if your report results in an attempted attack on Gracis..."

Herscherik thrust his sword into the ground. His action completed his sentence for him—his imposing expression seemed to say, "Prepare for your country to be utterly destroyed."

Thomas then recalled how this prince had led the kingdom to victory against an imperial army of one hundred thousand soldiers with a mere twenty thousand men of his own. That was why people called him a hero. Seeing Thomas trembling and frozen in place, Herscherik realized that he had won.

"You can take her hair back with you as proof. I'm sure returning a part of her to her home country will help Felvolk's Greatest Treasure rest in peace," Herscherik mused. "Now then, have a safe trip home."

With a parting wish that could only be taken as sarcasm, Herscherik turned around and instructed Kuro and Tatsu to release the Felvolk soldiers. As the soldiers had already been made well aware how dangerous Herscherik's men were, they made no attempt to fight back. No one there was in a rush to die.

Wallowing in his defeat with Alterisse's hair clutched in one hand, Thomas was about to board the carriage again when Gale stopped him.

"You there," Gale said with a piercing gaze as Thomas looked back with suspicion. "I will never forgive you or Felvolk."

Gale spoke with a voice so low that it seemed to come from below the earth. It was filled with rage and spite.

"I'll never forgive you for killing my people and my comrades," he continued.

His comrades had asked him to protect Alterisse, and that was always at the forefront of his mind; however, that did not mean that his anger toward Felvolk was quelled. They had destroyed his country and exploited his comrades, only to mercilessly slaughter them in the end.

"The next time I see you..." Gale continued with an even deeper voice. "I'll kill you."

Seeing Gale's gaze, which was even more murderous than his words, Thomas started trembling violently before his legs gave out. He recalled having heard about Gale alongside Felvolk's Greatest Treasure. He was the slave unit's birdman captain, known as the "Blue Tempest." It was said that if you ever saw his blue wings in the skies over the battlefield, your head would be rolling the very next moment. Once he set his sights on you, escape was impossible.

Thomas grew pale and quickly launched himself into the carriage, which set off the moment he closed the door.

"Okay then. Let's head home," Herscherik told everyone once he saw the Felvolk emissary ride off, and the party started to make their way back.

At the same time, Tessily was just about to leave Solye's office. After parting with Herscherik, he had immediately set off to meet Solye in order to report on the youngest prince's plans and discuss how to handle matters going forward. Solye quickly agreed with Tessily's proposal and instructed him to carry it out.

"Understood, Father. I will begin the necessary preparations with Will," Tessily replied.

"I'm counting on you, Tessily," Solye replied before continuing in an apologetic tone. "I always seem to be working my children to the bone, don't I?"

"Far from it, Father," Tessily responded with a sympathetic smile. "I don't think so in the least. And we're all happy to do everything in our power for our beloved father."

Tessily then left the office and began to head toward the Department of Foreign Relations to discuss how to deal with Felvolk and Lustia. He had already outlined the general policy with his father, but there were still details that he needed to work out with the officials and his brother William. He also had to report to his oldest brother, Marx.

Briskly strolling down the corridors of the castle, Tessily reminisced about the

past.

“Don’t cry, Tessily. You’re a big brother now.” So Herscherik’s mother, whom Tessily had loved like an older sister, had said on her deathbed as Tessily wept by her side.

“But... But...!”

“A big brother always has to be strong,” she said as she stroked Tessily’s hair. “And you have to protect our family, and my child, in my stead.”

The dying queen gave Tessily a feeble smile.

“Will you promise me?” she asked.

Tessily wiped away the tears streaming down his cheeks before giving her a firm nod.

“Yeah!”

“Thank you, Tessily.”

Tessily would never forget her smile.

I’m the one who was supposed to protect him...

Tessily gave a resigned smile as he continued down the corridor.

I never thought he’d solve everything on his own before I even finished my preparations.

He had heard about the death of the minister while he was off in a foreign country, but when he learned his youngest brother was responsible, his surprise was immense.

“Well, he’s *her* child after all,” he mumbled to himself.

She always did the unexpected and unprecedented, and Herscherik certainly takes after his mother.

Tessily then thought back to that wish he’d heard from his younger brother.

“Neither winning nor losing, always kind to others... You’re too hard on yourself, Herscherik.”

His youngest brother’s wish was the result of his wisdom and his kindness.

Tessily stopped walking and shook his head. He didn't have time to think about that right now.

"Well then, it's a bit earlier than I planned, but I suppose it's time to go change the country," he said to himself as he resumed his stride.

Epilogue: The Reincarnated Prince and Felvolk's Greatest Treasure

One week had passed since the conclusion of the harvest festival. A number of figures of various heights were gathered on a hill a stone's throw away from the road that led west from the capital. Two of them were princes of the kingdom, and next to them stood their men of service. Finally, there were two former illegal immigrants.

"Thank goodness the weather is so nice. It's the perfect day to set off," the Seventh Prince of Gracis, Herscherik, said with a smile to Kurenai beside him.

Herscherik shifted his gaze to see his older brother performing a final inspection of the carriage along with his own butler of service and Kuro. Shiro was reading by himself in the shadow of a tree, and Oran, Tatsu, and Ao talked among themselves. The white bandage around Oran's arm looked painful, but he himself claimed that it didn't impact his day-to-day work.

Ao's wound had been shallow, and beastmen apparently healed faster than humans, so his injury was almost completely gone. He still had some slight scarring, but that too would likely disappear with time.

After Herscherik brought Kurenai back to the castle, she visited Oran. He'd already woken up, and she apologized to him with a vigorous bow that made her newly-cut hair sway back and forth. Oran, seemingly understanding of the situation, accepted her apology, and there was no bad blood between them after that. Herscherik, too, had apologized profusely for cutting Kurenai's hair—that was worth as much to a woman as her life, but Kurenai had just smiled and explained that she felt lighter now. Her long hair had apparently been something like a memento for her, or perhaps a prayer—a reminder of her ambition to clear her father's name and restore the Danvir house, and a prayer for her comrades' freedom.

"Was this really the right thing to do, Your Highness?" Kurenai asked.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Herscherik replied with a puzzled look.

“Don’t you regret making an enemy out of Felvolk?”

Herscherik had saved the two of them—but at the same time, there was a good chance that he had angered the military nation of Felvolk to the east. While Thomas was unlikely to report his failure exactly as it happened, he probably wouldn’t exactly stay quiet either. All of this could hamper Gracis’s attempts at establishing amicable relations with their neighbors.

Herscherik scratched his cheek in response to Kurenai’s question.

“Well, if I had to say whether this is good or bad... I guess it’s bad. The kingdom still hasn’t had time to stabilize.”

“Then—”

“But Felvolk won’t be able to attack us anytime soon. They don’t have any pretext,” Herscherik said as he pointed at Kurenai. “The public story is that Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure was executed in accordance with Gracis law. There is nothing they can fault us for here. Thus if they want to declare war on us, they need to come up with a persuasive reason.”

Unlike Gracis, where the king had the final say in national policy, Felvolk valued the opinion of the public in addition to the leadership of the army and the ten houses. A war with the continent’s largest nation would result in the loss of many lives, and they would need a reason good enough to convince the populace.

“Now, what kind of reason might Felvolk come up with to attack a country whose military might equals or exceeds their own?” Herscherik mused.

“Oh, I see...” Kurenai nodded.

If they were to attack Gracis, they needed a convincing reason to dispatch their troops. If they wanted to make Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure that reason, they would have to explain what she was doing in Gracis to begin with. But if they told the truth—that they had failed in their attempt to eliminate her after she called for the freeing of slaves, then put a bounty on her head when she fled the country—it might trigger a slave uprising. If they instead claimed that she had betrayed Felvolk, many people would find that hard to believe in light

of her past accomplishments. This would undermine the people's trust in their country, which in time would cause discord that other countries could take advantage of. It was unlikely that Felvolk were so desperate to attack Gracis that they would accept that risk.

Tessily had also explained that there were multiple factions within Felvolk, and that there were many who were hoping to take their place as one of the ruling houses. Any failure could cause one of the current ten houses to fall to ruin just like Kurenai's family had.

"So then even if they were to attack, we'd probably have some time to prepare. We'll make arrangements to ensure that nothing happens before then," Herscherik reassured Kurenai with a smile.

Kurenai was astonished at the way this little prince was quickly devising countermeasures involving entire countries. Another question then surfaced in her mind.

"When did you realize what was really happening, Your Highness?" Kurenai asked.

Herscherik spoke as though he had seen this coming from the beginning. But Ao, and especially Kurenai, had not revealed their identities until the very last minute.

"Since the day we met, probably. Though I only became convinced after hearing the results of Kuro's investigation," Herscherik said after a moment's thought. "I've always had a habit of planning for the worst. Besides, this isn't nearly the worst-case scenario anyway."

"What do you think that 'worst-case scenario' would have been?"

"You want to know?"

Herscherik gave Kurenai an adorably curious look, and she nodded in response.

"If you'd revealed your identity and manipulated Gracis into attacking Felvolk," Herscherik explained. "You told me that your chances of success were about thirty percent, but if you'd used the kingdom as a pawn, wouldn't that have increased your chances significantly?"

Gracis was the largest country on the continent, and as they had to protect this vast territory from their enemies, their military strength was also extraordinary. Had Kurenai revealed who she was and convinced Gracis to launch an attack on Felvolk, there would have been no telling what might have happened. She could have disrupted Felvolk from the inside, and then invited Gracis to invade. The chances of success for such a plan would have far exceeded thirty percent.

However, war also inevitably meant significant casualties on both sides. Herscherik detested war—as idealistic as the causes might often be, he didn’t want to see people die, regardless of whose side they were on. Had Kurenai attempted to go through with a plan like that, Herscherik would have been unable to help the pair.

Listening to his father explain the situation for beastmen in Gracis, Herscherik had steeled himself for two things. One was to use every possible means at his disposal to help Kurenai and Ao. The other was, if worse came to worst, to use every means at his disposal to stop them instead—even if it meant taking Kurenai’s life.

Herscherik was relieved from the bottom of his heart that the latter had never come to pass.

“I’m no match for you, am I?” Kurenai said. That was proof that she had indeed considered the plan in question.

“Kurenai—I mean, Alterisse...” Herscherik said, unsure what to call her.

“Won’t you call me Kurenai, Your Highness?” she responded.

The name Herscherik had given her was no longer a mere alias. The same was true for Ao. For some reason, whenever the prince called her by that name, she felt a strange sense of comfort and relief.

“Got it. Kurenai it is!” Herscherik said with a nod. “Kurenai, you are no longer Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure, Alterisse Danvir. Alterisse Danvir was executed by a prince of Gracis.”

Kurenai held her breath in suspense.

“You died, and were reborn as Alterisse di Rot.” The tactician who suffered

from her mistakes, hated her homeland, and cursed herself no longer existed. “I won’t tell you to forget. But just like the people who fought to protect you, I want to see you happy. I wish for your happiness from the bottom of my heart.”

Her pain would never fully go away, no matter how much Herscherik tried to convince her to leave it behind. Herscherik knew how far-fetched his reasoning was, but he still had to express his feelings. Perhaps he saw a bit of himself in Kurenai’s suffering.

Herscherik wanted to free Kurenai from her curse.

“I’ll bear all your suffering in your stead. I want you to live freely.”

“Your Highness...”

Herscherik gave a smile, one far too mature for a child merely seven years old. Seeing that smile, Kurenai’s heart began to race.

Thinking back, Kurenai realized that she had always had a hard time keeping up her tactician’s mask in front of Herscherik. She had spent ten years as a tactician in Felvolk, during which she had always maintained a smile. No matter how distressing the situation, no matter how much contempt and scorn others hurled at her, her smile would never fade for a moment—with the exception of that night when she succumbed to despair surrounded by a sea of flames.

But this prince would cut right through her mask as though it was nothing. And even after saving the two of them, he hadn’t expected anything in return. Despite declaring them to be his retainers, he had not said anything further about it nor compelled them to do anything after returning to the castle. Even now, he only smiled as though nothing had happened as he saw them off. A feeling of sadness filled Kurenai’s heart, and she fell silent, unable to express her feelings.

“Oh, it’s almost time for you to depart,” Herscherik said as he shifted his gaze from Kurenai to Ao, who was approaching them wearing a coat to hide his wings. “Ao, are you feeling all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine,” Ao said, placing a hand on the center of his chest.

The Brand of Servitude that had once enslaved him no longer existed. Shiro had removed it.

"I still can't believe it was actually possible to remove it," he continued.

Ao's surprise was only natural. Brands of Servitude were not the same everywhere in the world—each country and organization used its own magical formulas. Removing any one Brand therefore required a unique formula. A third party would need a vast amount of knowledge and time to accomplish it.

However, as soon as Herscherik had learned of Ao's Brand of Servitude and asked his Spellcaster of service, Weiss had started researching its removal in between his preparations for the harvest festival. He had claimed to simply be interested in beastman physique and Brands of Servitude generally as an excuse to investigate Ao's mark—though from an outsider perspective, Shiro's fondling of Ao certainly looked suspicious.

"Yeah, my Spellcaster's a bit too OP..."

Between the opening performance during the harvest festival, the removal of the Brand of Servitude, and even managing to construct a flying spell, Herscherik was at a loss for words. He vacantly stared off into the distance, where that very same totally overpowered and far too pretty Spellcaster was reading next to a tree.

"O...P...?" Ao asked, bewildered at the unfamiliar word, but Herscherik simply gave him a vague smile before going to fetch Shiro.

Ao watched the tiny figure walk off before walking up to Kurenai.

"Alte... Are you sure about this?"

"Gale?"

"Are you sure you want to leave the prince like this?"

Ao seemed to have seen right through her, and Kurenai looked conflicted.

"You don't have to hide your true feelings anymore," Ao continued as he put one hand on Kurenai's head. "I've made up my mind as well."

I wish I could have served that prince like you. When she'd thought that she was leaving for good, those were the words that slipped from her mouth. All of her feelings from that moment still existed, buried in her heart.

Kurenai closed her eyes. Alterisse Danvir, the tactician who had been

obsessed with her revenge on Felvolk, no longer existed. Though she still carried those feelings of hatred, with Herscherik's help they no longer dominated her soul. So what did she need—or *want*—to do now?

Kurenai imagined her future self. If she left for Lustia, she would be able to live a quiet, happy life with Ao. She would give up her identity as a tactician and instead find happiness as an ordinary woman.

No, that's not right. Kurenai rejected the idea. Such a future would indeed have been a happy one—but it was not the future she sought.

She opened her eyes again. There was not a hint of hesitation in them.

She started walking, and Ao followed after. They walked in the direction of Herscherik, who was dragging Shiro toward the carriage.

"You two, it's almost time to..." Herscherik turned around, but stopped mid-sentence. Before him, Kurenai and Ao were kneeling while bowing deeply. The gesture signified the loyalty of a subject toward their master. "Kurenai? Ao?"

"Your Highness—no, My Liege," Kurenai started speaking with her head still turned down. "My Liege, allow me to confess. When I first met you, I underestimated you and sought to exploit this country for my own purposes."

If it meant she could destroy Felvolk, she would have used any means she could have gotten her hands on.

"But," she continued, "after spending time with you, and seeing how you would stop at nothing to protect this country and its people, even sacrificing yourself without a second thought, I abandoned any such thoughts."

His childish smiles; his mature expressions; the pride and dignity he possessed as a royal. She had been unable to take her eyes off him. Deep down, she had started longing to serve someone like him.

"I never trusted anyone in this world besides Alte and my comrades," Ao followed.

He had become used to enduring oppression. The only people he could trust were the comrades in his unit and Alterisse.

"But you never cared about things like appearance or race, and protected

both me and my desires,” Ao continued.

Never asking for anything in return, Herscherik had extended a helping hand for no other reason than because he wanted to help the two of them. Ao couldn’t express how happy that had made him.

“I have no idea how I can repay you,” he finished.

Herscherik looked at the two of them, still bowing, with bewilderment.

“I only did what I wanted,” Herscherik explained. “You don’t need to feel so indebted to me.”

As far as Herscherik was concerned, he had just dragged everyone along with his own whims. If anything, Herscherik felt like he should be apologizing to them instead.

“I only made you two my retainers as a pretense, or rather, a means to an end. I never intended to tie you down.”

Though he hadn’t had any other choice at the time, making them his subjects had meant forcibly tying them to the kingdom. It may have been a last resort, but he still felt sorry about having restricted their freedom, if only on paper.

Kurenai lifted her gaze and looked Herscherik straight in the eye.

“In that case, will you grant us our wish?”

She laid her right hand on her chest.

“My intellect exists for your ideals, my will for your glory, and my life for your righteous rule.”

This was the oath she had sworn at the age of fourteen, when she had first joined the Felvolk army as a tactician. Back then, she had given it to her country, not an individual, and it had said “mighty rule,” not “righteous rule”—and she had put absolutely no emotion into it.

“My name is Alterisse di Rot,” Kurenai said, stating the name that Herscherik had given her as she once again bowed down. “I beg of you, My Liege—let me serve at your side.”

Ao followed Kurenai’s example.

"I, true name Gale Fal Kilvy Blau, devote everything to my master, Herscherik."

In addition to given names, beastmen also had true names, which they would only reveal to their lifelong partners and those they swore fealty to. Alongside his true name, Ao had additionally included the new name "Blau," meaning "blue," that Herscherik had given him. Ao was effectively swearing his fealty to Herscherik for life.

"My body is a sword that cuts through your enemies, a shield that protects you from harm, and a staff that guides your way." Kurenai recited the pledge of loyalty.

"My Liege, please allow us to join you," Ao said, seeking Herscherik's permission.

The pledge of loyalty was famous enough in Gracis to be made into picture books. Originally, it was the pledge that the servants of the hero Ferris had sworn long ago. Over time many variants had sprung up in other countries. The oath Kurenai had originally sworn to Felvolt was also descended from this pledge.

During her stay in the castle, Kurenai had come across a picture book featuring the pledge of loyalty and asked Oran about it—whether he himself had pledged his loyalty to Herscherik using these same words. Oran had given her an embarrassed nod in response, which had made her jealous.

"Please allow us to call you Our Liege," Kurenai pleaded.

Herscherik observed the two as they kneeled; everyone else simply watched over the scene that was unfolding. A breeze stroked Herscherik's cheek and shook his light golden hair.

The silence that followed went on for no longer than a minute, but it felt like an eternity. Herscherik took a deep breath and then exhaled.

"Okay, fine! I give up!" he said—as his face brimmed with joy. He then knelt down himself next to the pair. "Raise your heads, both of you."

The two of them looked up at Herscherik, who greeted them with a warm smile reminiscent of spring sunshine.

“Alterisse di Rot, Gale Fal Kilvy Blau, you have my permission. Come with me.”

Herscherik extended one hand to each of them, which they took.

“Your wish is our command,” the two said in unison.

Holding their hands, Herscherik brought them both to their feet. Seeing his small but happy brother, Tessily let out a silent sigh.

“See, I knew this would happen!” Tessily exclaimed.

Tessily, the rest of the family, and Herscherik’s men of service had all sensed how sad Herscherik had been about parting with them—but Herscherik had refrained from saying anything, as he didn’t want to tie the two down.

“Tessily?”

“And that, my dear brother, is why I brought *this*!” Tessily said with a smirk as he handed a crumpled document to Herscherik, who was pouting in an attempt to hide his embarrassment.

“Thank you, Tessily.”

Herscherik took the paper from Tessily, turned to the couple, and held it out toward them.

“Read this, you two.”

“This is...” Kurenai said, trailing off in surprise as she read the words written upon the paper.

The document was a decree written by Solye, the king of Gracis himself, appointing the two of them as the Seventh Prince’s aides and declaring them emissaries responsible for forging relations with the Lustian Confederation.

“This country is still not ready to accept Ao and his fellow beastmen,” Herscherik explained.

Ao may have been one of Herscherik’s servants now, but he was still a beastman, and would not be able to live openly in Gracis for the time being. Thus, until the country was ready to fully embrace him, Ao needed to stay outside the kingdom borders—and the safest country on the continent for beastmen was the Lustian Confederation.

"I want you to visit the Confederation as official emissaries from the kingdom. Tessily will explain the details and what will happen next during the ride."

"Will... Will Gracis really change?" Kurenai asked, grasping the significance of what Herscherik was saying.

Herscherik nodded. The kingdom, which until now had prohibited the entry of non-humans, was about to change all of that, and establishing relations with Lustia was a vital first step on that path. However, if one of Gracis' usual emissaries attempted to visit, the Confederation might have refused them entry as a precaution. That's why Herscherik wanted Ao and Kurenai to go instead, and lay the foundation for future relations between the two countries. As this would also ensure the pair's safety, it was two birds with one stone.

"You're quick on the uptake, Kurenai. But it'll probably be harder than you think, you know."

Regardless of the actual circumstances, officially the two countries had broken off connections. It was hard to imagine that reestablishing diplomatic relations would be that easy.

Additionally, just as beastmen were discriminated against in other countries, Herscherik couldn't help but worry about how the human minority was treated in a country of beastmen.

Kurenai gave the visibly anxious prince a warm smile.

"It should certainly be easier than destroying a whole country," she said, her smile brimming with confidence. Her face was now that of the tactician once called Felvolk's Greatest Treasure.

Seeing Kurenai's encouraging expression, Herscherik responded with a conflicted smile.

"Well, you sure seem confident..." the prince said. "Ao, I'm sure it'll be hard for you too, but I'm counting on you."

"I'll be fine," Ao answered stoically.

Herscherik was overjoyed with his two reliable new friends.

But then, the time came for them to part.

"We'll depart now, My Liege," Kurenai said, giving Herscherik a deep bow. Ao nodded along with her.

"Just call me Hersch," Herscherik responded, suddenly realizing something. "Oh, I almost forgot—there's another important job I need you to do."

"A job?" Kurenai asked quizzically, and Ao gave Herscherik a confused look. The men of service and even Tessily looked at him with similar expressions, but Herscherik answered them all with a radiant smile.

"I want you to have a happy life together! I can't wait to see your children!"

The moment Herscherik uttered these words, an awkward silence fell over the gathering, as though everyone had frozen solid. Herscherik threw the others a puzzled gaze.

"Huh? Why are you all so quiet? I mean, they're lovers, aren't they? They *are* getting married, right? What's wrong, everyone?" he said, perplexed.

The fruit shop couple's daughter Risch was very cute, and Herscherik was sure Kurenai and Ao's child would be just as adorable.

Looking around, Herscherik noticed the genius tactician, who would otherwise be smiling at all times, staring down at the ground with a face as red as her hair. Ao was hiding his face with one hand, but he too was red all the way to his ears.

Tessily approached his confused brother and silently smacked him across the top of his head.



“Ow!” Herscherik exclaimed, holding his head with his eyes starting to water. Looking up, he saw his older brother wearing a cold smile.

“Hersch, you’re a bit of a busybody sometimes, you know.”

Herscherik looked at his brother, still confused.

Later, Herscherik learned that while Ao and Kurenai were in love, their relationship was not exactly physical yet. The moment he realized that he had effectively sexually harassed an inexperienced couple, he went down on all fours to apologize in the direction that they’d set off. In time with Herscherik, the windcatcher of fortune—decorated with feathers in both their colors—rattled by the window, its crystals glittering in the sunlight.

There once was a female tactician known as Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure. She joined the Felvolk army at the tender age of fourteen, where she devised many a plan to lead her country to victory on one battlefield after another. However, following her defeat in battle during an uprising, she defected to the kingdom of Gracis, where she was ultimately executed. She died at the age of twenty-four.

At the same time, a tactician with deep crimson hair appeared before the Hero of Light, Herscherik Gracis. Her name was Alterisse di Rot. Coincidentally sharing a name with Felvolk’s Greatest Treasure, she dominated the battlefield as though guided by the gods, bringing her master Herscherik victory time and time again.

Always maintaining a smile on the battlefield, no matter how hopeless the situation, people referred to her as the “Smiling Crimson Tactician.” “Where the Hero of Light goes, so does the Smiling Crimson Tactician,” people would say. As long as his tactician was by his side, the Hero of Light’s victory was assured.

The Crimson Tactician also had a single child together with a birdman who served Herscherik, known as the Blue Tempest. The child had dark purple hair and dark eyes and grew up skilled in wind magic; just like the Crimson Tactician, this child would go on to defend the kingdom. From then on, all descendants of the Smiling Crimson Tactician would devote themselves to ensuring the peace and stability of Gracis.

With time, the Rot house became the most prestigious house of tacticians in Gracis, while the genius tactician once known as Felvolk's Greatest Treasure was forgotten by history.

The Reincarnated Prince and the Hero of Light — Fin.

Anecdote: The Blue Tempest and the Smiling Crimson Tactician

A man stood observing the deep blue sea spread out before him. His eyes were azure, the dark blue of his hair recalled the depths of the sea, and from his back spread a pair of wings the same color as his hair, marking him as a beastman—a birdman, to be precise.

The man was perched atop the main mast of a merchant ship, watching the ocean waves as they made for the horizon. It was high enough that anyone but a seasoned sailor would usually be paralyzed with fear, but as a birdman able to soar through the skies, he simply gazed out over the sea without even needing to hold on to anything.

Suddenly, he heard a voice. Glancing down at the deck of the ship, the man saw a person waving in his direction, and he quickly jumped down from the mast. After a split second's sensation of weightlessness, the man then gave himself to gravity as he plummeted downwards.

The other passengers watched on, stunned. However, just as he passed the middle of the mast, he spread his wings, floating in the air for a short moment before landing on the bridge without a sound.

“What is it?” he asked the person whose voice he had heard.

In front of the man stood a woman with deep crimson hair that reached her shoulders, and she narrowed her eyes to give him a gentle smile. To this man, she was the only woman in the world who mattered.

Her name was Alterisse Danvir—nay, Alterisse di Rot—although her master called her Kurenai.

“Well, I couldn’t find you anywhere, Gale...” Kurenai answered bashfully.

“I see,” the man in question, Gale Fal Kilvy Blau—referred to as Ao by his master—answered brusquely and without emotion.

“The sea breeze is so nice, isn’t it?” Kurenai continued, taking no note of Ao’s demeanor as she held down her hair to prevent it from being tousled by the wind.

Ao quietly nodded.

“If things go according to schedule, we should be arriving in Lustia in two days,” Kurenai said.

“I see,” Ao responded, yet again brusque and emotionless.

Most people would have been enraged at Ao’s attitude and apparent lack of interest, but Kurenai only smiled happily. Having spent many years by his side, Kurenai could tell that Ao was truly excited about journeying to the Lustian Confederation, even without him saying it out loud. Whenever the other passengers talked about Lustia, he would secretly listen in on their conversations, and as the days passed he had become more restless and began to climb atop the mast—though no one but Kurenai would have understood this change in behavior.

However, she had also noticed that he would wear a slightly anxious expression from time to time.

“Are you worried, Gale?”

Ao twitched slightly before turning his gaze down.

The man known as Ao was born in a small country of birdmen called Kilvy, before the beastmen had formed the alliance that led to the creation of the Lustian Confederation. Though its population was small, it was a beautiful country surrounded by abundant forests.

But Kilvy no longer existed. The country was ravaged and destroyed by Felvolt.

As the first born son of the king, Ao was a prince of Kilvy. As beastmen generally had few children, the whole country eagerly celebrated the birth of a prince, and the neighboring beastman nations sent gifts as well.

The prince grew up happily and comfortably. He learned to fly first among all

the other children his age, and he would spend his days soaring through the skies, from morning to night, faster than anyone could keep up with. He was also a skilled fighter—when it came to spears and rods in particular, he could best even adult soldiers.

He was an expressive child, and though he rarely spoke he was always cheerful and upright. He treated his elders with respect and those younger than him with kindness, and everyone looked forward to the day he would take the throne.

But that never came to pass.

Before the prince who would grow up to be Ao had even come of age, the neighboring country of Felvolk launched an invasion of Kilvy. As Kilvy was a narrow country, the Felvolk army made it to the capital in a matter of days, well before the capital had even received word from the border, and they did not have time to ready their defenses. Though the Kilvy soldiers did their best to oppose the invading army, Felvolk quickly wiped them out using magical weapons. In order to buy time for the citizens to flee to a neighboring country, the king and a small number of guards chose to intentionally attract the enemies' attention.

“Gale, you must flee!”

“But, Father, I can fight too!” the young prince pleaded with his father atop the castle walls beneath the starlight as the king prepared to depart for battle—one from which he would never return. The Felvolk army was already in sight.

The king looked at his brave son, spear in hand, and shook his head.

“This country is doomed,” the king explained. “But our people will live on. You must survive and protect them.”

“Father!”

“Take him away!”

The nearby soldiers did as ordered, dragging Gale away, passing by his mother.

“Gale, my dear son, you have to live,” his mother said with a smile before

moving to stand with the king. She was a Spellcaster, highly skilled with wind magic.

“Father! Mother!” the prince screamed, but his cries failed to reach his parents’ ears as he was escorted out of the castle.

Gale did not clearly remember what happened afterwards, except that he suppressed his anger and his frustration as he flew through the night sky, determined to protect his people. However, the sound of an explosion suddenly rang out, and in the very same moment, the birdman in front of him fell down into the forest below. Unable to process the situation, he could do nothing but watch as his comrades fell, one by one—each time accompanied by the same booming sound.

“Prince Gale!” he heard a soldier scream as he rushed to his aid, but in the next moment Gale found himself falling.

The prince lost consciousness for a brief moment as he landed, but he quickly roused himself. He had made it through with only a few scratches thanks to the trees breaking his fall.

Upon hearing the sound of groaning, Gale took a look around—only to be struck speechless with shock. A number of his fellow birdmen were lying on the ground, writhing in pain. The very soldier who had tried to protect him was there as well, and Gale quickly ran over to him.

“Are you all right?!” Gale desperately asked as he helped the soldier up.

“Prince Gale...” the soldier moaned. “Please, leave me behind and flee...”

“I can’t—!”

“They got my wings...” The soldier interrupted Gale, showing him his back. “I can’t run anymore.”

The soldier’s wings looked as though they had been mercilessly torn to shreds by wild beasts. And he was not the only one—every birdman Gale could see had suffered similar injuries.

A birdman losing their wings was a death sentence. With medical care, they might be able to fly again one day, but there was no time for that now.

In an attempt to at least flee on foot, Gale forced the soldier to his feet and started to walk, but then a noise from a nearby bush interrupted them.

“Hey, I found them! Hmph, not a woman in sight.”

“There are uninjured young men, though.”

Gale turned his gaze toward the voices to find two soldiers. As they had no wings, it was clear that they belonged to the Felvolk army. They both held some kind of tube.

“Look, there’s one up there too!” one of the men said as he directed the tube toward the sky.

The next moment, there was another exploding sound, followed by a painful scream.

“Hey, that sounded like a woman!” The man grinned.

That’s when Gale finally understood what had happened. The enemy soldiers had used this cylindrical tool to shoot them down from the sky. His body burned hot with rage at the realization. The Felvolk soldiers, though, took no notice of him, continuing to talk merrily amongst themselves as if they were on a hunting excursion.

“If only this magical weapon wasn’t so damn hard to use. And there’s a limit to how many times you can use it.”

“What do you expect? It’s still a prototype. This is the first time it’s being used in real combat.”

“Well, at least the limited power makes it easy to capture those birds alive.”

“Right? That reminds me, did you see that new weapon they tested on the castle? Sent the whole castle flying. All the birds got blown to pieces too.”

The two Felvolk soldiers’ laughter echoed through the forest.

Hearing their discussion, Gale saw red. Ignoring the Kilvy soldier trying to stop him, he leaped straight for the two soldiers. Due to his lack of composure, Gale’s attack only turned into an awkward struggle with one of the soldiers; the other soldier quickly stepped in to subdue him. Before long they had pinned Gale to the ground, holding down his wings with their boots and making it

impossible for him to move.

“Ugh. Hey, let’s just kill this one,” one of the men suggested.

“No, hold on. The order’s to capture anyone we might have a use for. Besides, the cockier someone is, the more fun it is to break their spirit, don’t you think?” the other soldier sneered.

“No, stop! Let him go!” a Kilvy soldier screamed, but the Felvolk soldiers just gave him a quick glance.

“What do you want to do with that thing?”

“He’s not a woman, and he’s injured too. He’s useless.” The soldier then picked up an object that had been hanging from his hip—a smaller tube than the weapon he’d used earlier. Unlike the other tube, this one had a grip, which the soldier held as he pointed the device toward the Kilvy soldier.

There was a quiet sound of something rupturing, followed by an explosion and the thud of someone falling. Still on the ground, Gale turned his head toward his fellow birdman and instantly froze. The soldier that had tried to protect Gale was lying motionless on the ground, the upper half of his body scorched.

Gale screamed.

“Be quiet, would you? Hey, switch bullets and put him to sleep.”

After that, Gale remembered nothing else.

When he next woke up, Gale found himself inside a cell. As he sat up, his limbs and wings felt heavier than usual. He looked down to see his hands and feet chained, and looking behind him, his wings had been weighed down with metal weights. The weights must have also blocked any magic, as he found himself unable to cast even a single spell.

“Prince Gale, are you all right?” someone asked. Gale turned his gaze toward the voice to find a soldier he had sparred with regularly since he was a young boy.

“Where are we?” Gale asked.

“We appear to be in a Felvolk fort near the border. Everyone who was

captured was brought here.”

“Where...are my father and mother?”

The soldier answered Gale with no words—only a pained expression. Gale fell likewise silent. He had known the answer already—but even so, he had to ask.

“How many people were captured? Do you know if anyone managed to escape?” Gale asked.

“I’m not sure how many escaped. However, they killed or captured a significant number of people... All because of that magical cylinder of theirs...!”

Hearing this, Gale went over what had happened again in his head. The Felvolk soldiers had used a tube-shaped magical item, which they’d referred to as a weapon.

“Because of that thing, our army was almost completely wiped out... Just what *was*—” the soldier said, but he was cut off by the sound of heavy footsteps and lowered his voice. “Prince Gale, whatever you do, you mustn’t let them know about your lineage—or your ability!”

Gale nodded in response to the man’s whisper. In addition to his royal blood, Gale also possessed a special ability. It was a hereditary trait, but it very rarely manifested; Gale was the first member of his family to display this ability in a number of generations. There was no telling what Felvolk might do with him if they found out about his power.

The Felvolk soldiers who had approached them let Gale out of his cell and brought him to an open area in the middle of the fort. Other birdmen, all of them prisoners, had been gathered alongside him, and their eyes were fixed on the platform in front of them. The man atop the platform must have been the person in charge of the fort, as he was dressed in clothes noticeably more expensive than the other soldiers.

“Your pitiful country is now Felvolk territory!” the man roared.

The man’s declaration caused a stir among the birdmen as they all shot him menacing glares, but they were unable to move with the Felvolk soldiers all pointing their spears at them.

"I shall give those here three choices: to swear fealty to our country and become citizens, to become slaves...or death!"

Angry roars and screams could be heard from the crowd, but the man on the platform paid them no heed.

"If you become citizens of Felvolk, I shall ensure your safety. However, you will have to pay a regular tax to the state," the man said as he detailed the amount they would have to pay—a sum far beyond the means of anyone listening. It was effectively a choice between slavery and death.

"Kill me..." someone grumbled, and the utterance spurred the others to start shouting.

"We are the proud and noble people of Kilvy, the rulers of the sky!"

"We will never succumb to barbarians!"

"We'd rather die than become slaves to the likes of you!"

Their roars filled the area. The man on the platform, though—having seemingly expected this response—gave one of his men a signal. In response, his subordinate walked up onto the platform—with a white-winged girl in tow. She was shaking, her hands and wings bound with chains.

"Very well. I will do as you wish," the man on the platform spoke as he unsheathed his sword.

The birdmen immediately fell quiet. The man's sword glistened in the light as he brought it down upon the girl. She shrieked, and white feathers danced in the air—the man had mercilessly cut through one of her wings.

"Why the long faces? You were chirping so happily just a moment ago. You're choosing death, aren't you?" the man said, raising the corners of his mouth into a malicious sneer.

No one could even react. The girl fell down onto the floor, pale-faced, and started trembling. The sword had only grazed her wing, and had not yet touched any flesh or bone. With time the feathers would grow back, and she would likely be able to fly again.

"H-Help..." Gale heard the girl's trembling voice—as must have every birdman

present. But still, no one could bring themselves to move.

"Hmph, well... Aren't you a noisy little bird," the man said as he once again raised his sword.

You must survive and protect them. His father's words echoed in Gale's head.

"Stop!" Gale's scream rang out in the silent courtyard. The man slowly lowered his weapon.

"Are you trying to tell *me* what to do? Who do you think you are?" the man scoffed, but Gale stepped closer.

The other birdmen tried to stop Gale as he kept advancing toward the man, but Gale forced his way through the crowd.

"I am the king's son," Gale said, looking up at the man, who raised an eyebrow as he waited for Gale to continue. "I'll become your slave, if you do not kill my people."

"Please stop!"

"You mustn't plead for your life with these barbarians!"

"Are you trying to disgrace His Majesty's name, after he fought so valiantly?!"

But despite his people's pleading, Gale continued to stare at his captor.

"Is that any way for a slave to talk to a human?" the man said, descending from the platform and closing the distance between himself and Gale.

Gale remained quiet for a few moments before kneeling down in front of the man.

"I want you to spare my people," Gale said, bowing his head.

The very next moment, Gale felt a sharp pain across his face, and he was thrown to the ground. The man had kicked him in the face with his boots. The distressed shouts of the birdmen echoed through the court.

"You 'want' me to spare them? Work on your language!" the man growled angrily, giving Gale another kick to the stomach. "This country lost, you see! You lost!"

The man's boots sank into Gale's stomach again, and then again.

“Stop it!” a birdman shouted, trying to run up and protect Gale from the man’s assault.

“Don’t!” Gale shouted to keep the birdman away, before sitting back up and coughing. Then he went down on his knees again. “Please, spare my people’s lives.”

As Gale bowed deeply and made his plea, he felt another blow. The man had planted his foot on Gale’s shoulder.

“And? What are you going to do in return?” the man asked mockingly.

“Please...”

Gale paused and closed his eyes. He thought back to his father and mother, his beautiful home country, and the people he held so dear. All of that was gone now—except his people. They were all he had left

For them... Gale made up his mind.

“Please make me a slave.”

The man gave a satisfied sneer in response.

“You there—take this one away. Get a Spellcaster to engrave a Brand of Servitude on him.”

Two soldiers forced him to his feet and began to drag him away. As Gale was being carried off, the man whispered into his ear.

“What a waste of a good opportunity to slaughter them all... Well, their lives are in your hands now.”

Gale responded with silence.

After that, a Brand of Servitude was seared into Gale’s chest with a pain like red-hot iron, and he became a battle slave.

For a number of years after that, Gale continued to fight obediently as a battle slave—but no matter how obedient he was, if he ever opened his mouth, he was hit. If someone didn’t like his attitude, he was kicked. And if someone didn’t like his look, he was whipped. Some people would abuse him for no

reason other than to pass the time.

However, Gale would never show any signs of resistance; he would willingly fight on the front lines even in the most dangerous of battles, all for the sake of what remained of his people. As long as he risked his own life, he was protecting theirs. With time, the once-expressive young prince grew up to be an expressionless and stoic man.

At one point, he heard the news that some beastman countries in the south had formed an alliance and founded a nation known as the Lustian Confederation. It was only much later that Gale would learn that the invasion of Kilvy had sparked the establishment of the alliance in the first place.

Along with founding the Confederation, Lustia also called for the liberation of all enslaved beastmen. Felvolk had responded by treating its slaves even harsher. Any hint of defiance would be punished by death using the Brand of Servitude. So no matter what kind of treatment he suffered, Gale endured in silence.

A decade passed. Gale was eventually assigned to a battle slave unit of the national armed forces stationed in the capital of Felvolk. There, he was reunited with the soldier who had given him that warning so many years ago.

“Prince Gale, I’m so glad to see that you’re safe...” the soldier said with tears in his eyes, while Gale nodded with a blank expression. Seeing how the little prince had changed, the man began to weep.

“And the others...?” Gale asked, only to be met with a reply that would plunge him into the depths of despair.

After he had left that court, half of birdmen that remained had chosen death, and the other half slavery—and almost all of those who had become slaves had been sent to their deaths in battle or sold off, if they were women. The soldier himself had only been reunited with surviving birdmen a handful of times.

Gale was dumbfounded. Now he was forced to question why he had patiently endured his suffering all this time. For a split second he considered death, but the magic of the Brand of Servitude would even prevent him from taking his own life.

“Prince Gale, please live.” The soldier spoke as though he had read Gale’s mind. “Please live.”

Gale nodded feebly in response to the soldier’s insistence.

A few months later, that soldier died protecting Gale in battle.

Years passed, and Gale continued to stand on the battlefield as a slave, narrowly escaping the jaws of death. With his excellent fighting skills and sturdy physique, coupled with his complete obedience, he eventually became captain of the battle slave unit. Felvolk continued to use him as they pleased. Even if it was sometimes spoken in mockery, his overwhelming talent on the battlefield earned him the nickname of the Blue Tempest—the wind that brings death.

Gale had lived on, just as his father and mother had asked him—just as that soldier had asked him. He lived and lived, simply waiting for the day he would finally die.

During one battle, the slave unit had been sent to the front lines, and the commander’s ineptitude had cost the lives of over half the unit. Gale, however, still survived.

“Sheesh, why do we have to put up with this?” a snakeman—Misthor—grumbled. As a snakeman, his white skin was covered with light purple scales here and there, and he was tall and lean. After Gale, he had served in this unit the longest, and like Gale, Felvolk had invaded his country and forced him into slavery.

Unlike Gale and the other slaves, who only grew more and more emotionless as time passed, Misthor would both laugh and complain. This earned him a great deal of ire, but out of all beastmen, snakemen were some of the most gifted Spellcasters. Misthor could also use a bit of Divine Magic, so the higher-ups would look the other way—though he was still mercilessly thrown into battle like every other slave.

“We only lost because of that incompetent commander. Do they realize how many of our men died?!”

“Be quiet,” Gale warned him, and Misthor responded with an annoyed glare.

"Are you seriously all right with this, Captain?! First that halfwit goes off on us like there's no tomorrow, and now we're getting some kid from a disgraced house—and she's a woman, too! Screw dying under the command of someone like that!"

Gale sighed and kept quiet—all the while thinking that the next battle could be his last.

But the girl that joined them defied not only Gale's expectations, but those of everyone in the slave unit. She did not so much as flinch when threatened by a tigerman, and as she bathed in the murderous glares of the battle slaves, she gave them only two orders: to always follow her command and to never give up on living.

You must survive and protect them.

Gale, my dear son, you have to live.

Prince Gale, please live.

The wishes of the people he had lost echoed in his mind.

The new tactician completely changed the slave unit. They began to win battle after battle; soldiers returning from the field alive became the norm, and the number of slaves who suffered injuries decreased dramatically. She would meet the ridiculous demands of the army leadership, humming cheerfully all the while, and any reward she received was spent on supplies and better living conditions for the slave unit. In this way, she steadily earned their trust.

There was one thing Gale couldn't get off his mind, though. The tactician was always smiling—yet every now and then, her expression would seem somehow sad. In fact, he had not been able to get her—Alterisse—out of his head ever since they first met.

Three years had passed since the new tactician was assigned to the slave unit.

"Hey, Captain. You've got a crush on the commander, haven't you?" Misthor said to Gale as he was healing the birdman with his magic.

"What...?" Gale said, visibly bewildered by the sudden suggestion, for a

change.

Only a moment ago, Gale had shielded Alterisse from being verbally abused by two men—though all he had really done was endure their blows. Alterisse was the one who had chased them off in the end.

Alterisse had been unusually upset when she dragged Gale to see Misthor and asked the snakeman to heal him.

“What? You seriously haven’t realized? When literally everyone else in the unit has?” Misthor asked incredulously.

Gale looked around to find the other soldiers smirking as they listened in on the conversation, and Gale returned their gazes with a confused look.

“C’mon, Captain. You’re always staring at her, and you told her about that ability that you kept secret even from us. Are you *seriously* not aware of your own feelings?”

Gale had told Alterisse about his own special talent—telescopic sight—in an attempt to help her with a reconnaissance mission that she had been struggling with. The moment she learned about it, she issued a gag order within the unit. If information about his unusual skill leaked out, Gale would most likely have been removed from the slave unit and forced to undergo human experimentation. Slaves had no rights in this country.

The members of the slave unit still talked about the fierce manner in which she had issued this absolute order, smiling all the while.

“The commander seems pretty dense when it comes to romance too...” Misthor continued. “This battle is gonna make our *actual* fights look easy by comparison.”

Not even Misthor, though, had imagined that it would take another three years for the pair to finally get together.

They were surrounded by a sea of flames.

“Captain, take the commander and flee!” Misthor shouted as he struck down the approaching enemies with flashes of lightning. “They tricked us! We’ve got

no chance! But with your wings, you can at least save the commander!”

“Misthor?!” Alterisse shrieked. Her face, streaked with tears and soot, bore no trace of her usual smile.

“We are the property of our commander! As long as you’re with him, his Brand of Servitude won’t activate!”

The Brands of Servitude put the life of a slave directly into their owner’s hands. For the slave units in the Felvolt army, that ownership belonged to each unit’s commander. Even if one of them were to flee right now, the state could not take their life using their Brand of Servitude.

“But... But...! What about all of you?!”

“All of us were doomed to fall on the battlefield anyway. Personally, I’d rather die saving you and the captain!”

Their comrades shouted in agreement with Misthor as they fended off their foes.

“None of those magical weapons the captain hates were supposed to be used in this battle! Even if they did bring a few guns, they can’t have that many! The captain should be able to flee using his wings!”

“Guns” were the cylindrical devices that had destroyed Gale’s country—magical weapons that had been replicated from ancient relics. They were not magical devices that assisted in the casting of spells, nor were they magical items that could be used by simply imbuing them with Magic. Instead, formulas were engraved on bullets enchanted with Magic; to activate the spell, these bullets were loaded into the cylindrical device and fired. However, they required skill to wield, and manufacturing the magical bullets and the firing mechanism was very costly.

More effective formulas and more powerful Magic made these “guns” much more lethal, but it was hard to get it just right, and they would sometimes misfire and injure allies too. This had resulted in budget cuts, and barely any research on them had been done over the past fifty years. Many suggested that it was simpler to just use ordinary magic instead. Even so, their range and ability to fire instantly made guns a significant threat to birdmen.

“Captain, hurry! Keep on living!” Misthor shouted.

Gale made up his mind. He picked up Alterisse and spread his wings.

“Gale! I...”

Without waiting for Alterisse to complete her sentence, Gale took to the sky. He heard a gunshot and felt a pain in his wings, but it was not enough to impede his flight.

“Alte, hold on tight,” Gale whispered to the one he loved as she struggled in his arms, and he raced across the night sky.

“Gale, are you all right?”

The worried voice brought Ao back to the present.

“Oh... I...was just just thinking about the past,” Ao replied.

Kurenai made a pained expression, realizing that Ao must have been remembering that fateful day.

“If only I had...” Kurenai said regretfully, but before she could finish Ao let out a sigh and embraced her. “G-Gale?!”

“It was unavoidable,” Ao whispered into Kurenai’s ear.

Kurenai was visibly uneasy, worrying about drawing the attention of the other passengers.

“They all wanted you to survive,” Ao continued. “That’s what they wished for.”

“But...”

“I’ll say it as many times as I need to. They didn’t die in vain. They protected us. I wanted to protect you too.” Ao brought his mouth to Kurenai’s ear and whispered so only she could hear. “And I want to continue to protect you... Forever...”

“Gale, you’ve become quite talkative ever since we left the kingdom,” Kurenai pouted, her ears red from embarrassment.

“Yeah. I’m taking Our Liege’s words to heart.”

His young master, wise beyond his years, had told him that the only way to convey your feelings is to put them into words. Ao was no longer a slave. No one had the right to beat him. He no longer needed to suppress his emotions.

Suddenly, Gale caught a sound that was definitely distinct from the sea breeze. He released Kurenai and looked out toward a specific point far out at sea.

“Gale?” Kurenai asked.

“I heard a scream.”

Birdmen had better hearing than humans—though the far more specialized rabbitmen still surpassed them.

Ao used his telescopic sight to locate the source of the scream.

“A ship is being attacked by monsters,” he explained.

Kurenai squinted in the direction Ao was looking and noticed a black shadow, so far away it was barely the size of her fingertip.

“Gale, can you make it there?”

“On it.”

“I’ll go inform the ship’s captain.”

“Right. I’ll take care of it in the meantime.”

Ao spread his wings and took flight, soaring high up into the air. He then sped straight for the ship in distress.

“Help!”

“Stay away!”

The screams of the crew members rose up from the ship. Around twenty monsters, each twice the size of a human, were swarming around the vessel. These creatures had the body of a lion but the limbs and head of a bird, with wings on their backs. All of these monsters were striking at the crew with their sharp beaks and claws.

Despite their large size, the creatures were extremely agile. Any time one of the sailors tried to fight one the monsters off, it would flee up into the sky as

another monster attacked them from behind. The crew members' attempts at countering the monsters were also not exactly organized.

Ao grabbed the foldable rod attached to his hip and extended it with one swing. Then he surrounded himself with Wind Magic as he quickly descended upon one of the creatures. Before the monster had a chance to react, he sliced straight through its wings. The monster let out a shriek as it fell from the sky, robbed of its ability to fly, and sank into the sea.

Hearing the beast's dying shriek, the other monsters quickly abandoned the crew in favor of focusing their attacks on Ao. They communicated with a series of cries before surrounding him—obviously, they had decided to prioritize taking down a powerful threat that had suddenly appeared over the easy prey on the ship.

Any normal person would have been paralyzed with fear, but Ao simply readied his weapon, as expressionless as ever. Then one of the monsters dived at him from behind, signaling the start of the battle.

Ao evaded the creature's claws with a somersault and then immediately sliced through its wings. Defeated, the monster plummeted into the sea. Another monster launched itself at him, but he again evaded the attack by a hair's breadth, destroyed its wings as it passed by, and sent it spiraling into the ocean below. Ao did not have to kill them himself—for a creature that lives in the sky, losing its wings was a death sentence.

After reducing their numbers to roughly half, Ao finally sent the largest monster down to its watery grave. The other creatures immediately fled, screeching as they went; the larger beast he had just defeated must have been the leader of the pack.

Ao watched the monsters flee before descending onto the deck of the ship below, where the captain rushed toward him.

"Th-Thank you so much for saving us!" the captain exclaimed.

"Some of your men must be wounded. A ship is coming to help. Is this a merchant vessel?"

"Y-Yes! We are just returning home after stocking up in Lustia!"

Hearing this, Ao observed the captain. He was a rather well-dressed man, but he was avoiding Ao's gaze. Looking around the ship, Ao noticed that the other crew members on deck were dressed more like ruffians, and they also seemed to be acting a bit suspicious. In addition, the ship itself seemed rather run down for a merchant vessel that traded with the confederation. Lustia only traded with well-respected—and well-connected—merchants. It seemed unlikely that such a ragtag group with such a ramshackle ship would meet Lustia's standards. Ao gave the captain a suspicious look as he waited for the ship carrying Kurenai to arrive.

About ten minutes later, the merchant ship Kurenai was riding was pulled up alongside the ship that had recently been under attack. Doctors boarded the ship with medical supplies, accompanied by Kurenai herself, who immediately ran to Ao's side.

"Gale! Are you okay?" Kurenai asked.

"I'm fine," Ao replied with a nod. "Alte, this ship claims to be a merchant vessel that trades with the Confederation."

Kurenai immediately understood the meaning behind his words.

"It seems we're in luck!" she responded with a bright smile.

Kurenai approached the ship's captain, who was currently receiving treatment for his wounds.

"I'm so sorry about this accident. It must have been an awful experience," Kurenai said, adopting a friendly tone.

"No, no—thanks to the generous help of the man over there, we didn't suffer any casualties," the captain replied, grinning at the appearance of such a beautiful woman. "Our cargo is safe too. The goddess of the sea must have protected us."

The goddess of the sea guarded the ocean's bounty and ensured the safety of sailors. Many seafarers would worship statues of the goddess, or decorate their ships with a figurehead of her.

"Yes, indeed. By the way, I hear you do trade with the Confederation," Kurenai noted. "What kind of cargo do you carry?"

The captain's startled look did not escape Kurenai.

"H-Handicrafts and the like..." the captain answered hesitantly.

"My! That sounds absolutely delightful. I would love to have a look myself."

"That's..."

The captain nervously glanced to and fro.

"It seems your 'cargo' is something that you don't want us to see..." Kurenai noted. "Gale."

The moment Kurenai said his name, Ao used his investigation magic on the entire ship. He easily located the areas within the ship's hold where this "cargo" was located.

"It's below deck, Alte."

The captain trembled at Ao's low, rage-filled voice.

A few minutes later, beastman women and children who had been bound with chains were lined up on deck. Most of them were beastmen with little fighting prowess, like birdmen, rabbitmen, catmen, and ratmen. Grown men might have been able to fight the slavers off, but these were all women and children who would have been easy to capture with the aid of magic or drugs.

The captive beastmen were weakened, but they did not seem on the verge of death, at least. Wrapped in blankets, the beastmen were moved to the merchant ship with help from the ship's crew. The crew of the unfortunate merchant vessel—or rather, the slavers' ship disguised as a merchant vessel—were bound with rope.

"Damn it all... If only those monsters hadn't attacked..." the captain spat.

Beastmen were prized both for their labor and their exotic looks. Thus there were those who would kidnap them, engrave them with Brands of Servitude, and sell them as slaves. Despite the danger, the return on investment was large, and as a result this form of trafficking showed no signs of going away.

There was the sound of something cutting through the air, and Kurenai turned to see Ao holding his rod against the captain's nose.

“Quiet. Do you want me to throw you into the sea like I did those monsters?” Ao threatened.

The captain grew quiet. Kurenai turned to Ao, still wearing her smiling mask.

“It seems the goddess of the sea favored the captured beastmen instead. How unfortunate,” she said, before turning around. As she did, Ao withdrew his rod.

Kurenai had already talked things over with the captain of the vessel they were traveling on—they decided they would be taking both the beastmen and the slavers back to Lustia. The slavers would likely face capital punishment—the Lustian Confederation outlawed both slavery itself and the trafficking of beastmen.

Neither Kurenai nor Ao were especially concerned about the fate of the slavers; however, the fact that there was a supply meant that there was also a demand. Without buyers, there would be no sellers.

“It’s so tragic...” Kurenai muttered, and Ao nodded silently.

Slaves had everything stolen from them—their country, their family, the people they loved, their dignity, their pride, their emotions—and ultimately their lives.

“We need to change all of this,” Kurenai declared. She wanted to change this unfair world, just like their master wanted.

Their master had considered not only his own country, but everything beyond his borders too—even if it was still too early to do much. Supporting him in his goals was what Kurenai and Ao wished to spend their lives doing.

“But I must say, we really are in luck. The goddess of the sea truly is on our side,” Kurenai noted with a cheerful chuckle, and Ao gave her a quizzical look from atop the ramp connecting the two boats.

“Because we were able to save the beastmen?”

“That’s not all.”

Kurenai stepped aboard the merchant ship and spun around to face Ao, her now-short hair fluttering as she did.

“By saving them, we’re in a better position to negotiate,” Kurenai explained. They would at the very least be able to meet with someone notable. That would make it easier for them to do their work as emissaries from Gracis.

Ao then realized something. When he had first explained the situation to Kurenai, she had said “we’re in luck.” She must have already predicted how the events would unfold back then—including what would happen once they arrived in the confederation. She seemed to possess not only tactical skill and quick wits, but command over luck itself.

“Someone who even has luck on her side...” Ao mumbled. “What a terrifying tactician.”

“That’s not quite accurate,” Kurenai replied with a bright smile. “Luck’s really siding with our liege, Herscherik.”

Herscherik was the one who had managed to stop her when she was planning to die, and had gotten Ao to open up despite his distrust of humans. Perhaps these were all mere coincidences—but if enough coincidences add up, they become inevitabilities. Herscherik was the one who had brought all of this about. At the same time, however, those who attract great fortune are also doomed to attract misfortune—just like the figures that history books referred to as heroes.

Kurenai and Ao both needed to become someone worthy of standing at a hero’s side.

“We have to make sure to keep up with Our Liege. Right, Gale?”

“I agree, Alte.”

Kurenai gave him a genuine smile from the bottom of her heart, and Ao responded with a smile of his own.

The Blue Tempest once again became a symbol of death in Felvolk. As he served under the Hero of Light, though, he had also become a symbol of love that transcended race. Despite their differences of birth, he remained by the side of his master, the Hero of Light, and his wife, the Smiling Crimson Tactician. Having a longer lifespan than humans, he continued to serve as a mediator

between different peoples even after his master, wife, and comrades had all passed away. He never stopped loving the Smiling Crimson Tactician, even after her death. Tales of his love, featuring both a grain of truth and all kinds of embellishments, continued to be passed down through generations to come.

The Blue Tempest and the Smiling Crimson Tactician — Fin

Postscript

Hello—Nobiru Kusunoki here again with my fifth postscript. Thank you for reading *Herscherik Volume 5 - The Reincarnated Prince and Felvolk's Greatest Treasure*. Once again, no spoilers here.

Thanks to the generous support of my readers, the Herscherik series is now on its fifth volume. I probably shouldn't say this as the author, but to be perfectly honest, I wasn't sure that I'd be able to keep the series going, considering the last volume ended on a good note. However, all the support from my readers and the publisher completely erased any negative thoughts I had, and now the fifth volume has finally made it all the way to publication. I couldn't be happier. Thank you so much!

Once again, Arico's beautiful art decorates the scenes that my editor M worked hard to select. I was especially looking forward to seeing illustrations of the first woman on Herscherik's team, as well as the beastman. I originally came up with the characters when I was writing the web version of *The Haloed Sage*. I remember wanting to write this story so badly while I was writing *The Hero of Light*. (And then of course I get writer's block when I actually start working on it.)

I wrote some parts of the web version in a hurry, so revising it turned out to be quite the task—there were many contradictions I didn't notice at the time and stories I forgot to include. I'm both thankful for and embarrassed by all the contradictions that M pointed out. When I saw how many mistakes there were, I practically ended up writhing in pain on the floor...

It's weird to think about how I've now worked together with M, the publisher, and Arico for over two years, and had people reading this series for more than four. I can't express my gratitude enough to all those who have helped me along the way.

Finally, a huge thank you to all those who read *The Reincarnated Prince and Felvolk's Greatest Treasure*, the readers who have supported me ever since the

web version, Futabasha, my editor M (thank you for everything you do), Arico for another set of wonderful illustrations, the designer who made this title really stand out on the bookstore shelves, the proofreader (thank you again for all your help pointing out inconsistencies and typos, I'm so sorry for all the mistakes), all others involved with publishing the book, and my family who always supports me. You're all the reason I've been able to bring you yet another entry in the *The Reincarnated Prince* series. Thank you so much!

Before I go, a quick ad(?): I've published a few *The Reincarnated Prince* short stories on Shosetsuka ni Naro that didn't make it into the book. Please take a look if you're interested!

Now then, I've rambled on for long enough here. I hope I get to see you again in the next volume!

— Nobiru Kusunoki













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