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2

*A Young Lady
Finds Her True Calling
Living with the Enemy*

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A Young Lady Finds Her True Calling Living with the Enemy Vol.2

Syuu

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Syuu

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Chapter 31: Budding

BERTINE and Cecilio, the Federation's leader, were on their way to a tavern located near the government building. Though the place was crowded, the tavern owner led them to a small private room inside out of consideration for Cecilio. Placed on top of the table was a variety of dishes. Skewers of grilled beef covered in melted cheese. A stew made of chicken thigh and vegetables. Tiny, fried confections drizzled in molasses. And distilled liquor made from cactus. It was all hearty, down-to-earth fare.

"I would very much like to sample a drink you usually enjoy, Your Excellency."

Bertine's remark had been the catalyst for their order of the cactus liquor. Once they tapped their glasses together and toasted each other, Bertine took a swallow of the liquid. She started coughing violently when the powerful taste of the cactus liquor hit her tongue.

Cecilio stood up in a rush. With a "Pardon me," he thumped her on the back as her vigorous coughing fit continued. Her eyes teary, Bertine finally managed to get the coughing under control. Cecilio couldn't help smiling down at her then. At that moment, she looked much more charming than always.

"My apologies," he said. "I usually drink this stuff with my men who guzzle it like water. A bit much for a woman, eh?"

"No, not at all. I'd like to think I can handle my alcohol reasonably well, but I certainly wasn't expecting that. What a surprise indeed. I imagine it burns terrifically if lit with fire, hm?" So saying, she downed the contents of the small glass.

"There is no need to force yourself to drink this. I'll order a weaker spirit," he suggested.

"No, I should be fine drinking it while eating. Please don't worry about me."

Never listens to anyone, does she? Cecilio smiled ruefully.

“Oh, I just remembered. Whatever became of the small gems you bought in bulk sometime ago? Are you selling them in your shop?” he asked.

“No. I plan on gifting them to a certain friend. She’s the daughter of Lady Dalila, the woman who graciously purchased the scarlet fabric from me. I thought the gems would serve as moral support for her considering the awful situation she’s in at present.”

“Lady Dalila’s daughter? As in the emperor’s concubine? I had no idea you were friends with her,” he said.

“The Lady Diana I know was still a girl when we met, before she began her life in the imperial palace. An intelligent young woman, always ready with a refined and sunny smile. It seems she’s leading quite a restrained existence now in deference to the empress after the emperor fell in love with her at first sight.”

Sorrow engulfed Bertine’s face.

“Right around the time she became his official concubine, she sent me a letter. ‘I’m overjoyed.’ ‘I feel honored.’ ‘I’m ever so grateful.’ She wrote these seemingly happy words and more in it. But on the second page, I saw the traces her tears left behind. I have no doubt she’s being subject to cruelty. I strongly believe the happy words in her letter are her way of remaining defiant. Her way of saying, ‘I will not lose.’”

“I see. And that’s why you decided on your current course of action?”

“Yes. She’s as lovely and pure as a snow-white flower, so when I think about her still enduring ill treatment, my sympathy for her is endless. After all, *she* never sought the position of concubine herself. The emperor receives no harsh judgments for acquiring a concubine, but Lady Diana has to suffer others’ malcontent because of it? Especially when she’s not even in a position to be able to defy him or others!” Bertine’s voice rose a notch. “It’s absolutely absurd. Just one outrageous thing after another. Which is why I wish to gift her a necklace of those gems. I hope it will fuel her courage. You’ll be happy to know Meira designed. Its magnificence will arouse everyone’s envy, and that is how I plan to support Lady Diana.”

Cecilio’s eyes narrowed. “Does she hate the emperor then?”

“No. The rest of Lady Diana’s letter was clear about her love for him. Even though *he* was the one who forced her into such a role in the first place!” Bertine scowled and drank more of the spirit from her small glass.

“Again, stop forcing yourself to drink it,” Cecilio said. “Here, have some water.”

“No, thank you. I find myself utterly baffled by Lady Diana’s love for the emperor. Could it be his face? His personality? Why does she still love him?”

Because there’s the sort of love that comes after you’ve had a child with someone. But if I say this out loud, this young noblewoman will surely cut me to pieces. So Cecilio wisely exercised his thirty-five years of wisdom and remained silent. It was the adult thing to do, after all.

“Lady Diana is the only one who knows her own feelings,” he said instead. “Let me ask you something. Don’t you want to see the man you were to wed?”

“That odious man,” she hissed. “One without the compassion or courage to even bid me farewell when I left after our betrothal was dissolved at the country’s behest. I had honestly forgotten he even existed until you spoke of him just now, Your Excellency.”

Bertine relaxed more and more under the alcohol’s intoxicating effect. Drunk now, she grabbed the fried sweetbread coated in molasses with her fingers and carried it to her mouth, just like she would when it was her and Dorothee alone. She continued rambling while chewing. “I wager Lady Diana must be incredibly dear to the emperor.”

“To that, I say you yourself are quite a dear existence for my country too,” Cecilio told her.

“I... Those words make me very happy now. I vowed to myself that ‘I will become someone with such a powerful, overwhelming presence that no one can ever hurt me again.’ And your words are proof of my efforts.” Cheeks stuffed with fried bread, Bertine stared at Cecilio as she chewed.

“Did something happen lately to inspire such a thought?” he asked.

“My father sent a few members of his private army to bring me back home. Diego is one of them. My father told me to return because he will pay the rest

of the reparations. But my stepmother commanded Diego not to obey him. Also, I learned that San Luenne's royal family forced me to come here anyway, despite knowing Your Excellency had declined the offer to marry me. It felt like I wasn't needed here nor there, you see," she confessed.

So I wasn't imagining the slight tremor in her voice. And now I see I'm one of the people who told her she wasn't needed. Back then, Cecilio had made his decision for the sake of this country. Yet the more he learned about Bertine's circumstances, the more he wondered how much he had wounded her.

"You yourself don't wish to return to your homeland?" he asked.

"I would like to spend the remainder of my life in this country, so I have no plans to go back there ever again."

"I...see."

In an attempt to change the mood, Bertine suddenly posed a question to Cecilio using the brightest tone she could muster. "Your Excellency, what sort of delicacies are there in your hometown? If there's anything in particular you want to eat, I'll bottle it up and bring it back with me."

"Bottling the delicacies of my hometown, hm? Can you give me some time to think about it?"

"Of course!"

Then Bertine slowly closed her eyes, her head bobbing as she sat in her chair. Up until that point, she had been talking quite energetically. But it seemed the strong liquor she drank without rest was finally making itself felt.

I'd just assumed her upbringing would have been a happy one since her father is the chancellor of a wealthy nation. Yet she has suffered more than I can imagine. Cecilio's normally fierce gaze softened as he gently rubbed Bertine's sleepy head with a large, rough hand. After some time, Bertine abruptly opened her eyes with a gasp.

"I can still drink and I can still eat!" she insisted forcefully.

"Is that right? No need to overdo it."

Cecilio's expression was affectionate as he replied to her. He watched over

her for a little while after. Around the time most of the food had been consumed, he decided to call it a night. He calmed a protesting Bertine into the carriage and took her home.

“My lady almost never drinks this much. I do apologize for any inconvenience.” Dorothee thanked him while taking Bertine into her care.

“Thank you very much, Your Excellency.” Diego bowed his head.

“Make sure she drinks plenty of water before you put her to bed.”

With that instruction, Cecilio boarded his carriage once more and departed. His chest ached when he thought about Bertine’s situation with her stepmother. He wondered how painful her childhood must have been since her own home wasn’t a sanctuary for her as it should have been. And then to have his own servants wound her so deeply upon her arrival at his estate after leaving such a home behind. Not to mention his own harsh words to her. Despite everything, Bertine had told him with a smile there was no longer any need to apologize.

Bertine, who appeared strong on the surface though underneath, she remained silently wounded. He couldn’t stop thinking about her. *I want to protect her with my own hands. But I don’t have the right to say so after everything that’s happened.* For a long time, the only thought occupying Cecilio’s mind was the future of the Federation. Yet now he could acknowledge a tender emotion budding quietly within his heart, starting to take root.

THAT night, after returning to his estate, Cecilio summoned his housekeeper. She had been in his employ since his time in his hometown.

“Nilda, what would you say are the flavors that define our village?”

“Hm, an interesting question. I would have to say bumpfish. Open it up, dry it for half a day, then after roasting over charcoal, tear it apart with your hands and squeeze some citrus juice over it... Your Excellency, I find myself suddenly craving it. Even though it’s impossible to find in the area.”

“Bumpfish, eh? I would love to eat some well.”

The bumpfish was so named after the large bump in its brow. It was a fatty fish and its white meat was plump and delicious when grilled. Spurred on by nostalgia, Nilda continued talking, a dreamy look in her eyes.

“Fried giant clam comes to mind as well, the minced meat seasoned with garlic and herbs. A liberal dash of salt makes it the perfect snack to accompany alcohol!”

“Stop. I can’t bear to hear anymore. I’m hungry enough as it is now,” he sighed.

“Why did you ask about the flavors of our home, sir?”

“Bertine wants to bottle them up.”

Pain prickled through Nilda at the mention of Bertine’s name. Regardless of their misunderstanding, there was no doubt that she and the rest of the staff’s treatment of Bertine and her servants was beyond the pale. They had regretted their behavior after His Excellency’s thorough reprimand, but none of them had yet been presented with an opportunity to apologize.

“Your Excellency, it pains me tremendously that I still haven’t apologized to Lady Bertine.”

“My servants’ mistakes are mine. I have already apologized on all of your behalf as well. To ask anything more of her would be to ignore her wishes and demand her forgiveness. But if your heart won’t be at ease no matter what, then you may apologize to her directly. A great deal of time has passed, though.”

“Do you think she’ll agree to meet me?”

“Yes, I do. That’s the kind of person she is.”

Then I’ll do it. I must, Nilda resolved to herself.

“I’ll visit her soon then.”

“You’ll be shocked at how much she’s changed since her time in this manse.”

“Oh, really? Do tell.”

With a laugh, all Cecilio said was, “You’ll find out when you meet her.”

TWO days later, Nilda went with Carlito, the butler, to The Flower of Krusula, Bertine's shop that sold embroidery and accessories. Since they wore their regular clothes instead of work uniforms, Bertine remained unaware of them as Cecilio's estate staff. She cheerfully called out, "Welcome" when they entered.

Both Nilda and Carlito plucked up their courage and introduced themselves. Bertine looked surprised after they finished, then replied.

"I appreciate your visit here. Please, don't concern yourselves anymore over what happened. His Excellency already apologized to me, you see."

With a smile, she served them tea.

"Instead of sugar, I recommend pouring this jam into your tea. I promise it will taste delicious that way too."

Nilda and Carlito stared in surprise at the labels on the jars she arranged for them. They saw jams made from such beloved fruits as dragon's egg and star fruit amongst the collection.

"Oh, my, how nostalgic. Where can I purchase these for myself?"

"I sell them wholesale here since I'm responsible for assembling the goods. I loved all the delicious fruits I came across when I visited the hinterlands, so I send my business partners there jars and sugar. They in turn make the jams and marmalades," Bertine explained.

"Now I see why His Excellency asked me about the flavors of our homeland," Nilda said. "I suggested flayed, roasted bumpfish and fried giant clam to him."

Carlito nodded energetically, familiar with the dishes she mentioned.

"I haven't tasted either of those," Bertine said. "Giant clams don't inhabit the ocean near San Luenne, you see. Roasted bumpfish and fried giant clam, hm...? I wonder why they sound so delicious to my ears even though I've never eaten them."

Nilda chuckled. "His Excellency was right. You have changed a great deal, Lady Bertine."

"Oh, have I?"

“During your stay at his estate, you looked like a typical young noblewoman from the Empire. But now...how should I put it...”

“Now you give off the air of a Federation chief’s daughter,” Carlito said.

“Well. Thank you for the compliment then,” Bertine smiled. “I’m happy to hear you say so, considering how entranced I am with this country.”

Not long after, Nilda and Carlito left the shop, their expressions leagues sunnier than when they first entered. Bertine had thanked them both for their various purchases before their departure. They chatted to each other now that they were back in the carriage.

“What a weight off our shoulders, eh, Nilda?”

“Indeed. I feel lighter now.”

They decided to give the accessories they bought to the maids on staff. Rocked by the carriage’s swaying rhythm, they continued talking on their journey home. The pain in their hearts hadn’t vanished entirely because they both knew it was penance for what they had done. Neither said the words aloud, though they thought the same thing.

Bertine felt relieved as well as she saw them off. She honestly thought Cecilio’s staff’s treatment of her back then had been abhorrent. But misconceptions and misunderstandings abounded on both sides at the time. A way of life that didn’t allow for even a single failure meant accepting that one too was not allowed to fail. What a suffocating, painful way to live.

“After all, people make mistakes, hm?” she murmured, watching the carriage grow smaller in the distance.

Chapter 32: The Dyer and a Boat

BERTINE was at the dyer's, having been summoned there by the owner.

"Now, then, Seilo. Tell me about this request of yours," she said.

"I'd like your permission to mix other colors into this dye you always have me use."

"That is welcome news indeed, because I myself was wondering if it would be possible to create a color other than the scarlet," Bertine responded. "Though I am concerned about what would happen to the glow with other colors."

"I agree. It would be a complete waste to eliminate the soft glow, so please allow me to test out various recipes," Seilo said. "It will be difficult, but I think I can find a solution."

Cecilio had introduced Bertine to this dye shop. An older man and a young artisan ran it. They never asked her questions about the dye's ingredients because Cecilio had warned them not to.

"Excellent, I would appreciate it," Bertine said with a smile. "You can experiment however you wish to, as I have ample supplies for the dye. Shall I bring you the undiluted solution tomorrow?"

"Yes, thank you. Hugo, we have her permission."

"I sure hope we can make lots of colors, boss," Hugo responded.

"I'll see you two tomorrow then."

Bertine left the dyer's shop with that parting greeting. If they could produce colors besides the vivid scarlet and dark red they'd managed so far, she knew she could sell even more fabric. And those sales would bring her one step closer to achieving her goal: establishing a small hotel where the Empire's wealthy nobles would want to stay for long periods of time. They would naturally want to spend their coin there as well, which would allow Bertine to hire many people.

Despite her aim to keep the hotel relatively small, building and running it would be a feat in itself. Bertine herself wasn't confident in her ability to make this enormous dream come true. But her heart danced at just the thought of furthering this tremendous goal.

So she spoke to Dorothée about her dream while sipping on a cup of tea. Her maid questioned her curiously.

"But why a hotel, my lady?"

"Dorothée, have you already forgotten the number one source of income for San Luenne's royal family?"

"Ah, I see the light."

"Yes, indeed, the high-class hotel managed by the organization under the royal family's direct control. Although I have to admit I myself had forgotten about it until after I came up with my own hotel idea," Bertine confessed.

"Oh! Then you mean to strike back at the royal family with your hotel!"

"I do. Except their hotel is a long-standing one with many affluent regulars from the Empire, so my challenge to them would be akin to a sardine confronting a whale. But even a massive school of sardines poses a threat... On second thought, that's not necessary. It's my dream to run a hotel. A small one tucked away in a verdant paradise. Exciting, don't you think?"

Dorothée gazed off into the distance. "We would be awakened in the mornings by the cries of wild birds, hm?"

"And we could take tea on the terrace as we watch flocks of emus."

"That sounds wonderful, my lady. Absolutely enchanting!"

"Evince's fairy-tale buildings will take center stage there," Bertine said.

"So you intend to bring his fantastical designs to life?"

"Yes. Don't you think people will be fascinated by his unusual work?"

"I do!" Dorothée agreed.

Bertine giggled, singing her own praises. "I'll sell all those fabrics to the Empire as well as the jarred goods. Then I'll use those proceeds to build a hotel

and make even *more* money. Perfect, isn't it?"

"My lady, do take care with your expression."

"Oh, dear. Did I look so sinister?"

"Quite."

Building and operating a hotel required someone who understood the whole project well enough to lead it. Bertine keenly wanted to consult with her father on the matter because of his vast experience in managing one, but she feared attracting her stepmother's attention. As the queen's younger sister, the woman might very well relay any hearsay, and Bertine didn't know what kind of awful things the queen might do in turn.

"It will be a roundabout route, but I have no choice except to ask Luca if he can introduce me to someone knowledgeable about the hotel business," Bertine said.

"A sound idea, my lady, considering his position as the manager of a world-class hotel in the imperial capital."

"The only problem is whether or not imperial talent will deign to visit the Federation to teach me how everything works."

"Also a good point," Dorothee nodded. "After all, imperial citizens are quite prejudiced against the Federation."

Bertine frowned, gazing anxiously at the ceiling. "Oh, before all that though, I need to think about how to jar all the seafood Nilda and Carlito mentioned."

"Bumpfish and giant clam, yes?" Dorothee asked.

"There must be other delectable seafood as well. Perhaps I should take a trip there and see for myself."

"If you're referring to His Excellency's birthplace, isn't it quite far from here?"

"Yes. Evidently, a round-trip journey by coach takes a month and a half. The continent truly is enormous. In comparison, the Kingdom of San Luenne might as well just be a cramped dot on the map."

If Bertine built her hotel in the hinterlands she fell in love with, a one-way

journey from Ybit, which lay in the center of the Federation, would take two weeks. Longer with bad weather. All this meant difficulty for the Empire's current stock of working nobility to venture so far out for leisure. The distance from the Empire to the Federation's southlands also needed to be taken into consideration for retired nobles.

Would the affluent elderly even be willing to make such a long journey? Or should I target the younger generation? But they may not have enough financial freedom either.

Older aristocrats were flush with coin and time while lacking vitality and stamina. The younger ones had time and stamina, but were restrained financially. The working ones had both coin and stamina, but lacked the time because of their duties. So which bracket should she target?

Bertine found herself enjoying tackling the problem despite not even having the capital yet for her venture. It was a pleasure missing from her life when she was the marquess's daughter.

"First things first, we'll visit His Excellency's hometown," Bertine decided. "I must sample the grilled bumpfish and fried giant clams."

Before she went on her trip though, she needed important information in advance, such as where the best delicacies could be found and general points to note. Bertine decided to consult Ignacio, Cecilio's secretary. She set out at once for the government building and found herself approached by an unknown man en route.

"Excuse me! I just wanted to say I really enjoyed the dragon's egg marmalade the other day! Please let me know if you ever decide to sell it officially here in the capital. I will most certainly be a regular customer!"

He was one of the civil officials who had participated in the tasting event Bertine and His Excellency had arranged in his office a while ago.

"Thank you very much," she responded. "Would you like me to have a jar delivered to you today? Each variety costs five large copper coins."

"Wow! I can taste the fruits of my home for so little? If you let the receptionist know when you stop by, I'll be there right away. My name is Daniel

and I work for accounts.”

“Understood. I’ll be sure to mention Daniel in accounts then. The delivery will take place later today, so what would you like?” Bertine asked.

“All of them. Two jars of each flavor, please!”

She thanked him and bade him farewell with a smile. When she arrived at the reception area, she asked if it would be possible to meet with Ignacio. Fortunately for her, the man himself walked past just then carrying a mountain of documents.

“Lady Bertine, how may I help you? If you’re looking for His Excellency, he’s currently on an inspection and will be away from Ybit for a week.”

“No, I’m here to see you actually, Ignacio,” Bertine said. “I’d like to visit His Excellency’s hometown in search of local delicacies, so I thought you might tell me anything important I needed to know before I go.”

“Oh. The Callisto district? You *are* aware it’s located in the country’s southernmost tip, yes? Are you sure you want to go there?” he asked.

“Well, I have a feeling I’ll be able to think of ideas on how to package its local flavors after I’ve sampled them myself.”

“You truly are something else...” Ignacio’s expression was both astounded and intrigued.

“Without a husband or children, I can do what I please,” Bertine reminded him. “So it’s only natural I would want to get started on something once I’ve made up my mind, you know.”

“I see. Then please follow me to my office.”

There, Bertine received a pleasantly surprising bit of information. About a ship.

“By coach, it will take about three weeks to reach the Callisto district from Ybit. But if you go by boat via the Saran River, it shouldn’t take more than ten days,” Ignacio explained. “Hm, though it might prove a bit tricky for women. Rough men from the Empire take the same route to head for the ore mines there, so the journey on the boat may be difficult, especially on the way back to

the Empire.”

“Ten days, you say? From Ybit to the Federation’s southernmost point? Truly?” Bertine asked to be sure.

“Yes. Unlike carriages, where it’s necessary to stop and rest the horses, the ships sail without pause. Through the night as well. Although I would like to stress I’ve never seen a woman on one of these ships...” he trailed off.

“Thank you very much! This is wonderful information. Where can I board the ship?”

“There’s a harbor in Ybit. Lady Bertine, I must tell you that sleeping won’t be easy. You’ll all be in the same cabin, you see.”

Bertine grinned at him and raised her right hand, fingers curled into a light fist. “That will not pose any problem. I’ll put up with such sleeping arrangements for the sake of business.”

“Even so...”

“I have an extremely capable escort, so there’s no need for you to worry. Besides, in the eyes of society, I’m no longer a marquess’s daughter. I have nothing of value to my name anymore.”

“Oh...well then.”

After Ignacio gave her a detailed overview of the Callisto district, Bertine cheerfully left. He stared after her, frowning in thought. *I have a feeling His Excellency will reprimand me for telling her something I shouldn’t have.*

“Excellent! I now have a potential prospect for shortening the travel time between the Empire and my hotel. Ignacio truly is an outstanding individual.”

Bertine’s mood was terrific.

Chapter 33: A Journey Sailing down the River

THE Saran River was a confluence of three separate rivers flowing from the Empire. Once this river entered Federation territory, its name became the Saran River. Within the Federation, its width expanded and its current slowed. The Saran River ran through the country from north to south, terminating in the sea that bordered the Federation's southernmost region, the Callisto district. In the Empire, the river flowed fast, sluicing away at the soil and carrying nutrients with it. Its gentle speed in the Federation then allowed all that sediment to settle in the earth. In this way, the Saran River had transported great quantities of fertile soil to the Federation over many long years.

The harbor Ignacio had mentioned to Bertine consisted of a simple pier and a caretaker's shack nearby. Bertine stood on the bank of the Saran River and watched it flow past for some time before calling out in the direction of the caretaker's shack.

"Hello! Is anybody there?"

A man in his forties stepped outside, squinting hard at Bertine and Dorothee.

"Hello. I was told I can board a boat here," Bertine said. "When does the next one set sail?"

"The boat sets sail once a week, but I think you misunderstand the situation," the man replied bluntly to her. "Only men board it and there's only one cabin for everyone. The boat doesn't have any separate rooms for nobility or women."

"Yes, I'm aware, thank you. So when does the next one arrive?" Bertine asked, unruffled.

"Midday, three days from today. Miss, are you sure you intend to board?"

"I am."

"Even knowing you'll be surrounded by filthy men?"

“I don’t mind.”

The man looked doubtfully at Bertine though he accepted her reservation for three passengers on the next boat. Once she returned home, she informed Diego that they would be heading to the Federation’s southernmost region via boat. Dorothée immediately voiced her concerns.

“My lady, we’ll have to prepare the appropriate clothing since there is only one cabin.”

“You’re right. Due to my height, I believe clothing made for smaller men should fit me. Dorothée, you’ll have to adjust it to my size once you buy it.”

“Leave it to me. I’ll ready everything quickly.”

THREE days later, dressed in a shirt and trousers designed for men, Bertine arrived at the harbor via stagecoach. Two other passengers, both men, were already there. They stared at Bertine and her companions in surprise, muttering something about this being their first time seeing women board the boat.

“We won’t be causing anyone any trouble, so I hope the journey goes well,” Bertine said.

“We’ll be playin’ poker until we make port. Things tend to get rowdy, so we’d appreciate it if ya didn’t get angry when they do.”

“Of course. I would be happy to join in a hand or two myself if you’re amenable,” she smiled.

“Not a problem ’t all, missy. Looks like we’ll be makin’ a nice profit on this trip.”

Dorothée and Diego smiled ruefully listening to Bertine’s conversation. The men saw her servants’ expressions and assumed the two must be exasperated with their lady’s whims.

Then the boat finally arrived and docked. Bertine learned that a riverboat was very different from the boats in the Kingdom of San Luenne. The hull was shallow, making the boat quite wide. It looked like an oversized raft that somehow managed to maintain the appearance of a ship. A number of white

triangular sails were attached to the two masts. The main cabin was a simple box-like structure.

Diego held out his hand and helped Bertine board the boat from the pier. Many hammocks were strung up from the ceiling beams inside the cabin. The space smelled strongly of tobacco and alcohol, traditionally masculine scents.

“Oh, my, they have hammocks instead of beds. I’ve always wanted to sleep in one,” Bertine said.

“There must be a trick to getting in and out of one, my lady.”

“Allow me to show you how it’s done.” Diego strode over to a hammock. First he lowered his torso into it then swung both legs on. “Reverse the order when you want to get out. You can also sit and then lie down, but this way is much safer until you get used to it.”

Bertine succeeded on her first try, but Dorothée tumbled to the floor on her attempt. The other passengers already aboard the boat snorted with laughter when they saw that.

“Dorothée, they’re laughing *with* you, not at you, so don’t mind them,” Bertine said.

“I know, I know. I’ll get the hang of it soon enough and show them.”

Before they could even decide where to store their luggage after boarding, poker games began all around them. Four groups, each consisting of three to six men, had set up collapsible tables to play. As Bertine surveyed her surroundings in interest, the two men who had been on the pier with them called out to her.

“Ya wanna play a hand, missy?”

“Could I?” she asked.

“Sure, sure. How ’bout we start you off with a low buy-in?”

“Thank you, how thoughtful of you.”

The men smirked at each other. Clearly, they were overjoyed at having a rich, sitting duck amongst them.

But sometime later, Bertine had amassed a mountain of large and small

copper coins in front of her.

“Goddammit, you’ve been winning hands back to back.”

“I apologize. It seems Lady Luck is on my side,” Bertine grinned.

Listening to the exchange, a bearded man from another group spoke to her.

“Young lady, how about playing with us? Our buy-in’s a miiiite high, though.”

“Gladly, and that won’t be a problem for me.”

That group only had small silver coins on their round table. The bearded man’s friend warned him.

“I ain’t so sure about invitin’ a noble to play with us. Wouldn’t want her father to challenge us to a duel or summat after.”

“Oh, my father would never do something so tasteless, especially when *he* was the one who taught me how to play poker,” Bertine assured them. “So he would be forced to reflect on his instruction if I lost.”

“Then I guess we don’t need to hold back, eh, young lady?”

Sometime later, Bertine once more amassed a mountain of coins, this time small silver ones.

“Ye’ve gotta be kiddin’! Ye sure ye ain’t cheatin’?”

“Of course not. You should know that very well just by looking. Where can I possibly hide cards?”

“W-Well, when ye put it like that, can’t say yer wrong...”

Bertine had anticipated such accusations, so she had rolled up her sleeves and taken off her coat with its pockets before she even started playing. Her shirt was a thin one and the pocket flaps on her trousers remained buttoned.

“I’ll have you know my father subjected me to an intense, grueling education since the age of five,” she told them.

“But yer pa’s a noble, ain’t he, missy?”

“Yes, in the Kingdom of San Luenne, but he absolutely loves poker.”

“Ah-ha. I never would’ve asked you to join us if I’d known ye were so good.”

“I feel the need to apologize for my winning streak,” Bertine said. “Never mind that this is my first trip on a riverboat. If any of you would be so kind as to tell me about the Callisto district’s local delicacies, I’d be more than happy to pay for all your drinks tonight.”

Her words created a buzz amongst all the passengers.

“You mean that, missy?”

“Hey! You haven’t even played her yet.”

“I’ll treat you all since I made so much money,” she vowed. “Please, drink to your hearts’ content. Is there a bar on board, by the way?”

“No, but look for the man wearing eyeglasses. He’s part of the ship’s crew and he’s in charge of the liquor. Ye can pay him!”

“Thanks in advance, little missy.”

After that, everyone clustered around Bertine and told her about all the delicious things she could find in Callisto.

“I’d like to know about foods besides grilled bumpfish and fried giant clam,” she said.

“Shoot, you already know about those?”

“Well, there’s pan-fried stickleback. It’s right tasty.”

“No, no, stickleback is best when it’s charcoal-roasted and seasoned with salt.”

“I myself enjoy oysters steamed in white wine.”

“Largemouth fish liver seasoned with salt and alcohol then steamed is the best snack for alcohol.”

“You’re all wrong. It’s gotta be clam stew, the one simmered in white wine and herbs. All that tender, juicy meat.”

Bertine smiled in satisfaction as she wrote everything down in her notebook. She had enjoyed playing poker *and* she had acquired valuable information. Her southern venture was off to a great start.

Dorothee and Diego had been watching the whole time with amused

expressions. They approached her quietly now.

“My lady, that was very unkind of you.”

“She’s right. Not very mature of you to practically steal the shirts off these amateurs’ backs.”

“Shhh,” she hushed them. “It’s fine, Dorothée. I’m using all my winnings to repay them with alcohol. Besides, Diego, you know very well I am no novice.”

“No, you most definitely are not, my lady,” Diego replied in a no-nonsense tone.

Once she started learning how to play poker at the age of five, Bertine’s talent in the game progressed rapidly. By ten, she occasionally won against her father. By fifteen, she won half of their matches. By twenty, her win rate was 80 percent. And since then, she had become so skilled, she won most of her hands against him.

The secret to her success wasn’t anything unusual. If a hand was bad, her draws were unlucky, or someone was about to win big, she quickly conceded defeat when the stakes were low. Conversely, if she was confident of her hand, she went all in and won. After all, the main things her father had taught her were not to get greedy and not to leave a game to chance. But that was incredibly difficult for the average person to do.

“Bertine, you brat. Your calm playing style is unbefitting of someone your age.”

This was what the marquess would always gripe in frustration after a loss, despite being the one who taught her the trick to poker.

Thus, the ten-day river journey passed in an enjoyable blur, immersed in poker and conversations about the sea’s delicious bounties. Then the three of them arrived in the Callisto district.

Chapter 34: Charcoal-Roasted Bumpfish

THE Callisto district was a lot more relaxed than Bertine could have ever imagined. Seemingly as wide as the ocean, the river wound through the region, bird feathers floating on the surface drifting ever so slowly.

All of the bungalows built near the shoreline appeared much airier than the houses in the hinterlands. The windows were large. They sported shutters on the outside that allowed inhabitants to shade themselves from the sun. Each house had a large terrace-like area by the entrance with awnings overhead. Elderly people sat in the shade and chatted while gazing upon the sea.

“What a wonderful place!” Bertine exclaimed. “The blue ocean looks just like a painting.”

“I couldn’t agree more,” Dorotheé said. “And the snow-white sand on the beach. This is my first time seeing a coastline made of white sand.”

Bertine blocked the sun’s rays with her right arm as she surveyed the landscape. Dorotheé’s eyes were wide as she took it all in. Using gestures, Diego spoke to a local who happened to be near the harbor. Since his arrival, Diego participated in every one of Bertine’s imperial language classes. Unlike her other students though, he was in the process of learning the Federation’s tongue. He had recently absorbed enough of the language to be able to communicate, albeit brokenly.

“My lady, it seems there is no inn here,” he informed her. “Neither travelers nor laborers visit this region apparently.”

“Oh, dear. Then we must find a place to stay. Ignacio told me to head for the chief’s residence, so let’s do that and introduce ourselves.”

Bertine approached the elderly folks sitting on a nearby terrace. They kindly gave her directions to the chief’s house. It was the large bungalow closest to the forest. They told her she might find the former chief there as well, so the

three of them started walking.

“Diego, our luggage must be heavy because of all the glass jars, yes? Share the load with us then,” Bertine said.

“My lady, if Diego isn’t able to carry it, he should retire from serving in my lord’s private army,” Dorothée quipped.

“She’s exactly right. Should the occasion call for it, I am more than fit enough to run while carrying you on my shoulder, my lady.”

“Oh, stop it, Diego. Should the occasion call for it, I am more than fit enough to run myself, thank you,” Bertine said.

They finally arrived at the chief’s large bungalow.

“Hello! We come from Ybit. Is anyone home?”

“Hail!”

A slender but energetic old man responded to Diego’s call. He looked to be just past seventy.

“Well met, well met. What can I do ya for?”

“I’m here on Ignacio’s recommendation. I work for Cecilio and my name is Bertine.”

“Oh ho, ya work for Ceci? Ya don’t say?”

“Yes.”

Technically speaking, rather than working directly for Cecilio, he had entrusted her with a specific task. But Ignacio had mentioned it would be best if she told folks here that she worked for him because it would make it easier for her to conduct business.

“Huh. So ya work for Ceci. Must be right tough, on ‘count o’ that boy bein’ a real slave driver. Come in, come in. Ya must be dead on yer feet. I’ll pour some tea for ya lot. I’m Emilio, Ceci’s grandpa.”

“Thank you very much for hosting us, Emilio.”

She had just learned Cecilio’s nickname in his hometown. Fascinating.

Emilio seemed to be the only one currently in the house. With his slightly stooped shoulders, he shuffled into the kitchen. She could hear the *clink clink* as he arranged a tea set. Dorothee immediately stood up and briskly headed his way, calling out to him that she would assist. A few minutes later, she walked out holding a tea tray.

“Ahhh, sure is nice havin’ a talented young lady help. ‘Preciate it.” Emilio followed behind her, beaming happily.

A faint citrus scent wafted from the tea. When Bertine raised the cup to her lips and sipped, she found she quite enjoyed the mellow flavor.

“Now then. Tell me what business ya have here,” Emilio said.

“My job working for His Excellency is to package delicious goods for sale to the Empire,” Bertine began. “I heard that the Callisto district has quite a variety of tasty foodstuffs, so I’m here now to learn more myself.”

“That right? Tasty foodstuffs, eh? I really don’ think you’ll find anythin’ special in this area though.”

“But I was told about grilled air-dried bumpfish and fried giant clams?”

“Ahahaha! Little lady, we eat that stuff e’ry day. I doubt any of those high-faultin’ imperials will buy it.” The old man grinned like she had just told him a funny joke.

“No, no, you’re wrong,” she insisted. “Vast stretches of the Empire are both far from the sea and bitterly cold as well, so I believe the imperials will very much prize the bounties that come from the southern ocean.”

“Hm, I wonder. How ’bout I grill ya up some bumpfish then? Just happen to have an air-dried batch on hand.” So saying, Emilio placed charcoal on the cook stove in the garden, then layered twigs on top before lighting the whole thing. “Be patient for a bit, eh? Takes some time for the charcoal to catch.”

“Would it be all right if I observed you up close?” Bertine asked.

“Whatever floats yer boat, girl.”

Soon, the coals crackled merrily, the surface covered in white ash while burning red-hot inside.

“Hokay, that should do it.”

Emilio went into the kitchen and came back out holding a colander with a large filet placed on top.

“Is that bumpfish?” Bertine asked.

“Right in one. My son caught it fresh yesterday. He’d been lookin’ forward to retiring, but then Ceci went and hied off to Ybit, so he’s still working hard as the chief. How’s Ceci doing? Good, I hope.”

“He is indeed. He told me what a wonderful place the Callisto district is and how much he loves it.”

“Haha! Gud, gud.”

The old man’s dialect was so strong that Bertine had to pay close attention to him when he spoke. Otherwise she never would have understood him, despite her proficiency in the Federation’s official language.

Emilio placed the bumpfish filet on the heated iron grill. With a loud crackling noise, the skin sizzled and shriveled up. He prodded at the coals and the fish using the same pair of long, iron tongs. Meticulous to a fault about everything including the proper use of cooking implements, Dorothee watched him anxiously, doing her best to swallow her objection to his handling. Fat dripped down onto the coals from the bumpfish filet, causing smoke to rise.

“What an appetizing scent,” Bertine said.

“Innit? Bumpfish is right fatty, so it tastes better if ya drain off some o’ the fat like this.”

The elderly man flipped the filet with the same tongs from earlier, letting the other side of the fish roast through slowly. Then he ground some sort of white seeds using a stone pestle and mortar. Dorothee continued staring at the tongs in frustration. Bertine was sure she desperately wanted to wash them right away.

At long last, the bumpfish filet finished roasting, the flesh beginning to fall off. Emilio transferred the filet to a plate, then he took a small knife he’d brought from the kitchen and cut off a still-green lemon from a tree in the garden. He

cut it in half, rubbing the lemon halves on the steaming filet. Finally, he finished it off by sprinkling the white powder he had ground earlier.

“Chow down, chow down.”

“Gladly!”

The air-dried, charcoal-roasted bumpfish was piping hot and the freshly squeezed lemon juice gave it a refreshing edge. It tasted of charcoal and the smoke that rose from the coals from the dripping fat. The thick, plump white meat tasted sweeter thanks to the salt. When she chewed, the white powdered seeds would occasionally make itself felt in the tingles it created in her mouth. All the flavors made the fish taste incredible.

“This is...”

“My lady, it’s fantastic!” Dorothée exclaimed.

“She’s right. I grew up eating fish in San Luenne, but this is amazing. The fish itself is delicious, though I find myself partial to this white substance.”

Grinning, the old man watched them as they dreamily devoured the bumpfish.

“Dorothée, I’m not sure how we can bottle or package this. I’m afraid it will rot,” Bertine said.

“We have no choice but to try. Look, even Diego is obsessed with it.”

“I would very much like to take as much as I can of this fish. It’s absurdly delicious,” Diego said.

After finishing the charcoal-roasted bumpfish, they helped themselves to more of the citrus-scented tea. While drinking it, a man who strongly resembled Cecilio returned to the house. He dragged a net holding game behind him. Age-wise, he appeared to be in his mid-fifties.

“Father, I’m back,” he said. “We have guests, eh?”

“Right ya are, Delio. They work for Ceci.”

The man turned out to be Cecilio’s father.

“A pleasure to meet you. My name is Bertine du Jeanne. In my role on His

Excellency's staff, I'm responsible for procuring and selling the Federation's specialty goods to the Empire."

"Specialty products, you say? Unfortunately, you won't find much 'round these parts."

"Oh, that's not the case at all! The bumpfish your father made for us was absolutely scrumptious."

"Well, everyone here's mighty tired o' bumpfish, considering it's regular fare for us."

"Then what do you say to jarring and selling it?" Bertine proposed.

"Will it sell though is the question, innit? You'll be in a right pickle if it doesn't."

"It will sell. I'm sure of it. In fact, we'll buy it all, so no one here will lose anything!"

Cecilio's father, Delio, looked troubled.

"As ya can see, miss, it's just us two men in this house. No women to help us, y'see. I'll ask the women in the neighborhood if they're keen, but if they're not, I'd like you to give up on the idea."

"Of course. I too will take the chance to explain and demonstrate the process to them. If they're still unwilling after that, I'll give up," Bertine conceded.

"Understood. We'll try it your way then. How's Ceci doing, by the by?"

"Very well. He's working hard every day for the sake of the Federation."

"Is he now? Good enough, I s'pose. So, then, Bertine, from the looks of ya, can I assume you're from the Empire?"

Bertine realized telling them about the reparations wouldn't be a good idea. She chose to go the safe route instead with her reply.

"I migrated from the Kingdom of San Luenne because I love this country."

"Didja now? And here I thought Ceci finally got himself a woman. Guess I was wrong, eh? I can't make heads or tails of why that boy won't marry. He passed thirty years ago, don't'cha know. At this rate, makes me wonder if he's plannin'

on going down with the country.”

“Well, it’s really not my place to comment on that.”

She knew she couldn’t speak carelessly, so Bertine accompanied her non-committal reply with a polite smile.

Chapter 35: Magic Seeds

DELIO, Cecilio's father, insisted the trio stay with them, so Bertine and her servants gratefully accepted his offer. She had most definitely enjoyed the charcoal-roasted bumpfish, but she couldn't stop thinking about the crushed seeds sprinkled on the fish. Which was why she asked Delio about the substance while helping with dinner preparations in the kitchen.

"Delio, which plant do those round white seeds come from?"

"Round, white... Ah, stingers. We call 'em stingers or pricklers 'round these parts since they sting your tongue when ya eat 'em. They grow plenty right over there. Ya got a liking for the smell and taste, right? Everyone grows 'em in their own gardens, so they can use 'em whenever they get a cravin' for 'em. C'mon, I'll show ya."

He led Bertine out into the garden. Delio pointed to a tree at the edge of the garden. A slender vine-like plant twined around it and on the vines, she saw many small, round green berries clustered together in long, thin bunches.

"Pluck one off and try it."

"Right then... Wow! It's spicy! But refreshing at the same time!"

"We wait until the green ripens to red. Then we soak the red berries in water, peel the skin, and dry the seeds. That's how we get the white stingers."

"Are there other varieties besides white?"

"Black. We can get 'em that color by harvesting and drying them whole while they're still green."

"Is the flavor different too?"

"Yeah, the scent is much stronger on the black ones. We use 'em to remove the smell of meat and strengthen the flavor. The black seeds go well with boar and deer meat. In the end, it's really up to personal preference, but I myself

enjoy using a whole bucketload of the white ones on fish.”

Bertine trembled with excitement at the stunning discovery she’d just made. These seeds would dramatically increase the flavor profile of meat and fish one was used to eating. If she sold them, she had no doubt gourmands would leap at the chance to buy the product. No, not just gourmands, but everyone else too.

“Delio, these seeds would delight a great deal of people.”

“You sure ’bout that? Don’t tell me yer plannin’ on selling these too?”

“I am!”

He smiled wryly. She could tell from his skeptical expression that he didn’t believe her. Since the seeds were just a normal, familiar part of his life, he didn’t recognize their value. It was the same as the scarlet fabric. But Bertine’s intuition shouted at her: “This is delicious. People will love it. It will definitely sell!” She had a difficult time controlling her overflowing excitement.

“Then, why don’t I show you the different ways we use stingers?” he suggested. “You can sample it all and decide for yourself.”

“Thank you! I can’t wait!”

She followed Delio back into the kitchen, where he showed her bottles crammed to the brim with black and white stingers. Her heart fluttered at the sight. All of the bottles were corked, so she wondered restlessly if the stoppers were to prevent the seeds from going stale or as a defense against humidity.

Delio picked up one of the bottles and poured out a handful of black seeds into her palm. Bertine really couldn’t get enough of the wonderful scent. When she bit into one, she found both the taste and prickling more powerful than the white ones.

She realized the reason neither the Empire nor San Luenne ventured into this region. Citizens of both countries most likely assumed that there were no noteworthy products to be found here. Except the reality was entirely different because of the treasures hidden in plain sight all along, since time immemorial. And it was just her fantastic luck to learn this information.

That night, Dorothée helped Delio cook dinner, which turned out to be a veritable feast of meats and fish. They enjoyed eating everything, particularly the dishes sprinkled with stingers. *This country truly is an undiscovered treasure trove*, Bertine thought to herself.

THE next day, Bertine and Dorothée immersed themselves in the process of jarring the local fish, including bumpfish. They shred the meat from the charcoal-roasted fish filets then dredged the pieces in crushed white stingers before packing them into jars. They screwed on the lids. After which, they placed the jars in a hot-water bath. Once the jars were sufficiently warmed up, they loosened the lids to let the steam escape, then quickly twisted the lids closed tight. Throughout their work, they frequently cooled their hands using cold well water because of the hot jars and lids.

“First, we’ll jar enough of the charcoal-roasted bumpfish for His Excellency and see if they smell fishy after enough time has passed,” Bertine said. “We can process the oil-fried and white-wine-simmered fish the same way we work with marmalades and jams, so I don’t anticipate problems there. Tomorrow, we’ll talk to everyone in the Callisto district about the jarring business.”

DELIO, the chief, sent out the notice to the local residents regarding the venture. Neither their age nor their gender mattered as long as they showed interest in the idea. Unfortunately, the turnout wasn’t large. Bertine learned the hard way that a promise of profit left the citizens here unmoved. After all, why did they need money when they lived their lives very well without it?

Only five individuals attended the gathering. Two men too old to go out into the sea, an old woman, and two young women. Bertine recalled her father’s words: “It is precisely when the situation isn’t going well that there is merit in devising a creative solution. Therein lies the fun in the job.” With a determined smile, she straightened her spine and explained the jarring process to the five.

At first, the participants were doubtful of whether their daily fare would even sell in the Empire. But when she told them about how successful her fruit-jarring venture was in the hinterlands, they seemed intrigued. Mentioning how

the people there were able to turn a profit and use those funds to purchase vital medicines seemed to do the trick.

“I could buy books with the money I make.”

A slender, young woman made the remark. She had Bertine’s attention from the start since most of the women living in the region were of strong constitutions.

“I teach the local children the official language,” she said. “After my husband and I met and married in Ybit, we moved here to his hometown. But there’s no bookstore in the area, meaning there are no books for the children to read, even though I would dearly love for them to have the experience. It would be too expensive to order them from Ybit, especially considering the high delivery costs. I could buy the children many books if I had money.”

“Indeed. You’ll be able to give the children, on whose shoulders the country’s future rests, the things they need. But it won’t just be them who benefit. Once this area’s specialty products really take off in sales, the young people here can earn a comfortable living right here. They wouldn’t need to leave their homes for the metropolises.” Having said her piece, Bertine gestured for Diego to show them the hinterlands’ fruit products.

“Oh, my. So you’re saying these sell well in the Empire?”

“Yes. They’ve become quite the hot topic amongst the nobility there. The unusual and delicious flavors are all the rage. I charge one small silver coin for each jar in the Empire.”

“One small silver coin? Impossible!”

“It’s the truth. These fruits could never be grown in the Empire because of its cold climate, so I can sell the marmalades and jams for a high price,” Bertine explained. “If the shine ever wears off these goods, I may have to lower the price someday, but I’ll handle that day when it comes.”

The people of the Callisto district each took a jar in their hands and inspected the contents. Seeing the fruits they ate every day inside, they found themselves surprised once more.

“So your plan for Callisto is to bottle the sea’s bounty, yes?”

“That’s right. But I have yet to sample the giant clam and stickleback dishes here, which is why I humbly ask you to teach me how to prepare them,” Bertine requested.

“Oh, is that so? Then why don’t we make it right now and eat it together?”

Now? You have the ingredients on hand? Puzzled, Bertine nevertheless followed the five individuals. Their destination turned out to be the slender woman’s house. She invited everyone inside and walked to the kitchen, mentioning the freshly caught seafood she received yesterday. Then, while conversing with everyone, she quickly whipped up a batch of fried giant clam.

Frying the chunks of giant clam meat in oil transformed the texture into a sublime chewiness. The oil was evidently derived from tree nuts that grew all year round. It perfectly complemented the sweetness of the meat. A mixture of sliced onions, garlic, herbs, ample white stingers, and coarse sea salt sprinkled on top of the meat was the finishing touch on the dish.

“Mmm!”

Bertine’s eyes widened in surprise at the first taste of the steaming hot fried clam. She glanced at Dorothée and Diego, the former enjoying her morsel in bliss with her eyes closed while the latter happily helped himself to a spot of distilled liquor with his piece still in his mouth. Said liquor was made from potatoes that grew in the outskirts of the nearby forest. The woman of this house had brought it out for Diego after he sat down.

“You seem like one who enjoys spirits,” she remarked.

He politely declined with a “Thank you, but I’m currently on duty.”

To which she responded, “Today is an exception, so please, try it.”

“Well, if you insist then. Only a glass, though,” Diego conceded defeat, his expression relaxed.

“So what do you think? Is it delicious?”

“It’s incredible!”

“Just so you’re aware, we can’t harvest the giant clams in great quantities since this particular variety of clam requires a lot of time to grow. But there’s a

smaller clam with a similar flavor that is quite plentiful.”

“Then let’s use those clams instead of the giant ones!”

The residents chatted casually to Bertine, who was in high spirits.

“We can catch as much as we want of those small clams.”

“I have a large jar of stingers at home as well. They’ve been thoroughly dried out, so you can take the whole thing as-is with you since we can always just make more.”

Without thinking, Bertine closed her eyes and thanked God for her powerful ability to convince people. She knew the stingers would definitely sell. She would ask Luca to use the seeds in his hotel first. The wealthy nobles who frequented it didn’t flinch at the price they charged for the fruit goods, and they would surely jump at the chance to buy the stingers as well.

“My lady, get a hold of yourself. And your *face!*” Dorothee waved her hands urgently in Bertine’s face and forced the younger woman to return to reality.

Chapter 36: Let's Take Our Time

BERTINE showed them the process of jarring over and over again. She also checked the five people's work until she was satisfied with the results. They all worked together in a harmonious environment day after day.

Spending so much time in each other's company naturally led to their conversations becoming more intimate, to the point that they would talk fondly about their spouses. The first one to reminisce about their love was the old man in his seventies.

"Marrying my woman was my life's greatest achievement," he said.

"He never once complimented his wife while she was alive, but he's been like this ever since she went before him. We were all shocked the first time he said such words."

"Like I could ever say such things to her face! Woulda embarrassed the heck outta me."

Bertine couldn't help smiling at the exchange. She always felt soothed whenever she heard others speak fondly of the ones they loved. Her heart melted even though the words were never about her. Still, it was a thousand times better than being forced to listen to slander.

I think I finally understand why I feel so much calmer and lighter since coming to this country. Because I have yet to hear anyone here gossip maliciously about others. Which brought to mind various experiences she'd had in San Luenne as a member of its high society. The constant insults, rumors, and speculation had me convinced that was just a normal part of life. None of that served any purpose. No, it acted as a silent poison instead.

Bertine had intended to adapt to life in her old home, but it was clear that deep inside her heart, she had grown tired of such skullduggery.

ON her last day in the Callisto district, Bertine left the five individuals with a final thought. “There’s no rush, so please make the most delicious jarred goods you can.” She had grown close to them during her time here and each gave her a handmade present. Bertine received things like a seashell necklace, a pendant with a polished nut hanging from the chain, and an embroidered drawstring pouch. She gratefully accepted them all.

Her visit to their home had been unplanned, an entirely selfish whim of hers. On top of that, she’d shamelessly asked them to do such a huge favor for her. Yet now she would return to Ybit with their handmade gifts. The kindness in their gifts brought tears to her eyes. But she controlled her emotions and instead thanked them with a smile.

“I’ll cherish each and every one of these. Thank you so very much. This amount should cover the transportation charges once you finish making the products, as well as your labor up until that point. Please, take it.” She pushed the money into their hands, closing her fingers tightly around theirs. Then she left the Callisto district.

The pack Diego carried on his shoulders contained a huge quantity of black and white stingers. Bertine had purchased them fair and square. Cecilio’s family and her five colleagues insisted she didn’t need to pay them, but she was determined to compensate them. Because she knew the stingers would sell for far more than they could ever imagine. The idea that only she would profit never entered Bertine’s mind.

The riverboat sailed upward on their return journey. Though the ship’s crew took advantage of the wind’s direction, they nevertheless operated the sails and rudder the whole way. Their relaxed attitude on the journey down to the south was nowhere to be found as they all strove to do their best managing the boat.

As for the passengers, they were different from the ones Bertine had initially traveled with, but they still played poker. They looked indolent on the surface, yet it was clear they had worked themselves hard in the mines. It was one of the things she learned during her time in the Callisto district. Both the miners and their site foremen worked under harsh conditions. Once they went into the mines, they generally didn’t come out for a whole day or so. Her coworkers in

the jarring venture had told her it wasn't unusual for men to die in cave-ins either.

Bertine thought of a plan to sell the stingers on the return journey. First, she wanted to ask Luca if he would use the condiment in the dishes served at the Rose Hotel he managed. The customers who frequented the hotel would spread news of the seeds through word of mouth, which would be the fastest way for the wealthy to learn about them. Both aristocrats and merchants. They would vie for the lead when it came to purchasing the stingers. Or so she hoped. It was more difficult to predict how luxury grocery items would sell compared to marmalades or wheat.

She occasionally joined a poker game, but the boat's crew had warned the passengers this time since they had been privy to her prior winning streak. So not many invited her to play with them. Dorothee remarked that it was a good chance for her to rest because she had been working too hard anyway.

THE return trip took a few days longer, but they finally arrived in Ybit. Bertine headed to the government building that same day. She was, after all, the Special Envoy for the Sale of Local Specialties under Cecilio's direct supervision. Which meant it was necessary for her to inform him of the results of her venture. She was led to his office immediately upon her arrival by Ignacio himself because he had been aware of her idea.

Diego and Dorothee remained in Ignacio's office with their jars of roasted bumpfish. Ignacio was apparently from the Callisto district as well, so he had rushed back to his office after taking her to see Cecilio.

"Welcome back, Bertine," Cecilio said. "I heard you traveled to the region I grew up in. You can't imagine my surprise when Ignacio told me upon my return from an inspection. And you went by boat, no less. You're as driven as ever, I see."

"I just got back today, Your Excellency," Bertine responded. "The journey by boat was quite pleasant indeed. You'll be happy to know that your father and grandfather are in good health."

"I see... It's been quite some time since I last saw them, so I'm relieved to hear

they're doing well."

"Exceedingly well, I'd say. They both very much wished to see you as well, Your Excellency. I've brought some things for you on their behalf."

She retrieved several jars from her bag. Roasted bumpfish meat, oil-fried giant clam, pan-fried stickleback, and oysters steamed in oil as well as white wine. There was also an entire jar of stingers.

"Those are stingers!" Cecilio exclaimed. "How nostalgic. I ran out of the supply I brought with me to Ybit a long time ago."

"I know they're more delicious freshly made, but I hope you can enjoy these dishes whenever you please."

"What precious flavors here in Ybit. Once I get home, I'll heat everything up and enjoy it all leisurely. I think that will be the best way to eat them, considering it's been so long since I've tasted home."

"Please do."

Just then, Bertine's eyes were drawn to the book lying on top of Cecilio's desk. She couldn't read the title because of the documents carelessly covering it. But she recognized it nonetheless. The deep green cloth it was bound in. The dark red color of the bookmark ribbon. Its size and thickness. All of the book's hallmarks were familiar to her.



It's quite improper to inspect a book someone else is reading. Bertine looked away. Except another thought soon followed. *But why does His Excellency have it?* While she contemplated the situation, Cecilio inquired curiously.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, not at all. Speaking of your home, Your Excellency, it possesses a relaxed charm different from hinterlands', hm?"

"There isn't much there, but I still love it. I'd like to go home at least once while my grandfather remains in good health. Yet there's so much to do here that I can't escape. Building schools and hospitals, the aftermath of the flooding, maintaining the road infrastructure. It never ends."

"Yes, I noticed how busy you and Ignacio always are."

"I have to create an organization to get anything done, y'see. Someday, things will settle down. I was worried when I heard you were heading to Callisto, so I'm glad you're safe. You didn't experience any danger on the ship journey? With all those men abroad?"

"Not a whit. They regaled me with stories about the delicacies I would find in the Callisto district and invited me to join their poker games."

At the mention of poker, Cecilio gave Bertine a sidelong glance.

"Is something the matter?" she asked innocently.

"This is only a guess, but you bled those men dry of their coin, didn't you?"

She burst out laughing at his comment. It was like he had been there himself.

"I knew it. I had a feeling you were a betting woman," he said.

"Don't worry, I repaid them with alcohol using my winnings. Back to the matter at hand. Your Excellency, I believe we can sell the stingers for a high price. Is it possible to establish a system in the Callisto district to cultivate and ship them?"

"How much do you intend to charge?"

"Hm, that's a good question... I think five small silver coins for a jar this size would work."

“Five? Interesting... So much for berries that grow in everyone’s gardens back home. If you say they’ll sell, then I’ll believe you. A man works for my father, helping him govern the Callisto district. He’s the main candidate to take over as the next chief, so I’ll inform him and my father of your plans. Since you still have to oversee your projects with the scarlet fabric and other jarring ventures, they can manage the finer details there.”

Oh, he’s right. If I take on any more work, I won’t be able to do it all myself.

“Stingers grow easily in Callisto, but I noticed they weren’t used in the hinterlands. I imagine that has to do with the soil and climate of Callisto creating such a favorable growing environment that everyone has them in their gardens,” Bertine said. “That being the case, Your Excellency, I have a proposition. We buy dried white stingers for a jar this size at the price of two small silver and five large copper coins, and the black ones for two small silver coins.”

Bertine exhaled softly then.

“I thought so too during the contract negotiations for the wheat, but it infuriates me to think about all the goods the Federation’s people have sent off to the Empire without knowing their true value,” she huffed. “Right on the heels of that thought, I’m reminded of the Kingdom of San Luenne, which has led an affluent existence by dint of cozying up to the Empire...”

“Bertine, don’t be so impatient. Not long has passed since this country awakened to its potential. If you try to rush things in a short amount of time, the outcome will most certainly be disastrous. So let’s take our time while we consider the bigger picture.”

“Disaster, you say?”

Cecilio nodded emphatically. “If you try to mobilize people by prioritizing efficiency, you’ll end up with a military force. And that’s not something I want for our country. Although I must admit it’s difficult to find the right balance considering how carefree our citizens are. I sometimes think they’re *too* carefree.”

Not long after, Ignacio came back and informed Cecilio that his next visitor had arrived. Bertine took the opportunity to say goodbye and leave his office.

She thought back on the book. *He must be reading it now since it lay on his desk. That book is about San Luenne's laws, isn't it?* She could think of only one reason why he was currently reading it. The storm blowing violently over the Empire, the Federation, and San Luenne had not yet abated.

Chapter 37: Diligent Evance and the Finished Necklace

EVANCE had arrived alone in the imperial capital. He lived in a certain old man's house as his apprentice.

At first he tried to enroll at a school of architecture to study, but he wasn't allowed to have an interpreter, so he had been at a loss on what to do. "Unfortunately, there isn't much else we can do." The schools' employees only had responses along these lines for him and they struggled to conceal their prejudice against him since he was from the southlands. Evance himself didn't notice their attitude, but his interpreter, Herman, did as he translated next to him.

Herman was disappointed about losing a job he thought would last a long time, and on his first day no less. Worse though, he felt extremely sympathetic for the large, good-natured young man as he dispiritedly hung his head. Which was why Herman appealed to the president of his company about Evance's dismal situation.

"Boss, isn't there anything we can do to help him?"

The president of the firm summoned Evance to him that same day after listening to Herman.

"I can't ignore your plight because you're here on Lady Bertine's introduction. Marquess du Jeanne and I have had a long friendship, ever since he helped me start my company, so I'll do what I can for you out of my debt to him."

Hope blossomed on Evance's face.

"Evance, I'll introduce you to a famous architect, one who contracted our translation services in the past. I'll draft a letter of introduction for you, but it's up to you to entreat him with the resolve you arrived here with. Though he's currently retired, this architect is famous all around the world, not just in the Empire, so it's your responsibility to make a strong impression."

"Thank you so much, president! I'll do everything in my power to convince

him to take me on as a student!”

And so, Evance visited the home of Eckhart Beck with Herman accompanying him.

“I would like to study to make my dream houses a reality. But the school of architecture wouldn’t accept me if I needed an interpreter. So, please, sir, I beg you to allow me to study under you.”

He pleaded with Eckhart through Herman. Eckhart was a small man in his sixties. A pair of reading glasses rested on the bridge of his nose, over his upturned eyes. He peered at the large young man sitting in the chair across from his.

“Hmmm. Tell me, what kind of house do you want to build?”

“Here, let me show you.”

Evance placed his sketchbook on top of the table then turned to the page with his favorite design. Eckhart Beck took the sketchbook in his hands and flipped through the pages, studying Evance’s designs. All of the houses were strange to say the least. A house that resembled an egg standing upright on a plate. Another that took after a mushroom. He wanted to ask Evance if these houses were designed for fairies to live in.

Eckhart couldn’t contain his chuckles. But he gave Evance his full consideration, scrutinizing every design until he reached the end of the sketchbook.

“It’s a darn good thing you didn’t receive admission to the school of architecture,” he said. “If you had, these ideas would have been stamped out of you, never to see the light of day. Because that school is designed to churn out architects ready to draw and build in the mainstream styles. They would have rejected all of your designs.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yes, indeed. Now, you listen to me, young man. Buildings are for people to use. So the most important thing is whether or not a structure is safe. The buildings you want to create lack that essential factor. Typhoons, heavy rains. Your buildings must be strong enough to withstand either of those phenomena,

so you *must* take safety into consideration when designing. The appearance of a building comes after you can guarantee its safety. Henceforth, you will live in my home and learn the fundamentals of how to build a safe structure first.”

Evance stood up in a rush without thinking. “You’ll teach me then?”

“Yes. Your way of thinking intrigues me. I retired a long time ago from teaching, but I find myself interested in the idea of bringing your houses to life. This challenge is perfect as my last architectural project. Yes, yes, intriguing indeed. I envy you for being able to dream up these ideas.”

Favored tremendously by fortune, thus Evance became the elderly architect’s apprentice. The famous architect possessed a wealth of practical experience. He hadn’t lost his passion for architecture either, so Evance’s fated encounter with this man would prove enormously beneficial for his future.

EVANCE’S lectures with Eckhart began the next day, with Herman serving as interpreter. In between, he also took lessons in the imperial language from Herman. Some time later, he began working in Eckhart’s house as his assistant. It wasn’t an easy life for Evance. As the son of a chief in the Federation, he had grown up with servants tending to him. But he never complained, not even once.

Bertine had given him a great deal of money without thought and sent him here because she believed in his talents. So he could handle anything if it meant living up to her expectations.

“Bertie, just you wait. I’ll definitely help you make your dream come true.”

So his days passed in a busy blur, working and studying architecture.

THEN there was Bertine living her life in Ybit, the Federation’s capital. After several months, the necklace she’d been working assiduously to create was finally complete. It consisted of delicate silver parts joined together and incorporated an abundance of small pink sapphires and garnets. The whole time she worked on it, all she could imagine was how the necklace’s glow would complement Diana’s red-gold hair, making her look even more beautiful. Large

gems were all the rage amongst imperial aristocracy, but Bertine judged them unsuitable for this necklace's design.

"It's done!" she rejoiced.

"Oh, did you finally finish, my lady?" Dorothee asked.

"Yes, after a very long time. Now I would very much like to present this to Lady Dalila so she can give it to Lady Diana."

She couldn't just send it by post because of how expensive it was. Which meant she would have to deliver it directly herself. So Bertine immediately wrote a letter addressed to Lady Dalila. In it she mentioned her creation of a one-of-a-kind necklace and how she would love for Lady Diana to wear it. She ended by asking her when it would be most convenient for her to visit. Then she sent it off via express delivery and awaited Lady Dalila's reply. When it finally came, she read the date Lady Dalila had written as well as how much the older woman looked forward to seeing her again.

"Right, then, I'll need to pack since I don't have much time before we meet," Bertine said. "Once I finish, I'm off to the imperial capital. And the timing couldn't be better, since I just received a large shipment of jarred goods."

In the midst of her packing flurry, a messenger came running from the government building.

"I come bearing a letter from His Excellency Cecilio!"

"Thank you very much. I'll respond to him by writing now, so please wait a bit."

Bertine hurriedly tore open the envelope and took out the letter to read.

"I propose we meet in the Empire because I'll be journeying there myself on some business. I would like to become acquainted with Lady Dalila myself, so please allow me to accompany you on your meeting with her."

"I imagine he doesn't get many opportunities to visit the Empire now that he's the leader of the Federation. It might be a bit discourteous to meet Lady Dalila like this, as just another stop in his official schedule, but she doesn't need to know that," Bertine decided.

“If anything, I think it’s reassuring to have His Excellency by your side, my lady,” Dorothee said.

“You’re right. I want to meet Lady Diana as well, but I doubt the emperor’s concubine can leave the palace so easily. It will probably be impossible to see Prince Claudio too.”

THE next morning, Bertine departed for the imperial capital after leaving her shop in Isabella’s capable hands.

“My lady, we’ve been traveling tremendous distances of late,” Dorothee noted.

“Oh, you’re right. North to the imperial capital, south to the Callisto district. Goodness, what a busy schedule.”

Dorothee chuckled in response to Bertine’s rueful smile. Compared to their time living in the tiny Kingdom of San Luenne, their recent travels might as well measure the distance between the heavens and the earth.

“Regardless, I’ll go wherever I’m in need. Dorothee, I never imagined every day could be such a joy to live. It feels like that awful day I left San Luenne happened decades ago.”

Dorothee nodded vigorously. “I couldn’t agree more. I’m ever so happy to see you bubbly and energetic, my lady. My lady up in God’s garden must surely be delighted as well.”

“I wonder how Father feels about my current circumstances. Maybe I should send him a letter through Luca? No doubt any letters sent directly to him bearing my name would be thrown away before they even reach him.”

The fact that Bertine had to steel her nerves and go to such lengths just to get a letter to her father made Dorothee’s chest ache in sympathy for the younger woman. So she deliberately affected a bright tone when she replied.

“I think that’s a wonderful idea. Since Master Luca and my lord presumably exchange correspondence regularly, it shouldn’t raise any suspicions.”

“A word, my lady,” Diego spoke to her nervously. “The marchioness told me

to while away two months in the Empire at my leisure, but much more time has passed. With your permission, I'd like to remain in the Federation with you both."

"A good point. My stepmother must be wondering what delayed your return this long, Diego. I'll ask Father about this too. I'm sure he'll think of a good solution."

"Oh, thank you. I'm relieved to hear that."

The day she stepped foot in the Southern Federation, Bertine had no prospects for her future. Without her even noticing though, she had built a community for herself. Dorothée wasn't the only one with her now. Isabella, her shop manager; Cecilio; Ignacio; Chief Bruno, his wife, Cassandra, and his son, Evance; Chief Kurt; Cecilio's father, Delio; and Luca, her father's hotel manager. She had a network she could rely on.

Chapter 38: Off to Diana's Imperial Villa

BERTINE and her escorts headed north once more on a stagecoach and finally arrived at the imperial capital. Their first stop was the Rose Hotel managed by Luca. There, they secured lodgings to rest for the night.

"My lady, what a long journey that was."

"Yes, I do find myself a bit tired. But I need to inform Lady Dalila of my arrival here and about the meeting with His Excellency," Bertine said.

Diego accepted the role of messenger and departed at once for the countess's residence. Not long after, Luca visited their room.

"Bertie, you made it safely here, I see," he said. "I've seen to the shipment of the jarred goods. I can't believe the business is doing so well that we can place orders of a thousand units."

"Indeed. We now have two manufacturing locations, plus everyone has become quite familiar with the process. I hope your profits are faring well too, Luca."

"They most definitely are. I won't be surprised to see the Southern Federation swept up in the tides of time in the near future. It's simply a matter of when at this point. In any case, one can never have too much money."

For an instant, Bertine's expression hardened. "But, Luca, the southlands' charms can't be measured by coin. The same goes for its people. You would understand in a single glance if you were ever to visit. I want to protect that paradise, you see. Oh, right, I never thanked you for everything you've done. I'm truly grateful to you for selling so many of the fruit jars, not to mention at such a high price as well. Are you sure you wouldn't like to take a commission?"

Luca shook his head. "The excitement, I feel, is more than enough commission. Our clientele consists exclusively of the wealthy, so they don't even blink at the price I set. Besides, it was the first time in a long time I felt my Luennian blood heat. Makes you feel like dancing, being in charge of popular

goods, eh? You really are an alchemist for thinking up such a product.”

“Don’t call me that, please. Right, I almost forgot. I brought you something you may like. Here you go!” Bertine rummaged in her luggage and withdrew two jars of the stingers. One white, one black.

“Are these some sort of seeds?” Luca asked.

“Yes. If you crush them into powder, the black ones go well with meat dishes and the white with fish. The more finely ground they are, the stronger the flavor. Take one out from each and try them yourself. Start with the white one. You’ll be surprised.”

Luca picked out a white stinger seed then carried it to his mouth where he bit down on it. “Wow! This is spicy, huh? I’ve never tasted anything like it before. It’s not poisonous, is it?”

“Of course not! You’re looking at the Federation’s newest specialty product,” Bertine pitched. “The plants don’t grow in the Empire, you see. I’d be delighted if your chefs could incorporate these into the hotel’s menu.”

“Thank you. The head chef will be pleased to use them. What price do you intend to set for these?”

“You only need a little bit for any dish, so I imagine one jar will last a customer for quite a while. Which is why I’m thinking of charging five small silver coins per jar.”

Luca grinned at her reply. “Excellent. We’ll both earn well off these then, especially because they can’t be grown in the Empire. I have no doubt they’ll fly off the shelves.”

“Wonderful! But I don’t plan on overworking the people of the Federation to produce these or any of our other goods. Because they’re different from the citizens of San Luenne.”

“How?” Luca asked.

“Unlike Luennians, the people of the Federation lead happy lives even without money. My dream is to build my own small hotel in that paradise and grow old there.”

Luca seemed puzzled by her words. “Then you don’t wish to marry?”

“More accurate to say I gave up on the idea,” she confessed. “Now then, Luca, if you would please deliver these stingers to the head chef.”

“Right, of course.”

He looked both worried and like he wanted to press her further, but he said nothing and left the room. Bertine didn’t notice his expression at all. Instead she walked to the en-suite, thankful for the plumbing that piped hot water directly into the rooms.

Listening to their conversation, Dorothée recalled how Cecilio had escorted the drunk Bertine inside their home back in Ybit. *His Excellency tended to my lady very diligently in her intoxicated state. I wonder if he has feelings for her.* But she didn’t voice her thoughts aloud.

My lady has been through much and more, to the point where even now she still needs to scheme to merely send a letter to her father. I must not say anything at this juncture and risk destroying their relationship. After all, a seed can only sprout when it has been carefully nurtured. Dorothée decided it was indeed best to keep her own counsel on the matter.

Bertine remained blissfully unaware of her maid’s concerns as she filled up the bathtub with hot water and submerged herself in it. By the time she finished bathing, Diego had returned.

“Thank you for acting as messenger despite being as tired as us, Diego,” Bertine welcomed him back. “How did Lady Dalila respond?”

“She requested you accompany her to the imperial palace tomorrow. Lady Diana would like to thank you for the scarlet fabric. Since His Excellency is staying at the palace while he’s in the Empire on business, they went ahead and invited him to join you all as well,” he reported.

“Oh, I’m so looking forward to seeing Lady Diana again!” Bertine exclaimed. “I don’t even remember the last time we met. Was it fourteen years ago? Fifteen?”

THE next day, Bertine visited Lady Dalila's estate and rode with her in her carriage to the palace. Within its confines, the countess regaled her with tales of the innumerable letters she received from women asking about the fabric. Bertine couldn't be more delighted by the news.

The Empire of Centaur's palace was built as an extension of an ancient castle. While the old castle was made of dull white stone, the imperial palace was made of marble. The palace glittered blindingly white, with several tall, slender towers jutting skyward. Both the castle and the palace were surrounded by high stone walls, designed not only for protection but also to engender a sense of awe in the viewer.

When Bertine's father had brought her here as a child, she had been stunned by the majestic beauty of the structure. Yet all she could think of now was the greenery of the Federation instead. *Ahhh, I want to go home already.* She recalled the cries of the emus, the monkeys' howls, and the wild birds' squawking. *I've become a citizen of the Federation through and through,* she thought to herself with a rueful smile.

Their carriage crossed over a narrow stone bridge on its journey to the imperial palace. Soon, Bertine spotted flowerbeds ahead overflowing with roses. Then moments later, she saw Cecilio standing in front of one of the imperial villas. He wore a white formal uniform. Next to him stood a slender young boy and they were both protected by several guards.

"Oh! It's Claudio!" Lady Dalila pressed a hand to her mouth as tears welled in her eyes at the sight of her grandson, the second imperial prince.

"I presume you do not have many opportunities to see him?" Bertine asked.

"Yes, that's right. He's grown so much taller since the last time we met!"

To Bertine, Cecilio appeared leagues more gallant and handsome in his formal attire than usual, especially in comparison to the prince next to him. *Men certainly do look twice as masculine in their formal military uniforms.* She knew Bianca, the girl over the moon for Cecilio, wouldn't be able to control herself if she saw him now.

The carriage stopped. When Lady Dalila started to disembark, Cecilio extended his hand up and helped her descend. The second prince offered his

hand to Bertine.

“Welcome to our villa in the imperial palace, Lady du Jeanne. Mother is very much looking forward to seeing you again,” Claudio greeted her.

“Thank you very much, Your Imperial Highness. It’s a pleasure to finally make your acquaintance. I have been on pins and needles to meet both you and Lady Diana.”

He smiled graciously. Though the boy looked to be around twelve years old, his expression was incredibly mature because his smile, though polite, seemed crafted as a social nicety. *I don’t think he ever had the chance to run around carefree like a child should*, Bertine thought to herself.

“Bertie! Oh, Bertie! Look at you. Such height you have on you now! You really are an adult now, hm?”

She knew the excited voice. When Bertine turned her head in the direction of its owner, she found Diana, her red-gold hair done up in a complicated twist.

“Di!” Bertine unconsciously called the other woman by the nickname she’d used affectionately and rushed to her side. Diana opened her arms wide, welcoming Bertine warmly. They hugged each other tight as tears welled in their eyes.

“Right, then, come in, come in,” Diana said. “I hardly slept a wink last night, I was so delighted by the prospect of seeing you again. Oh, Bertie! I’ve missed you so much!”

Chapter 39: Conversations at the Imperial Villa

FIRST, Cecilio, the leader of the Federation, introduced himself to Diana and Claudio. Once they finished greeting each other, the five of them began bantering in a friendly manner. But they were careful about the topics they chose because of the maids and guards stationed inside the parlor. They didn't know if or how anything they discussed would get back to the empress.

For a while, Claudio smiled calmly and merely listened to the adults speak. Though after judging an appropriate time had lapsed, he issued a command to all the servants waiting in the wings.

"Please take your leave," he ordered. "It has been fifteen years since Mother and Lady du Jeanne have seen each other, so it's best to give them privacy."

Cecilio spoke as well. "I would very much like to tour the palace gardens."

He took his own guards from the Federation with him when he left the room. Bertine realized Cecilio must have decided it would cause unwanted speculation if the leader of the Federation were in the presence of the emperor's concubine.

Once the four of them were alone, Bertine immediately took out a slim, flat box from her bag. "I made this while wishing for your happiness, Lady Diana."

"I wonder what it is... Oh, my! What a beautiful necklace! I've never seen a design like this."

"Mother, allow me."

Claudio stood up and placed Bertine's gift around his mother's neck. The gorgeous necklace stretched across her chest like the finest lace, its gems picking up the sunlight streaming through the window. It reflected the rays at Diana's slightest movement and sparkled brilliantly.



“It suits you very well, Mother.”

“I *do* feel so luxurious wearing it. You’re incredible, Bertie. I had no idea you could make something like this as well.”

“This design was actually created by a woman from the southlands. I have five additional designs made by her as well,” Bertine said. “Should you desire any of them, please let me know and I shall make it for you. I also wanted to let you know that the scarlet fabric can now be made in the following colors—navy blue, dark green, maroon, brown, dark brown, and fuchsia.”

“Is that so? Marvelous.”

A determined light suddenly entered Lady Dalila’s eyes. “Older women would love those colors. No, younger women will as well, depending on the design. Bertine, might I place another order with you?”

“I’d be delighted if you did. Lady Dalila, I want you to be the only point of contact for that fabric. The more you can expand your social network and increase your power, the easier it will be for Lady Diana and Prince Claudio to lead normal lives. Don’t you agree?”

“Oh, Bertie...why are you doing so much for us?” Diana asked.

Bertine took a deep breath. Then, while gazing at Claudio, Dalila, and Diana, told them everything that happened, from the moment she left the Kingdom of San Luenne to now.

“Essentially, I was told again and again that I wasn’t needed,” Bertine said. “Maybe not so explicitly, but the lack of words doesn’t change the truth. Which is why I decided to make a place for myself where I *am* needed. And now I have both people and a place that need me. I have so many goals left to accomplish and I’m having so much fun on my journey too. You can think of this necklace as a fruition of my experiences as well as my desire to support you, Lady Diana.”

Listening thoughtfully, Claudio asked her a question. “Lady Bertine, please tell me something. How did you become so strong?”

“Your Imperial Highness, there was a time when I wondered if my life has any meaning. Death scared me, but I didn’t know how to move forward either, so I

spent a long time lost and confused. I brooded for so long that the sun rose and set, the angle of its rays changing as the day passed. The whole time, my maid silently stood watch over me. I think she was so worried about me she couldn't bring herself to say anything."

Bertine exhaled, regrouped her thoughts, and continued.

"I realized then that if I died there, she would be in pain for the rest of her life. My maid's name is Dorothée, but she is so much more than that. She has been with me during the happy moments and the unhappy ones, remaining steadfastly by my side no matter what. Protecting my pride wasn't worth causing her pain. That was when I decided to throw my pride aside and live anew. Dorothée's devotion gave me the courage I needed in the eleventh hour."

"Your maid's courage, you say?" Claudio was surprised by her unexpected answer.

"From the moment we are born, death makes equals of us all," Bertine said. "Even if one doesn't die in a hurry, one will die someday regardless. So I decided as long as Dorothée watched over me, I had no choice but to try my best and leave behind no regrets."

The boy nodded emphatically a few times, his expression indicating his deep contemplation of her words.

IT was finally time for her to take her leave from Diana's imperial villa. Her friend repeatedly insisted she pay for the necklace, but Bertine shook her head and refused.

"Lady Diana, be strong and live a good life. That will be my payment."

Once she said her farewells to the three of them, Bertine stepped outside the villa. When she had taken a few steps away, Claudio suddenly rushed toward her. His expression was serious as he spoke softly.

"Mother has hidden it from me, but I know the truth. The harder I work and show results for my efforts, the harsher the criticism she faces. I couldn't find any meaning to my efforts or my life here. But after listening to your tale, I now

understand what I need to do. I'll do what I can for my mother's sake."

Bertine lowered her voice too and responded swiftly. "Your Imperial Highness, there is always a path that leads to hope. Even if it is a narrow, hard-to-find road, I know there must be a way for you and your mother to live happily. You're still only twelve years old, after all. Take however much time you need to discover the correct path. I myself am still searching for the path I should walk. If you ever need someone to talk to, I'm here for you. Please send any correspondence to the manager of the Rose Hotel. He'll forward it to me."

Bertine smiled reassuringly at Diana and Dalila as they stared, puzzled. Then she left the villa grounds. A few moments later, she joined Cecilio, who'd been waiting for her outside the grounds' gate. They both boarded a carriage and then he spoke to her.

"Well, that was certainly worth our while."

"Indeed, it was, Your Excellency. May I ask what business brings you to the Empire?"

"Despite the wars we've fought, the Federation and the Empire will always need each other. So the emperor and I discussed various matters that needed to be discussed."

"You're always extremely busy, aren't you, Your Excellency?"

"Perhaps. But it seems the emperor has his plate full too."

The carriage they rode in continued its journey toward the Federation. Inside the vehicle, Bertine recalled Claudio's words. *Someday, Prince Claudio will become a duke and have his own lands to manage. So long as his relationship with the crown prince doesn't sour, he may even have a chance to take his place in the political arena. Save your strength for the future.* She shouted those words in her heart in support of the young prince.

AFTER her visit, Bertine received an order for thirty bolts of the fabric in the new colors from Lady Dalila. The total came out to twenty-one large gold coins. Cecilio had consulted with Ignacio ahead of time to establish a special division to oversee the protection of the trees from which the bark was made. It would

prevent the trees from being overharvested and would also set up a system for payment and transportation of the bark.

Since they had matters well in hand on that front, Bertine decided to withdraw from the cloth venture in order to focus her attention on the business of stingers as well as the preparations she would need to make for the construction of her hotel. She received her share of the profits once the Federation took its portion.

One night, Dorothée made a comment to her.

“His Excellency’s portrait in the business district has changed, from depicting him in his navy blue military uniform to him in a pure white ceremonial attire. He looks magnificent, to be honest. Quite an impressive portrait.”

“Yes, he does look exceedingly splendid in full military dress.”

Then Bertine realized what she said and started in surprise. Dorothée pretended not to notice, but she secretly smiled inside and thought to herself, *At last, my lady sees the light.*

A month later, Bertine received a letter from Diana. The necklace she’d gifted her friend became all the rage amongst imperial noblewomen. They were enamored with its innovative, opulent design. Diana wrote that she would be more than happy to pay Bertine to create additional pieces from the other designs in her collection.

“Consider it done, Lady Diana.”

She decided to have Isabella make a new necklace and approached her with the suggestion.

“Me? You want *me* to craft a necklace for an imperial concubine? I-I couldn’t!” Isabella immediately balked at the idea, but Bertine gripped her hand and replied encouragingly.

“Don’t worry, I’ll check your work at the end of each day. Just try your hand at it, a little bit at a time. I know how scrupulous you are with the accessories you make, and that attention to detail is reflected in their popularity with

customers. You can do it. After all, didn't I promise you 60 percent of net profits once we're able to create high-value products?"

"I can't even imagine how much 60 percent of something this expensive would be. The thought alone terrifies me. My wages are already so high!"

"Nothing to be frightened of, Isabella. This commission may very well prove to be a great leap forward for you."

Though she tried refusing numerous times, Isabella was ultimately overwhelmed by Bertine's determination and accepted the work. She would never have another spectacular opportunity like this in her life. For a necklace *she* made to be worn by the emperor's concubine, someone of such high stature. Resolved now, Isabella intently studied the design Bertine had given her.

Chapter 40: The Stingers' Unveiling

LUCA handed off the white and black stingers to the head chef. When he tasted them, his eyes widened in surprise at the unique scent and jolt of flavor, neither of which he had experienced until now.

"Manager, do we have Lady Bertine to thank for these as well?"

"That's right. She discovered them somewhere in the Southern Federation."

"Black for meat and white for fish, yes?"

"Is what she said. Also, you can use however much you want to your taste."

The head chef folded his arms and scrutinized the stingers for some time. Tonight's main dish would be braised beef tongue. He wondered if he should put a few of the black ones in while the stew simmered. Or might it be better to sprinkle some on at the end?

"I'll try out various arrangements. This will certainly test my skills, eh, manager?"

"There's a good chance they'll wind up as popular as the jams and marmalades."

"Do you plan to sell them? I would rather not have other chefs get their hands on these just yet, so kindly hold off on your plan. They're called stingers, right? Why don't we just keep them as a special privilege for our hotel's guests only?"

"Hmmm."

If Luca had only the hotel to consider, he would have readily agreed to the head chef's suggestion. But he personally wanted to increase Bertine's profits from this venture too. After all, the Rose Hotel only existed because of the marquess. So Luca decided Bertine should take priority in this situation.

"How about we do this? Once the stingers have become the talk of the town, I'll first sell them off in small amounts at a high price. Those sales will determine how to deal with them after."

He would need to get Bertine's permission before implementing his course of action. Moreover, he wanted to inform the marquess of her activities. Not to mention she had given him a letter to give to her father.

So Luca decided to hide two letters, his own and Bertine's, inside a package containing confections baked at the hotel. The marchioness wouldn't be suspicious of anything coming from the hotel. He tied off the package with a pretty ribbon to make it look like a gift, then included a card sporting the Rose Hotel's name. It was addressed to the marquess.

A week had passed since the head chef came into possession of the stingers. At the Rose Hotel, a luncheon was being hosted by ten nobles whom the emperor favored strongly with his trust. The latest topic of conversation among them was how uniform the price of Federation wheat had become, set to a minimum of seven large silver coins per wagonload.

"What an aggressive price increase. It seems some in the Federation realized the chronic wheat shortages here in our country. At the emperor's behest, we've been purchasing the wheat wholesale on individual contracts with Federation sellers, so this is absurd."

"It must have been Cecilio, the Federation's leader, who noticed the shortage and raised the prices. Otherwise, there is no way he would have been able to enforce the minimum price throughout every corner of that enormous nation."

"Cecilio's appearance on the political stage has pushed the Federation forward a decade, no, two decades into the future in a single stroke. Astounding progress."

"I wish they had continued living in their tribes fighting amongst each other. Would have continued making our lives easier, eh?"

"He's an eagle who doesn't fly with pigeons."

"An aggravating man indeed."

The others nodded in agreement, their expressions acrimonious as they recalled that very bird of prey Cecilio embodied on the Federation's flag. While conversing, they steadily made their way through the appetizer and soup

courses. Then they started on the main dish, flounder basted in butter.

“Hm? What are these white seeds?”

“Count Adler, please taste it yourself. The flavor is incredible!”

“I wonder where this crushed powder comes from. Such a stimulating aroma and taste.”

The ten nobles sampled their morsels dusted in the powder and were all surprised by the flavor. These parts of the flounder were far more delicious than the pieces breaded and basted in butter. When they bit into the mysterious powder, the aroma flooded their mouths.

“This powder really brings out the flavor of the flounder, doesn’t it?”

“I agree. After experiencing such an amazing taste and scent, the butter-basted bits leave me unsatisfied.”

Their discussion on wheat prices disappeared completely as they all concentrated on the butter-basted flounder. They continued making astonished comments while they ate. Once the fish course was over and their empty plates were taken away, they were served braised veal. One of the aristocrats questioned the waiter.

“Can you tell us if the mysterious powder on the flounder was some sort of herb?”

“Yes, I believe so. It goes by the name of ‘stinger,’ and we recently acquired a supply of it.”

“Stinger, you say?”

“That’s correct, sir.”

The noble looked down at his plate and saw a black powder dusting the braised veal. This time, they all took a bite of the dish.

“Wow! The aroma is much stronger than the white one.”

“Pungent and spicy but also very fragrant.”

“I would love to know where these powders come from.”

“They will definitely sell well. Before they go on the market though, I’d rather

take some home with me for my chef to use.”

It hadn’t taken long for their conversation to center around the stingers now.

“I’m quite partial to the black.”

“Ah, but the milder flavor of the white can’t be so easily dismissed.”

“I want to buy some for myself.”

As they raved about the stingers, the waiter brought them their dessert course. It consisted of cheese coated in honey and pastries. The pastries were covered in a soft yellow marmalade and bright red sauce.

“Such a refreshing sauce, although the aroma differs from berry fruits.”

“I’ve never seen this fruit before either. What a rich scent.”

“I think the white stingers would go well with this honeyed cheese.”

Clearly, a few of them had already fallen completely under the stingers’ spell. After their luncheon ended, they asked for the chef because they wanted to know more about the stingers. The manager arrived instead.

“Those things called stingers are marvelous. So aromatic too. Very appetizing indeed.”

“Thank you very much. They were actually gifted to our hotel and are quite a precious commodity. We currently have one jar each, around this size, of the white and black stingers.” Luca used his hands to describe the size of the jars.

“Only one jar of each? Is that all you have in stock?”

“Yes, at present.”

“Will you be receiving a greater supply anytime soon?”

“I certainly hope so. We’re currently doing our best to negotiate a stable supply for the hotel.”

“Which means if I want to eat these stingers again, I have no choice but to dine here?”

“Unfortunately, that’s exactly the case.”

Luca did his best to project an apologetic expression to accompany his polite

reply, but he was afraid his lips would split into a grin at any moment. Since Bertie had wanted the Rose Hotel to be the first sales hub for the stingers, he knew it wouldn't be a problem to acquire more supplies. But people were easily lured in by the words "precious" and "limited." However, they would dismiss a product if the price didn't match its value, so it was the merchant's responsibility to find that fine line.

The nobles' luncheon started with a discussion on wheat and ended with one on stingers. They had no notion whatsoever that a young woman was responsible for both topics.

NATURALLY, rumors of the stingers spread like wildfire amongst the aristocracy, who loved the newest trend. The Rose Hotel's restaurant ended up fully booked for the next three months. A fair number of customers who came from afar because of the rumors stayed at the hotel. The hotel's entire staff remained extremely busy.

The rumors didn't stop at the aristocracy though. Word of the product reached the ears of wealthy merchants too and it wasn't long before the stingers from the Federation practically flew off the shelves. One medium bottle in a shipment was divided into eight smaller ones. Each of the small ones sold quickly despite the high price of one large silver coin per bottle. Some folks even resold those small bottles at three to five times their original price. Eventually, the emperor found out about these stingers as well.

"Seems something called a stinger is the talk of the capital. It's some sort of herb? Regardless, I would very much like to try it myself."

With this single comment from the emperor, stingers found their way to the imperial palace via Luca. He knew everyone in the empire would be clamoring to get their hands on some once they learned that stingers were being used in the palace too. He suppressed the excitement surging in his chest and calmly conducted his meeting with the palace's food purveyor. Instead of the small retail bottles, he agreed to provide the palace with the medium-sized jars—three each of the black and white—he received from the Federation.

"You can only allot six jars for us? You do understand this request comes

directly from His Imperial Majesty.”

“Humidity will destroy the stingers. Not only will they become stale, but if mold grows on even one, you have to throw them all away. So it is best to purchase them in small quantities.”

“Hm. Understood.”

Heeding Luca’s advice, the food purveyor wrapped the jars in oilcloth and stored them in airtight wooden boxes to prevent moisture from seeping out. The Rose Hotel’s head chef had accompanied Luca on the trip and he explained the finer points of using the stingers. Then, from that night onward, stingers were served at the emperor’s dining table, where it was well received by the man himself.

ON a certain night, the emperor visited Diana in her villa. He told her he would have stingers delivered to her galley as well because she would love the flavor and aroma. Except she had already received stingers and fruit goods from her mother, Dalila, by way of Bertine. But Diana had no intention of telling him so. She certainly wouldn’t be so uncouth as to dampen his spirits.

“Oh, my, how exciting. Your Majesty, I didn’t know about these stingers until you mentioned them, but I have fruit marmalades from the Federation. My mother sent them to me. Claudio and I enjoy eating them for dessert, but they pair well with dry wine too.”

She signaled surreptitiously with her eyes to one of the maids. The woman went promptly to work. In moments, she served buttered saltine crackers covered in a layer of marmalade sporting thin slices of fruit. The emperor wasn’t averse to sweets.

“Well, well. A Federation fruit, hm?”

He ate the treat with great interest while sipping on wine. From that night onward, each time the emperor visited Diana’s villa, she served him a different kind of fruity commodity arranged on different types of treats. As a result, some time later, her villa always maintained a ready supply of the Federation’s jams and marmalades.

When this information reached the hinterlands, Bruno and Kurt exchanged pointed glances then toasted before swallowing the spirits in their cups.

“The emperor himself, eh? Wheat, I can understand, but I can’t wrap my head ’round the emperor enjoying the marmalades and jams we make in our villages.”

“Would’ve thought it impossible myself not too long ago.”

“If our fathers and grandfathers knew, their knees would buckle in shock.”

“Ahahahaha! It would have been nice to tell them, don’t ya think?”

They smiled at each other and finished their star fruit liquor.

Chapter 41: Dinner at the Marquess's Estate

THE stingers' popularity skyrocketed in the Empire, successfully selling at a high price. Though belated, the herb also eventually gained critical acclaim in the Federation's capital of Ybit, where restaurants incorporated them into their menus. Many Federation citizens had been unaware of the product since it grew in the far southern reaches of the country, so its popularity as a new type of aromatic herb continued to grow. However, Cecilio and others from the south were overjoyed to be able to experience the taste of their homeland in the capital and used the stingers extensively.

"Seems that a small jar sells for one large silver coin in the Empire."

"Wow! Lucky for us in the Federation that it only costs two or three small silver coins, eh?"

"I'm just glad to know that at long last our nation is finally getting its money's worth from the Empire."

Cecilio and Bertine heard this conversation from beyond the partitioning screen. They smiled wryly at each other while enjoying their spirits. Recently, the two of them had been venturing on outings like this quite often. Cecilio was the one who always invited her.

"Excellent work, Bertine," he said.

"Thank you. I've come to learn how much fun it is for my business instincts to pay off since moving to this country."

"For my part, I'm certainly grateful to be enjoying Callisto's seafood goods every night."

"I certainly hope the seafood jarring business continues. It seems the people there would rather harvest and dry stingers."

Cecilio nodded then commented about something that had been on his mind for some time now. "I appreciate your decision on how profits should be

distributed for the stingers. Wise of you to determine it on the basis of each medium jar sold.”

“Oh? Why is that?”

“If it had been in the form of a percentage of net income, like the fruit goods, the Callisto district would have been in an uproar right now with everyone flabbergasted by the large sums of money they’d never seen before. If the situation had come to that, they might have begun to deride humble work such as fishing and working in the fields. And that would have been undesirable.”

She understood what he meant. Fruit goods were already being sold in abundance in the Empire before the Federation’s entry into the market, so the margins were easy to read. Stingers, on the other hand, were a completely new kind of herb, ones that didn’t grow in the Empire like other herbs. Therefore, it had been harder to predict the profit margins, so the price was determined based on the cost of labor. But it turned out to be a blessing in disguise.

“I’m glad to hear you say so,” Bertine replied. “I certainly don’t want to take any actions detrimental to this country.”

“Right. Now that that’s settled, tell me what you wanted to discuss, Bertine.”

“Yes, of course. Ships, Your Excellency. Specifically, I would like to construct vessels to sail up and down the Saran River,” she said. “I envision elegant boats, ones that even aristocrats and women aren’t afraid to board, to shorten the travel time to places like the hinterlands and the southernmost tip of the country. The round-trip journey by boat to either of those regions would be much faster than by carriage.”

Cecilio’s expression was pensive. “Boats, hm? You wish for imperial nobles to use them, don’t you? But I wonder if they would be willing to undertake a river journey. After all, we’re discussing people who love to show off their personal carriages customized with their family crests.”

“Then we should build boats that they’ll *want* to board. The Federation boasts tremendous supplies of stingers, fruits, and meat. Eventually, when I build my own quaint hotel, I’ll use all of those and more to entice the imperial nobles here and reap the profits.”

Cecilio drank the distilled spirit in his tiny glass then grinned at her. “You know, Bertine, lately, I’ve been thinking that anything you say really does become reality.”

“Well, I very much plan on bringing this idea to life as well, Your Excellency.”

“Ignacio calls you our very own goose that lays the golden eggs.”

“A goose... I *can* take that as a compliment, yes?”

“Of course. Thanks to you, our country is producing specialty goods one after another, leading to our people becoming ever more prosperous. Frankly, I’m still amazed a single person can achieve so much for us through sheer willpower. The national government will bear the costs of the riverboats as part of our transportation infrastructure.”

“Thank you very much! I’m certain that once river journeys are fully underway, we’ll see even more progress.”

Cecilio’s words delighted Bertine.

“The Kingdom of San Luenne truly committed a grievous blunder by sending off such a talented individual to another country,” Cecilio said. “They must be regretting their actions deeply by now.”

“I wonder about that, since I’ve been circumspect about keeping my name out of our ventures.”

Bertine strove to put Luca and the Federation at the forefront of her ideas. She had come up with this tactic after she’d been attacked for the dyes. Standing out too much in business inevitably meant drawing a target on one’s back. Thankfully, only two villains had tried to rob them back then. But if it had been five or ten, she and Diego might not even be alive now.

“If you make a name for yourself in business, then you’ll make enemies. It’s even worse for women. So be discreet when it comes to earning your keep. Don’t seek attention or accolades. You don’t need that sort of validation. The numbers in your ledgers will give testimony to your talents instead.” Those were her father’s thoughts on the matter and she found herself explaining them to Cecilio.

“I’d like to meet your father at least once.” An earnest expression accompanied his reply.

“Oh, that would be fascinating indeed,” she responded. “I wonder what sort of conversation you and he would have. I very much want to hear that.”

“I may not know much about commerce, but I still want to chat with him. Right, then. I’ll consult some experts on shipbuilding. Give me some time, won’t you?”

“Thank you!”

They spent the rest of the night as usual—enjoyable conversations while drinking together, with Cecilio escorting her home at the end of the night. But Bertine still couldn’t bring herself to ask him about his research into San Luenne’s law. She was a bit afraid to learn his answer.

AROUND the time Bertine and Cecilio were chatting the night away, her father, Marquess Maxim du Jeanne, was in his home in the Kingdom of San Luenne, reading the letters in the package from the Rose Hotel.

Dear Father,

I’m happy and healthy. Every day has meaning for me.

You’ll be pleased to know that my efforts went beyond the reparations of a thousand large gold coins due to the Federation. Once the debt was cleared, His Excellency bade me work directly under him. I’m now the Special Envoy for the Sale of Local Specialties.

Does my stepmother suspect Diego for not returning? I worry about this.

In the near future, I want to open my own hotel in the hinterlands here. Just a small one, mind you. If you know of anyone who is an expert in hotel management who’s willing to teach me, please introduce them to me.

All my love,

Those were the contents of the exceedingly succinct letter from his daughter. In his letter, Luca wrote about Bertine's tremendous success in the sales of Federation fruit goods and a particular type of aromatic herb. He also mentioned how the emperor himself had taken a particular liking to both commodities and ordered his people to have supplies on hand. Luca ended by noting that he would send any future letters from Bertine to the marquess under the hotel's name.

Maxim read Bertine's letter over and over again. Elias, a member of his private army, had informed him about her work designed to pay off the reparations. But he was surprised to learn of her new position, particularly the fact that His Excellency Cecilio himself had created it for her.

Yet one thing troubled him...

"Nowhere did she write of her wish to see me again." The marquess's expression grew sad as he realized how easily his beloved daughter had attained independence from him. "Still, her interest in hotel management certainly marks her as my child."

The luxury hotel owned by San Luenne's royal family and the Rose Hotel in the imperial capital. He had drafted the plans for both hotels himself, on top of being responsible for their operation. From the beginning, he had been involved in every stage of the projects, down to the finest details.

"A hotel in the hinterlands, eh? I should ask Franz if he'd be interested."

Franz was the Rose Hotel's first manager and was currently approaching sixty years of age. Maxim had intended for Franz to manage the Rose Hotel until his sixtieth birthday. But eight years ago, the hard-working man's daughter had fallen gravely ill after giving birth.

"I want to care for my daughter in her last days and raise my grandchild in her stead after she passes." With those words seven years ago, Franz handed over his position to Luca and had been living a quiet life ever since.

"He might refuse since his grandchild is still young."

Nevertheless, the marquess penned a letter to the man he thought most suitable for the role. After he finished, he took out a small glass bottle hidden amongst the mountain of sweets in the package from the hotel. He sneezed when he opened the lid and the pungent aroma of stingers wafted out.

“Bertie, I sure hope this won’t poison me,” he muttered to himself.

He read Bertine’s letter once more, but try as he might, he couldn’t find any hint of the words “I’m lonely” and “I miss you.”

“Seems the Federation, as massive as it is, suits her disposition more than this country.”

His eyes drifted over his daughter’s pen strokes, seeing the strength of her personality conveyed even on paper.

THE next day, during dinnertime, the marquess commented idly. His tone signaled something that suddenly came to mind as he broached the subject.

“I just remembered I received a letter from Diego.”

His wife, Rose, tilted her head thoughtfully, waiting for him to continue.

“It turns out he was afflicted by some terrible disease in the Federation with an uncertain prognosis. He’s been bedridden for quite a long time now apparently. He wrote that he somehow managed to recover, but is requesting a temporary leave because of how physically weak he still remains.”

“Oh, my, how awful. I have indeed heard of illnesses unique to the Federation. I’m so glad to hear he’s escaped death’s door. Please allow him to convalesce at his leisure, my lord.”

“Yes, I’ll let him know just that in my reply,” the marquess responded with a smile as he stared at Rose’s pale, delicate face.

So he went to the Federation, despite my warnings, she thought. Rose was infuriated to hear how Diego’s loyalty led him there after all. But it didn’t matter as long as Bertine never returned. If the chit ever did show her face here again, she would worry about it then. Should Diego ever return and tell her husband about her interference in bringing Bertine back, she would have him

dismissed from his post. She could use any reason as justification. The marquess wouldn't gainsay her because she was the queen's sister.

Her place remained secure, her life peaceful. At least for the time being. Encouraged by the thought, Rose continued eating.

Chapter 42: Franz's Visit and a Twelve-Year-Old's Resolve

WITH the letter of recommendation from Bertine's father in hand, Franz Adler visited her at her home. He was accompanied by his wife as well. As the former manager of the Rose Hotel, he carried himself impeccably in a manner befitting his previous position. The man's smile was calm and soothing. *I want him to manage everything about my hotel*, was Bertine's immediate thought the instant she saw him.

"Thank you so very much for agreeing to see me, Franz," Bertine said. "I never imagined you would arrive so soon."

Both Franz and his wife, Elise, shook their heads and waved off her gratitude.

"Think nothing of it. My wife and I were raising our grandchild after our beloved daughter passed away, but her husband recently remarried. Thinking about the future, we decided it would be better for our grandbaby to live with our son-in-law and his new wife instead of spending life with an old married couple. We convinced our grandchild it was the right decision, but I must admit we were sorely at loose ends rambling around in our house just the two of us. So you can imagine the marquess's letter was a godsend to revive our spirits."

Bertine realized the two of them chose to come to this country as a means to ameliorate their sadness over parting with their grandchild. She wished with all her heart that the joys they discovered here would go a long way to healing them.

"I realize the actual construction of your hotel is still quite a while away, but we're fully committed to making a new life here in the Federation," Franz continued. "We brought everything we could with us so that we can dedicate ourselves to helping you get the hotel up and running."

Bertine found herself panicking a bit when she saw their veritable mountain of trunks. "I'll find you a residence right away then."

“No, no. We will arrange our own lodgings since our arrival was entirely unannounced. That aside, do you have a location in mind for your hotel?”

Bertine had already received Chief Bruno’s approval on that front. “Yes, I have. The lush Bilva district in the hinterlands.”

“And have you received the local residents’ permission?”

“The chief there approved my proposal after discussing it with his constituents, so I anticipate no issues,” she explained. “He said he will designate an area for the hotel where an old village was located.”

“I would very much like to see the planned site,” Franz requested.

“Understood. I’ll make the arrangements as soon as possible.”

“Forgive my husband’s impatience. It’s been so long since he last worked in a hotel that he can’t contain his excitement,” Elise apologized to Bertine with a rueful smile.

Bertine suggested they rest up for a few days and recover from their long journey from the Empire. Before they went their separate ways, she led them to the government building because she wanted to introduce them to Ignacio at least. When they met him, he said he could carve out half an hour from Cecilio’s schedule as well, then showed them to a waiting room. Not long after, Cecilio himself entered and greeted them.

“My name is Cecilio Bonifaccio and I’m the leader of the Southern Federation. Though our country is steeped in ancient traditions, it is nevertheless undergoing a rebirth as we speak. I expect great things from your new hotel as it attracts and teaches imperials about the Federation’s many charms.”

“And I have been fortunate enough to savor one of those charms which Bertine discovered,” Franz replied. “Stingers, I believe they’re called, yes? I’ve only tasted them once, but what a novel sensation. Alas, quite expensive. I hope I’ll be able to enjoy them at a more reasonable price now that I’m living here.”

Easily done, Bertine thought.

“You certainly will,” she replied to him with a relaxed smile. “We have ample

supplies of the stuff, so no need to restrain yourself.”

“Oh, Franz, our lives have become so much more exciting at the drop of a hat, hm?”

“Indeed. I’m glad we made the right decision in coming here, Elise.”

Bertine beamed, charmed by the affable couple who clearly doted on each other. Though her heart also ached a bit at the sight they made. As someone who had given up on marriage, she found her thoughts turning maudlin. *I’ll never see a future where I can have such an intimate relationship with a husband. No children to raise either or grandchildren to spoil.* She didn’t feel much whenever she chanced upon couples passionately in love, so she wondered why this loving duo made her chest sting with pain.

BERTINE had returned to her home with Franz and Elise after their meeting with Cecilio and Ignacio in the capitol building.

“Franz, Elise, won’t you stay tonight for dinner and enjoy the cuisines this country has to offer?” she invited. “I have all sorts of things. Stingers, of course, but also fruit marmalades and jams and bounties from its far-off ocean. We also have fresh vegetables and meat on hand too.”

“I’ve become quite proficient in cooking Federation dishes, so I’m confident in my abilities now,” Dorothee politely added.

“Her cooking truly is sublime,” Bertine said proudly.

That night, Dorothee used both black and white stingers unsparingly on everything she made. Fried giant clams. Grilling jarred bumpfish. Roasting the cuts of pork she’d bought at the market. It was a feast for the older couple, one which they thoroughly enjoyed.

“Ahhh, this was all so delicious,” Franz remarked. “These stingers do wonders on all sorts of ingredients, eh? I’m particularly fond of the combination of white stingers and fried clam.”

“The white ones make sweet things taste so refreshing,” Elise said, impressed.

A short time after their meal ended, the carriage Bertine had arranged in

advance for them arrived. Pleasantly tipsy on the star fruit wine, both Franz and Elise cheerfully boarded the vehicle along with their mountain of trunks. Then the driver set off for their hotel.

Once Dorothee and Bertine saw them off, they headed back inside, where the younger woman spoke.

“Dorothee, the dream in my mind is finally starting to take shape in reality. Now that the former manager of a high-class hotel has arrived, there really is no going back for me. I certainly can’t afford to fail with their lives at stake too.”

“You *will* succeed, my lady. I have no doubt. After all, there are so many people willing to help you. And I’m one of them. I shall do my utmost to support you as well.”

How could I have forgotten I have Dorothee on my side? Bertine thought to herself. She had always been there next to her, quietly believing in her and supporting her. Throughout all the moments, despair, happiness, and everything in between.

“Yes, you’re here. I can endure anything again and again because of you.”

“Oh, my. How unusual for you to say such things, my lady. Is something the matter?”

“Not at all. I myself will continue striving to be someone you’re proud to work for.”

Bertine started cleaning up the kitchen. Dorothee quickly followed suit. While she bustled around efficiently, she discreetly wiped away happy tears with her fingertips.

AT the imperial villa, the second prince, Claudio, devoured the books he’d brought from the library. Ever since meeting Bertine, a singular idea had grown larger and larger inside him. It was the desire to live his life on his own terms, without his imperial identity or the Empire itself.

For as long as he could remember, he and his mother led suffocating lives so as not to attract the attention of the empress and those loyal to her. But once

his studies in academics and swordsmanship began, he realized that the harder he worked, the more those people resented his mother. It had been years since his realization of the consequences of his achievements. Yet still, he couldn't forget how every time he was praised, days later he would find his mother's eyes reddened from crying.

He had always known how much the empress hated his mother because of the way she looked at her. *My schedule of lessons is completely different from the crown prince's, so we don't ever cross paths. How then does the empress know of my results? Do my teachers go out of their way to inform her?* In the beginning, he hadn't been sure of anything.

Once Claudio grew older though, he finally understood why his mother always remained unusually tense whenever she was in the presence of three particular attendants. Because they were all in the empress's camp.

He'd learned the truth one day from one of his mother's other attendants. This particular woman had accompanied his mother to the imperial palace from her childhood home. She'd told him that those three women reported every detail of his and his mother's conduct to the empress. Furthermore, when the empress and the trio encountered Diana outside the villa, they deliberately gossiped about her loud enough for her to hear their ridicule. The attendant had tearfully confided all this to him.

Once Claudio knew, he rushed immediately to Diana.

"Mother, what did they do to you? What did they say?"

But no matter how much he pressed her, Diana refused to answer. When he asked her why she wouldn't tell His Majesty, she only had this to say: "I refuse to lower myself to their level. It's better to deal with them by feigning ignorance of their words."

Why was his father allowing such a situation to continue? He wanted to unleash his frustration directly on the man, but whenever he mentioned the thought to his mother, she pleaded with him not to. So he silently grit his teeth and took care not to provoke their enemies' hostility by making a spectacle of himself.

Yet in one fell swoop, Bertine blew away the struggles suffocating his life.

Forcibly sent to the Federation with no allies there, she nevertheless managed to carve her own path. Alone, no less. She successfully completed all of her tasks, one bigger than the next. Her smile was so blinding it made him ashamed of how timidly he'd been living his life thus far.

"There is always a path that leads to hope." Since that day, Claudio hadn't been able to forget Bertine's words. Since that day, he'd been wondering if he and his mother could leave the Empire. Go somewhere his father and the empress's reach didn't extend.

It was entirely possible his mother wouldn't go with him because of her love for his father. In that case, he would venture out on his own. If his existence was the reason this society shunned his mother, derided her, then it would be best for him to leave this country. So the young boy concluded.

Though he couldn't deny he was worried about going to another country on his own, without his guards. But hadn't Bertine survived as a woman alone? Not just survived but *thrived*, seeing how brilliantly her aura glowed? He would much rather live and die with hope instead of allowing pain and anxiety to continue their reign of terror.

Brooding, the twelve-year-old boy dedicated himself to finding a way out of the Empire.

Chapter 43: A Letter from the Empire

SEVERAL days after Franz and Elise arrived in the Federation, Bertine acquiesced to Franz's demands to visit the hotel's planned site. He said they had rested plenty and were ready to go. So the three of them, plus Dorothée and Diego, boarded a riverboat. As usual, they had a long way to go before they reached their destination.

"Franz, I'd like to use hammocks in my hotel as well," Bertine mentioned.

"That's a great idea. Nothing is more representative of the charms of the southlands than hammocks."

"I'm just imagining how lovely it would be to read while swinging in one."

"And it's essential to have a bottle of something strong on the side table next to it, Bertine."

They exchanged pointed looks then laughed in unison. She wondered why it was so much fun to talk about her dreams like this.

After that conversation, Franz, Elise, and Bertine joined different groups playing poker. They had a secret race amongst each other to determine who would win the most hands. Turns out, Elise defeated the other two by leagues. Her modest attire combined with her fragile appearance and seemingly virtuous personality led her opponents to drop their guard magnificently. Bertine couldn't help being amazed by her behavior, especially because she had been so confident she would take a commanding lead.

"Well, I certainly learned my lesson today..." Bertine muttered to herself. Or so she thought, but Franz heard and laughingly replied to her.

"Anyone who underestimates Elise based on her appearance has only themselves to blame when they end up burned. I've witnessed it countless times."

Their river journey passed in a blur of poker games and hotel planning before

they finally arrived in the Bilva district of the hinterlands. Both Franz and Elise were stunned by the various sights. Trees heavily laden with fruits of the southlands. The rustling sounds made by ball rabbits as they moved through the forests and fields. An elderly man leading a flock of emus. They murmured if they had accidentally found themselves in paradise.

“Bertine, this is a fantastic location,” Franz said. “The imperial aristocrats will definitely delight in this region, particularly the ones from the north. Though the sun beats down strongly, it’s pleasantly dry with low humidity.”

“I’m glad you agree,” she said. “I, too, thought this was paradise the first time I laid eyes upon this region.”

Smiling broadly, Franz continued, “Right, then. When do you plan to open the hotel? We need to hire and train employees accordingly in advance. Also, it will take quite some time to choose wallpaper, flooring, furniture, and the like. Not to mention the general layout of the hotel in terms of rooms, the galley, and more.”

“I’ll contact Evance first and go from there,” she replied. “It hasn’t yet been a year since he moved to the imperial capital to study architecture, so I believe construction is still a ways off.”

Bertine wondered if Evance was working hard in school, accumulating knowledge of his field.

THAT night, Evance’s father, Bruno, welcomed them all warmly into his home. Franz and Elise were thoroughly delighted by the star fruit liquor as well as the soft texture and incredible flavor of ball rabbit meat. Halfway through the feast, Bruno and his wife, Cassandra, extended their deepest gratitude to Bertine.

“We’ve been able to buy many medicines and books from the profits we received off the jarring venture. Thanks to His Excellency, schools and hospitals were built in the hinterlands, but now our people can see doctors without worrying about the cost as well. We no longer have to fear the worst if we injure ourselves or fall ill. Thank you, Bertie.”

She was glad from the bottom of her heart to hear that her work helped this

country's citizens.

"Money can be used for medicine or poison," Bertine said. "It all depends on how people utilize it. But I'm absolutely confident that the people of this region will use it for good instead of ill."

"When my younger sister became sick, Lord Bruno was kind enough to take her to see a doctor in one of the larger towns," a young man near Bertine said. He'd been waiting for the right time to join the conversation. "We were able to pay the doctor's fees because of the jarring work. It saved my sister's life. Thank you very much, Bertine."

"I'm so glad to hear the business is working out well. Where are your father and mother?" she asked.

"Our father is no longer with us. My sister is still bedridden, so my mother remains at home with her. I came here on my mother's behalf to thank you."

Bertine wanted to cry. With a "Thank you from me as well," she gripped the young man's hand tightly and smiled gratefully at him. He returned it with one of his own before taking his leave.

Franz approached her then, his face slightly reddened from spirits. "Bertine, you have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. As a citizen of the Empire, I had no notion whatsoever of this country's attractions until I moved here. I'm sure my fellow imperials will be much the same. They'll be shocked and delighted by what they find. But you must do something about that darn boat."

"There's actually a plan underway on that front," she confided. "His Excellency introduced me to a shipbuilder, so soon enough we'll have boats even imperial nobles can't find fault with."

"Always one step ahead, eh?"

"I appreciate the compliment," she replied with a soft chuckle.

DURING their weeklong stay in the Bilva district, Franz and Elise worked energetically. Franz spent a great deal of time talking to many of the locals about all sorts of topics. Whether they would be interested in working at the

hotel. What kinds of fruits grew where. Where could one see various animals. Which water source was safe for drinking. He questioned the residents diligently, noting down their responses on a map he was drafting. As for Elise, her conversations with the locals revolved around regional cuisine. She jotted down their answers in her own notebook.

Then it was the night before they were set to return to Ybit. As Bertine prepared for the journey back, Franz made an unexpected remark, a smile on his face.

“My wife and I would like to stay here a bit longer.”

“Oh? You *are* aware the boat only stops here once a week, yes? So you intend to stay here until next week?”

“No. We’re thinking six months, at least. Perhaps a year or two even. Naturally, we’ve fallen in love with this region, but I also want to learn as much as I can about it. Otherwise, we won’t be able to build an enchanting hotel.”

A year or two. Bertine was dumbfounded by those words. She knew they were financially comfortable, yet there were some things in this district that money just couldn’t buy. *Life here might get inconvenient for them because of their age.* Perhaps her worry was reflected on her face because Elise interjected then.

“Franz is absolutely obsessed with the hotel at this point.”

“Fear not. I’ve already made arrangements with a married couple who will work for us in our house. While in our employ, we’ll teach them enough about etiquette and daily life in the Empire so that they’re accustomed to providing service once we finally have imperial aristocrats as guests. They will be the hotel’s first two employees,” Franz said.

“Well, I really shouldn’t be surprised at your initiative then. I’m truly grateful that you both agreed to help me, Franz, Elise,” Bertine said. “I never would have considered such factors if I undertook this venture alone.”

“And that is exactly why your father asked me to take on this job. You’re in good hands, Bertine.”

She thanked them again and again before they went their separate ways for

the night. Knowing she had such heartening friends warmed her heart. *Do or die, this hotel will get off the ground. And by God, it will be a success!*

WITH resolve firm in her heart, Bertine returned to the Federation capital of Ybit. Krusula's store manager, Isabella, rushed out in greeting, her expression panicked.

"Bertine, we have an emergency! A letter arrived from the Empire bearing the imperial family's crest. More than ten days ago! I've been at my wit's end this whole time wondering what to do!"

Ah, it must be from Prince Claudio. He sent it to me directly, hm, instead of going through Luca. While she watched Isabella fret, Bertine wondered how exactly the boy had acquired her address here.

"Ehrenfried, hm? If I recall...that is the emperor's younger brother."

She didn't stop to change her clothes or unpack her luggage and immediately opened the envelope to read the letter inside. Dorothee and Diego waited anxiously by her side. When Bertine finished, she shrieked in alarm.

"What is today's date?!"

"It's the thirteenth, my lady," Diego responded calmly.

She looked dismayed at the information.

"The emperor's brother is visiting us tomorrow! He wishes to discuss something."

"My lady, did he mention the topic? His reason for coming here?"

"No, Dorothee, he didn't. Only that he wants to speak with me. He wrote that it's a personal visit, so I needn't make any fuss over it."

Without a word, Dorothee started unpacking.

"Dorothee, this isn't the time for that. You do realize an imperial prince is coming, yes? Tomorrow? Here?!" Bertine cried.

"Which is precisely why it must be done. First, I'll unpack, then clean the house from top to bottom, and finish off with a run to the market for foodstuffs

and tea snacks!”

“R-Right. You’re absolutely right. What should I do then?”

“Why don’t you wash up and tend to your skin, my lady? It’s quite dry and burnt from the sun!”

“Oh, dear, is it...? I’ll get right to it then...”

“Diego, please start cleaning!”

The three of them didn’t even have a moment to rest from their journey before they set about their various tasks. Dorothée continued calling out orders one after another as she worked through the house, cleaning up and organizing. By the time they finished, night had already fallen. They decided to eat dinner out because they were all exhausted from their efforts.

“My lady, Dorothée is such a slave driver I feel like I worked a month in a day.”

“I agree, Diego. I agree.”

“The two of you should take to your beds early tonight. I myself will sleep after I make sure I didn’t overlook anything.”

“Will do.”

“Thank you ever so much, Dorothée.”

Thus, their busy day ended after their return to Ybit. Dawn arrived not long after, bringing with it an imperial prince’s visit.

Chapter 44: The Imperial Crown Prince's Visit

TEN in the morning, three luxurious carriages not bearing any family crests came to a halt in front of Bertine's shop, the Flower of Krusula. The guards in the leading and rear carriages stepped out then inspected the surroundings, after which one of them opened the door to the middle carriage. His Imperial Highness Ehrenfried, the emperor's younger brother, disembarked slowly. He would be forty years old this year.

The neighborhood's residents watched the spectacle from a distance. Bertine and her servants welcomed him respectfully. He spoke to her, his expression calm.

"I'm sorry for all this trouble, Lady Bertine du Jeanne."

"Not at all, Your Imperial Highness. Thank you for gracing us with your presence."

She gestured for him to enter the shop and take a seat in one of the chairs. The chairs and the table were locally made and had been reasonably priced when she bought them, but now the furniture appeared entirely unsuitable for an imperial prince.

Ehrenfried was a slim, tall man. She estimated his height to be approximately six feet and three inches. His golden hair streaked with white strands and pale blue eyes were characteristic features of the cool, refreshing beauty embodied by the people of his cold country.

"I wish to speak with you frankly and without haste," he said. "Please send your servants away."

Diego, Dorothee, and Isabella promptly left the room. Once the prince's soldiers confirmed their exits, they too followed suit, but remained at attention just outside the door.

Ehrenfried then calmly turned to face Bertine. "Allow me to get to the heart of the matter. The truth is, Claudio came to me and asked if I would covertly slip

a letter to you by way of the Rose Hotel. When I asked him what the letter was about, he said he wrote about how he wanted to live his life. Intrigued, I asked him to tell me more about it and you. It didn't take me long to learn that Claudio greatly admires you."

"I...am humbled to hear that," Bertine responded.

At this point, Ehrenfried extended his hand to pick up the teacup Dorothée had left behind. But he paused when he saw the pink jam in lieu of sugar on the table.

"What is this?" he asked.

"It's a jam made out of a fruit called the wax apple, which grows here in the Southern Federation. The flavor is marvelous when used as a substitute for sugar."

"Oh? Let me try it."

I guess I don't need to taste-test it for poison? While that errant thought ran through Bertine's mind, Ehrenfried scooped up a dollop of jam on his spoon without hesitation and dropped it into his cup. He stirred, mixing the jam into his tea. Raising the cup to his nose, he sniffed at the aroma before taking a sip.

"Well, well. Isn't this delightful?" His face relaxed as he swallowed. "I hear the imperial palace has been keeping ample supplies of Federation goods lately. Stingers and jams and such. When my brother, His Majesty, investigated the source of these products, he was surprised to learn they were all *your* doing. The fabric for which Lady Dalila is acting as intermediary. That was you too, wasn't it? You're a clever young woman in many ways."

How much does he know about me? Why is he here? Surely, he doesn't think I'm trying to use the second prince as a pawn for the Federation? Good lord, I hope not.

"Relax. There's no need for you to be so nervous," he assured her. "I don't consider you an enemy."

"...Thank you."

"San Luenne's royal family is so focused only on what's in front of them that

they can't see the forest for the trees. I was disgusted when I learned they had traded you to Cecilio instead of paying the reparations. They should have known better than to treat the Alchemist's daughter so poorly. They'll certainly reap what they sowed for their foolishness."

Bertine remained silent. There was no way she could agree with his sentiments out loud, not at this point. Instead, she let the remark pass by as she kept her expression neutral and her gaze on the prince's chest.

"Before I allow you and Claudio to become penfriends, there are a few questions I would ask of you. May I?"

"Yes, of course."

"What's the relationship between you and His Excellency Cecilio?"

"He appointed me to the role of Special Envoy for the Sale of Local Specialties under his direct supervision. He is my superior and I, his subordinate. It's a working relationship," she said.

"Even though you were sent here to the Federation as his intended bride?"

"Yes, but my work now keeps me financially independent."

"I know you've developed a fondness for this country, so I'd like to know your thoughts on the relations between the Empire and the Federation."

Keep calm, Bertine. Don't say anything that can be used against you.

"From the Southern Federation's perspective, the Empire of Centaur is an important neighbor and trading partner," she said. "I believe the Empire views the Federation as a necessary existence as well. I hope that the two countries' relationship remains cordial and mutually beneficial for a long time."

"Hm. A polished response, one I would expect from a model student."

Ehrenfried cut a small, round butter cake Dorothee had meticulously baked into two pieces with a fork and popped one half into his mouth. He seemed to enjoy the taste because soon after he ate the remaining half too. His table manners were impeccably refined.

"If I were to say that Claudio may become San Luenne's king, how would you respond?" he asked.

Bertine's gaze involuntarily jerked from his chest to his face. *Is this a trap? But I can't think of a reason for a powerful man like him to make the journey all the way here just to trap me.*

"I believe I know a bit about Prince Claudio's troubles and the reality of the situation facing San Luenne's royal family. Should His Highness wish for that once he comes of age, I will of course support his decision wholeheartedly," she responded.

"Interesting. So you don't support the idea *now*?"

"People change. To say nothing of the fact that His Highness is only twelve years old, so it's only natural for his thinking to evolve constantly. As wise and intelligent as he is, the second prince is still a child. Should an adult act on a twelve-year-old's words, it would be a tragedy if he changes his mind after. I'm sure it would haunt him for the rest of his life. So as an adult, wouldn't it be the responsible thing to avoid such a fate?"

"I see."

Then, complete and utter silence. It dominated the room.

God, this feels so suffocating. Just as the thought floated in Bertine's mind, Ehrenfried finally spoke again.

"I'll allow you and Claudio to write to each other. And you make an excellent point."

"Your Imperial Highness, I need to know. Did he actually say he *wants* to become the king of San Luenne?" she asked.

Ehrenfried shook his head.

"No. He said he wants to leave the Empire with his mother and head to the Federation. I think you're the reason for his determination, Lady Bertine. But our country cannot allow Claudio to leave because it would pose a problem for us were he to be used by another. Yet the boy himself is unbending on the issue. He always did have a strong will. So I thought it might be easier to have him become the king of San Luenne rather than complicate matters by defecting to another country once he comes of age. I doubt your father will object either. Though the marquess and I only have a passing acquaintance, I

know well enough that he's a man of foresight."

Bertine remained silent because she couldn't think of a response, so Ehrenfried took pity on her and changed the subject, asking her various questions about her life here in the Federation. She answered him honestly. He also probed her on Cecilio's personal details, but she feigned complete ignorance.

Then he finally stood up.

"Right, then, that should do it. Both the jam and cake were delicious. Thank you."

And departed with those final words.

The emperor's brother came here, suspecting that I would most likely tell Cecilio and my father about his visit. No, if anything, I wonder if he wanted me to do exactly that. Since he's well aware I have no obligation to him or a reason to keep this secret from them. If that's the case, then why didn't he just come right out and ask me to help him with his plan?

It had been exhausting to carry on such a fraught conversation with a member of the imperial family while trying to fathom his true intentions.

INSIDE the carriage on the return journey, Ehrenfried contemplated everything he knew so far. Some time ago, one of the lady's attendants in the imperial villa had informed him that Prince Claudio was reading through the archive of information on the Federation every day. The attendant was the youngest daughter of one of his close friends.

Uneasy after hearing this information, he had met with Claudio alone and talked to him. In the beginning, his nephew had insisted he was only studying for the sake of studying. But the battle between a man and a boy was unfair from the outset, so he had eventually, skillfully drawn the truth from him.

"I intend to renounce my imperial blood and leave this country for the Federation."

Ehrenfried had been stunned speechless by Claudio's words. He had known

about Bertine and Cecilio's visit not too long ago. Shortly thereafter, his nephew began his search for Federation documents. In short, one of those two said something to spur the boy on. Bertine's mother and Lady Dalila had been close friends, making his brother's concubine, Diana, and Bertine childhood friends as well. It wouldn't have taken much then to open Claudio's heart, especially because of the boy's inherently kind nature.

"I want to leave this country." He knew Claudio meant exactly what he said, but he also understood the implicit meaning in his nephew's desire—by leaving the Empire, he wanted to destroy the circumstances under which he and his mother endured. Not to mention Bertine lived in the Federation as well.

Claudio knew his mother was a concubine. He grew up watching his mother feel ashamed and inferior. Even so, both mother and child had continued to lead quiet lives, not making any waves. At least until recently. But then Bertine inspired hope in the boy's heart.

Instead of rejecting Claudio's desire to leave outright, he had tempered his response by telling the boy he sympathized with and understood his feelings. Because it would have been foolish of him to ignore the thoughts of someone at that age. His efforts bore fruit when his nephew finally confided in him.

"I want to exchange letters with Lady Bertine. Will you help me?"

The woman is backed by Cecilio. It's very possible he's been skillfully manipulating her all this time. So Ehrenfried had thought until actually meeting her.

But he'd changed his mind about her when she expressed her opinion that Claudio should wait to make any life-changing decisions until he was of age. If she intended to use him for her own ends, she would have done so now. After all, the younger he was, the easier to control.

Cecilio, the eagle who didn't fly with pigeons, and Bertine, the Alchemist's daughter. A dangerous combination no matter how he thought about it. Ehrenfried knew he needed to remain ever cautious, but he had come to a conclusion based on what he'd gleaned from their conversation—she hadn't deliberately influenced or instigated Claudio's new mindset.

However, he also wouldn't deny his idea of usurping San Luenne's throne was

a bad one. It had come to him because of Claudio's words. For the Kingdom of San Luenne survived by leaching off the Empire's prosperity. Meaning it wouldn't pose any sort of problem if San Luenne became an imperial territory instead. Ehrenfried suspected both the Luennian aristocracy and proletariat would welcome Claudio with open arms.

The reason his bond with the boy was so strong was because he himself knew very well what it was like to be born and live as the second prince.

Chapter 45: The Queen's Motives and the Marquess's Motives

IN the Kingdom of San Luenne's royal palace, Queen Adele had summoned Chancellor Maxim du Jeanne.

"What happened to Bertine afterward?" she inquired. "Does her relationship with His Excellency Cecilio remain tense?"

"My daughter opened her own shop selling embroidery and accessories to make a living."

"Oh, dear. So he felt nothing for her no matter what? I wonder if she tried hard enough."

"I am sorry my daughter couldn't help."

Cecilio refusing to marry Bertine had been a possibility Adele had accounted for. But she knew it had been a gamble to force the girl to the Federation. Once he laid eyes on her, he might have fallen for her beauty, after all.

If anything, it would have been convenient for her if Cecilio *had* taken a liking to Bertine. Through their marriage, the Kingdom of San Luenne would have been able to take control of the Federation's gem mines. The Empire currently had a monopoly on those, so San Luenne was forced to buy them from their powerful neighbor. It would have been much more profitable for the royal family to gain a foothold in that way in the industry, without making waves with the Empire.

Moreover, Bertine's marriage to a son of San Luenne's high nobility would have increased the power her father held as chancellor. Adele had wanted to avoid this at all costs, so shipping the girl off to the Federation was a tactic meant to kill two birds with one stone.

In the event she had returned to the Kingdom without being taken as a wife by Cecilio, her failure to be useful to her country would have provided Adele

with the perfect pretext to marry her off peremptorily to one of her own relatives. And once she'd done so, she could have taken one or two of the chancellor's businesses from him, under the guise of "giving them to Bertine."

But the girl neither married nor returned. Worthless, egotistical chit.

"Chancellor, have you summoned Bertine home?" she asked.

"No. My daughter has found a place for herself in the Federation, so I shall watch over her from afar for the time being."

"I see... Since the Federation's leader rejected the marriage, you do realize our country will have to pay the unpaid balance of the reparations, don't you? One thousand large gold coins, I believe it was."

"Well, I didn't receive any demands for the sum, so I'm frankly a bit at a loss on how to proceed."

"Indeed. Perhaps we should keep an eye on the situation then. See how it unfolds."

The queen dismissed the chancellor after that. Then she closed her eyes.

Adele knew the chancellor was too good to be true. He performed his duties extremely well, always turning a profit on anything he did. If the man himself said he hadn't received any further demands, it means the royal family didn't have to rush to come up with the reparation amount.

But...the Kingdom of San Luenne, *her* country, was in violation of the treaty signed at the close of the war. So she worried about leaving the situation as is. Regardless of what the chancellor said, the ultimate responsibility lay on the royal family's shoulders.

The marquess was a frighteningly intelligent man, though also a dependable one. But his cleverness was the very reason she sensed it would be dangerous to trust him completely and leave everything in his hands. Unable to come to a decision on her next steps, the queen made her way to the king's private chambers.

Recently, the king had acquired a water clock from some country or other. A thin stream of water ran from the top of the device to the bottom, marking off

time. He was completely obsessed with the thing. Before the water clock, he had been enamored with a mechanical doll made in a faraway foreign nation. As a result of his personal interests, the queen managed more than half of government affairs. It had reached the point that most of their officers came to her with any particularly troublesome concerns.

But Adele didn't complain because she had been chosen as queen for this very reason. The previous king, God rest his soul, had personally told her that his confidence in her talents was a deciding factor in his selection of her as his son's wife. Even so, she still found it discouraging that she couldn't rely on her husband in times such as this when she couldn't make a decision for the country's sake.

"Oh ho, Adele. Finished with work for the day, then?"

"Yes, more or less, since the chancellor is doing so well on our behalf."

"Good, good. I'm grateful that both you and Maxim are so outstandingly capable."

"Thank you, Your Majesty. How are you finding the water clock? Interesting?"

"I am indeed. I never tire of it, no matter how long I observe. A marvelous invention. It truly is a work of art in my opinion. Those imperial merchants found yet another thing I would enjoy."

"I'm glad to hear that then."

With a smile, Adele left her husband's chambers and entered her own. She ordered a maid to bring her hot tea right away. After it arrived, the queen sat there sipping, pondering.

Her only son, the crown prince, was already sixteen years old, but he left all his official duties to his retainers to manage. He refused to listen even when she warned him of the consequences of his dereliction of duty.

I have to remain firm. I'll continue keeping a watchful eye everywhere and tighten the reins on the officials who serve us. Though she admonished herself, she still couldn't help worrying over the remaining reparations. *What do I do about that?*

“No, I’ll put it out of mind for now. I can feel a headache starting.”

Adele let go of all the thoughts scurrying in her mind.

THAT night, Maxim sat in his office at the du Jeanne residence. He pored over the various papers in front of him. Sales at the Rose Hotel and its restaurant, which he operated under the pretext of an imperial citizen, had skyrocketed. All thanks to Bertine’s discovery of the stingers and the jarred goods.

He also received a letter of thanks from Lady Dalila, one of his old friends. She wrote of her increased influence in imperial society because of his daughter.

The last letter he picked up was one he had already read countless times. It stated that “experts on Luennian law were invited to the Federation.” Two jurists received personal invitations from the Federation’s chief secretary and were sworn to absolute secrecy about their visit. They had given a lecture to His Excellency Cecilio on the Kingdom of San Luenne’s laws. One of the two used to work as Bertine’s teacher and they had penned this letter to the marquess.

“Our country’s laws, eh?”

Maxim could guess reasonably well at Cecilio’s intentions. He suspected the younger man was preparing to use Luennian law to make his move on the issue of the Kingdom’s shortfall of reparations. He’d had this information before his audience with the queen. Which was why he had deliberately told her there had been no demands for the remaining sum when she’d asked him how they would deal with the matter. By misleading her, the marquess had wanted to give Cecilio enough room to maneuver for whatever he had planned.

Because as far as he was concerned, Cecilio had proved himself leagues more worthy than San Luenne’s royal family of his trust and respect. The queen had long since forgotten her country and thought only of her family. Having said that, there were no promising prospects to succeed the current king either. In comparison, Maxim felt that Cecilio was a truly desirable candidate to be in power.

At one point, he even wished the younger man would serve as this country’s king along with his post as the Federation’s leader. Yet it had been all too easy

for him to imagine the Kingdom's citizens rejecting His Excellency because of their deeply rooted prejudices against the Federation.

While such thoughts ran through his mind, his butler entered carrying something. A parcel from the Rose Hotel in the Empire. Maxim rushed to open it and found a veritable treasure trove of things. Jars of stingers, jars of fruit goods, jars of what looked to be fish of some sort. And last but not least, a letter from Bertine.

He stiffened when he read the letter. Then he read it again. Then a third time.

"The Empire's Prince Claudio is determined to become San Luenne's king, eh? Well, what an unexpected entrance by a new actor. Feels as if God himself chose the boy to make the play even more entertaining to watch."

According to his daughter's letter, the emperor's younger brother deliberately went to the trouble of visiting her in her home. If he'd gone to such lengths, it meant the Empire was serious about usurping San Luenne's throne via the second imperial prince.

"I imagine this will keep everyone quite busy, hm?"

Prince Ehrenfried was forty years old. A young man in his prime. Maxim knew what a brilliant fellow he was too. If he took up the position as regent when his young nephew took the throne of San Luenne, he would make an excellent advisor. After laying the groundwork and smoothing the way for Claudio, he would retire once he knew the country was in capable hands. Maxim knew that with Ehrenfried at the helm, he wouldn't have to worry about San Luenne's future.

They would have to investigate the citizens' reactions on the matter eventually, but he knew there was no issue on that front. This country survived off the Empire. Rather than oppose him, the people would in fact welcome the imperial prince as their new king. Because the people's estimation of the current king was awful and even worse of his son, the prince.

For a long time now, Maxim's worry over Bertine made him feel like he'd been standing in the shadows of dark clouds. But now they parted and he bathed in the comforting warmth of the sunlight shining through. According to Bertine's letter, the situation would pick up momentum once Prince Claudio

turned fifteen years old. In two and a half years then.

“Ah, the things you witness the longer you live,” Maxim murmured.

Then he unscrewed the lid off the first jar he set eyes upon. Using the attached dainty fork, he speared a rectangular piece of flesh-colored meat and sampled it. The label said, “Largemouth fish liver steamed in white wine.” It didn’t smell fishy at all. The rich fat and savoriness of the liver filled his mouth.

“This is...delicious. I can taste the white wine too, as well as the herbs, stingers, and...salt? The liver practically melts in the mouth.”

Maxim summoned one of his servants, asking for alcohol. He had a feeling it would taste particularly sublime tonight.

Only two and half years, then the sunlight would reach San Luenne. He drained the glass of its contents after deciding he would do whatever he could to aid the cause.

“Delicious.”

The marquess took another bite of the largemouth fish liver.

Chapter 46: In Agreement

TWO days after Prince Ehrenfried left, Bertine visited the capitol building on the pretext of discussing the riverboat's budget. Ignacio met her at reception.

"His Excellency is currently meeting with a guest who had an urgent request."

He guided her to a waiting room adjoining the office. Upon hearing the door in Cecilio's office open, she stood up thinking to herself, *I believe his guest left*. But Bertine heard a woman's voice from beyond the connecting door when she drew close.

"Ceci, do drop by sometime. I'd welcome you with open arms."

"I will, soon. I'm sorry, Monica, but my next guest is waiting for me."

"Oh? Well, that's disappointing news. I would have loved to chat more. But I suppose it won't do to keep them waiting. I'll see you again soon then."

Bertine found herself inadvertently holding her breath at the clear intimacy in their exchange.

His Excellency is always drowning in work whenever we meet, so I just assumed there wasn't a woman in his life. But that was silly of me, considering his appearance and his status as the country's leader. Of course he would have someone he's close to. Bertine felt overwhelmingly ashamed to realize that only she had thought their closeness was special, even though it was through work.

In the next moment, the door in front of her suddenly opened.

"Oh! So this is where you were hiding, eh?"

Cecilio looked surprised. It hadn't been her intention at all to eavesdrop, but when she realized that's exactly how it appeared, her face flamed in embarrassment. Then she felt someone's stare from her left. Bertine turned her head in that direction and saw the woman Cecilio had been conversing with. She had stopped on her way out of his office to observe.

Possessed of long, lustrous black hair and a bewitching aura, the woman stared at her in amusement. Bertine had automatically lowered herself into a shallow curtsy. Except the woman merely smiled at her before she walked out.

“Your Excellency, pardon me for interrupting your meeting. I would be happy to return another time.” The instant Bertine finished speaking, she realized her words essentially constituted a confession of her eavesdropping. She wanted to cover her mouth in desperation now.

“With her you mean? Don’t concern yourself with that.” She was surprised by his nonchalant tone, then he continued. “Monica’s husband is a good man, but an extremely jealous one. If he learned she and I spoke at length in my office, alone, he would storm in here, wildly brandishing a greatsword at my head.”

“A greatsword... Well, that does indeed sound terrifying,” Bertine said.

“Heh. I certainly wouldn’t want to lose my life in such a way. Monica’s merely a childhood friend, you see.”

In her overwhelming relief at the information, Bertine let her mouth run away from her brain before she could stop it. “I see... I misunderstood the situation because of rumors I heard about you in my homeland, Your Excellency. If I ever get the opportunity to correct the gossip, you can count on me to set the record straight.”

“Ah. Rumors about me being ‘an unparalleled womanizer,’ I take it? Or ones about me being ‘a warmonger who tremendously enjoys the sight of bloodshed’? I personally feel no pain or anything really concerning what others think of me, so I just leave it all alone honestly.”

“Surely, you can’t be serious. How can you let them continue to say such awful things about you?”

Cecilio chuckled softly as he guided Bertine into his office. “Ever since I became the country’s leader, more and more people have come to me offering women and money. That sort of thing still happens even in a country as magnanimous as ours, you see. So sometimes, awful rumors are useful in determining who you can really trust and who you can’t.”

“Oh, really? Hm. I suppose no country exists where all its citizens are virtuous.

Right then, time to discuss what I came here to.” With that, Bertine immediately pulled out her calculations on the riverboat construction and explained her plan to him. Cecilio commented after she finished.

“I always wonder about the source of your seemingly limitless drive.”

“Well, at the moment, I’d say there are two feelings spurring me on: I want the people of other nations to know how amazing the Federation is and I want to do everything I can for this country.”

“Bertine, a large-scale operation can be dangerous if it’s rushed through only on a single individual’s momentum. Are you sure you have enough allies for this?”

“Of course. There’s Evance and Franz, not to mention everyone in the Bilva district.” For some reason, she suddenly thought of San Luenne’s queen then. “Your Excellency, I just realized the Luennian queen thought of all her wicked schemes on her own, which is quite incredible in a way...”

“Is that right? Why don’t you tell me concretely what exactly she did?”

So Bertine related to him all the details about how the woman had destroyed her engagement twice. Cecilio sat in his chair and listened quietly, his long legs crossed.

“Fascinating. Taking into account everything the royal family has done to yours, I wonder why your father hasn’t yet rebelled.”

“I believe it’s because he’s considered what would happen after the throne has been overturned. He *is* in his late fifties, after all. Should he become king of San Luenne upon deposing the current king, he would soon be forced to choose his successor. So I think he’s searching for someone much more suitable than himself.”

Cecilio raised an eyebrow as he gazed at Bertine. “Perhaps he’s considering making *you* San Luenne’s queen?”

“Absolutely not! Don’t say that even as a jest, please. I’m definitely not a candidate, Your Excellency.”

“You’re right, forgive me. I was indeed jesting, clearly in poor taste though.”

“I know. Besides, there’s a perfectly suitable individual for the king’s throne.”

“...And who would that be?”

“Prince Claudio, the emperor’s second son. He himself said he aspires to the position in his letter to me.”

Cecilio froze for a moment when he heard those words. Then he huffed a laugh, his expression difficult to describe. Bertine didn’t understand why he laughed.

“But His Imperial Highness is still twelve years old,” she said. “There isn’t much anyone can do until he turns fifteen. After he does though, I’m sure my father would counsel him in his capacity as chancellor. Not to mention he would surely have Prince Ehrenfried’s support as well. It would be the ideal solution for His Imperial Majesty as well. By planting his second son on San Luenne’s throne, the Empire would have direct control over the Kingdom and the emperor would be able to snuff out any embers that may spark a war of succession.”

“So you’re telling me the emperor and his brother have consented to this already?”

“It was actually Prince Ehrenfried himself who proposed the idea.”

“Huh. Then how do you think the Luennian citizenry will react?”

“They would welcome the change, and quite effusively at that. After all, the only reason the Kingdom can even survive is because of imperial tourists. An imperial prince becoming their king would strengthen and deepen the country’s bond with the Empire. They would be absolutely delighted. Especially when you take into consideration the people’s disappointment in the current king.”

Cecilio contemplated her words for some time then said something unexpected. “If Prince Claudio becomes San Luenne’s king, the Federation will wholeheartedly lend him its support.”

“That’s...very reassuring, but I’m not sure such an action will benefit you or this country, Your Excellency.”

“You’re wrong.” He stood up, then picked up a green book in one hand, the

whole time watching Bertine intently. It was the same book she'd noticed on her last visit. Today, she could read its title clearly: *The Constitutional Laws and Bylaws of the Kingdom of San Luenne*.

"I knew it! I knew it was *that* book!"

"The truth is, I actually wanted Prince Claudio to become San Luenne's king as well. Although my reason is different from the Empire's," he said.

"You did? May I ask why?"

"At the end of the war, the Empire paid its share of the reparations immediately, but the Kingdom of San Luenne continued to haggle over its portion of a thousand large gold coins. It was a deliberate and reckless affront to the peace treaty."

Cecilio took out a sheaf of letters from a drawer and placed it on his desk.

"So I thought to depose the current royal family and have Prince Claudio take the throne as king instead. Which is why I researched the legalities of the proceedings. First, if there were any laws in place I could use to achieve my goal and second, any laws that would be a hindrance after he becomes king. As you can see, Claudio himself has been writing to me frequently as well, wanting my advice on his political future. I think he would make a fine, virtuous ruler based on what I've read in his letters."

He's relying on another country's leader for advice instead of his own father, the emperor? Bertine couldn't help but worry about the boy's emotional state.

"If I can support a young king passionate about his ideals, then I will extend my hand in aid however often he needs it. San Luenne's royal family may have done what they did because they gravely underestimated the Federation by thinking of us as a backwards country. But I will not stand idly by and let the lives of my people be treated so lightly, not when they risked their lives to fight for us. Now that we have someone who can be a good king, one whom the people will welcome with open arms, then I would gladly offer my help to him. But..."

Cecilio paused, his eyes still intent on Bertine, before resuming.

"But I too will wait until Claudio's fifteenth birthday. I actually planned on

making my move before the Kingdom repaid its shortfall. On this matter though, I shall match my pace to the Empire's. After all, I must *repay* the queen in *full* for the pain she's caused you. You are precious to me."

What did he just say? Bertine stared at him in a dazed shock, but he simply smiled back at her. She tried to keep the conversation going despite her agitation.

"Your Excellency, I believe my father will agree to the plan. May I tell him your thoughts on the matter? I've already written to him about Prince Ehrenfried's views."

"Your father's second wife is the queen's younger sister, yes?"

"Naturally, I would ask him to make sure she learns nothing of this."

"Then, please, go ahead. I have a strong feeling your father will be on my side. The queen has acted unforgivably toward you not once but twice. And a man as clever as your father certainly wouldn't let this opportunity pass him by."

Chapter 47: The Emperor, His Younger Brother, and His Son

THE emperor, Christhardt, was in his office, finishing up the day's duties. Then he received communication that his younger brother, Ehrenfried, was requesting a meeting with him.

"Something must have happened then."

Both the emperor and his younger brother were of the same height, possessing the same lean build and pale blue eyes reminiscent of an ocean frozen over. Where they differed was their hair color. His brother's was golden, while the emperor's hair was a soft brown.

When he returned to his private chambers, he found his brother and son waiting for him, their postures ramrod straight.

"Let's sit. How very unusual for you both to be here."

"Christhardt, we come today seeking your counsel."

At Ehrenfried's words, his son, Claudio, paled. He looked quite nervous.

"What sort of counsel?"

"To tell you the truth, Claudio would like to leave the Empire and migrate to the Federation. I've managed to stop him from doing so by suggesting he become San Luenne's king instead. I realize I might have been presumptuous in thinking of this, which is why I'd like to ask your thoughts, Christhardt. If I'm not mistaken, you have been wanting to annex San Luenne for a long time now, yes?"

"...Wait. Just wait a second." Emperor Christhardt had heard the same exact thing some time ago. "Ehren, are you in contact with Cecilio?"

"Cecilio? You mean the leader of the Federation?"

"Yes."

“Then, no. We haven’t correspondent at all. Why do you ask?”

“You’re not lying to me, are you?”

“Of course not.”

Questions bounded in Claudio’s mind as he listened to his father and uncle converse.

“I’ll be honest with you. Not long ago, Cecilio visited me, wanting to discuss the tariffs on the minerals in private. But it wasn’t the real topic. No, he wanted to talk about putting Claudio on San Luenne’s throne.”

“Huh?”

“What?”

Claudio and Ehrenfried exclaimed in surprise at the same time.

“Since you said the exact same thing, Ehren, it made me wonder when the two of you developed a relationship with him.”

“Father, His Excellency wishes for *me* to become San Luenne’s king? Are you certain?” Claudio asked.

“I am. Part of the reason lies with his anger over the Luennian royal family’s attitude. But that’s not all. He also said he’s willing to back you completely and lend his full authority to your reign as San Luenne’s king, Claudio.”

Though rendered speechless, Claudio nevertheless listened attentively.

“Cecilio wishes to avoid further warfare between the Empire and Federation, and I share in his sentiment. He has long desired to place his country on an equal footing with ours. So you can imagine his fury and frustration when San Luenne refused to pay their share of the reparations, on *top* of forcing the chancellor’s daughter upon him. Seems the Luennians were foolish enough to believe in the rumors of his womanizing.”

Claudio’s brow furrowed in thought. Though they had only been in each other’s company for a scant few hours, it had been long enough for the boy to understand how much the fiery Cecilio differed from his ice-cold father. Since their meeting, he had come to greatly admire the Federation’s leader.

“Which is why Cecilio decided the only way to depose the royal family without resorting to warfare was to install you as the king instead, Claudio. And once you take over, he will offer the Federation’s support to you. I’m sure he thought that by building a favorable relationship with a San Luenne under your governance, he could protect his own country from further imperial aggression. Two birds, one stone, wouldn’t you say?”

Claudio was surprised. When his uncle had pressed him about his worries and he’d confided in the man about his intention to abandon the Empire, Ehrenfried told him he understood his feelings. Instead of forcibly stopping him like he thought his uncle would, he had instead offered another solution with these words, “If you have the conviction to leave the country, then what say you to becoming San Luenne’s king?”

All he wanted was a way to settle things without his mother suffering more ridicule and pain. It didn’t matter what form the solution took. If he was to become king, he would be one who served his people. *I will never become the sort of corrupt king who forcibly uses a woman as a pawn, not like San Luenne’s current king*, Claudio had thought to himself. This feeling was gradually taking a concrete shape.

And now he learned that the man he respected, His Excellency Cecilio, *also* wanted him to become San Luenne’s king.

“Claudio. Heed me well.”

“Yes, Father.”

“You’re a brilliant young man. But your brother, Felix, is no fool either. If the gap between your talents was so overwhelmingly large that no one could deny you were the superior heir, I would forsake him and choose you as my successor. Except I’ve realized the difference between you isn’t that great.”

“...I understand.”

“So in this case, choosing you would create more discord than any benefits to be gained. The country would fall into chaos if the aristocracy were to split into factions and wage a war of succession. I will say this though—your plan to take up San Luenne’s throne instead isn’t a bad one.”

“Then let me...!”

“*But*. It’s still too soon. Wait until you’re of age. That’s all I ask. Another thing I want to ask. Can you become such an accomplished leader that you erase any of the Luennian citizenry’s doubts and resentments? How will you manage the transfer of power from the current royal family? I want you to think through the situation thoroughly. Once you have answers to these questions and more, then I will counsel you again.”

“I won’t disappoint you, Father! I’ll do my utmost to find the right answers!”

“Is that so? I have high hopes for you then. I still have things to discuss with your uncle, so you can leave first.”

“Yes, Father. Thank you very much for your time and advice.”

After his son left the room, Emperor Christhardt spoke once more.

“I’m stunned, Ehren. What do you mean he wants to leave the country? He didn’t even come to *me* with his concerns. He went to *you*. Tell me.”

“I can’t be certain, but I have a feeling the Alchemist’s daughter has had an effect on Claudio’s mindset.”

“Are you talking about Bertine? The daughter of San Luenne’s chancellor?”

“Yes.”

At that point, Ehrenfried told his elder brother everything that transpired on his visit to Bertine’s home in the Federation.

“Damn it, Ehren, I had no idea. When were you going to tell me?”

“Of course you didn’t know. It was imperative that I go in secrecy, so I chose not to inform you first. I disguised myself at the border to create the impression that I was merely a noble traveling incognito. The inspection at the checkpoint was laughably easy to pass, Chris. You may want to consider tightening security protocols, eh?”

“You absolute bounder... Stop putting yourself in danger like that.”

“Don’t worry, I took my guards with me. More importantly, I know I said Bertine’s had an influence on him, but there’s something else you should know.

Half of his wish to accomplish his goals comes from his desire to protect Diana.”

The emperor’s eyes narrowed slightly when he understood the implication of those words.

“The empress won’t stain her hands, but those loyal to her will understand what she wants and act accordingly,” his brother continued. “Claudio is a kind, intelligent boy, so it’s only natural he would want to take his mother away from this country to protect her.”

“I had no idea... I’ve pressed Diana about it countless times over these past thirteen years, but she’s always insisted that there is nothing for me to worry about.”

“That’s her pride talking, don’t you think? ‘As if I would lose to them.’ So her pride has sustained her for these last thirteen years. If she were a weaker woman, her body would have broken by now and her life utterly spent. Since you have her, it is *your* responsibility to protect her properly until the very end.”

“I let things get so out of hand that a child of twelve felt he had no choice but to leave the country... The blame lies with me and me alone.”

And what’s this about Diana’s pride? For thirteen years, no less. An image of Diana sprang to his mind. He had never thought of her as anything except fragile. I wanted to know everything about her, yet I knew nothing whatsoever of her pain or her strength.

THAT night, the emperor spent a very long time talking to his concubine, Diana. She repeatedly told him again and again that she had received no ill treatment. The smile on her face never wavered either.

But the next day, the emperor’s chamberlain summoned each of Diana’s attendants one by one for questioning.

“Tell me about anything unreasonable she has experienced. I won’t reveal your identities, so you can speak honestly.”

And one by one, the women told him everything about all the spite and harassment Diana had been subjected to by the empress’s ladies-in-waiting.

The chamberlain took meticulous notes on who did what, then delivered the information to the emperor.

Christhardt scowled furiously while reading the sordid details. Once he finished, he ordered the guilty women serving the empress to be reassigned. He was bitterly disappointed with himself for not taking concrete action sooner because he had allowed himself to be duped by Diana's smile and words until now.

All of the women were either daughters or wives of nobility, so no official reason was given for their reshuffling. They were told it was a normal restructuring of personnel. But those who saw the list of women and their new assignments understood right away the real reason for the changes.

THE night the women were given their new marching orders, the emperor visited the empress, Ekaterina, in her private chambers.

"Ekaterina."

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"I intend to appoint Felix as my successor."

"Oh, my lord, thank you so much!"

"But remember this—your actions reflect on Felix, so I suggest you conduct yourself accordingly. Surely you understand why your ladies-in-waiting were reassigned?"

"Yes...but—"

"It makes no difference if you never explicitly ordered them to do what they did. If you're mocked as a foolish empress who can't even keep her own servants in line, then Felix too will suffer the same ridicule."

"Please forgive me, Your Majesty. I should have taken more care in my role."

Ekaterina bowed her head. *And who do you think is at fault for all this?!* She wanted to spit the words at him, but she pushed them deep down.

She could endure anything with a smile as long as her own child became the

next emperor. For in this country, the emperor was the light, the answer, and the law. Since she had only been able to bear a lone male child for the emperor, she could not complain if her husband forsook her for a younger concubine. After all, hadn't the people around them *wanted* him to take one? He did, and the blasted woman secured her place by birthing a boy herself.

If I have no choice but to accept this path, is it my duty to accept everything with a calm expression? Ekaterina closed her eyes and sealed all of the emotions whirling within her heart.

The next day, her new attendants received instructions from the empress.

"I would like you all to serve me for a long time, so please take care in your words and conduct."

Of course, the women all knew the real reason for their reassignments. So they behaved impeccably to avoid repeating their predecessors' mistakes. If they showed any disrespect to the emperor's concubine, then they too would be removed from their prestigious positions serving the empress and summarily demoted.

Though still only twelve years old, Claudio's wish to leave the Empire, one on which he had staked his life, thus helped protect his mother, Diana. It also represented the bud that would sprout into San Luenne's new king.

So marked the beginning of the Luennian royal family's end.

Chapter 48: Eckhart Beck's Visit

DESPITE knowing that San Luenne's royal family would eventually be destroyed by the Empire and Federation's combined machinations, Bertine saw no real changes to her daily life. She kept her ledgers up to date, accepted orders from her customers, placed her own for the specialty products, and shipped them. So the cycle went.

But her heart was in turmoil. *I wonder what steps His Excellency plans to take regarding San Luenne.* Bertine herself had been tossed into the maelstrom by the royal family and certainly not of her own accord. Still, she couldn't help thinking about the situation since she was involved as well. She hoped that someday Cecilio would confide in her everything about his plan.

"Yet there's nothing I can do about it even though I know now what will happen."

By using this argument to convince herself, she tried her best not to dwell on the matter. But it wasn't long before her mind wandered back to it anyway. *How exactly do Prince Claudio and Prince Ehrenfried plan to defeat the Luennian royal family?* Bertine spent her days in a fog of uncertainty and worry.

The stingers sold well, as usual. Sales of the jarred fruit and seafood products were steady too. According to the letter she received from Delio, Cecilio's father, many of the locals in the Callisto district were sowing stinger seeds to grow more of the plant. The community there decided to save their profits from the stingers' sale and purchase a larger boat than the one they were using now.

"A larger boat is much more stable than a smaller one. There's less risk in it capsizing too. The stingers are doing a great job in protecting our lives," Delio wrote in his letter. Bertine couldn't be happier to hear how the venture was making their lives better. She pressed the letter to her chest and closed her eyes.

In addition to all the work already done so far, Bertine decided it was time to

meet with Evance again in earnest. He sent her no letters, nothing, which made sense in light of his disdain for writing.

Which was why she reached out to the company that employed interpreters in the Empire. The president responded to her query. She learned that instead of attending school, Evance became an apprentice for a renowned architect. He was currently studying under and living with his mentor.

“I don’t understand. Why didn’t he enroll in the school?”

While reading the letter, she learned the answer to her question. Evance had apparently been refused admission by the architecture school.

“Then he should have contacted me straight away. I could have done *something* to help him. Honestly, that dolt.”

Aggravated by Evance, whom she considered a thoughtless younger brother, Bertine nevertheless wrote a letter to him and sent it to the architect’s address. The company president had kindly included it in his letter.

“I decided on a location for my hotel in your homeland and have arranged for the former manager of an imperial hotel to assist me. Preparations are proceeding smoothly. I now also have enough capital to start construction on the hotel.” She noted this in her letter then sent it off to be delivered via a transport carriage heading to the Empire. While Bertine waited for a response to that letter, she penned a reply to one she had received from Claudio.

In addition to his education in kingcraft, the prince was also studying San Luenne’s history as well as its unique economic structures. He did all this in absolute secrecy. His uncle, Ehrenfried, was the one who hired his tutors and made all other necessary arrangements for Claudio’s learning. He also acquired the emperor’s consent on the matter. Moreover, the emperor agreed to keep everything a secret from the empress and his firstborn son, the crown prince.

“Discussions on the matter are proceeding smoothly in private. My uncle told me your opinion as well, Lady Bertine, about how it would be best if I waited until I was fifteen years old. I agree. I’ll start taking action once I come of age. Thank you for your cool-headed suggestion. My father and uncle were also of the same mind. I shall become stronger in due course, without rushing. I’m also receiving counsel from someone who would make you gasp in surprise.”

The last bit made Bertine realize she must know this someone. *Is it my father? Or His Excellency Cecilio? Either is a likely possibility.*

Claudio's letter was steeped in his ambitious eagerness. She knew San Luenne's future would be bright indeed if he became its king.

The Luennian royal family remained blissfully unaware of this situation, and it almost tempted her to feel sorry for them. But she honestly couldn't dredge even an ounce of sympathy for them. Even now, the memory of her anger and emptiness when she learned her sacrifice for her country had been unnecessary burned within her.

Though Ehrenfried told her she was the reason for spurring Claudio's emotions, that hadn't been her intention at all when she first met the prince. Yet now that things were finally progressing, Claudio's ascension to San Luenne's throne felt like the miraculous last piece of a puzzle falling into place.

Bertine had sent a letter to her father asking him what would become of the three members of San Luenne's current royal family. But his reply had been short and blunt.

"Don't worry your head about that. Let your dear old man handle it."

THE shop's doorbell on the first floor rang and a familiar voice called out.

"Bertie! Are you in there?"

"Evince?!"

Dorothée and Diego rushed down the stairs faster than Bertine. Lagging behind them, she hurriedly descended the steps as well. Evince, towering as ever, stood in the hallway grinning from ear to ear while carrying a large amount of luggage. A small elderly person stood next to him.

"Evince! What brings you here?! And introduce us to your friend already!"

"I'm back! I showed your letter to my teacher here and he decided we should go to the Federation."

The old man doffed his hat and bowed his head lightly. "Nice to meet you, Lady du Jeanne. My name is Eckhart Beck and I'm in charge of Evince's

education.”

The two dropped their bags and followed the other three upstairs to the second floor, where Bertine had them sit down. As he sipped on hot tea mixed with jam, Eckhart explained the reason for their sudden visit.

“I couldn’t just stand still once I read your letter to Evance. This large oaf never says what needs to be said, so naturally I had no idea *when* precisely he planned on building his dream houses. After I learned that plans were already underway, I realized we could linger in the Empire no longer. And so, we hurried here as quickly as we could.”

“But...I don’t understand,” Bertine replied, her head tilted in bewilderment.

“In order to build a house, we must calculate the magnitude of the various forces on a building. But Evance’s designs are extremely unique. It would take him a decade, if not more, even with experience to be able to do the calculations on his own without problems.”

“I see...”

“I have a wealth of architectural experience, but at the age of sixty-five, I can’t guarantee I’ll still be there to see long-term plans through to the end. Who knows when God will invite me into His garden? So I thought to myself. If the plans are already underway for Evance’s buildings to come to life, then I wish to see them with my own eyes and help him build them. He possesses an innate talent. Which is why I decided I would do the calculations for his structures for him, so I accompanied him here.”

Then Eckhart Beck bowed his head with a plea.

“Please allow me to be a part of your hotel’s construction.”

Though Bertine didn’t know Eckhart himself, she knew of the buildings he’d designed in the Empire. A magnificent headquarters for a large firm. Universities and places of worship. She had even heard of his involvement in creating royal villas for the Azdal Monarchy. His accomplishments were vast and varied.

“Oh, no. It would be my honor to have such an esteemed master of his craft in our midst. I look forward to working together.” She had anticipated the

hotel's construction taking five years to complete, but it suddenly felt much closer and real now.

"Right, then. Let's get on with it," Eckhart urged impatiently. "I want to see the planned site to make sure the foundation is strong enough."

When she asked him if he would prefer to journey via riverboat or stagecoach, he replied, "Whichever is faster." Diego set out at once to secure their reservations on the first boat out. Then that night, they hosted a welcome party for Evance and Eckhart on the second floor of the house. The two would be staying with them as well.

"This is delicious. What is it?!" Eckhart asked.

"Fried giant clam harvested in the southern seas," Bertine said. "This is the liver of a large fish steamed in white wine."

"Delectable. Absolutely delectable. I can't believe I can dine on such fine seafood despite being nowhere near the ocean."

Eckhart loved alcohol *and* poker, so Bertine knew he would enjoy the river journey tremendously. Evance was familiar with the hinterlands since it was his homeland and the two would stay with his family once they arrived, so she anticipated no problems on that front. The only issue was his extreme dislike for writing letters.

"Ah, no need to fret," Eckhart said. "I'll be diligent in maintaining frequent correspondence with you. I shall send you updates on the progress as well as any concerns or questions we may have. We can't trust this giant oaf to handle all that, after all."

"Oh, thank you ever so much, Professor!" Bertine exclaimed.

Evance shrunk in on himself after hearing Eckhart and Bertine's exchange.

"You can pay the riverboat staff to take your letters to a delivery company once they reach Ybit," she instructed. "Then they will bring them to me."

"Excellent, excellent."

"Then I'll give you the capital I've managed to accumulate so far. Please use it to buy materials, fund the construction costs, and pay for your living expenses."

Bertine started to take out the money from a leather bag. But Evance stopped her.

“Bertie, I still have loads left from the amount you gave me, so we’ll use that instead.”

He’s always been sincere. Never a lie on his lips. She found herself smiling at him. Although he could stand to do something about his dislike for letter-writing.

Only two years remained until Claudio came of age.

Chapter 49: Riverboat Construction

TODAY, Bertine was visiting the workshop of the shipbuilder Cecilio had introduced her to. Of the several on his list, which included both imperial and Federation businesses, she had ultimately gone with a Federation carpenter. “The little things help a nation flourish.” It was her own personal creed to live by.

The current riverboats had been designed without factoring in women as passengers and she thought that unacceptable. Surely, there would come a day when women wanted to travel the country by boat just like she had. Bertine certainly didn’t want to dash any feminine dreams just because of the way a boat was built. After all, not all women in the world could be as brazen as her.

If her first hotel proved profitable, it would create the possibility to open more. So one riverboat might not be enough. Then she would have to make sure the carpenter became comfortable with building a boat that was accessible to nobles and women, in case she needed to order more in the future.

The men at the workshop dedicated themselves to their tasks, sweat pouring down their bodies. One of them, who appeared to be the master carpenter, approached the table. His torso was bare as he used a cloth to wipe off the sweat clinging to him. He picked up her list of requirements for the boat. The expression on his face turned to one of dismay while he read through it.

“A boat aristos will use? And you want *me* to make it? Impossible. I wouldn’t even know where to start.”

“I’ll instruct you. Please peruse this document. It notes the necessary features to attract the nobility.”

The man in his forties introduced himself as Chuy and took the papers from her. He looked increasingly perplexed as he read through the list. Stroking his beard, he spoke, “Will you really need this many private rooms? They’ll be narrow and cramped. What’s more, this design won’t allow many passengers to

board at once.”

“That is precisely the point. It will be large enough to host the boat’s crew and a few aristocrats plus their servants. This boat won’t be a regular ferry.”

“What do you mean then? An exclusive charter service? Sounds luxurious.”

“Luxury is part of the pleasure of a journey.”

“Then how ’bout a double-decker? The aristos can stay on the second floor with their servants on the first. That should make the rooms bigger and well-ventilated for everyone. ’Cause depending on the season, these southlands can get murderously hot.”

“What a wonderful idea! A two-story riverboat would be perfect. Let’s proceed with this then,” Bertine approved.

“What about the interior?”

“I’ll contact you again once I decide what to do with it. When I do, I’ll be sure to have the furnishings and such ready by then to outfit the boat.”

“Roger that. Nothing to do but try my hand at it.”

PROGRESS was being made at a steady pace. Bertine received letters often from Eckhart. In one, he wrote that the ground for the hotel’s planned site was firm and stable. In another, he talked about how delicious emu stew was. A third detailed his bewilderment over why Evance’s parents were so overprotective of a large man like Evance. That last one made her laugh.

In one of her replies, she had asked Eckhart about the hotel’s exterior appearance. He wrote back that Evance wanted to surprise her, so she would just have to wait and see. *How can a hotel’s construction continue if the owner doesn’t know what it looks like?* Immediately after, she had a rejoinder for her own thought. *I guess it’s fine since Eckhart is overseeing it and he is an expert, after all.* Besides, Bertine loved all of Evance’s designs.

SOMETIME later, she received a message from Chuy. He had finished drafting the blueprints for the riverboat, so she went to see him. Bertine was stunned

when she saw the design.

“Fantastic! Chuy, you understood exactly what I wanted,” she said.

“That’s what I came up with as far as luxury goes. I thought about what I’d do if I were rich and threw everything I could think of into the design.”

He looked rightfully proud over the gorgeous, lavish riverboat in his illustration. The second floor boasted two rooms. All of the windows were large and open in design. He had even included smaller ventilation windows that could be easily opened and closed to invite the river breeze. There was even a veranda that wrapped completely around the second floor, though it was a bit narrow. Shades were installed in the ceiling. Guests in the second-floor rooms could draw them closed when they wanted privacy. He had also thought of simple en-suite bathrooms, so Bertine had no complaints whatsoever over his design.

The first floor would have the usual large chamber, but this one too possessed wide windows as well as a small bar area. The chaise lounges placed around the wall looked comfortable and also served as storage. There was also enough space for several hammocks and lifesaving equipment.

“Wonderful! This is absolutely wonderful. It isn’t gaudy at all, either. Minimalist but elegant,” she raved.

“Make it too elaborate, and the guests will get hurt if the boat hits a rough current.”

“That makes sense. What is this here on the prow?”

“It’s the angel, Beren, the one responsible for protecting ships.”

Attached to the prow, the angel gazed forward, wings slightly spread, and arms crossed in front at the chest.

“Have you decided on the interior then?” he asked.

“I was thinking of using this fabric for the wallpaper.” Bertine showed him one sporting the white roses her mother had loved so much.

“You want to slap this expensive fabric on all of the walls? You must be incredibly wealthy, miss.”

“I wouldn’t say that, but I suppose you could say I’m getting by.”

A smile accompanied her reply, but the truth was that at the moment, her income was through the roof. All of her ventures—the jarred goods, stingers, and scarlet fabric—produced profits like a never-ending spring. She still had plenty to spare even after accounting for the local and national governments’ shares. If she hadn’t spent her capital on the hotel and riverboat, she could have lived the rest of her life completely in leisure.

Except Bertine’s life now was more akin to a servant’s compared to her former life of luxury. Her clothing was simple and easy to move in. She no longer fussed when she sweated. And she certainly wore no jewelry. Despite everything though, she still enjoyed this lifestyle leagues more than her old lavish one.

Moreover, it didn’t matter how much money she made. Because once she died and went to live in God’s heaven, she wouldn’t be able to take a single copper coin with her. So by using her gains for work, she could enrich others’ lives too. That suited her just fine.

“Oh, right, miss. It would be great if the furniture you chose didn’t have too many sharp edges, to avoid hurting the passengers, y’know.”

“I picked with just that in mind, but would you mind looking everything over just in case? I would feel at ease with your inspection since you’re an expert on this.”

Chuy huffed out a gentle laugh.

“Did I say something odd?” Bertine asked.

“No, no, I was just thinking how nice it is that nobles like you exist too. I talk and dress rough, but it makes no never mind to you. And you always ask for my opinions too.”

“But I don’t think one’s rank matters in the face of an expert,” Bertine insisted.

“Now that’s where you’re wrong, missy. Most nobles demand folks like me do exactly what they say and how.”

This time it was Bertine's turn to laugh.

"Well, if I had to deal with customers like that in your place, I'd want to tell them to walk a mile in my shoes then come talk to me again."

"I sure would if I had my own riches to throw in their faces. But I'd rather feed my wife and children and have them wear nice, clean clothes, so I'll smile and nod along with whatever they say. And o' course, I want to do work I can be proud of."

His words made her teary-eyed. *Chuy's wife must feel so loved*, she thought enviously. A second later, she admonished herself. *No, no, I shouldn't envy others.*

"Why don't I bring over the furniture catalog tomorrow and you can tell me if I made the right choices?" she suggested.

He agreed and she left the workshop with a smile.

Just when Bertine was about to step into her carriage, a young woman around twenty came running toward her. She stared at her in surprise, wondering whatever was the matter, while the young woman doubled over, panting heavily.

"Thank you so much for offering my father such wonderful work," the woman said. "You can't imagine how excited and happy he's been to build a boat for the nobility."

Of course. A good father raises good children. Warmth surged in Bertine's heart.

"Not at all. Please accept my thanks as well because your father is an outstanding carpenter, one who prioritizes the customer's needs."

His daughter's face shone brilliantly with happiness. Even after Bertine's carriage departed, she could see the young woman still waving cheerfully.

THAT night, Bertine wrote a letter to her father about Cecilio's plan. How he wanted to force the Luennian royal family out of power then install Prince Claudio as the new king, during which the Federation would give the boy its full

endorsement and support. She also mentioned the hotel's progress and told him about Eckhart, as well as how much the president of the company supplying interpreters had helped Evance in his time in the Empire.

The reason this letter ended up being longer and chattier than her usual ones was because of the father and daughter she saw during the day. As she penned it, Bertine wondered how lonely her father must be living with a wife whose heart remained closed. Perhaps the wine she drank while she wrote could be blamed for the next passage in the letter.

"I have long since given up on marriage, to the point that I don't even wish to marry. But I can't help wanting children and raising them. You see, there's this carpenter I work with and today, I met one of his children..."

The marquess cried when he read his daughter's heartfelt letter a few days later.

"I would love for Bertie to be happily married..."

Because of him, her matrimonial hopes had been dashed twice, so she had abandoned the notion completely. Although he had been responsible for teaching her everything he could about trade, he never imagined Bertine would be so successful at it. So it stung him painfully to see her letter now with her simple wish of "wanting children and raising them."

Then he read the part about San Luenne again and again.

"So it wasn't just the Empire but the Federation as well that intended to make Prince Claudio king of this country, eh? I wonder if God himself wrote this play."

The marquess surmised this plan would probably succeed. But in everything there was always a chance, no matter how small, of failure. Then he knew what his role in all this would be. He would lay the groundwork for the leaders and young nobles who spearheaded the idea. Make certain their objective wasn't discovered ahead of time. Smooth the way for them to succeed. So he swore to himself.

Chapter 50: The Karina's Maiden Voyage

THE head of the Department of Public Works in the Kingdom of San Luenne had been feeling a subtle sense of discomfort recently. This was because the chancellor, usually strict about withdrawals from the treasury, seemed to be much more permissive than usual on the matter. Of course, all the disbursements were necessary for things such as repairing the stone paving on the roads, fixing the aqueducts used to draw vital fresh water from the springs, mending the churches, replacing the decrepit ships owned by the country, and more. Since the Kingdom relied on tourism for its survival, everything needed to be taken care of anyway, so better sooner than later.

So the chancellor's behavior wasn't necessarily odd in the grand scheme of things. It was just the first time in memory that the marquess had been so lax in approving the costs of expenditures.

But the blame would ultimately fall on me if I did nothing about any of this. With that thought, he set about instructing his subordinates on the various repairs and purchases they needed to make. He made sure they knew to adhere to the approved budget.

As time passed, the heads of the canal management, harbor maintenance, and emergency rations divisions slowly came to the same realization as the head of public works, that the chancellor was being unusually magnanimous in approving budgets this year. But they all gratefully spent their funds because they were the ones who had requested them in the first place. No junior civil servants noticed the changes occurring in the treasury as the only ones with full access to the ledgers were the chancellor and the minister of finance. Moreover, the minister of finance and senior officials had already consented to the chancellor's proposals.

As a result, the reparation payments were once again postponed due to the steady decline of capital in the national treasury. The fact that not a single demand came from the Federation also helped the royal family push repayment

out even further. When the queen asked the chancellor why this could be happening, he had an answer ready for her.

“Perhaps the Federation is feeling generous toward us because the Empire repaid its share of the reparations in full?”

His deliberately mild response was designed to make her lower her guard.

AT around the same time, Chuy and his men completed constructing the riverboat Bertine had commissioned. She went to his workshop when she received the news.

“Miss, once we finish painting her, my work here is done.”

“You finished much sooner than planned. Thank you, Chuy. After that, all we have left to do is put up the wallpaper and move in the furniture and supplies. Oh, you painted the angel as well. How beautiful!”

“We were able to do right fine work thanks to you, miss.”

“You’re most welcome. Thank you again, Chuy.”

She had already hired a crew to man the boat. The only remaining task on the personnel front was to train the staff in etiquette and service to nobility, which Bertine herself would handle.

After a week’s training in customer service, she decided the boat would make the journey to the hinterlands. She would act as a customer on the trip to test the staff’s abilities. What excited Bertine the most was seeing how far the hotel’s construction had progressed. Dorothee’s expression softened upon seeing the boat’s name painted on its side.

“My lady, what a lovely boat. I see you named it after your mother, hm?”

“Yes, I named it in her memory. It really is a beautiful boat, isn’t it? Such a lovely pristine white.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

On the day of its maiden voyage, the Karina sailed into the Saran River via the canal located near Chuy’s workshop. Its first passengers were Bertine, Dorothee

, Diego, Cecilio, and Ignacio. The latter two had received a request from the hinterlands for the construction of a main thoroughfare, so they had planned to head there to investigate. Bertine learned of this when she went to report to Cecilio on the stingers' sales and invited the two to join them on the journey.

"The national government provided funding for the riverboat's construction, after all. If it wouldn't be an inconvenience, why don't you both come with us?"

"We'd be much obliged, Bertine. I admit, I've been curious to see this boat too."

"Thank you so much for the invite! I do so love sailing, you see!" The usually composed Ignacio spoke in a high, excited voice.

On their departure date, Ignacio arrived quite early and surveyed his surroundings with keen interest. Everything inside and outside the boat reflected its conception as a vessel designed to attract nobles and wealthy merchants. Even the floorboards were made of the finest materials, polished to a fine sheen using beeswax. Numerous lamps had been built into the walls.

"Wow, how extravagant. Lady Bertine, this riverboat is like something out of a dream!" Ignacio exclaimed.

"You've loved boats for as long as I've known you, eh, Ignacio?" Cecilio remarked.

"Indeed, I have, Your Excellency! Boats are amazing, you know. I really do feel like I'm dreaming right now!" Ignacio was like a boy in a candy store as he inspected every little detail and marveled over it.

"Dinner will be a scrumptious affair, but would you two like to partake in some libations beforehand?" Bertine asked.

"An excellent idea," Cecilio said.

"Sir, I cannot thank you enough for allowing me to do such enjoyable work," Ignacio thanked him.

Bertine grinned as she watched them both. Cecilio was relaxed, already looking like he was right at home, while Ignacio remained in high spirits. A young man tended the bar. She had hired all of the customer service staff in

Ybit. The ship's crew consisted of folks with prior experience on the regular riverboat. They too were dressed in navy blue uniforms, their movements sharp and efficient.

The Karina slipped smoothly from the wharf and slid to the heart of the Saran River. Once the boat adapted to the river's currents, it sailed slowly down. A bright white triangular sail was attached to the rope stretching between the two masts. It remained folded as the boat made the journey downriver. Several small birds perched on the gunwale, resting their wings.

"Ahhh, it's nice not to listen to the clatter of a carriage, eh, Ignacio?" Cecilio said.

"You're right, sir. I can hear only the sound of the river."

Bertine found herself charmed by the sight of the two men chatting easily as they stood on the deck and stared out at the water.

"The drinks are ready," she announced.

"Oh ho, is that so?"

"Then let us indulge at once, sir."

Their relaxed airs vanished so quickly she almost believed she imagined the whole scene as the two men moved eagerly into the boat's main cabin. A strong distilled spirit mixed with star fruit liquor was served.

"That looks delicious."

"Cheers, then, sir."

Both men drained their glasses in a single swallow then asked the bartender for refills.

"Ignacio, you and His Excellency hail from the same region, don't you?" Bertine asked.

"Yes. Well, technically speaking, I'm not from the Callisto district, but the one next to it. Although His Excellency was so famous by the age of fifteen that there was no one in the region who *hadn't* heard of him."

"Ignacio, stop right there," Cecilio interrupted.

“Oh, really? I’d *love* to hear more about that. What was he like at that age?” Bertine asked.

Cecilio scowled at Ignacio, who snickered back at him. And Bertine suddenly found herself fascinated by the latter’s words.

“You can imagine, considering his devilish good looks. Whenever there were festivals in the Callisto district, a veritable horde of his admirers would overwhelm the streets in their attempt to see him. From girls as young as twelve to women close to thirty, you know. Naturally, that meant all of us homely boys and men who couldn’t hold a candle to him insulted him nonstop.”

Bertine stifled her laughter at Ignacio’s words and tone, which were completely contrary to his normally expressionless visage behind his glasses. By the by, Ignacio himself was a fairly handsome man. Cecilio’s visual appeal lay in his jet-black hair and fiercely leonine, striking features. In contrast, Ignacio’s bespectacled handsomeness presented an intellectual sort of beauty.

“And there was this incredibly strong woman.”

“Ignacio, say any more and you’ll give me nightmares.”

“Oh, my, now I *must* know what comes after,” Bertine insisted.

“So this woman, she would visit His Excellency’s home every day, demanding he marry her... Heh heh heh.”

“Good grief, those were dark days for me,” Cecilio groaned. “Toward the end, even my father got carried away, overcome by her dedication. He drove me up a wall insisting she would make a fine wife.”

“What sort of woman was she?” Bertine asked.

“Do you remember Bianca? Exactly like her,” Ignacio replied. “His Excellency was extremely blunt when he finally refused her. ‘No. I won’t marry for another twenty years, so give up.’ So she did and married another man not long after.”

Bertine enjoyed hearing such tales she normally wouldn’t have been able to. The two men continued asking for refills throughout their conversation.

A round table covered with a white tablecloth was situated behind the trio. On it lay a vase full of fresh flowers and neatly arranged cutlery. The staff

skillfully set various dishes on top.

“And dinner is served. Shall we, gentlemen?” Bertine asked.

The three of them took their seats at the table. After a simple toast, they began eating. Tonight’s entree was an entire hunk of pork with the skin on boiled in a variety of savory herbs. Thin slices of the meat were arranged in a fan-shaped pattern on the plate. They could dip a piece into any sauce they liked, but one was particularly tasty. A mixture of lemon juice, black stingers, coarse salt, and honey. The gelatinous skin, sweet fatty flesh, and juicy red parts of the meat were all tender and melted in the mouth.

“Wow, I had no idea lemon and black stinger harmonized so well! And the honey aftertaste is superb.”

“Fantastic. I could eat this forever.”

“Your Excellency, this herb-salted sauce is wonderful too.”

Bertine recommended a concoction of coarsely powdered white stingers, salt, chopped parsley, and other herbs. Another sauce made from grated garlic, black stingers, olive oil, and salt was delicious too as it emphasized the meat’s flavor. In between morsels of pork, they chewed on freshly baked bread. This alone felt like enough to fill their stomachs to the brim.

While they ate, Bertine asked Cecilio why he had rejected the passionate woman. Ignacio, slightly drunk now, answered for Cecilio, who seemed uncomfortable.

“Because His Excellency doesn’t like the type of woman who clings. I’ll tell you who he prefers though, Lady Bertine, and that’s y—”

Before he could finish the word, Ignacio felt Cecilio’s hard stare that told him enough was enough. He quickly dropped his own gaze to the meat on his plate and carried a piece to his mouth with a composed expression.

“It isn’t that I don’t like clingy women,” Cecilio said. “I’m just not very good at dealing with them.”

“I see,” Bertine responded.

After a relaxing, leisurely dinner, they went their separate ways. Bertine

availed herself of the bathroom then headed to the second-floor guest cabin allotted to her and Dorothée. They would use the beds there while the three men slept in the hammocks on the first floor.

LATE at night, Cecilio and Ignacio discussed their upcoming duties in their hammocks situated a distance from Diego's. Then Ignacio lowered his voice before he continued speaking.

"Your Excellency. I think it's wonderful how you continue to strive for our country and people, but you should also seek your own happiness."

"Hmm."

"You know what they say. A year means a different thing to a woman than it does to a man."

"Impossible. Not until *that* matter is settled once and for all."

"Well...I suppose I can understand when you put it like that. Speaking of, it still boggles my mind how foolish the Luennian royal family is."

"I'm certain the queen lost sight of what's important along the way."

"And what might that be, sir?"

"Many things. I don't think she was always as greedy as she is now. She must have steadily become blinded to her true purpose in life. And in the end, she'll lose all the wealth she has single-mindedly focused on too. The irony."

"When you're right, you're right."

They fell silent, then closed their eyes and fell asleep. The river journey continued peacefully, only the sounds of the river lapping against the hull.

One year and eight months remained until Claudio's fifteenth birthday.

Chapter 51: There Aren't Enough Words

THE next day, both Bertine and Cecilio sat in the first floor's main cabin furiously working on various documents. *Good grief, what workaholics*, Ignacio thought when he stepped inside and saw them. Then he too sat down to do his own work. He read through a stack of petitions, dividing them into two piles—one he would turn over to Cecilio for him to handle and another he could manage himself.

For a while, only the sound of pens scratching busily on paper could be heard in the stateroom. Then Ignacio suddenly lifted his head with a gasp.

"Your Excellency, your mother's death anniversary is almost upon us. We should be done with our work in time, so why don't we head to the Callisto district after? We'll take this boat down to visit her grave and make it back to the hinterlands in time for Bertine to return."

"Hmmm..."

Cecilio contemplated Ignacio's suggestion. Bertine interjected to reassure him that she didn't mind the change in plans. She would inform the crew as well.

"Are you certain it won't be a problem if we travel down south after our inspection is finished?" he asked to be sure.

"Of course. After all, the national government also funded this boat's construction, so please don't feel so reserved about its use. Would you mind if I accompanied you to Callisto as well? I would like to thank everyone there for their hard work," she said.

"Please do. Thank you, I appreciate it."

Did Cecilio's mother die from an illness? Though Bertine was curious, she knew it would be impolite to ask him, so she concentrated on her work again. But it seemed Cecilio guessed what she was thinking because he began to tell her about his mother.

“My mother died from an injury. When I was five years old, my mother was in charge of providing meals to the miners. I was my parents’ only child. Both my father and grandfather were fishermen, so I would go with my mother to the mines for her work. I played outside, where I wouldn’t bother the others, and waited for her until she finished. That was my life every day. You know how my home is situated far from others’? It would have been difficult for our neighbors to watch me while the adults in my family worked. Back then, the mines were dug by the citizens of the Federation while imperials owned the companies and oversaw the operations.”

Cecilio’s tale helped Bertine understand even more now how he became this country’s leader.

“That day, my mother told the imperial supervisor something. He pushed her hard and sent her flying when he heard what she had to say. There was a massive rock jutting up behind her and she hit her head on it once she fell on the ground. She didn’t bleed, and she even said she was fine. Although she had a headache. A few days later, she died in her sleep.”

Ignacio nodded, his expression bitter.

“Both the mine’s owner and the man who pushed her that day didn’t visit her, much less attend her funeral. They refused to apologize too,” Cecilio continued. “The day after my mother died, one of our neighbors came to our home with a payment of five small silver coins from the company that owned the mine. I don’t know what they told him or how they convinced him. My father couldn’t even do anything about it since I was the only witness and no one would believe a child. Moreover, he didn’t have the means to wage war on an imperial company.”

Bertine didn’t know what to say at hearing such a tragic story.

“His face expressionless, my father tossed the silver coins out the window into the garden. But like I said, I was only five years old at the time. I searched desperately for each and every one until I found them all. I still keep them with me. Five coins. My mother’s life was apparently worth only five small silver coins. I couldn’t just leave it at that. A country’s lack of power cheapens the value of its people’s lives. I didn’t find out until much, much later that what

happened to my mother was just the tip of the iceberg. Sometimes, I'll take out those coins and stare at them. Every time, the sight strengthens my resolve. 'Move this country forward every day, even if it's just an inch.'

Stunned as she was, Bertine couldn't even offer him any words of comfort. Cecilio continued speaking.

"I was five years old and all I had was the grief of losing my mother. But the older I became, the more I found the imperials' treatment of us unforgivable. Then I started taking action, determined to protect my country and my people. A poor, ignorant country treats the lives of its citizens cheaply. Someone had to do something to change the situation. And I decided it would be me since no one else would. That's how I've lived my life. I will *never* again allow this country's people to be treated like cheap tools to be easily discarded once they've outlived their usefulness."

Ignacio picked up the thread from there. "His Excellency's uncompromising position on the reparations wasn't just about the money itself. He wants to punish the Luennian royal family for their dismissive attitude toward our so-called uncivilized nation. They think they can just ignore their debt to us because they have no respect for those who gave their lives in the war."

"Now the Federation's mines are owned and managed by our own people," Cecilio added. "They do what they can to protect the lives of the workers who dig the shafts. We've also made it illegal for Federation landowners to lease their lands to imperials at such low prices it's practically free. When I became the leader of our country, I was almost overwhelmed by how much work there was to be done. But I've made steady inroads. Though we may be moving as slow as snails, we *are* moving. And that's better than standing still. So I have no intention of granting mercy to San Luenne's royal family."

Bertine remained silent. Any words she offered would be token ones in comparison to the pain of this country and its people. Cecilio smiled gently at her before he spoke again.

"If my mother were still alive, she'd be haranguing me to introduce you to her. Driven and frank as you both are, I think you two would have gotten along famously."

“I feel the same,” Bertine said. “I would have enjoyed meeting her, Your Excellency. She must be so proud of her son as she watches over you from God’s garden.”

“Hm, I wonder about that. She might be angry at me, calling me ‘an undutiful boy,’ for leaving my father and grandfather behind in our village. Especially since I don’t even visit them that often.”

With that, Cecilio once more dedicated himself to his documents.

Meanwhile, Bertine recalled their meeting in her shop.

“Now you understand the depth and severity of the Empire’s exploitation of the Federation through its people’s ignorance... The Kingdom of San Luenne conducted business with the Empire and provided financial support for its armies... I want to restore my country through reparations... But it’s difficult for me to claim there’s a shortfall in the funds due to us because of your presence here...”

At the time, she had only been able to take his words at face value, but now she understood. Cecilio wanted to protect this country and its people from the bottom of his heart. He rescued those who had been deceived and enslaved, captured. He convinced the stubborn chiefs of each region to set aside their differences and unite as a country.

Then she remembered what his father had told her about him: *“At this rate, makes me wonder if he’s plannin’ on going down with the country.”*

“Your Excellency, please allow me to join you on your crusade,” Bertine said. “Though I lived as a Luennian myself, feeding off the Empire’s crumbs like the rest of my countrymen, I will do everything in my power to help you.”

“Thank you. But you’re already one of us, Bertine. And besides, you’ve done more than enough.”

Ignacio stood up then and with a, “I’ll prepare some tea,” left the main cabin.

Feeling strangely motivated now, Bertine’s penstrokes became ever more vigorous. When Cecilio noticed, he pushed up out of his chair and approached her, then gently pressed his hand on top of hers.

“Huh? What is it, sir?” she asked.

“Your fingers will be covered in calluses if you use so much force.”

“O-Oh, yes, thank you.”

She replied obediently and immediately loosened her grip on her pen. Her face flamed. *Urk, I must look like a tomato right now.* Despite being flustered, she did her utmost to affect a stoic expression. Cecilio stared down at her for a moment, his eyes soft, before returning to his own table.

Bertine lowered her head as deeply as she could to hide her hot cheeks without actually touching the table’s surface. *If only he had told me all this long ago, I would have worked much harder to help him. Not only is he overly reticent, he’s terrible with words even when he does speak. Honestly.*

“Your Excellency.”

“Hm? What is it?”

“You’re quite inarticulate, aren’t you?”

“...”

Having said her piece, she returned to her work. Cecilio looked flabbergasted. Bertine refused to look at him as she continued writing. Then he resumed his own work and silence reigned thereafter.

Ignacio was disappointed when he stepped back into the cabin. *Here I was being thoughtful by leaving only to find Bertine going at her documents like a demon and His Excellency wrestling with his own. There’s no helping them. Birds of a feather, eh?* With a rueful smile, he sipped on his cup of tea.

SEVERAL days later, the Karina pulled into a port in the hinterlands. They had arrived much faster than a coach. Cecilio and Ignacio departed to conduct their inspection of the location for the proposed thoroughfare while Bertine and her servants headed for the hotel’s planned site in their own carriage.

The trio’s first stop was Chief Bruno’s home.

“Oh ho! Bertine, long time no see.”

“Yes, indeed, Bruno. I’m here to check on the hotel’s progress,” she said.

Upon hearing that, his face broke out into a huge grin.

“Oh, dear. Has something happened?” she asked.

“Go see for yourself.”

She obeyed and made her way to the site. Bertine took a narrow path winding deep into the lush forest. Once she neared her destination, she saw it.

“Oh, my.”

“My lady!”

“Well, well, well.”

Bertine, Dorothée, and Diego stood there, mouths agape in shock. She had expected to see only the foundation laid down. Or perhaps the bare bones framework, at her most optimistic. What she hadn’t expected was for the hotel’s construction to be almost complete.

“How is this real?!” she cried.

Chapter 52: What It Means to Be Royalty

THE hotel was built to be entwined with three huge trees. Each tree supported a room tightly bound to its thick trunk and a number of logs held up the bottom of the rooms like slanting fans from below. Each room was connected to the others by a covered, floating corridor. The roof was entirely covered with bark. A slender staircase wrapped halfway around a large tree, allowing someone to reach the lowest-built room.

Bertine heard a voice calling out to her while she stared up in amazement.

“Bertie!”

It was Evance. Eckhart and Franz were with him as well.

“Evance! You didn’t mention a single thing to me about your progress!” she cried.

“Well, I have a good reason for that. The men of the village were deeply amused by the project, so they came out in full force to build it. Before I knew it, construction was almost finished.”

“That’s an understatement.” Eckhart approached them with a wry smile. “I must tell you how shocked I was. The men here climbed up to the third floor like it was nothing. Without using any sort of footholds, I might add. They said they didn’t need a safety net either, so you can imagine how many years I shaved off my life by merely observing them.”

“No footholds? But how...”

“We’re all excellent climbers in these parts on account of long years spent hunting for the fruits of palms and other trees,” Evance explained, grinning the whole time. “If a tree is too wide for us to wrap our arms around, then we tie ropes around us and climb.”

“Wow!”

Franz told her he had been surprised too at first and added his own

commentary. “They slinked so easily up these trees. Once they reached the top, they would drop one end of the rope down and tell the others to tie the next piece of wood on. After the pieces were tied to the rope, a few of the men would work together to pull up the load. Quite speedy and efficient, I say. Like magic.”

The whole process had been wondrous to Eckhart, who spoke again in an excited tone of voice. “If the Federation’s people worked as carpenters and such in the Empire, our projects would finish in the blink of an eye.”

One of the villagers listening nearby said, “We don’t need footholds for something this short,” with a laugh.

“Franz, Eckhart, can I look inside?” Bertine asked.

“Of course, of course. The highest-ranking imperial noble wouldn’t be able to find any fault with what we’ve built.”

Franz and the others guided her to the first floor. When she stepped inside, she found a foyer, sitting room, bathroom, and kitchen. Right above this space on the second floor was a bedroom and terrace.

The radial supports and thick ropes strung beneath each room were no doubt a result of Eckhart’s gift for calculations. *How can this be so stable, attached as it is to the trunk?* Still, Bertine was impressed as she surveyed the structure.

She spotted thin piping winding its way discreetly from an elevated spot deep in the forest to the first floor. Wondering what it was, she realized spring water must be flowing through it via a wooden channel. Bertine marveled at the ingenuity since it would be quite difficult to carry water all the way here.

“There’s a spacious sunroom on the third floor.”

Climbing up to the space on the third floor, she found a variety of flowers and plants placed in earthenware pots. Vines seemed to have been carefully cultivated to wrap around here and there. She knew when they bloomed, the entire sunroom would be filled with the fragrance of flowers.

Bertine sat down on one of the settees and stretched her legs out. The view outside extended deep into the forest. Since the walls only reached waist-high, she could see clearly in every direction.

“Amazing! This is amazing, Evance!” she exclaimed.

“Heh heh, glad you like it.”

The big young man smiled bashfully. Both Franz and Eckhart extolled his genius.

“The only thing left to do is furnish the place and install the appropriate equipment in the bathroom and kitchen,” Franz said. “Once you do, it will be ready to welcome its first guest. Eckhart’s calculations are meticulous enough that the trees can support the bathtub when it’s full of water and a person.”

“Franz, how about hotel staff?” Bertine asked.

“I recruited the fine folks from the village. I’ll have you know I’ve become great friends with everyone here.”

“Then this means we can open soon, doesn’t it?” she hoped.

“No. I would say not for another year. The staff still have a long way to go in their training. I also need to hire a chef and work out a menu. Food is extremely important, you know. I’ll make sure to find someone who can do justice to the local ingredients.”

“It sounds like you have things well under control, Franz, so I shall take care of the furniture,” Bertine said.

Still impressed by what she saw of the hotel, Bertine made her way to the nearby village. A small school had been built in the Bilva district since her last visit. She learned that the children were taught the fundamental subjects in the country’s official language. It was proof of one of Cecilio’s dreams coming true.

“Bruno, would you like to take a tour of the new riverboat? It’s how we traveled here today. I designed it with the aristocracy in mind.”

“Bertie, are you telling me I can board such a magnificent vessel for sport?” He looked and sounded quite enthused by the prospect. His excitement brought a smile to her lips.

“Of course, and any others who are interested as well. Why don’t we go now?”

“Gladly! Lead the way, young lady!”

“Most people around here have never been on a boat, so I’m sure this will be a delight for everyone,” Cassandra explained the reason for her husband’s elation.

Bruno walked quickly to the bell hanging from a pillar in front of his house. He rang it three times, paused, then another three times. He repeated the pattern until a sizable crowd of people had gathered.

“Chief, what’s the matter?”

“Bertie made a boat to bring hotel customers here. She said anyone can take a tour, so I was wondering who wanted to take her up on her invitation.”

His announcement caused a huge stir. Men and women, boys and girls, people of all ages clamored to go, resulting in a large procession heading toward the river. It would take about an hour on foot. Bertine and her servants were dismayed by the distance, but none of the locals minded.

“We’re built of a different stock than you folks, so don’t worry your head over it,” said an older woman with a laugh.

When their carriage arrived at the pier where the boat was moored, the crew were surprised to see them return so quickly. They had been resting after the long journey. Bertine told them that the residents of the Bilva district would be there soon to take a tour, so they swiftly made the necessary preparations.

Not long after, the large group of people finally appeared.

“Oh ho, a pure white boat, eh?”

“It has two floors!”

“What a lovely ship.”

The villagers stepped aboard as they chattered in a lively fashion. A few of them brought fruits, dried meats, and various alcohols as well, turning the boat’s interior into a festive atmosphere. Bertine asked the staff to bring out the liquor and snacks in the ship’s storage, and so they held an impromptu party. Everyone enjoyed themselves tremendously.

Hours passed and night fell. With their inspection over, Cecilio and Ignacio returned, and they all went to Evance’s home for a lavish dinner. Ignacio

wouldn't stop raving over how much he had been wanting to eat ball rabbit and emu. The more he drank, the more animated he became. Cecilio sat next to Bruno, his face relaxed as he conversed with the chief.

By the feast's end, their stomachs were pleasantly full with both food and drink. They made their way to the boat after thanking their hosts.

"I had myself a look at the hotel Evance designed. What an incredible feat," Cecilio said.

"I, too, had no idea it was nearing completion. You can't imagine my surprise," Bertine responded.

"Despite its otherworldly structure, it somehow blends into the surrounding forest, doesn't it?"

"That may be because all the materials were sourced locally."

Cecilio and Bertine were alone in her carriage while the other three rode in his.

"Bertine, only a year and a half remains until Prince Claudio comes of age."

"Indeed."

"It will be the end of the Kingdom of San Luenne."

She lapsed into a thoughtful silence trying to imagine how she would feel when it became a vassal state of the Empire.

"In its present state, the people of San Luenne are focused only on trying to persuade imperials to spend as much of their coin as possible. That won't change, even if the country's name does. Which is unfortunate because clearly, Luennians have forgotten the wish of their king three generations ago that his subjects lead safe, healthy lives."

But the country that held both happy and sad memories for her would always remain, regardless of what it was called. Its citizens would be the same even if its royal family changed. In the end, only the people they pledged their fealty to would be different after the unloved current royal family disappeared.

"Your Excellency, do you ever wonder what it means to be royalty?"

“I personally think royals are people who are supposed to live for the sake of their country and their people.”

“By your definition then, royals ceased to exist in the Kingdom of San Luenne long ago.”

Bertine looked unbearably sad when she said that as she sat across from him. And without thought, Cecilio leaned forward and cupped her cheek in his right hand.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes. But can we stay like this for a little while longer?”

“Of course. However long you need, I’ll be here.”

“It’s strange for me to become maudlin over a simple name change.”

“Don’t worry. San Luenne will become an even better nation.”

“I hope so, I really do.”

I pray that they never again trade a woman in exchange for money, Bertine thought to herself. Her experience was more than enough.

Chapter 53: The Grand Opening of the Bilva Hotel

BERTINE resumed her busy life after her return to the Federation's capital of Ybit. Furniture, linens, tableware. There was just so much to buy. She chose simple, light furniture boasting gentle lines that would suit the hotel. The plan was to transport them via ship as far as the hinterlands and then load them onto a carriage for final delivery to the hotel. When Franz received everything, he sent her a letter noting how the structure was feeling more and more like a hotel.

The Karina was seeing greater use lately by wealthy merchants heading to the south. Initially, she intended the riverboat to be used only by herself, her people, and hotel guests. But she had changed her mind when the ship's crew complained that too much free time on their hands would make them less capable. So the boat was placed into regular service.

To no one's surprise, the Karina's first passengers were all men. But after those men told their wives and daughters about the vessel, the women themselves and the friends they spoke to were eager to journey on it as well. Eventually, more and more women also embarked on river trips. And so, the Karina satisfied the desires of the Federation's wealthy women as they enjoyed sailing and dining in luxury on the beautiful, elegant vessel.

While rumors of the stingers spread mainly among men, rumors of the boat spread among women. From the Federation's north to its southern reaches. The women were delighted by the opportunity to set off on a short cruise in the morning, enjoy lunch abroad, and return to their families by nightfall. Bertine hadn't anticipated the demand for such excursions.

Preparations continued apace for the hotel's grand opening. Bertine herself stayed at the hotel several times to make sure there were no problems with the facilities or service. At long last, the time drew near to welcome customers.

"Dorothee, I'm not sure who we should invite as the hotel's very first guests. What do you think?" Bertine asked her trusted friend. "I would love to ask my

father to attend the opening since he's an expert on hotel management, but I don't think it'll be possible."

"I agree. My lord wouldn't be able to leave his duties as chancellor unattended for very long. How about Lady Dalila?"

"That's a great idea. I might be too optimistic, but I'll ask her."

Bertine penned a letter to the older woman right away.

"We recently finished work on a new hotel in the Federation hinterlands, so won't you grace us with your presence as its first guests? I promise you that you have never seen anything like it before. We have our own boat ready at your disposal. It will take you from the Empire to the Federation and back again. You can board it at the border between the countries."

It wasn't long before she received a reply from Lady Dalila. *"I gladly accept your invitation,"* it said. Bertine felt heartened by the thought of receiving the woman's thoughts on the hotel. After all, her mother's friend had attained the position of mistress of the robes by the time she retired from imperial service, so she could counsel Bertine on what the hotel might be lacking in terms of facilities and service. Lady Dalila would arrive the day after tomorrow.

THAT night, Bertine and everyone else involved in the hotel's construction celebrated its grand opening. Its name was the Bilva Hotel, in honor of the district in which it stood. Evance cried happy tears the whole night. Watching him, the hotel manager, Franz, and his wife, Elise, wept happily. Eckhart smiled ruefully at them all, knowing how quick Evance was to cry when he was overjoyed.

"Eckhart, does this mean you'll be returning to the Empire now?" Bertine asked.

"Not at all, Bertine. This was the first time I have had so much fun on a job. I enjoyed myself even more than when I built my first building. I would like to be here when Evance builds his second, third, and even more buildings. I'll be in charge of the calculations, making sure they stand good and strong. Would you happen to have any plans to commission him for more, perchance?"

“I do indeed, but first, we have to get *this* hotel started on the right track,” she said.

Smiling, Eckhart looked up at Bertine, who was just a smidge taller than him. “Right you are. Then I shall travel the length and breadth of this country until you’re ready for more. I’ve grown so fond of my life here that I wonder if it’s the reason I worked recklessly and saved piles of money. And thanks to this country’s climate, I have yet to feel any pain in my knees or back since my arrival here. I almost feel like I’ve gone back in time!”

“Oh, my, I’m so glad to hear that. Please, do enjoy your travels. I feel so reassured to know you’ll still be helping Evance the next time I ask him to make something for me.”

“Professor, I’ll act as your bodyguard and guide on your trip,” Evance said.

Bertine realized it didn’t need to be another hotel. What about a library? She would pay for it herself because it was her honor to do what she could to make this country a better place. Moreover, she found the thought of seeing Evance’s buildings all over the Federation highly entertaining.

She stood in front of the hotel after everyone else said their farewell and went home to their beds. Bertine hadn’t stopped running toward her goal since the day she swore to herself that she would create a place for herself with her own hands. And finally, the day arrived when her vow took shape. She made a plan, gathered the necessary people, negotiated, and accumulated the funds. The money for this hotel was a product of this country’s resources and its people’s efforts.

“I was born to come here.”

She could say that now. The memory of the day she left San Luenne came to her, how defeated she had felt then. Bertine wanted to tell her past self, “Don’t worry. Plenty of good things will happen after this. So chin up.”

THE day of the hotel’s grand opening arrived at long last. Bertine had stayed overnight in the administrative building located in the forest not far from the hotel. She was on pins and needles waiting for the first guest to arrive, when

she finally heard the sound of a carriage rolling in. Lady Dalila was here. She stepped down with a smile, accompanied by two of her attendants.

“Welcome, Lady Dalila! I trust your journey was pleasant?”

Led by Bertine, all the uniformed employees greeted their guests.

“Oh, yes, I did. The boat was fantastic, Bertine. I was a bit nervous about traveling in anything other than a carriage, but the river journey was absolutely sublime. And what a marvelous hotel! It looks like a fairy’s house!”

“Fascinating design, isn’t it?”

“It is indeed. So intriguing.”

“I’m so grateful I was lucky enough to meet the genius who thought of it.”

“Having fortune favor you might be one of your special powers, hm?”

Bertine accepted the compliment graciously and then showed Lady Dalila to her suite. Because of its construction, one of the walls on the first floor was the giant tree’s trunk, so a guest could touch the bark while inside the room. Lady Dalila found that feature interesting.

“Ahhh, I should have brought a painter with me!” she opined.

“Oh, I can’t believe I didn’t think of that,” Bertine responded. “I’ll have to hire one right away and have them paint many images of this hotel, so I can show its charms to people far and wide.”

“Do that. If possible, please have them make two extra copies of everything and bind them into collections for me. I’ll use one to introduce your hotel to the aristocracy back in the Empire.”

“Thank you, I’d appreciate it! I’ll make the arrangements as soon as possible.”

Then Bertine led her to the remaining rooms.

“Are you sure about this? These walkways up in the air won’t shake?”

Lady Dalila was afraid of using the floating corridors at first. But once Bertine assured her that the wisteria vines fixed them firmly in place as they twined their length, she climbed up to the third floor.

“Incredible... This forest stretches on for ages, doesn’t it? I see so much

greenery that doesn't grow anywhere in the Empire."

She leaned over the railing and stared out into the distance.



THE next morning, Bertine personally delivered Lady Dalila's breakfast to her room because she wanted to know her thoughts on the hotel. The woman welcomed her exuberantly.

"Bertine, this truly is a paradise! Wild birds perched on the third-floor railing, singing their songs! They weren't frightened of me at all as I sat on the settee. They preened while they trilled then flew off in a flurry of wings. Tiny, scarlet birds!"

"Oh, yes, their birdsongs are quite long and a pleasure to listen to. I love them as well."

"And dinner last night! My goodness! I could not get enough of the ball rabbit meat. So wonderfully delectable and completely different from the wild rabbits in the Empire!"

Bertine didn't want to interrupt Lady Dalila's effusive feedback, so she quietly placed the tray of food she carried onto the table. It was loaded with a platter of fruits, fresh bread, eggs, butter, jam, and tea.

"Wow! You were not joking about the variety of fruits to be found here! As much as I love the jams and marmalades made in the Federation, I must confess I've been *dying* to taste fresh fruit here. I know I'm only here for a week this time, but on my next visit, I plan to stay two weeks. No, a full month actually. Oh, but the more people learn about this place, the harder it will be for me to make a reservation in the future. Bother."

Yes, yes, I completely understand how you feel, Bertine thought with a satisfied smile.

"I highly recommend you go for a stroll after breakfast," Bertine said. "So many different flowers are blooming in the forest. Also, the hotel's guests have free reign over the fruits in the nearby orchards because the owner and I have an agreement in place. You can also see flocks of emu walking down various paths in the orchards."

"Emu, really?! I've only ever seen them in field guides. Bertine, you really did choose the perfect place for your hotel."

Before she could stop herself, Bertine let slip a pleased chuckle.

Lady Dalila was particularly pleased with the star fruit liquor and declared that she would buy fifty bottles as souvenirs to share with people back in the Empire. When Bertine told Chief Bruno, he immediately made plans to produce more, saying, “If we don’t make more soon, we’ll find ourselves running short.”

AT the end of her weeklong stay, Lady Dalila told Bertine over and over again how much she would have loved for Diana and Claudio to experience this as well. Then she left with a fond farewell.

It went without saying that soon after, Bertine received a flood of letters from the Empire to her home in Ybit requesting reservations at the Bilva Hotel. Bertine was so convinced of its success that she decided to budget for another hotel to be built a short distance away.

Sometime later, she sent Lady Dalila the two picture collections she had requested. The volume included illustrations of the hotel’s exterior, nearby flora and fauna, the hotel’s menu, and more. Bertine wrote the descriptions for all the pictures.

In her letter to Bertine, Lady Dalia complained that her friends would hold on to her books for much too long whenever she lent them out. Bertine also started receiving requests from others for the collections as well, so she ended up placing a rush order with the artist to produce even more copies of the drawings.

One year remained until Claudio’s birthday. The Chancellor of the Kingdom of San Luenne, Marquess Maxim du Jeanne, made steady progress on laying the groundwork for the boy’s success. Knowing that both the king and his son possessed neither the energy nor the desire to lead the country, the country’s other leaders immediately agreed to his confidential plans. If the Empire and the Federation joined forces, then they knew the path they needed to choose to survive.

Chapter 54: The Ship Pilot

THE Bilva Hotel was completely booked with reservations for the next six months. Most of the guests found out about it through Lady Dalila. Ever since she had become Bertine's point of contact for the sale of the fabric, the woman's social circle in the Empire expanded in leaps and bounds.

Moving forward, it was up to Bertine and the rest of the people involved in the hotel's operation to attract customers beyond those who knew Lady Dalila. If they provided the best service and stays, she knew their satisfied customers would recommend the hotel to members of their own social networks. Many of the guests they had so far enjoyed their time in the hotel so much that they often requested reservations for the same time next year.

"Bertie, Kurt and I decided to partner up on the production of the star fruit liquor," Bruno told her. "We'll be using his facilities as well, since ours are no longer enough to meet demand. And if that still proves to be insufficient, I'll reach out to the chiefs in other regions nearby."

"Bruno, I'm so sorry for increasing your burden."

"Now, now, none of that. Let me tell you, we've seen a trickle of young folks who went to work in the capital returning home. Thanks to you, I think we'll see an increase in our population here. Else our villages would have disappeared with only us old folks. So all this production is happy news indeed."

Then there was the master architect Eckhart and Bruno's son, Evance. The two had indeed gone off traveling around the Federation. Bertine received a letter from Evance, which noted that *"Eckhart wants to build a hotel on a hill overlooking a river for the view. If a hotel isn't possible, then a community hall or library is fine too."*

Bertine decided to have them work on the next building within the coming year or so. Because right now, she was up to her ears in making various plans a reality.

BUSY days make time rush by even faster. It wasn't at all an exaggeration to say that the days just flew by ever since the hotel officially opened. The Bilva Hotel earned money hand over fist, with reservations blocked off for months to come. There was a considerable increase in the number of guests who weren't here on Lady Dalila's introduction.

The ivy coiling around the third-floor sunroom grew even more, the scent of its blossoms permeating richly throughout the space. Hummingbirds visited often to sup on the nectar. Naturally, watching this sight became the latest craze for guests.

Sales of stingers continued to soar, especially as their reach steadily extended to other countries as well. Bertine's shop, the Flower of Krusula, became well-known even in Ybit for its high-quality embroidered goods and accessories. The necklace Isabella made for Diana was safely delivered in the woman's hands. Not long after, both Bertine and Isabella received letters of thanks from her.

Those letters bore both Diana and Claudio's names. They had been sealed with a purple wax designated only for the Empire's ruling family to use. Isabella teared up when she saw the letter addressed to her.

"I never imagined a day would come when I received something like this," she said joyously.

IT had been almost three years since Bertine arrived in the Federation. Her life remained as busy as ever. The fancy riverboats numbered three now, and she had built another hotel near the Bilva Hotel. A library had been added to the school in the Callisto district. Regardless of age, everyone living there had access to it. It had been a result of the people's strong demands to the chief, led by the woman who wanted to read books to children.

This nation is moving forward one step at a time. I'm so happy that my work has been able to help in the process. Bertine's heart warmed as she continued reading letters from her friends and colleagues in the Callisto district.

Then one day, she received a message from Ignacio requesting her

participation in a meeting. She made herself look presentable before she left her home for the capitol building. When she was ushered into the conference room, Bertine found another man there besides Cecilio and Ignacio. Possessed of a sturdy constitution, he looked to be a soldier in his late forties. Ignacio introduced him as the minister of military affairs. Once she took her seat, Cecilio immediately began the meeting.

“Prince Claudio’s fifteenth birthday will arrive six months from now. I asked you all here today to determine whether or not you want to be involved in matters of state moving forward. It is up to you to decide. I’ll support whatever stance you choose.”

“I...” Bertine just couldn’t remain neutral on issues concerning San Luenne’s future. After all, its queen was the one responsible for the dramatic change in her own life. “I’m the reason they tried to bargain down the reparations. I also bear some responsibility for Prince Claudio’s desire to leave his country. Though that hadn’t been my intention at all, there’s no denying I had an impact on his mindset, and I certainly won’t turn a blind eye to it either. So, as one involved in all this, I will see it through to the end.”

A slight frown had marred Cecilio’s brow as he listened to her, but once she gave him her decision, he nodded brusquely in understanding. “You know this means you’ll be betraying the Luennian royal family, yes?”

“I do. In this case, I think I’m most suited to fill the role of traitor.”

“Fair enough... Then let me explain how the situation will unfold, step by step.”

Cecilio told them what would happen on the fateful day. *I’m surprised he agreed to that line of reasoning*, Bertine thought to herself.

“I take it you didn’t expect that, eh?” he asked.

“You’re right,” Bertine said. “Your role in all this seems unfavorable, Your Excellency, especially when the emperor’s younger brother will walk away bearing most, if not all, of the credit.”

“Do you think so? I personally don’t give a fig what San Luenne’s royal family thinks about me. As long as I can get the results I want, I’ll drink muddy water

with a smile.”

The uniformed man picked up the conversation from there. “Lady Bertine, I’d like to ask you something. That country has sharp reefs all around the island, right down to just above sea level. We’re aware that there are thirty people on active duty in the Kingdom who know the route that won’t destroy a ship’s bilge. Do you know of any retired folks possessing this knowledge? If so, are they still healthy enough to move and would any of them be willing to work with us?”

Bertine realized the situation was so fraught they needed to rely on those already retired. “I don’t know how many are older and retired, but there should be quite a few. I *do* know they receive generous pensions for their service though. Whether they’re retired or still active, if any of them tell outsiders of the route, they *and* their whole families will be executed. Moreover, this route has no landmarks that can be easily recognized when taught by letters or words. It’s knowledge that the pilots teach only to one of their own children.”

Having suspected as much, Cecilio exchanged pointed glances with the other two men before speaking. “We have spent two years searching for someone in that group who would be willing to cooperate with us because of any resentment they hold for the Kingdom. Unfortunately, there isn’t a single ship pilot in San Luenne who fits the description. Most of the ones we spoke with were dissatisfied with the current royal family, but they were also resigned to the situation since there was no one worthy to replace the current king. We thought your father may have better leads than us. Except we’d rather leave him as our very last resort, considering he’s under surveillance within his home and outside it as well.”

The people’s estimation of the king and queen as politicians was extremely low. Yet the country continued to operate smoothly because of Bertine’s father’s leadership. So there was no reason for a pilot to risk his own life and his family’s to oppose the royal family.

Bertine chewed over the situation, then her face lit up as she remembered something.

“What? What is it? Have you thought of someone?” Cecilio asked.

“Yes, but...he has a family and he’s not a citizen of San Luenne anymore either. I’m not sure he’d be willing to help us on account of his peaceful life. I’ll try asking him though. I can’t guarantee he’ll still remember the route, but he definitely *used* to know it.”

BERTINE headed to the imperial capital to meet Luca. They met in her usual suite, the one wallpapered with white roses.

“The first thing this plan needs is a pilot,” she said.

“I understand. I’ll take on the role. I was glued to my father’s side whenever he entered and left the country on his ship, so I still remember the safe route.”

She had come here expecting him to agree. Even so, she felt awful when he did. Because Luca was married with children. He had no obligation to participate in this plan.

“You know, ever since we met again, I’ve been thinking about my father,” he said. “My father died of a broken heart, wondering until the very end why things happened the way they did with his business. And yet I could do nothing for him despite knowing the reason. So if I don’t do anything now, I know I’ll regret it until the day I die. No, even after. That’s not how I want to live my life.”

“I can relate, Luca,” Bertine said softly. “But there’s a chance, however slim, that our plot will be exposed. If that happens, your life will be in danger. Are you still determined to go through with it even then?”

Luca smiled. “I am. I have only one request. Promise me my wife and children will be safe. That’s all I need. Let me do this, Bertie.”

“I will. Thank you, Luca. I want you to discuss this with your wife first then tell me your final answer.”

Luca gave her a small nod. “You’re right. I’ll talk to her tonight.”

THE next day, Luca went to Bertine’s suite once more, his eyes slightly bloodshot.

“My wife yelled at me. ‘If you don’t do it, I know you’ll regret it for the rest of

your life. So did you really think I'd tell you not to? Idiot.' Is what she said. I had no idea she was so strong. Seems she realized that something has been weighing on my mind for a long time and she was angry with me for not talking to her about it. Then she made me promise that after we succeed and I come home, I'll take her and the children to the hotel that's been on everyone's lips. 'I want to stay in the hotel that looks like a fairy's house. I want to relax and enjoy fruits to my heart's content while watching the hummingbirds.'"

"Understood. I'll block the hotel's schedule for a full month from the day we carry this plan out. You and your family can stay there the entire duration," she vowed.

"Bertie, you know I can't take that much time off from work."

"I do, but I'm sure you'll insist your wife and children stay even if you return here to resume your duties halfway through the vacation."

"Well... You're not wrong..."

Chapter 55: Executing the Plan

LUCA and Cecilio were talking within the confines of the Karina, moored on the Saran River near the Federation's border with the Empire.

"You remember where the reefs are?" Cecilio asked.

"I do. I rode on my father's ship countless times as a child, so I remember exactly when the rudders turned," Luca told him.

"Can you draw the route on a nautical chart?"

"I think so, but I memorized the landmarks based on San Luenne's position in relation to the Empire and the continent. So I'm not sure whether my drawing will be completely accurate in that sense. If you put me on the lead ship, I can signal whenever a turn is coming up. I won't make any mistakes that way."

Cecilio mulled things over for a bit. "Do you still have any relatives in San Luenne? There's a possibility they may be executed as well should our plan go awry."

"Distant relations. But they cut off all contact with us once my father went bankrupt. Told us we were strangers as far as they're concerned."

"I see... Then will you tell me why you're doing this?"

Luca glanced at Bertine, unsure of how much to reveal to the other man. She nodded encouragingly at him. "My family's company went bankrupt because of the Luennian queen's scheming," he confided. "The shock and despair ruined his health. He never really recovered, eventually passing away. I do this for him and myself, since I've never been able to forget what happened to him. So, I want to be a part of this plan to destroy the royal family."

"Ah. You were the one who was meant to be Bertine's fiancé," Cecilio deduced.

"Yes. I'm married to an imperial woman with whom I have young children

now. She already knows everything about this, and I have her blessing,” Luca said.

“There’s no way we can test this out with you in advance. Can you do it without fail when the day comes?” Cecilio asked.

“I can. I’m confident I can safely guide everyone to San Luenne’s shores.”

At that point, Cecilio confided everything to him. “The emperor and his brother are involved in this mission as well, so I can guarantee your family’s safety.”

“Wh-What? Truly? Oh, what a godsend.”

“And on the Luennian side, we have Bertine’s father’s participation too.”

“The marquess...?” Luca said.

“Everything depends on you guiding us. We’re counting on you.”

“I won’t disappoint you, Your Excellency. I just have one request. I would like to practice with the ship’s crew until we’re perfectly in sync and they can maintain the speed I was familiar with as a child.”

“Of course. Both the ship and its crew are at your disposal until you deem them ready. Practice as much as you need.”

After a strong handshake with Cecilio, Luca disembarked. Bertine’s chest swelled with emotion as she watched him walk away. She had anticipated the emperor and his brother participating in the plot, but she hadn’t been sure. So she’d been surprised when Cecilio confirmed it for the first time. The enormity of their mission had finally sunk in.

It’s too late now to worry about involving Luca. We’ve reached the stage where we can no longer waver. At that moment, Cecilio placed an arm around her shoulders, pulling her close. She felt enveloped in his warmth.

“Don’t worry so much. We’ve prepared as much as we can,” he said.

“You’re right. I know you’re right, but I can’t help my mind flitting to the worst-case scenario.”

Bertine maintained correspondence with her father about this matter just like

Cecilio kept in contact with the emperor about it. Claudio gave his father the answers he sought, earning his approval. Everything they did was to replace the royal family without hurting the people of San Luenne.

Soon, Claudio would turn fifteen. He and Bertine no longer went through the Rose Hotel to exchange letters. Instead, Prince Ehrenfried acted as their intermediary. The boy sent her letters once a month, detailing his purpose in living as well as the decline in his mother's exclusion from imperial society.

"When I realized others' torment of Mother had stopped, I thought my desire to leave the country would disappear as well. But it didn't. It seems I want to do more than just simply save her."

I live a fulfilling life every day now. Whether it be my studies or martial training, or even my daily habits, I feel value in everything I do in my pursuit to become a good king. I finally found the path leading to real hope."

The boy of twelve she had met would soon be a young man of fifteen.

Even though we haven't seen each other in person since then, the prince must surely have grown tremendously in that time, she thought. I know we decided that Diana shouldn't be informed about the plan until the day before they depart, but still, I wonder how she'll feel when she finally learns of it.

"Your Excellency, is there *truly* a need for you to bear the brunt of all this?" Bertine asked.

"Yes, because I'm the only one who can."

"Well, then..."

There was no hesitation whatsoever in Cecilio's reply, so Bertine decided to say nothing more. In the face of his unyielding conviction to do whatever was necessary for his country, she wavered on voicing her own doubts and fears.

IN the imperial villa he shared with his mother, the Empire's second prince, Claudio, awoke before dawn. Ten days left until his fifteenth birthday. Today was the day they would finally depart. When he got up from his bed, he instructed the maids.

“I’m leaving today. I’d like you to prepare some clothes that are easy to maneuver in as well as my formalwear.”

“Oh, are you attending some sort of function, Your Highness?”

The maids were surprised. Naturally, they knew nothing of the plan.

“Yes,” he replied with a smile. “I have somewhere important to be.”

Claudio’s life had no purpose before he met Bertine. After meeting her, all he wanted to do was escape his hollow existence. But everything was different now. Ever since he chose his own path, he had dedicated himself assiduously to training his body and mind. He had grown almost a foot these last two and a half years. Plus, his continued studies in both kingcraft and martial arts had instilled confidence in him. Without himself realizing it, a dignified aura suited to a leader now emanated from him.

Claudio suppressed his overwhelming desire to leave at once and then visited his mother’s room. Diana learned everything from him suddenly last night. She hadn’t slept a wink as she greeted the new day that would take her son away from her as he went forth on his own journey. When he stepped inside her chambers, she excused her attendants so that she could speak to her son in private.

“Claudio. I have only one wish as your mother. Live. Promise me you’ll treasure your life, that you’ll come back here alive.”

It was bad luck to cry before a journey, so she blinked hard and pushed back the tears threatening to fall. She was still shocked that her precious child had hidden a matter this monumental from her for two and a half years. Her anger toward the emperor had yet to abate because she knew without a doubt that he was the one who told Claudio to keep quiet.

Did His Majesty truly think I would tell someone if I knew? For Diana, Claudio had been her only light in this suffocating world. And now he departs for San Luenne to stage a coup with only a handful of guards? Absurd.

“Mother. You have nothing to fear. A great many people are on my side, lending me their aid. Be at ease as you wait for my return. I’ll be sure to return bearing good news.”

With those determined words, Claudio left his mother's room. He deliberately didn't look back at her as she watched him go. *Don't worry. I'm simply going to do what I must.*

PRINCE Ehrenfried arrived in front of the villa. They had decided he and Claudio would depart together. Not long after, the emperor too appeared. Only their closest, most trusted security personnel knew the truth of the situation. The rest of the guards murmured amongst themselves about what was happening since they hadn't been informed of any events occurring today.

"Well, then, Father. Today is the day."

"It is. Go on. I expect you to return bearing good news."

From afar, the empress, Ekaterina, watched the sight with her son, Crown Prince Felix. She had been told nothing of the plan. To her eyes, Claudio's spirited aura made him look larger than life. Uneasiness surged within her breast at the overflowing confidence on his face.

The time for Claudio and Ehrenfried to depart had come. The non-descript carriage bearing them rumbled out of the castle gate. Only the smallest contingent of soldiers accompanied them.

After seeing them off, the emperor returned to the imperial palace. Ekaterina rushed toward him.

"Your Majesty, what is the meaning of this?"

"Nothing of import. They just have some minor business to attend to."

On the off chance the empress decided to interfere with the plan, Emperor Christhardt had decided not to mention anything at all to her for the next week. The moment after his decision though, he realized how much he didn't trust his wife of many years.

I wonder. When did it start? When did I stop trusting Ekaterina? Despite our marriage being an arranged one, I swore to myself that I would advance this country with this woman on the day we wed. So what happened?

Since Diana had captured his heart, the emperor had been careful not to let

his wife see what was inside. But this morning, guilt toward his wife plagued him. She had done nothing wrong. It wasn't her fault he fell in love with Diana. His own actions had transformed Ekaterina into a wife he couldn't trust. As the feelings of guilt coiled around him, Christhardt walked toward his chambers.

The empress bit her lip, watching her husband walk away from her. Not once had he met her eyes. *There's no point worrying about this. My son will be the next emperor after all. Nothing else matters.*

Yet an emptiness yawned inside her when she looked into the future and found no one there by her side who would love her even as the years withered her face and figure away. All she saw was a cold wind blowing through the barren wasteland of her life.

Ekaterina had been the envy of every young noblewoman after she had been chosen as the emperor's wife all those years ago. Her family had been delighted to have their daughter become his wife, and eventually the empress. She should have been living a life of splendor. Instead, jealousy toward the young concubine burned within her. She had fallen so low, become such a wretched excuse for a human being that she even wished for that woman's death and the death of her child.

And now, her husband wouldn't even tell her why her brother-in-law and Claudio left.

"Mother? Are you all right?"

Her son stared down at her in concern. He was so much taller than her now. At the age of sixteen, he looked just like his father when he was young.

"It's nothing, Felix. Right, then, off to breakfast."

"Mother." He wrapped his arms around her thin shoulders, sensing something was amiss. "I'm here. Please, won't you cheer up?"

"Thank you, Felix."

Felix too grew up witnessing his mother's pain. The gentleness on his father's face as he watched his younger brother leave. He had never looked at Felix that way.

He had always despised his father. Though he had never hated Claudio, he knew how much it would hurt and alienate his mother if he developed a bond with him as well. So he had deliberately kept his distance from his brother.

When I become emperor, I will never wound my wife like my father. And I'll make sure to build up this country together with Claudio. Hand in hand.

The emperor had yet to realize that his way of life strongly influenced not only his second son but also his firstborn. Things changed little by little as his family's feelings intertwined.

Chapter 56: Black Ships

CLAUDIO'S carriage headed steadily toward its destination—the Southern Federation. The further south they traveled, the deeper in color the blue sky became. He didn't recognize the plants and trees growing by the highway either. It wouldn't be long before they reached the border between the two countries.

The reason they didn't go directly to San Luenne via an imperial ship was the result of discussions between the Empire and the Federation. *I'm not fleeing from the Empire but crossing the border of my own volition.* Across the border, dozens of Federation soldiers in military uniform were lined up.

"Claudio, the hour is almost upon us."

"Yes, it is, Uncle."

"I'll deal with this. It isn't yet time for you to reveal yourself." Ehrenfried stepped down from the carriage and then addressed the unit in a voice that resonated. "I'm grateful for your escort," he declared. "Lead the way."

SEVERAL days later, under the Federation army's protection, they finally arrived in the capital of Ybit. Tall buildings stood everywhere. Claudio had learned about this city in his studies, so he wasn't surprised by the sights and sounds. Compared to the Empire, there was much more space between buildings here. Colorful pink and red flowers bloomed on the roadside trees characteristic of this country. The sun shone down much more strongly here than it did in the imperial capital.

When they arrived at the capitol building, they found Cecilio waiting out front for them. His black hair was brushed back from his forehead and he was in his snow-white full military dress uniform. He greeted them with a warm smile after they disembarked from the carriage.

“Welcome, Prince Claudio, Prince Ehrenfried.”

“Pleasure seeing you again after so long, Your Excellency.”

“I’ve been looking forward to this day for a *very* long time, Your Highness.”

The minister of war, Ignacio, and Bertine stood behind Cecilio. Claudio greeted them in order, leaving Bertine for last.

“It’s been a long time since we last met, Lady Bertine.”

“Indeed it has, Prince Claudio. You’re so tall now, I hardly recognized you.”

“I’ve changed a great deal on the inside and out,” he replied.

Led by Ignacio, the six of them entered the building to discuss the plan.

While sipping on hot tea laced with jam, Bertine watched Claudio. He was no longer a boy, but a well-built young man exuding a dignified air. She had no idea boys could change so much in two and a half years. Since it sounded like his voice had only recently started to change, he still had trouble speaking smoothly. It didn’t stop him as he actively participated in their discussion.

Luca, who had joined them shortly after the start of the meeting, trembled with excitement. *It’s finally happening.* His father’s handkerchief rested in his breast pocket. A keepsake. *Father, I hope you’re watching. I’ll avenge you without fail.* He occasionally pressed his hand against the keepsake.

The only one who remained calm and composed was Cecilio. He had gone over this plan with a fine-toothed comb countless times. There were no holes in it. It would go off without a hitch so long as everyone executed their duties without panicking. But he was well aware that there were no guarantees when it came to anything people did. *So it’s my role to be prepared for unexpected situations,* Cecilio thought coolly as he looked at the faces of the other five.

ON top of a high tower in San Luenne’s royal castle, a guard saw something that made him doubt his eyes. The sun had only just begun its ascent. Underneath the barely lightened sky, two enormous black sailing vessels floated out at sea. They looked to be Federation navy ships.

“What in the world?”

He hadn't been informed of any ships coming from the Federation. Baffled by the situation, he checked again, this time with a spyglass. What he saw stunned him. Two flags flew off each jet-black ship's stern. One was the Empire's griffin raising a sword and the other was the Federation's with its symbolic lion and eagle duo.

"Two flags?"

As if propelled by an unseen force, the lookout jumped up from his chair and rushed down the stairs with a fierce urgency. He couldn't very well sound the emergency alarm because of the imperial flag flying. But he had no doubt that this was a highly unusual situation.

Despite the fact that dawn was only just breaking, when the guard reached his destination, he found the chancellor standing there. In his confusion, he didn't realize how unnatural the marquess's presence was. It actually relieved him to see their country's most dependable person there.

"What's wrong? Why are you running?" he asked.

"Lord Chancellor, two Federation navy ships are heading toward us!"

"And you're certain of the Federation flag?"

"Yes. I mean, no. There were two flags—imperial and Federation."

"I see. The Empire's flag means we can't be too hasty in our approach. Return to your post, soldier."

"What? But..."

"Don't worry. I'll take responsibility for whatever happens."

"Understood, my lord."

If the chancellor said so, then he needn't be anxious. Because he basically ran the country. So the guard went back to the tower and once more turned his spyglass in the direction of the black ships.

"What the...?!"

Though no ships sailed out yet from the Kingdom to greet them, the Federation vessels nevertheless lowered small boats one after another into the

water. These small boats then advanced single file toward the port of San Luenne.

“They’re going to run aground on the reefs!” he cried.

The network of reefs surrounding this island was incredibly complicated. It wasn’t something foreigners could navigate. Just as he was about to run down to inform the chancellor of this new development, he noticed the movements of the small boat in the lead.

“Huh? It’s avoiding the reefs perfectly?”

That wasn’t the end of it. A second boat followed closely behind the first, continuously dropping things into the water as it traveled.

“Those are...!”

Buoys. Buoys made from circles of lumber tied to heavy chains and stone, painted bright white. They clearly marked the route to be followed, avoiding the reefs. When the second boat ran out of buoys, the one behind it picked up the slack and threw their own supply into the water. And so the pattern continued as the procession steadily made its way through the reefs.

“They’re giving away the safe route!”

The route that was so complicated to travel that it was akin to threading the eye of a needle. That complexity made it the country’s greatest defense. So it was a crime to make the route this clear. San Luenne didn’t have an army. Any attack signaled the end for the nation.

“Chancellor! Lord Chancellor! We have a major problem! The sea route!”

On his way down the stairs, a group of brawny, unfamiliar men blocked the lookout. They quickly tied him up, covered his mouth so he couldn’t speak, and shoved him into a closet by the stairs. The guard had no idea what had just happened to him.

“My lord, it’s done.”

“Good work. Now go hide yourselves until I tell you it’s safe to come out.”

“Yes, sir.”

After instructing his private army, Chancellor Maxim strode in a relaxed manner to the royal palace. He asked a passing maid to wake up the king because important guests from the Empire were en route. She hurried to the residential wing of the palace to do his bidding.

Luennians who lived near the coast started stepping out of their homes, looking out toward the sea.

“What’s the meaning of this?”

“I can see an imperial flag on the lead ship. Does that mean they have one of our special pilots guiding them?”

“Hey, look. There are buoys on the route. Whoever he is, he signed his own death warrant.”

“Can our government even execute an imperial, though? All they would have to do is lodge a complaint and that would be the end of it.”

“Now I’m wondering why none of our pilots are out there.”

Spectators streamed outside one after another. By the time the sun rose fully in the sky, around a thousand people stood on the coast watching the line of small boats as it drew closer.

“Hey! Those aren’t imperial soldiers!”

“Aren’t they from the Federation?”

At that, everyone ran back inside their homes. They mistakenly thought that the Federation had come to invade while deceitfully flying the Empire’s flags.

Luca continued giving instructions in the lead boat, just like he had practiced countless times in Federation waters.

“Nine, ten, eleven, twelve, ten o’clock! One, two, three, four, five, twelve o’clock!”

As a child, he had loved riding on ships by his father’s side. The two of them had made the ocean journey between San Luenne and the Empire of Centaur on innumerable occasions because of his father’s business. Sometimes, they returned right back to San Luenne without ever stepping foot in the Empire.

At some point, he had wanted to memorize the complicated route to the port of San Luenne, so he would count the numbers as he rode along. Since record-keeping was strictly forbidden, he learned the numbers just for fun. Which was how he ended up learning the timing of the ship's rudders as they turned. *Next up is two o'clock. Three, four, five, twelve.* He had enjoyed playing the guessing game with himself. Eventually he memorized the timing perfectly when his guesses always hit the mark.

Luca had boasted about his trick to Bertine a few times, right around when their engagement was supposed to be formalized. But he never would have guessed she remembered his silly bragging. And he certainly couldn't have imagined himself being part of a plot to destroy the royal family like this.

Once the plan had been set, he had practiced calling out directions, charting the secret sea route again and again on a Federation ship. With his detailed instructions on the speed of the ships, the Federation ships now cut through the waters at the same speed as San Luenne's.

Father, I was finally able to avenge you. Are you watching? Memories of his father flicked through his mind. He had to focus on the task at hand. Otherwise the tears would fall. Suppressing the surge of emotion, Luca continued guiding the ships down the route.

Chapter 57: The Curtain Rises

IT took quite some time for Faustino, San Luenne's king, to grasp the circumstances after he was roused from sleep. When his servant urged him to look out the window, he did as instructed. Only to find white buoys clearly marking the secret sea route that protected the country. The law was strict on revealing the route to outsiders. Anyone who was found guilty of violating it would be executed along with their entire family. It wasn't just the sight of the buoys that stunned him though. An entire line of small boats, presumably from the Federation, sluiced down the route as they headed straight for San Luenne's shoreline. Each vessel carried almost twenty soldiers.

"What is the meaning of this?! Remove those buoys at once!" he thundered.

"We can't, Your Majesty! Federation soldiers have already seized all of our ships!"

"Are you telling me this is an attack?"

"Perhaps. But they haven't done anything besides capturing our ships."

"What of the archers?"

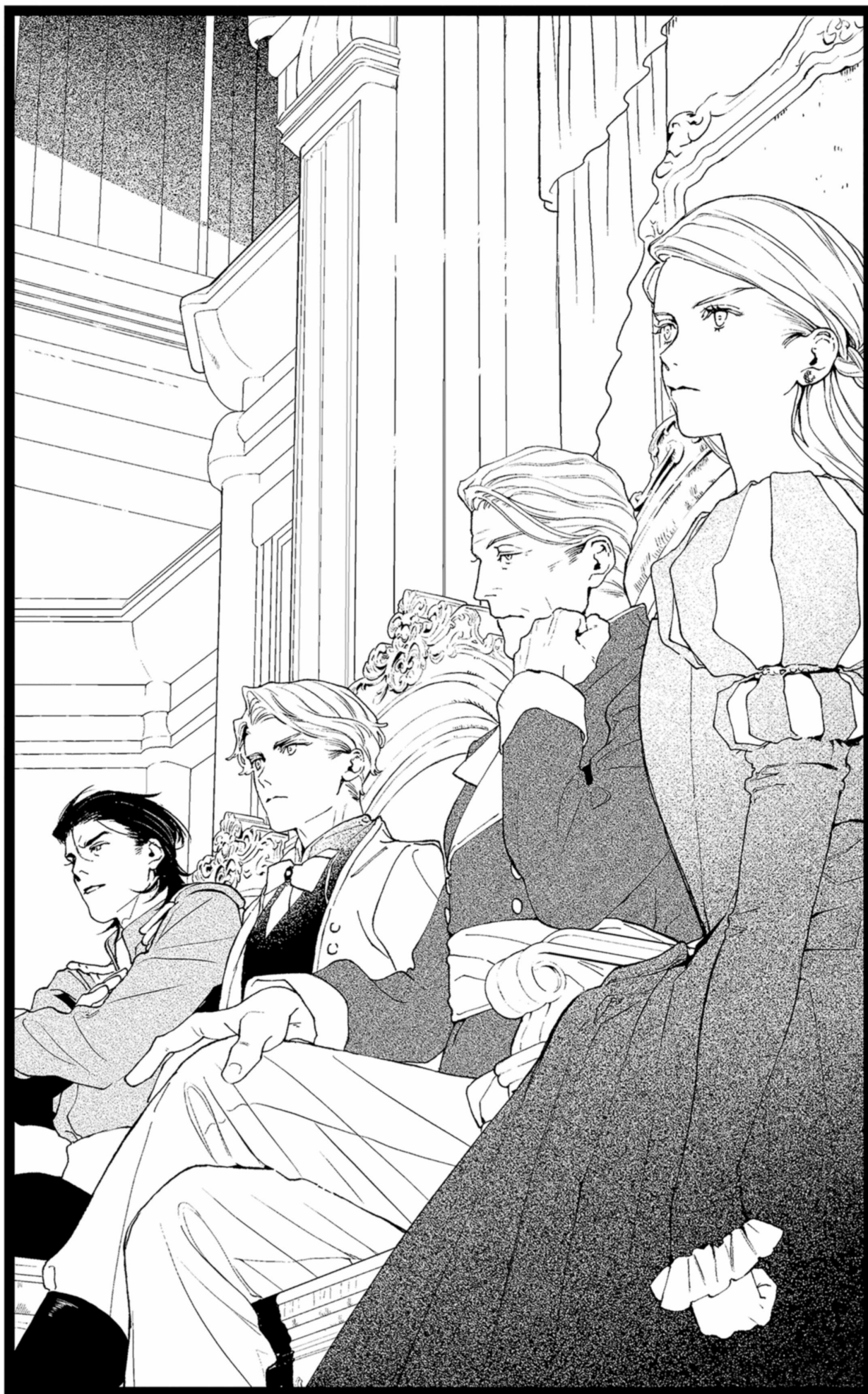
"I didn't see a single one of them in the duty room when I went to check!"

I don't understand this... Without a moment's delay, the king rushed out of his chamber to the throne room, but on his way, he discovered that Federation soldiers were already standing at attention at key locations throughout the palace. They remained at their posts even when they saw him, only giving him the briefest of cold glances. The members of the royal guard stationed in the palace were nowhere to be found either. They were all young men selected for their handsome looks, designed to draw in and please the tourists.

Faustino sweat profusely, spurred by the fear of when he would be cut down or captured. When he reached the large double doors to the throne room, he didn't wait for the attendant to open it, instead pushing them open himself.

Upon entering, he found soldiers lining the walls. Several people congregated in the center of the room. The emperor's younger brother, Prince Ehrenfried, and his second son, Prince Claudio. Bertine stood next to them. He also saw a black-haired man for the first time. Though they had never met until now, he knew it was undoubtedly Cecilio, the head of the Federation.

The four of them watched him. None of the three men stood up to greet him even though he was the king of this country. They continued to lounge indolently in their chairs.



“Bertine! Why are you here?! Your Imperial Highness Ehrenfried, what is the meaning of this?!” Faustino roared.

Cecilio answered him. “You have finally graced us with your presence, King Faustino, Your Royal Majesty. You saw our Federation ships with your very eyes, yet you lob your questions first at the imperials. You’re even more of a dullard than I expected.”

“Y-You! How dare you show me such disrespect?!”

The king ran out of breath then. A moment later, Queen Adele and Prince Odalis burst into the room. That was when Cecilio stood up leisurely. As he approached the royal family, taking long strides, he began speaking in a low voice.

“You’re all here. Good. Faustino, the only one who has shown disrespect is *you*. Despite being on the losing side of the war, you had the temerity to not only bargain down the reparations you rightfully owed, but also offer one of your subject’s daughters in exchange. Never in my life have I heard of such a despicable country. There is an exceedingly heavy price to be paid for reneging on the treaty you yourself signed. Your payment deadline passed three years ago. Since you clearly have no intention of paying, I decided to come take this palace as compensation for the shortfall.”

Hearing this, the queen shrieked in a tone so shrill it could have cut through glass. “I won’t stand for such idiocy! All we have to do is pay! So it’s outrageous you would cause such a fuss over a mere thousand gold coins! Have you lost your mind?!” Adele’s eyes bulged in fury as she turned to a servant. “Bring the money!” she snapped angrily. “Hurry!”

“Stop,” Cecilio commanded curtly. “Move and it will be the last thing you do.”

Then he drew close to the queen. The servant had frozen completely, overwhelmed by the force of Cecilio’s voice.

“Hm. How strange. Doesn’t this country’s law have a specific clause for when a debt is left unpaid for more than a year after the due date? In that event, if the debtor does not go through the proper channels or provide reasonable justification for being in arrears, a substantial portion may be forfeited from the

debtor's lands or other assets, such as property. Or am I wrong?"

The queen tightened her lips because no rebuttal came to mind.

"Furthermore, the law also states that in such cases, a punitive interest of 20 percent per year can be imposed retroactively starting from the date the original debt was created. I calculated the interest for these years. Combined with the original principal amount, I believe the new total comes to 1,728 large gold coins, yes?"

"We'll pay it all right now!" the queen shouted.

"Alas, I no longer have a need for your money. The Federation will take this palace as payment instead."

"You *do* know that Bertine is the daughter of our chancellor? How dare you continue to demand reparations even though we *gave* you Bertine?"

Bertine stepped forward and repudiated the queen's words in a clear tone. "His Excellency and I have nothing more than a professional relationship. He is my superior and I am his subordinate. I am entirely self-reliant because of my work in the Federation, and I came here today to testify as such."

"But that's not..." King Faustino trailed off.

"But that's not how things were supposed to be?" Cecilio supplied. "Is that what you're thinking? You funded the imperial army and now you have the gall to act like San Luenne played no part in any of this?"

"Now, now, Your Excellency. We need calmer heads to prevail, hm? So let's forgive them for their reprehensible actions. These people are not royalty by any means. After all, what sort of barbarians tender their subject's daughter in lieu of reparations? I couldn't believe my ears when I found out."

The queen heard Ehrenfried's words, but her confused mind struggled to grasp the situation. "Your Imperial Highness, I don't understand."

"It's simple. You have been too greedy, Queen Adele. Cecilio makes excellent points all around. If you had treated the Empire so shabbily, rest assured we would have retaliated without a qualm. And we certainly wouldn't have waited three years to do it. But there's no denying our two countries have a long

relationship, which is the only reason the Empire has decided to intervene in this matter.”

Hope sprung on the faces of the Luennian royal family.

Then Claudio spoke for the first time. “I am Claudio, the Empire of Centaur’s second prince. His Imperial Majesty bid me to give this to you.”

Adele raced forward and grabbed the documents from Claudio’s hands. “No! Absolutely not!” She kept muttering in panic as she read through them. Faustino drew close to her so he too could scan them.

“You are hereby ordered...ordered to relinquish the throne to Claudio,” the king’s voice was faint as he read aloud those words.

His son, Prince Odalis, shouted, “This is a coup, isn’t it?! The Empire and the Federation joined forces to take over our country! How is that even possible?!”

A new voice echoed throughout the room. Chancellor Maxim.

“Prince Odalis, Her Majesty’s judgment was wrong. Before my daughter was forcefully sent to the Federation, His Excellency Cecilio had in fact told your mother and father that his country would rather have reparations than a bride. But I didn’t learn of this until much later because they hid this knowledge from me. If they had honored the terms of the treaty and paid what they owed, none of this would be happening.”

“Maxim, you bastard! Did you betray us?!” Odalis roared.

“You have no right to insult my father, Your Highness,” Bertine interjected.

“Damn you, Bertine! You and your bloody father conspired to betray this country, didn’t you?!”

Enraged, Odalis suddenly unsheathed his sword, lunging to cut down Bertine and the chancellor. But Cecilio moved faster than the Federation soldiers surrounding them. He used one of his own legs to kick out Odalis’s from underneath him, all without drawing his own sword. Once the prince was on the ground, Cecilio slammed his foot down hard on Odalis’s wrist, forcing the prince to drop his sword. Then he kicked it far away.

“Huh. Not only is your son an imbecile, but he also lacks skill with a blade,”

Cecilio said coldly.

“How dare you say such a thing about Odalis!”

Federation soldiers held Odalis down while imperial ones surrounded the royal couple.

“Your Royal Highness, you have no notion of what your mother has done, do you?” Sadness, rather than anger, colored Bertine’s voice.

Ehrenfried raised his voice then. He had been watching the play unfold like a fascinated spectator. “I do believe it’s time to put an end to this farce. After all, I’m sure you all don’t intend to defy both the Empire *and* the Federation, eh? Excellent, we’re all in agreement. Then, as of this moment, the rule of San Luenne’s royal family is at an end. We’ll perform an official ceremony later, but I hereby declare Claudio Augustus Centaur the new king of this country.”

First, the imperial soldiers kneeled before him. Then Chancellor Maxim followed suit. Cecilio, Ehrenfried, Bertine, and the Federation soldiers pressed their palms over their hearts and bowed their heads deeply.

“Raise your heads,” Claudio said, his voice dignified. Then he addressed the three members of the former royal family. “The emperor has a message for you all. ‘I will give you land in the Empire, and you will use your own talents to manage it. You may bring any subjects willing to follow you.’”

“Begging your pardon, Your Majesty,” Chancellor Maxim interjected, “but my people and I have already interviewed most of the nobility regarding their feelings on this matter. We learned that not a single aristocrat wishes to emigrate to the Empire to serve the former king, Faustino, and former queen, Adele. If either of you have any doubts about our results, you are free to ask them yourselves.”

Silence stretched in the throne room. After a while, Faustino finally broke it.

“I see. Not a single one will follow us? I suppose that tells me everything I need to know. Maxim, thank you for everything you’ve done. I owe you a great deal. I’m at fault for not stopping Adele even though I was always aware of her actions. I’ve known for a long time now how our people see me. It seems I was the only one foolish enough to believe things might somehow change for the

better.”

“No! I will *not* go to the Empire!” Adele screeched. “I won’t step foot in that wretched place!”

Cecilio addressed her, his expression exasperated. “If you value your lives, you will cling to the Empire’s mercy and gratefully at that. Because the emperor lacks even more patience than I do. This is your last chance. Accept your disgrace. Know when to quit.”

“Cease your infernal blathering, you-you—” Unable to release her grip on the throne, Adele floundered for words to hurl at Cecilio when Bertine cut in.

“His Excellency has devoted himself body and soul to his work for the sake of his country and his people. I have personally witnessed how hard he strives ever since my arrival in the Federation. He’s different from someone who used my father while keeping him shackled. So *you* will cease insulting him.”

Though Bertine’s voice was low, everyone heard her words clearly. But the former queen and crown prince continued glaring malevolently at her.

After that, it took only a few hours for government officials to communicate the news of the change in the royal family as well as the country’s new name to the citizenry. The people who had been terrified when they saw the Federation ships make landfall so early in the morning were now delighted to hear of the Empire’s second prince becoming their new king.

“This will make it easier to do business with imperials.”

“We couldn’t depend on the royal family at all.”

“And with the Federation as allies now, it means lasting peace for our country.”

The citizens of San Luenne felt not a hint of sadness over their parting with the royal family because until now, they had been getting by on their own wits. After all, as a nation of merchants, the people valued a talent for trade, so those who failed in business were deemed incompetent. And if one was incompetent, then one was not fit to rule. In that case, it would be better for everyone if a foreign prince took over the throne instead.

Chapter 58: A Trip Together to the Callisto District

WITH Claudio's enthronement, the Kingdom of San Luenne became the Augustus Monarchy. And it wasn't a vassal state of the Empire, but its own sovereign nation.

Cecilio and Bertine had done their parts and overseen the fall of the former royal family and the birth of the new one. So they decided to return to the Federation, leaving the aftermath for Ehrenfried and Maxim to handle.

Standing on the ship's deck under the moonlight, Cecilio proposed to Bertine on the journey back.

"I want you to live with me in our country as my wife."

His words elicited both feelings of elation and confusion in Bertine.

"Um, might I ask the reason you chose me? Also, why now? I was so certain you weren't interested in marriage, Your Excellency."

"That day in your shop, when you demanded how much money would allow you to stay in the country. Ever since then, I've always thought how beautiful your eyes are."

"But there's more, isn't there?"

"Generous as your heart is, you forgave me and my servants for our mistakes. You always lived your life looking toward the future. Despite being a marquess's daughter from the wealthy San Luenne, you embraced the poor people of my country. In my eyes, you shone with a brilliance uniquely your own, a brilliance that illuminated and attracted those around you. You fascinated me from the beginning. But I decided to be patient until everything was settled with San Luenne once and for all."

"I see. I must say, I'm conflicted about how your proposal is connected to the matter of San Luenne. A part of me understands your reasoning, while another does not. Your Excellency, I'll be twenty-eight years old soon, you know."

“And I’m already thirty-eight.”

“Ha. This isn’t a competition, sir.” Bertine chuckled before continuing. “Right then. I accept your proposal with my deepest regards. Which means you’ll be my Ceci, won’t you?”

Cecilio sighed in relief at her reply. “I was afraid you’d refuse because I took too long to ask. Frankly, hearing you call me Ceci makes me feel...bashful, to say the least.”

“As if I could have ever refused you. I will admit you surprised me. I’d long since given up on the thought of marriage because I honestly thought it would never happen to me, all things considered. I’ve always respected you, Your Excellency. Your powerful resolve to never forget your childhood ambition and the way you dedicate yourself wholly to your country and your people. What’s more, ‘Ceci’ has such a warm, gentle sound to it, so let me tell *you* that I’ve been dying to say it ever since I heard it on my first visit to the Callisto district.”

“Thank you. Just to be clear, I have no intention whatsoever to take any concubines or mistresses like a certain someone we know,” he vowed.

“Of course not. And if you *ever* do, I will pack my bags and wish you all the happiness in the world on the same day you take up with another woman.”

“I thought as much.”

Cecilio grinned at her in response and Bertine couldn’t help smiling back at him.

More than three years had passed since they first met. Perhaps he could have asked her to wait for him until the matter regarding San Luenne was resolved, but he hadn’t wanted to do that for a good reason. It had been difficult to predict how his country’s relationship with the Empire would develop. Would it be strong enough to carry them to the successful transfer of power in San Luenne?

Until he could be absolutely certain that there would be no more wars with the Empire, he hadn’t wished to tie Bertine down with an engagement. Because he might have died in another war. After all, the Federation’s army still relied on his leadership and judgment in battle.

If he had died after their betrothal, his death would have only added to the heavy burdens Bertine already carried in her heart. He hadn't wanted to be the reason she was forced to give up on marriage a third time.

THREE months after the proposal, Bertine and Cecilio boarded the *Karina*. Schools of large fish jumped merrily out of the river's tranquil surface. The spawning season for fish had arrived.

Bertine and Cecilio relaxed under the white awning on the boat deck, chatting and playing poker.

"If I'd known how much support your father had already garnered in the country, I wouldn't have mobilized such a large number of soldiers or ships," Cecilio said. "I think thirty soldiers each from the Federation and the Empire would have been more than enough."

"You have a point, but we mustn't forget that day marked the beginning of Claudio's new life. Better we played it safe with such a great host in case something *had* gone wrong. Moreover, I believe it had less to do with my father's maneuvering and more with the fact that the Luennian people had lost all faith in the royal family. I fold, by the way," Bertine said.

"Come now, don't say that."

"Your Excellency, I'm almost positive you have a winning hand. So. I fold."

"Bertie, I won't let you go easy on me."

Cecilio had needed just one more card for a royal straight flush, but now he tossed his hand onto the table. Bertine couldn't stop laughing. She had assumed he'd be good at poker. Except it turned out she was the much stronger player and she proved it when she won their next round handily.

"Fine, fine, I graciously accept my defeat. This belongs to you then." He plunked Dorothée's butter cake onto the table. Soaked in loads of rum, it tasted and smelled sublime. While Bertine devoured her prize, Diego called out to them.

"Your Excellency, my lady, we'll be making port soon, so please be ready."

“Will do, thank you, Diego. It’s been so long since I saw your family, Cecilio.”

“Even longer for me, hm?”

She held up the last piece of cake and fed it to him when he opened his mouth. Soon after, his cheeks flushed as he realized his automatic obedience. Still, Cecilio enjoyed the flavor and Bertine looked pleased as she watched him chew.

“I just remembered something,” Bertine said. “When my mother was alive, she used to complain to me all the time about how my father was so perfect in his preparations, she had nothing to do on picnics or vacations. Which in hindsight, is precisely what happened with San Luenne. He laid the groundwork so well, there was hardly anything for the rest of us to do when the day finally arrived.”

“Hm. I believe I’d like to become a perfect father like yours too.”

“No. I forbid it. I love my father, but as his child, I can tell you it is extremely vexing to have such a perfect parent. Therefore, please become a charmingly absent-minded father instead.”

“So that’s how it is, eh?”

“That is indeed how it is. My brother grew up watching such a father, and it made him a cautious man whose highest priority was not making mistakes.”

Proper roads had been built in the Callisto district since her last visit, along with a school and hospital. Thanks to the stingers, the entire district’s income had increased significantly, and the reparations also allowed them to improve their facilities.

They climbed up a gently sloping hill, with Dorothée and Diego in tow.

“Are you certain that amount of reparations was enough? You were well within your rights to demand interest, you know,” Bertine said.

“As the new king, Claudio promised to build a facility promoting exchange between our countries. I count that as interest,” Cecilio replied.

“I wonder about that because I’m not sure the peoples of San Luenne and the Federation can get along.”

"I think we have good reason to be optimistic actually. I have it on good authority that Luennians have already placed massive orders for stingers, jams, and marmalades. Oh, and your special fabric too. Ignacio couldn't have been happier," Cecilio said.

They finally arrived at Cecilio's childhood home situated on top of the hill. His father and grandfather stood there, waiting for them with beaming smiles.

"Welcome home, Ceci."

"Been a dang long time, boy."

"It's nice to see you too, Pa, Grandpa."

"I'm glad to see you again after so long, Emilio, Delio."

Emotion swelled in Bertine's chest when she saw the joy on Emilio and Delio's faces at finally seeing Cecilio again.

"What brings you here with Ceci today, Bertine? He workin' you hard again?"

At Delio's question, Bertine glanced pointedly at Cecilio.

"We're getting married, Pa," he replied.

Just as he was about to sit down, Delio froze in mid-air while his grandfather, Emilio, stared wide-eyed in surprise.

"Oh ho, ain't this some grand news, Delio?"

"I-It sure is. Congratulations to you both, but I have to ask, Bertine. You sure about this? You know my son's a rough man with only work on his mind and nothing clever to come from his mouth."

Bertine peeked at Cecilio, who smiled wryly. Reassured, she nodded with a smile of her own. "You'll be happy to know I hold a deep amount of respect for his work because it's born out of a sincere love for his country and people."

"Hahaha! Then this means I can finally hold my great-grandbabies, eh?"

"Grandpa, you're getting ahead of yourself," Cecilio chided.

"Lucky for us, I have a very sturdy constitution," Bertine boasted. "Children are up to God's will, but I'll happily do my best."

“My lady, *decorum*,” Dorothée said with a rueful chuckle.

Then Emilio forced Bertine and Cecilio out of the house. He had decided to host a celebratory feast tonight and they needed to prepare for it. So the two of them walked along the beach together. As their feet pressed into the white sand, Cecilio recalled the day he made a promise to himself at the age of twelve. *I will lead this country*, the boy had thought.

The day when he learned his mother wasn’t the only victim of the Empire’s thoughtless treatment of his people. That there had been many more injured and killed. A local fisherman had been the one who told him. The man had sent his daughter to the Empire so she could earn a living as a maidservant. But she had been beaten violently by her employer. Her injuries ended up being so severe she could no longer work and was thus forced to return to the Federation.

“I *will* change things here. If it’s the last thing I do,” so the boy he’d been said to the fisherman.

“Thank you. I put my faith in you,” Bowing his head, the man replied with eyes red from crying.

Twenty-six years had passed since that day. Cecilio was still only partway through the long journey. Somehow, he’d managed to build a tentatively cooperative relationship with the Empire, but a mountain of challenges yet remained.

“Your Excellency, I’m here for you,” Bertine said.

“Hm?”

“You were thinking about this country’s future, weren’t you? I will make the path you tread easier to go down. I’ve decided it will be my job to build a road that will easily carry the beast of burden known as politics.”

“How lucky I am to have such a heartening and dependable wife.”

“Heh. I’ll do my best.”

“Just make sure you don’t *overdo* it. I doubt I’ll get anything done if you collapse from exhaustion.”

“Yes, sir.” She slipped her hand into Cecilio’s. “I’ve always wanted to walk with a man while holding hands, you know.”

THE newly born Augustus Monarchy adapted remarkably smoothly to its new administration. Maxim continued to serve as chancellor to King Claudio, who burned with ideals. Ehrenfried remained in residence to provide support for his nephew, his presence lending imperial might to Claudio’s rule.

As predicted, the people welcomed the Empire’s younger prince with open arms as their new king. Up until the regime change, the citizenry had no choice but to accept the incompetent former king and his son because there had been no one capable to whom they could entrust their country. Compared to the former royal family, the emperor led his nation skillfully and the Luennians watched the Empire thrive under his leadership. Which explained their high esteem for him. So, naturally, they embraced his son taking over the throne.

The people understood it might take the new king some time to familiarize himself with this country’s unique economic system. But they had incredibly high hopes for him considering his parentage. They knew he would weather the challenges well.

The former royal family was given a plot of land on the outskirts of the Empire. None of the aristocracy followed them. Out of consideration, King Claudio had provided them with enough of a pension and a few servants similar to what a noble would receive in retirement. But the former queen and crown prince continued to rail against their current circumstances.

Marquess Maxim divorced his wife, Rose, the former queen’s younger sister. She returned to her family’s home. Bertine found out about this from a letter her father sent. Evidently, her stepmother had been married off once again to another noble by her parents. She felt sorry for the woman who had never been able to secure a home to call her own.

One day, while she and Cecilio took a stroll in the garden, he talked to her about his past.

“When I was young, I lived in the Empire for three years. Only three years. I went there to study how its society worked, you see.”

“Oh, I had no idea.”

“I wanted to see how I’d be treated as a migrant worker there. The broker placed me in the employ of a duchess, who just so happened to be Prince Ehrenfried’s wife. I worked there as a manservant. The household was so large, they had a staff of nearly one hundred.”

“Wait. Does this mean you and Prince Ehrenfried are acquaintances?” Bertine asked. “You knew each other? But neither of you gave any hint of a prior association.”

Cecilio picked up a large, white shell and threw it into the bright blue sea.

“I did manual labor outside during my time there. One day, Prince Ehrenfried, whose father was still alive then, came up to me and struck up a conversation. He knew right away I was from the Federation because of my appearance. Even so, he still approached me. He asked me where I was from and why I was there. I told him I was the son of a chief, so I wanted to know the inner workings of this country as well as how its people treated us folks from the southlands. I still remember his words to this day. ‘Fascinating. I have a feeling I’ll see you on the political stage someday soon.’”

“Did he really say something so incredible?”

“He did. I wonder if he remembers me and our conversation then. When we reunited some twenty-odd years later, I was surprised to see the change in him. He’d gone from being a young man with a refreshing aura to an extremely cunning fox. I realized something then. As the second prince himself, he too must have endured a great deal living in the imperial palace. I can’t imagine the things he was forced to listen to, the emotions he suppressed.”

Up ahead, they could see the domed roof of the building sitting on the hill. It was a jarring factory designed by Evance. Soil had been placed on the roof, allowing small white and yellow flowers to bloom.

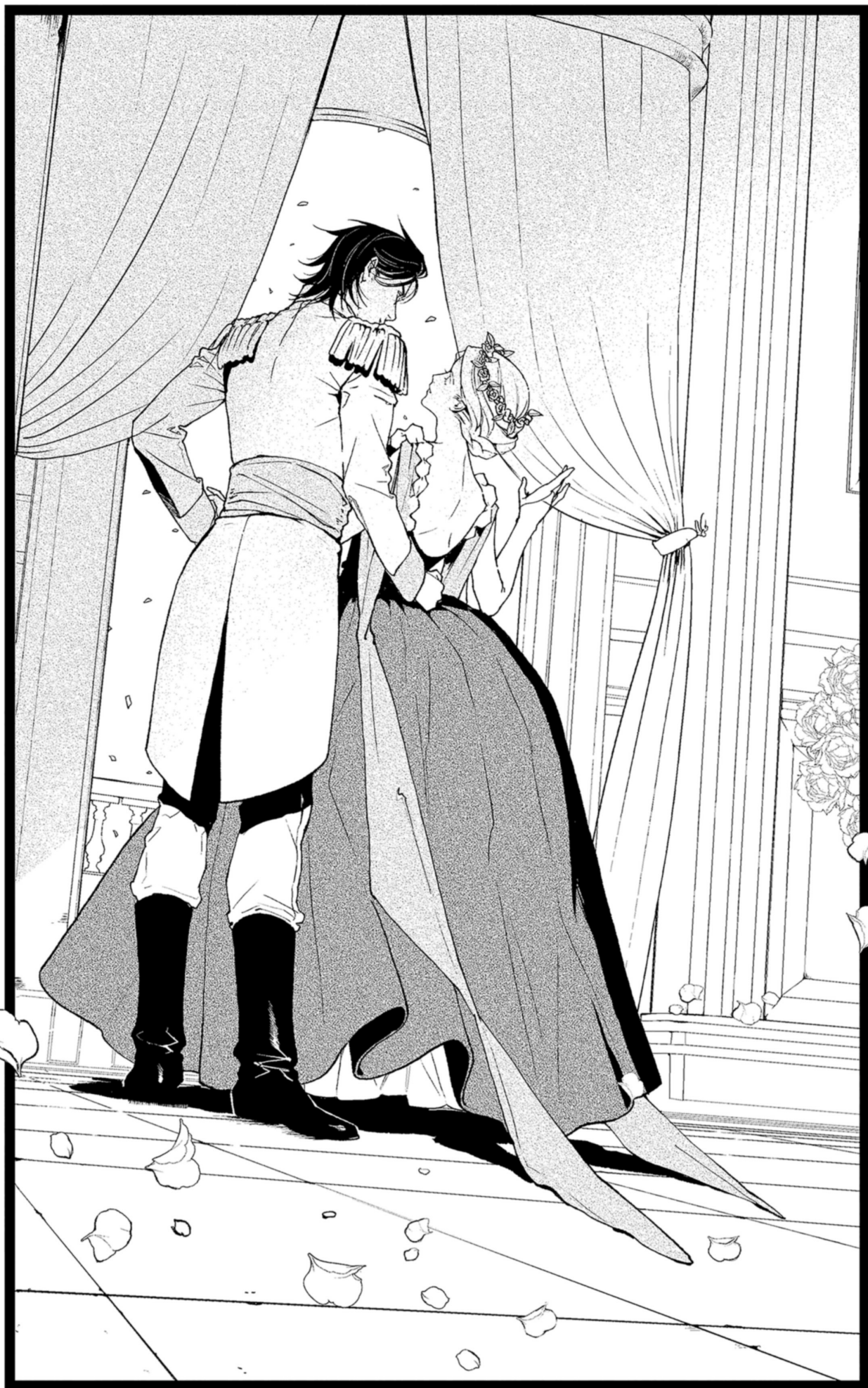
Since the hotel, Evance and Eckhart created one building after another. The old master architect continued his energetic assistance of Evance’s ideas. Of course, everyone was used to his constant refrain of, “After all, I don’t know when God will invite me to His garden.”

Bertine felt a sense of nostalgia when she saw the five people who had first volunteered to take part in the jarring venture. They waved at her and Cecilio as they walked toward them. She waved back to them, overjoyed at knowing she had friends here as well.

Chapter 59: This Is Where I Belong

BERTINE and Cecilio's wedding was a grand affair attended by the Federation chiefs, King Claudio, and the Empire's Prince Ehrenfried and his wife. Following Federation custom, Bertine wore a crown of white flowers on her head. It complemented the gorgeous dress she'd had made from the special scarlet fabric. Cecilio wore his snow-white formal military uniform. Afterward, the picture of the couple on their wedding day was hung all across the country, in every home, shop, and meeting hall.

Once the ceremony ended, the two of them stepped out onto the second-floor balcony in the capitol building. The thunderous cheers of the crowds gathered outside welcomed them. Their champion and his bride calmly waved back at them.



Then it was time for a banquet with the chiefs. Amongst the ones Bertine met for the first time, a few criticized her Luennian origins. But they changed their tunes when they learned of her deep love for their country and her breadth of knowledge through conversations conducted entirely in the official tongue. They were honestly surprised by their discoveries. No matter what sort of topic they threw at her, she responded smoothly and eloquently. They learned how much she knew about the Federation's spirits and cuisines as well.

"I quite like her, especially that strength of will. Won't be long before she leads His Excellency by the nose, eh?"

"The bespectacled secretary was constantly lauding her for the great wealth she brought to our country. A veritable goose that lays the golden eggs."

"If I didn't know she was from San Luenne, I would have thought she was some chief's daughter."

Bertine and Cecilio made the rounds at each table in the great hall. She poured drinks for others and had her own poured as well, meaning she made tremendous inroads into the alcohol flowing through the room. Cecilio watched her, his expression worried.

"You don't need to finish each glass," he said. "You'll collapse at this rate."

"I know. But for some strange reason, the spirits aren't affecting me at all, no matter how much I drink. Perhaps it's because I steeled myself for this in advance."

"If you're sure. I'll be drinking half from now on though."

From then on, Bertine would take a small sip from a glass and he would finish the remaining liquid. A few of the chiefs couldn't help commenting to each other when they saw how the couple behaved as the night wore on.

"Oh ho. I didn't know he could laugh and enjoy himself. I thought all he cared about was work."

"Well, His Excellency is old enough to know how to appreciate the bride he's finally got his hands on."

Dorothee cried happy tears the whole time away from the guests.

“Dorothee, stop crying,” Diego said. “This is a time to celebrate.”

“I know, Diego, but I honestly thought our lady and His Excellency would never marry, the way they were both so oblivious. So I’m just incredibly delighted!”

“You have a good point, considering her terrible luck with marriage. Lady Karina must surely be overjoyed up in heaven...”

Diego discreetly dabbed at the corners of his eyes as well. Dorothee delicately blew her nose into a handkerchief before speaking to Diego again.

“You’ll be returning home soon, won’t you, Diego?”

“Yes. I won’t have anything to worry about once she and His Excellency are living together. While I was gone, my daughter married and gave birth to my grandchild, you know. So I intend to head home as soon as Lady Bertine allows it. What about you, Dorothee?”

“I shall serve her until my body fails me.”

“I can’t believe she’s somebody’s wife now.”

“I feel the same, Diego.”

Tears spilled from her eyes again and Diego offered her his handkerchief.

Maxim du Jeanne attended the event as the bride’s father. While surveying their surroundings, he spoke to King Claudio. “Your Majesty, please be assured the new chancellor replacing me at the end of next month is extremely competent. I’m sure he’ll do his utmost for you and the country.”

“You have done so much for me, Maxim. I don’t know how I can ever thank you.”

“Because of you, my final days in this role have been quite fulfilling, so thank *you* as well. I don’t have any regrets whatsoever.”

After retiring from his position as chancellor, the marquess planned on turning over his businesses to his son and traveling throughout the Federation for some time. He knew this country would bring exciting new life into an old man like him as well.

Claudio watched the newlywed couple for a while before sighing quietly. “If only I’d been born a few years earlier. Then I might have been able to welcome her as my queen. The fact that it was only a few years frustrates me to no end.”

“Y-Your Majesty?” Maxim goggled at him in surprise and Claudio responded with a somewhat sad smile.

“Every woman pales in comparison to her now. After all, who can match her in vitality, intellect, and sheer charm?”

As Bertine’s father, the marquess couldn’t be happier to hear the young man’s compliments. But as a chancellor, the new king’s words made him worry.

“I am absolutely certain that someday you will find someone who suits you perfectly, my lord. You’re still so young, so there’s no need to fret.”

While soothing Claudio, Maxim couldn’t help but think that even if he’d been born a few years earlier, the two most likely wouldn’t have met anyway. Because the weft and warp on fate’s loom was the reason the present existed as it did. And the slightest aberration in the weave would have meant the young king never being born or his daughter never marrying the Federation’s leader.

THE products Bertine launched into the world—the scarlet fabric, the stingers, the variety of jarred goods—continued selling well, adding to the country’s coffers. Stingers found a market in the Azdal Monarchy by way of its neighbor, the Empire. They were well-received there too. As a result the Azdal Monarchy, with its thriving arms manufacturing industry, made direct contact with the Federation. By using its ships to travel southward around the coastline, its people were able to avoid having the Empire act as intermediary.

One day, when they saw a massive ship out on the water, Federation citizens cried out in alarm at the threat of an enemy raid. But the men who landed on shore in small boats lowered from the huge vessel were shouting something about stingers. They took some out on their palms and using gestures managed to convey their desire to buy stingers. Turns out, the men weren’t invaders but enthusiastic merchants.

Cecilio’s father, Delio, noted that the Azdalian ship was powered by machines

instead of sails. *I need to tell Cecilio before they leave.* Once his son received the urgent message, he journeyed to the Callisto district as quickly as he could via riverboat. Then Cecilio offered to buy the whole ship as well as the mechanism responsible for mobilizing it.

Bertine had accompanied him on the rushed trip. While her husband and the Azdalian merchants conducted their negotiations, one of them took her on a tour of the vessel. Inside, she learned that coal was the fuel driving the enormous machine. This knowledge spurred her to make a recommendation to Cecilio.

“There’s coal aplenty in our country. Instead of buying a ship or two, we should buy those machines in bulk instead. They can deliver to us via their ships.”

So the scale of the negotiations increased dramatically. Ignacio was there too. *I have a feeling this will be another golden egg for us!* The thought sprung to mind when he listened to Bertine. He immediately turned to a civil servant working in the finance department and ordered them to find whatever funds were available in the national budget to buy the machines.

Lately, Bertine and Ignacio were so in sync, Cecilio found himself remarking how much the other man was coming to resemble his wife. He said the words with a serious expression. Luca had been on the mark when he’d called Bertine the next Alchemist. Her instinct for business grew sharper the more experience she gained.

“I firmly believe we need people in this country with an interest in these machines. Ignacio, what do you think about starting a program to train interested individuals on how to service and maintain them? After all, we can’t use them if, or when, they break down, so it would be prudent to have staff who can fix them on hand. The first step will be to invite Azdalian engineers to teach them,” Bertine reasoned.

“You make a very good point. If we can’t repair them when they break, then the machines will just be useless hunks of metal.”

The Federation government dispatched representatives to the Azdal Monarchy at once with requests for knowledge and training on the machines’

service and repair as well as engineering. The Monarchy agreed in exchange for stingers. This meant the newly built schools in the Federation would come quite in handy.

An announcement was sent to every school in the country, targeting students in the upper grades. The government would provide scholarships to anyone interested in learning how to service and repair marine machines as well as those wishing to study abroad. Though the turnout wasn't as large as they expected, the scheme nevertheless received a few applicants.

"I knew it. Though the Federation's people have a reputation for being overly relaxed and come what may, there are still dynamos ready to take on the world." Bertine was delighted.

Applicants were interviewed and whittled down to ten students, who would start by learning the basics of the Azdalian language. The national government hired an interpreter as their teacher from the company Evance had used. Once the students mastered Azdalian well enough for use in their daily lives, they were ready to head to the Monarchy. Bertine spoke to these future engineers before they departed.

"You don't have to rush while you're there. As the inaugural cohort, even if it takes the next three years to learn what you need in the trade, that will still be a success. But remember this. The most important thing is that you all return safely."

Gathered in the capitol building, the ten youngsters had been tense with nerves at the thought of being sent to a foreign nation. But the encouraging words gifted to them by His Excellency's beautiful wife gave them a measure of relief.

"The most important thing is that you all return safely." In the future, those words would bolster them and give them strength to continue their studies in the Monarchy whenever they found themselves feeling discouraged.

IN the years after they married, Bertine and Cecilio were blessed with three sons. They lived in their own residence in the capital of Ybit. The large estate consisted of a normal brick house and a large oval-shaped bungalow with a

thatched roof standing side by side. The eccentric house became a popular tourist attraction for countryside visitors in the capital. Evance, the architect of the oval structure, was now famous not only in the Federation but also in the Empire and Azdal Monarchy.

Bertine and Cecilio raised their children mainly in the whimsical house. The three energetic boys resembled Cecilio closely, both in face and large build. According to Cecilio, their antics made them rascals of the highest order, leagues worse than him as a child. "They may look like me on the outside, but their personalities are practically you, Bertine," he would often remark.

The engines the Federation purchased wholesale from Azdal were installed one after another in its riverboats. As a result, the Saran River, its largest river cutting through much of the country, became a vital transportation route. Today, many boats, large and small, come and go on the river at a speed unmatched in the days of sails.

Bertine and the children always dragged the busy Cecilio away from his work to journey down to the Callisto district on the Karina. Ever since her riverboat had been outfitted with an engine as well, the Karina made even more speedy journeys. Delio and Emilio couldn't be more delighted to see the boys so often. The children loved Callisto's blue, blue ocean as well.

Dorothee became the housekeeper and managed their household. She hired all the new servants because she hadn't intended to employ Cecilio's staff at his previous official residence. They had declined as well when Bertine tried to keep them on, saying they appreciated her forgiveness but didn't have the right to stay on.

"My lady, Lady Dalila is visiting today, isn't she?" Dorothee asked.

"Indeed she is. I'm so happy to see her so much lately. I wonder which hotel she's staying at this time."

"I believe the one on the western shore."

"Hmmm, that would be the one resembling an enormous boulder?"

"No, it's the one with the three-tiered thatched roof."

"Oh, yes. Quite popular too, if I recall."

“Very much so. Lord Evance remains ever in demand as an architect.”

“Heh. I suddenly find myself thinking back to the day I met him. I can hardly believe he’s the same man, hungry and robbed. How nostalgic.”

Bertine and Dorothée both recalled the day they brushed off their despair and started running toward the future.

“Lady Bertine, you have always been and continue to be someone I’m proud to work for.”

“Well, I appreciate the thought, as sudden as it is. And I thank you for everything you always do, too, Dorothée. I’m so grateful and blessed to have you by my side. I wouldn’t be here without you, you know.”

Her voice wavered just a bit, the tip of her nose and eyes turned red. From outside the room in which they conversed came the sounds of the boys romping about with Cecilio. He often minded the children and acted as their play companion. Bertine had been pleasantly surprised to discover this side of him. He had a calm, relaxed way of raising them. When she’d commented on it one time, he had responded with a smile.

“I became a father well past my prime, so I want to take my time enjoying fatherhood.”

She heard her sons’ delighted shrieks. Then Cecilio’s mature voice, giving away his location. *This is where I belong*, Bertine thought to herself as she listened to them.

“Dorothée, I really am glad I decided not to give up on life back then.”

A gentle smile accompanied her words.

Side Story 1: The New King Claudio and His Older Brother

HALF a year had passed since the Kingdom of San Luenne became the Augustus Monarchy, over which Claudio presided as its new king. He was doing astonishingly well with his official duties. The important nobles had no issues with his rule despite his young age, so they worked without complaint under him. In fact, they were the ones who often proposed ideas and helped make his job easier. The civil servants carried out their duties earnestly, their expressions cheerful.

Whenever he stepped outside into the city on work matters, the citizens always greeted him warmly. The country was well maintained in every nook and corner. Its lavish public facilities continued operating smoothly even with the regime change.

“Chancellor, I’ve come to understand you’re the reason the country never fell behind,” Claudio remarked.

“Not at all, Your Majesty. The people have long desired a young, outstanding king such as yourself to take over. An old man like me only facilitated things with what little wisdom I’ve managed to gain over the years. Please be more confident in yourself.”

This dependable chancellor would be retiring toward the end of next month.

“I worry my worth as a leader will be questioned once you’re no longer in office. People will wonder if I can keep the country moving as fluidly without you.”

“You have no cause for concern. I’m certain you’ll do well, Your Majesty.”

The chancellor exited the room and Claudio found himself alone in his office. He stared out the window. A line of white buoys floated on the calm sea, bobbing with the waves. The buoys had remained in place since the day his ship sailed into this island nation.

The immensely powerful Empire stood behind this country. Anyone with designs on it had better be prepared to face the Empire's wrath. So, naturally, no one was foolish enough to be the aggressor.

The Augustus Monarchy's other ally was the Southern Federation, geographically close on the continent. Soon after Claudio became king, he had signed a treaty of friendship with the Federation. The treaty had an unexpectedly calming effect on the people as it meant the Federation would not be invading the Monarchy.

According to his subordinates, the people's opinions of the Southern Federation had been low, its citizens derided constantly. Lately though the situation seemed to be changing in the Federation's favor. He was told how Augustans discussed various aspects of their continental ally, like its warm climes allowing a variety of unusual fruits to grow or how they wished they could buy stingers for cheaper prices. Some even hoped that the Federation would allow Augustans access to their mines.

Claudio's correspondence with His Excellency Cecilio, the leader of the Federation, continued unabated. For over two years now, he had asked the older man for his advice on various matters relating to statecraft, such as tasks related to running a nation and how to build a relationship with the people. He trusted Cecilio more than he trusted his own father. Cecilio's ability to see far into the future, his broad mindset, his deep love for his people. Claudio respected all these parts and more of him.

When he received a letter from His Excellency informing him of Bertine's pregnancy, a sharp pain lanced through his chest. He knew this day would eventually come, but still, the news devastated him.

"What a pathetic human being I am to envy his happiness."

Though he rebuked himself harshly, he still couldn't banish the idea in his heart of wanting Bertine as his wife. He had known his first love would lead nowhere the moment he realized his feelings. So it made him feel ashamed to hold fast to his unrequited love, wondering when he would ever let go.

His mother, Diana, had been saddened to see him go the day he left the Empire. But not long after, she started visiting once every two months and

stayed for a few days in the royal palace. She deemed her visits a “nice change of pace because once you marry, I won’t be able to come as often.” Her smile had been gentle.

“What will you do moving forward, Mother?” he had asked her.

“Well, if your father’s affection for me ever wanes, I was thinking I would travel around the Federation with my mother. But you know the future is ever uncertain, hm?”

She had been able to survive her suffocating, closed-off existence by relying on his father’s love. Lately though, he had watched with relief as she slowly became more carefree. It must be because of his decision to leave the Empire and become this country’s king. He knew it had been the right one.

Yet his father remained ever in love with his mother, even now. And that love was the reason the empress hated his mother, creating a rift between himself and his brother the crown prince, Felix. *I will never be a faithless man like my father.* Of course, he never said it out loud because doing so meant criticizing his mother. But the thought sprang into his mind every time he reflected on her situation.

If no boys were born in a royal family, then society should strive to make girls queens. It was preposterous to say only boys were worthy or superior. After all, there were plenty of girls and women who were far more talented than their male counterparts.

Which was why he respected Cecilio even more on that point. Because the man loved his wife, and only her, with all his heart.

“I want to be like him. No, I *will* be like him,” the young king pledged to himself as he watched the line of white buoys floating in the sea.

IT was now approaching a year after Claudio’s enthronement. He received a letter bearing the Empire of Centaur’s official seal. Assuming it came from his father, he was surprised to learn it was from his older brother. He suppressed the commotion in his heart before unsealing the envelope and extracting the letter. All it said was that he wanted to have a long talk with Claudio.

Claudio had been king for less than a year, so it was too soon for him to leave the country for the Empire. He decided to consult with the new chancellor, Cruz, on how to respond.

“Hm, I think I have a solution,” Cruz said. “What if we requested a meeting with the imperial crown prince on one of the Federation’s riverboats? It would be neutral territory for you both. You can avoid the public eye as well as unsavory characters hoping to eavesdrop.”

“One of the riverboats. I hadn’t considered that. I heard the Federation’s riverboats are quite luxurious, so it would be an excellent occasion to study one too.”

“Understood. I’ll reach out to the Federation then.”

Chancellor Cruz set about the task at once. He contacted the necessary officials in the Federation and made the appropriate arrangements. Claudio would be meeting his brother next month. It would be an informal meeting. Once they set the agenda, the only thing left for him to do was await the day. He found himself stewing in anxiety.

Though he and his brother had lived together on the grounds of the imperial castle for his first fifteen years of life, Felix had never once visited him and his mother in their villa. Yet he wanted to meet him after he had left the Empire to become this island nation’s king. A kernel of suspicion sprouted in him, and Claudio wondered if the empress was scheming again.

Then the day finally arrived. Under the pretext of inspecting their riverboats, he headed to the Federation and boarded the Karina floating on the surface of the Saran River. The pure white vessel reminded him of an elegant, beautiful swan treading water. The Karina traveled upriver just a bit, docking at a wharf close to the imperial border where his older brother embarked.

Feeling nervous, Claudio shook Felix’s hand and then they both sat down to a lavish luncheon prepared for today’s meeting. Silence reigned for a time as they stared at the spread of food, tea, and spirits. Felix spoke first.

“It’s been quite a while since we last saw each other, Claudio. You’ve grown even more imposing in stature and aura.”

“Thank you for the kind words. If you don’t mind, I’d like to know why you asked to meet.”

He knew he couldn’t help his cold voice and blunt words. After all, their relationship had never been a brotherly one. They shared a father, but they might as well be strangers for the distance they’d kept from each other all their lives.

“I want to apologize for not engaging with you until now,” Felix said.

Why now? The thought popped into Claudio’s head immediately. There was no way Felix didn’t know what the empress had done to his mother. That he and his mother had led such suffocating lives for his first thirteen years because of her.

“I’m actually grateful you ignored me. If you hadn’t, I have no doubt my mother would have suffered even more.”

For a moment, Felix was overwhelmed by the fierce emotion in Claudio’s words. A part of him had known about the cruel malice his mother and her attendants had inflicted on his father’s concubine and her ladies-in-waiting. But Felix had lived his life pretending not to hear or see it. If he had said anything in defense of Diana, his mother would have become emotional and accused him of betraying her just like his father.

Felix had learned at a young age not to behave in any way that would agitate his mother. The habit was so deeply ingrained in him that he still fell into it even now as an adult. *It’s well past time to break free though*, he thought to himself. Because if he didn’t apologize now and at least try to make amends, his relationship with his brother would end as something even less than strangers. So he stood up quietly and bowed his head deeply.

“What are you doing?! This is unbecoming of the Empire’s crown prince. Please, stop,” Claudio said.

“I was weak. Though I suspected Mother and her attendants of performing nasty deeds toward Lady Diana, I did nothing to stop them,” Felix confessed.

“It’s all in the past. My mother’s life has become much easier since I left the Empire, so I don’t need your apology. Please raise your head.”

The intense torrent of anger instantly roused by his brother's remorseful words and attitude confused Claudio. It made him realize how angry he'd been all this time and how much he had suppressed the emotion. He had even almost said "my brother," but had caught himself in time to change his reply to the "Empire's crown prince." He would not acknowledge him as his brother. He wouldn't.

Felix hung his head, clearly saddened. After a beat of silence, he murmured quietly. "You aren't the only one who hates our father. I hate him as well. He should have faced Mother head-on and been honest with her. But his lack of consideration and effort hurt both my mother and yours. Then you left, choosing to abandon our country. I think everything is Father's fault. But I was weak too. So no matter how much I apologize, I know it will never be enough."

His older brother's words calmed the storm of rage running amok in his heart. Because Claudio had known the truth as well. How his and his mother's very existence wounded the empress.

He remained silent for a time, organizing his thoughts. Then he found himself surprised too by the unexpected words that slipped out of his mouth. "Brother, have you met the Southern Federation's leader, Cecilio?"

"No. I've only seen him from afar in the castle back home."

"He's a man incredibly worthy of respect. Not just as a ruler, but as a man. I myself admire him to the ends of the world, like a maiden in love almost! And I swore to myself I would be like him."

"Then you and His Excellency are close, Claudio?"

"We are. We've exchanged dozens of letters until now and continue to do so. He's the first one I write to when something is worrying me."

"Then I'd like to meet him as well. Would you mind introducing me to him?" Felix requested.

"Of course. Why not on this visit? He said he'll treat me to a delicious dish of ball rabbit grilled over open flames."

"That sounds wonderful. I'd very much like to talk to this man whom you hold in such high and fond esteem."

“Excellent. I’ll speak to him then.”

Pleased by their first extended conversation, Felix smiled gently at him.

“I think that’s the first time in my life you ever called me ‘brother.’ Thank you, Claudio.”

Claudio smiled ruefully. He hadn’t even been aware he’d said so until now.

“Brother, I won’t take a concubine. I intend to love and live my life with only one woman.”

“Does this mean you already have a wife in mind?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“Bah, and here I was hoping to know more about her.”

Claudio burst out laughing at Felix because his older brother truly looked disappointed by the news. “Don’t worry. I’ll find the right woman and tell you all about her when I do.”

“Good. I happen to agree with you, by the way,” Felix said. “I’ll most likely marry whoever Father chooses for me, but I don’t plan on being unfaithful to her.”

“Please do, brother. I don’t think the world needs any more victims like me and my mother.”

A myriad of emotions crossed Felix’s face at his younger brother’s response.

“You’re right. It would be infinitely better if everyone in the palace lived happily together. No more unhappy children like you and I ever again.”

“I’m glad we’re of the same mind on that front. Right, then, why don’t we enjoy this fantastic feast the Federation government prepared for us? Would be a pity to let it go to waste, don’t you think?”

“Indeed it would. Everything looks delicious.”

Felix raised his hand to call over the staff, who described each dish to him. While he listened, they both started eating.

“This is incredible, Claudio.”

“Yes, it is, Brother.”

The relaxed atmosphere within the cabin was worlds apart from the tension cloaking them both when they first met.

A waterfowl perched on the boat’s railing, peeking inside the room. It saw two young people who strongly resembled each other enjoying food and conversation.

Afterword

NICE to meet you. I'm Syuu. Thank you very much for purchasing *A Young Lady Finds Her True Calling Living with the Enemy*.

The coronavirus upended the entire world while I was working on this novel, forcing everyone, including me, into quarantine life. So I chose the tropics as my setting because I at least wanted to be able to savor the air of a faraway country in the pages of this book.

A sea such an unreal blue it looks painted, a white sandy beach made of crushed coral, trees heavy with fruits ripe for the picking, brightly colored birds. And generous people who believe in the philosophy of "If it can be done tomorrow, there's no need to try so hard today."

Then I threw a wealthy young lady, a high-ranking noblewoman at that, raised in a city into that environment. The normal way to write about a protagonist in a situation like this would be to describe their various experiences with culture shock. But trapped as I was inside my house, I thought of a different idea. "That's not what I want to write about. I want to write a story about someone who's tossed into another world and the knowledge they absorbed unconsciously as a child suddenly means something. Where that knowledge takes root, grows branches, and bears fruit." I truly savored the pleasure of writing throughout the whole creative process.

Around a year and a half after I started uploading my work on a web novel site, Editor S reached out to me, a novice amongst novices, about turning this story into an actual novel. They believed that the best way to help others improve was through praise. Some time later, they sent me Fujigasaki-sensei's illustrations and I was blown away by how beautiful they were. I couldn't believe my work would come to life through such an amazing artist. The illustrations are so beautiful I want to frame every single one. The keepsakes of a lifetime. I'm sure everyone who bought this novel would agree too.

My novel couldn't have become what it is without a great many people. It started with the readers on the website who praised my work. From there, it

went through editors, proofreaders, salespeople, bookshops, and many others before finally landing in the hands of readers like you. I'm forever grateful to everyone involved in this.

May this novel be a ship that brings joy to all who read it.

September 2022

Side Story 2: A Trip Together

“BERTINE, I think I can manage some time off.”

“Oh, how wonderful! How long?”

“Around two weeks or so. Ignacio did his best to arrange it.”

Bertine’s mind whirled with things to do and places to go in those two weeks. Cecilio was ridiculously busy. She had known as much before they were married, but the reality hit her hard after when he brought documents home from the capitol. So time off was extraordinarily precious.

“We need to go somewhere we can be alone,” Bertine said.

“Oh? You’re not taking Dorothee along then?” he asked.

“No. She needs her rest too. She can go years without taking a break if I don’t say something. I have to force her to take time off.”

An excursion would use up too much of the two weeks on travel alone, there and back. Bertine thought of a great location just then.

“Do you know the grasslands located between Ybit and the hinterlands? The stretch of area one can see from a boat when looking toward the banks of the Saran River? I would like to pitch a tent there and camp. We can use the boat to transport our luggage.”

“Ah, I know what you’re talking about. That was the site of a former battle. I concur. Let’s relax there.”

The planning went smoothly after and Bertine decided to take the Hummingbird, the smallest of the three riverboats in her possession. They loaded everything they needed for camping onto the vessel, then the Hummingbird set forth. Since it was a small sailing ship, it sped down the river shockingly fast on particularly windy days. This was luckily one of them. They arrived at the old battleground the next afternoon. However, they hit a bit of a snag.

“There’s no pier here, so we’ll need to use a rowboat to reach the bank.”

“Oh, I didn’t realize that was the case.”

In a practiced manner, Cecilio packed their belongings first into the rowboat, then set off toward the bank. After he unloaded everything, he returned to the Hummingbird for Bertine. He helped her settle in, then rowed back to the bank.

“You’re very good at this,” she commented.

“Did you forget where I was born? Children in Callisto learn how to do this fairly early in life.”

Cecilio still found himself embarrassed by Bertine’s effusive praise over everything he did. Although it did make him happy, of course. He hid his bashfulness by briskly setting up camp. He pitched the tent, started a fire, warmed the wine in a small pan, and stuck skewers of sausage into the ground near the fire, where the meat sizzled as it cooked.

Once the sausage cooked through, he sprinkled a liberal amount of black stingers on the meat before they bit into their respective morsels. The juices from the meat burst into their mouths, almost hot enough to burn.

“Mmm! Delicious.”

“Now drink the warm wine.”

“Okay, let me try. Oh, my. This is fantastic.”

“I’m glad you think so too.”

Having grown up on her family’s estate in San Luenne, Bertine had never gone camping until now. It would have meant taking several guards with her if she had asked her father, so she had refrained. But right now, it really was just the two of them alone. She found the experience novel.

“I always dreamed of this, you know. Staying in a tent with a man I love,” she said.

“Say that one more time.”

“Staying in a tent?”

“After that.”

“...Staying in a tent with my ridiculously tall, awkward husband with a mane of black hair like a lion’s?”

“That’s not what you said the first time.”

She burst out laughing then and couldn’t stop. When they were together, she smiled no matter what they discussed. Everything tasted delicious too. Bertine hadn’t known being married could be this fun and she savored every moment keenly.

That night, within the confines of the tent, they reminisced about the flavors of their youths.

“There was a beehive in our garden,” Bertine began. “I asked the gardener to take it down for me and he did, even cutting it into round slices. I broke them into smaller morsels then put them on bread. It was scrumptious!”

“I’m surprised to hear you enjoyed eating such wild things. I assumed you would regale me with stories of decorated cakes or some such,” Cecilio said. “As for me, there was one particular way I liked to cook my fish. After gutting a large one, I’d wrap it in palm leaves then start a bonfire on the beach. After heating two stones in the fire, I would sandwich the wrapped fish in between to steam.”

“I can imagine how much more delicious it was because it was freshly caught.”

Cecilio’s expression was peaceful as he thought back to his childhood. “Parents have a variety of roles, but I think one of their biggest is to stay alive until their children grow up.”

“...You’re right. My mother must regret not being here.”

“Mine too.”

“At least I had Dorothee, who was like a mother to me,” Bertine said. “She was so incredibly mature despite being only three years older than me.”

“She doesn’t plan to wed?”

“She says she won’t, but I’ve been trying to convince her otherwise.”

A comfortable silence stretched between them for a while before Cecilio

started talking about Ignacio. He sounded amused.

“Ignacio has been living together with his partner for a while now. He never said a word to me about it, but I could tell just by looking. His shirts are always crisply starched, and he brings lunch from home three times a week. He hasn’t been going out much lately for drinks after work either.”

“Oh, really? I wonder what his partner is like,” Bertine said.

“I caught a glimpse of them walking together once at night. She was quite a bit older, but she seemed kind. He looked ridiculously happy walking by her side.”

“That sounds nice.”

Just then, Bertine remembered something she’d been wondering about for some time now. She wasn’t sure if she should bring it up though, afraid it would spoil the mood. But Cecilio saw right through her.

“Is there something you want to ask me?”

“Did you ever court Monica?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Then did she ever declare her feelings for you?”

“...”

“I thought as much. I had a feeling, you know.”

“We’re finally alone camping under the stars, so I don’t know why we have to talk about Monica now.”

“You’re right. Nothing good comes of jealousy.”

“I have no reason for my eyes or heart to stray toward another when I finally got my hands on you.”

His wording made her giggle.

“Why, I’m flattered. And I’m sorry for bringing this up. I couldn’t help being suspicious at the idea of having a married woman as a childhood friend.”

“I can’t help either of those things. Monica *is* a childhood friend, and she *is*

married.”

“I know. Neither of those are your fault either.”

“Exactly. Although I must admit, I don’t mind your occasional bouts of jealousy. I would even say they make me happy in a way.”

They spread a thick blanket on the ground and another one on top of it before slipping between the layers. Nothing made her feel safer or more at peace than sleeping in the cradle of Cecilio’s arms. Then the hot wine did its magic and she fell into a deep sleep.

“Bertie. Bertie, wake up.”

“Hm? Wh-What is it?”

“I hear something walking around us outside. Animals, perhaps. It would be dangerous if they charged into the tent, so wake up. Hold on to a knife though, just in case. I’ll go out and chase them away.”

“Will do.”

Immediately after he left the tent, she heard the sounds of an intense struggle. Bertine wondered what sort of beasts were giving him such a challenge. Curious, she peeked out from a gap in the tent and saw six enormous wild boars. The leader of the pack possessed terrifying, dagger-like tusks.

“I know just the thing for this situation,” she said.

She took out a long, narrow box and opened it, then picked up the familiar rifle inside to load it with bullets. When she stepped cautiously outside, Cecilio snapped angrily at her.

“What are you doing?! Stay inside! It’s dangerous out here!”

He had managed to kill one of them, but it only agitated the others as they raced around the perimeter repeatedly before charging directly at him.

“I’m sorry.”

Simultaneously, she fired off three rounds in succession. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* Each of her shots found their mark in three separate boars. Their bodies collapsed to the ground with heavy thuds. The remaining two quickly fled after

noticing they were outnumbered.

“Ceci, are you hurt?” she asked.

“No. What about you?”

“Not a scratch. Ceci.”

“What?”

“If we don’t bleed them right away, the meat won’t taste as good.”

“...”

“You know what they say when you take a life. It’s the victor’s responsibility to make sure it doesn’t go to waste.”

The menace in Cecilio’s battle-ready body slowly drained away.

“Aha ha ha ha!”

“What? What’s the matter?”

“You really are your father’s daughter. Heh. You always steal the show.”

“But you know I never intend to. Stop being so mean.”

They grinned at each other then set about draining the blood from the four dead wild boars. Each weighed a little over two hundred pounds. Once the bloodletting was done, they gutted the carcasses before butchering the meat. By the time they finished, the sun had long since risen high in the sky.

They washed off the blood in a small stream leading to the river then buried the offal nearby, though not too deeply. The carnivores in the forest would eventually sniff out the remains and dig them up to consume.

Cecilio used long, narrow pieces of wood to build a fire. He laid down a rough lattice of branches to create a makeshift grill on which to smoke the carved meat. Bertine diligently picked up dead branches and twigs to help him stoke the fire.

While checking often on the meat as it cooked, he set up a small pot at the edge of the fire to boil water for tea.

“Huh.”

“What is it?”

“I feel like I’m back in the army, doing camping exercises,” he said.

“Ha! I’m sorry. I guess I didn’t need to kill all three. But I wasn’t thinking rationally at the time, not when they were targeting you,” Bertine confessed.

“Well, I for one am relieved to know what a dependable wife I have. I know you’ll protect our children should anything ever happen to me.”

“No. You must live a long life. You *must*. Or I’ll do you in myself.”

So saying, Bertine rested her head on his back.

“You’re right. Forgive me for saying such an unlucky thing.”

After that, they continued checking on the mountain of boar meat until it was all cooked. When the Hummingbird arrived in the evening to collect them, the riverboat’s crew stared at them in shock. They had thought the two were enjoying a sweet night as newlyweds only to find out they stayed up all night draining and butchering wild boar carcasses.

Dorothée was stunned by the mountain of boar meat they returned home carrying. She couldn’t help commenting after Bertine told her how it happened.

“My lady, don’t you think that’s a bit *much*? It’s not very charming or ladylike behavior.”

She sounded like a worried mother. But Bertine was unfazed.

“Not at all. In fact, he said he fell in love with me all over again at the impressive sight I made shooting the boars down.”

Husband and wife are two peas in a pod, Dorothée thought with a rueful smile at Bertine’s proud response. She conceded defeat with good grace.



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