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Illustration Ealmaro

The  
Genius Prince's  
Guide to Raising  
a Nation Out of Debt.  
(Hey, How About Treason?)



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(Hey, How About Treason?)

Toru Toba | Illustration Falmaro





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"I'm  
Wein,"  
he replied quietly.  
"Wein  
Salema  
Arbalest."

"I-I'm  
Ninym  
Ralei!"



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The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation

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The  
**Genius Prince's**  
Guide to Raising  
a Nation Out of Debt  
*(Hey, How About Treason?)*



**Toru Toba**

Illustration **Falmaro**



New York





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MAP OF THE EARTHWORLD EMPIRE





## CHARACTER PROFILES



WEIN

Prince regent of the continent's northernmost country, the Kingdom of Natra. A born genius who rescued his nation from many a disaster. Renowned as a benevolent leader; but his personality and looks conceal a truly self-indulgent slacker.



FALANYA

Wein's little sister and the crown princess of Natra. Idolizes her brother and studies tirelessly in hopes of helping him. Made her negotiation debut during the Gathering of the Chosen in the old capital of Lushan. Concerned there might be a side of Wein she's never seen.



CALDMELLIA

Director of Levetia's Gospel Bureau and second-in-command within the Church. Her youthful looks are incongruent with her recorded age, and her limitless cunning and mysterious beauty have earned her a reputation as a "witch."



NINYM

Wein's childhood friend and his Heart. Serves as his aide in the public and private spheres. Wishes Wein wouldn't be so reckless. Member of the Flahm, a group that's persecuted in the West.



LOWELLMINA

Empress of the Earthworld Empire. A brilliant young woman who rose to become history's first female monarch after winning the battle for succession. Befriended Wein, Ninym, and the others back at Earthworld's military academy.



KESKINEL

The Imperial Prime Minister; known as a bit of an oddball. He remained neutral during the fight for succession. Ever since the war ended, he has skillfully aided Earthworld's shaken internal affairs.





A young girl no older than nine wandered in the deep, dense forest alone. Her eyes swam with unease, and she stumbled many times on the uneven terrain. She shuddered at every gust of wind and bird call. Her visible fear made it apparent that she was unaccustomed to forest life.

“.....”

She peered past the breaks in the trees to the sky beyond. It was almost sunset. Needless to say, spending the night in a lightless forest wasn't the wisest decision. The girl understood this perfectly well and instinctively feared the approaching darkness. Dread hastened her pace. She needed to either find the way out or hide somewhere until morning. Yet despite her best efforts, there was no hint of refuge among the trees.

“Ah...”

Her crimson eyes spotted something beyond the distant foliage, and she raced over without a second thought. The sun's last rays cast shadows that seemed to pursue her from behind, but she arrived before they had the chance to swallow her up.

“A house...”

Indeed, there stood a single mansion. It obviously belonged to a high-ranking individual and looked nothing like the slipshod huts loggers built. Anyone could tell from a single glance this was a well-crafted residence and the perfect place to spend the night.

At the same time, the girl hesitated slightly. A stranger like her had no right to suddenly walk into a home uninvited. However, the truth was she'd run out of options. Her mind made up, she knocked on the door.

“P-pardon the intrusion...”

The door was unlocked and opened smoothly, so the girl cautiously entered. The interior was dark and gloomy.

Was the place abandoned? It would certainly be more convenient for her if



that was the case.

Footsteps clacked.

“Eek!”

The girl’s yelp betrayed her presence.

“Ah, I’m sorry! I promise I’m not a thief or anything,” she squeaked, hurriedly looking to the left and the right.

A silhouette emerged from the dim light of near-dusk.

“.....”

The girl gulped instinctively.

The figure belonged to a boy around her age. He was dressed richly and stood still as a statue. The girl came to the inevitable conclusion he was both the master of the house and a prominent individual.

More than any other quality, the boy’s eyes left her awestruck. Those light amber eyes. They were a bottomless abyss that might swallow her up if she stared too long.

“What is your business here?”

The boy’s question brought her back to reality.

“U-um, well, I got lost, and it’s almost dark. I was looking for a place to spend the night.”







Even if she wasn't allowed within the house itself, the girl would've been just as grateful to huddle outside the entrance. Would her desperate words reach this boy, though? Move his heart? She peered into his deep eyes, and time seemed to move at a tenth of its normal rate.

An oppressive silence reigned until the boy finally replied.

"Do as you please."

The girl hardly had time to process this response before the boy, having apparently lost all interest, turned on his heel and left her, the intruder, behind.

"U-um..."

He didn't even break stride when she called out from behind him.

"W-wait!"

The girl raced to his side and was met by a cold, empty stare. She was struck silent for a moment but held firm, compelled to meet this new challenge.

"I-I'm Ninym Ralei!"

Eager to prove she meant no harm, the girl hurriedly introduced herself. The boy then stopped and stared at her—at Ninym.

"I'm Wein," he replied quietly. "Wein Salema Arbalest."



The sight was, in a word, dazzling.

Parades filled the streets of Grantsrale, capital of the Earthworld Empire, day and night.

"Long live Empress Lowellmina!"

"Praise to our radiant ruler!"

"A new day has dawned on the Empire!"

As the people sang, danced, and drank, they all lauded one young woman, Second Imperial Princess Lowellmina of the Earthworld Empire. For several years following the death of the previous emperor, his children had fought each other for the right to succeed. In the end, it was Lowellmina who took the



throne.

“Who would’ve thought Princess Lowellmina would actually become Empress?”

“No kidding. It was a shock for sure, but did you hear the princess’s—no, Her Majesty’s—speech?”

“Of course! ‘I did not become Empress by my power alone. This was only possible thanks to you, our nation’s people. My victory is yours as well.’ It brought a tear to my eye.”

“Her Majesty really does put us regular folk first. Her reign will return light to our land!”

No one had believed Lowellmina stood a chance at first. Even so, she’d slowly proved herself and, in the end, bested the Imperial Princes. Future historians would undoubtedly study this event in an effort to record it in scrupulous detail. However, no amount of research would ever capture such a complex rise to power.

That’s precisely why Lowellmina now enjoyed such tremendous popularity. People sang her praises in the capital and throughout the Empire.

Amid these festivities, Lowellmina herself...

“Bleh...”

...cradled her head in both hands while a mountain of paperwork loomed from atop the desk in her palace’s office.

“Why is there so much? Does *everything* honestly need my approval?”

“I understand how busy you are as Empress, but unfortunately, this was the best I could do,” replied Fyshe Blundell, the aide at her side. “After all, our internal affairs have not yet recovered from this recent turmoil, and the Empire is vast.”





“True, but still...”

The Empire was a blend of main territories and surrounding provinces. The latter were still managed primarily by dispatched viceroys and local nobles. Nonetheless, large-scale issues involving either public works or provinces were reported to the capital.

Of course, the Empire’s capable officials usually dealt with such matters, so Lowellmina simply had to give her approval, but for a nation that ruled half the continent, that task alone meant endless paperwork.

“Honestly, everywhere I look, it’s work, work, work. ‘History’s First Empress’ is a glamorous title, but my to-do list is the same as ever.”

“Your Majesty may leave everything to the vassals if you wish.”

“That would give room for those vassals to take advantage of that power.”

“As Empress, that may be a useful way to test their trustworthiness.”

“...All expectations aside, I should think that would only increase my workload, so I’ll pass.”

“Very well.”

Lowellmina’s disgruntled attitude made Fyshe break into a tiny smile.

*Despite her new role, Lowellmina never changes.*

Lowellmina had overcome numerous challenges to become Empress just as she’d always dreamed. It was a joyous achievement, and she had every right to indulge herself. However, the Empress celebrated only briefly with her friends and followers before seeing to her duties. The image of Lowellmina quietly lifting the Empire back on its feet despite her fledgling authority was a fine example of her virtuous nature.

Yet even as her popularity rose, some still felt women had no place in politics and bemoaned the advent of a new dark age. Fyshe, however, believed the opposite. One sun had set on the Empire, only to be greeted by a new one named “Lowellmina.”

*Of course, examples of wise, respectable politicians marred by corruption and*

*depravity can be found in any era. Our budding Empress is full of promise, so I'll do everything in my power to help her grow into a tall, upright tree. That is the duty of a vassal.*

Fyshe had originally been an Earthworld ambassador, but Lowellmina hired her as an aide after a career setback. As a woman, Fyshe admired Lowellmina's fiery ambition and undying patriotism, and the bond built between them made her a trusted confidant. Considering the outcome, it was safe to say Fyshe had taken a significant risk and won. The journey hadn't been straightforward by any means, but she'd finally risen to head aide and was now the envy of every official.

*Unfortunately, my ascension has brought countless nuisances.*

Between letters from unknown relatives and sudden marriage proposals, Fyshe had to deal with it all as everyone tried to get their own piece of the pie. Still, this was nothing compared to those who plotted to push Fyshe out of the picture and gain Lowellmina's trust. She would have to constantly defend her position while still supporting her mistress. When Fyshe considered how she would likely go down in history as the trusted retainer of history's first Empress, she was beset by an overwhelming feeling. She had no intention of relinquishing her seat to anyone.

Honor and loyalty would be the two wheels of her cart. She would support Empress Lowellmina with these two guiding principles. That was what Fyshe had decided.

"What's the matter, Fyshe?"

"It's nothing," she replied smoothly. "More importantly, if Your Majesty feels so overwhelmed, then let's coordinate with Prime Minister Keskinel and try to lighten your workload."

"Right!" Lowellmina exclaimed, her mood instantly brighter.

"However, please remember that all of your spare time has been set aside for diplomatic appointments."

"Right..." Lowellmina's expression soured. "Which means we'll only break even..."

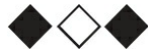


“I expect it will be some time before your schedule permits any leisure.”

Lowellmina let out a wail of protest. “Well, so be it. In any case, we have more important business than mere paperwork.”

“Yes, especially from today onward.”

“Exactly,” Lowellmina replied with a smile. “It’s time for a delightful conversation with our princely ally.”



Lowellmina’s ascension had an immense impact on the Empire, but needless to say, those waves rippled through foreign nations as well. The West, in particular, was highly conservative, and its politics were a male-dominated sphere. No one questioned this. Nonetheless, the new sovereign of one of the most powerful nations in the East was a woman. The West’s flustered males were surely scrambling to ascertain Lowellmina’s character, ideologies, politics, and what connections could be made.

Among these nations, there was one which remained unfazed by the Empress. The dragon of the north, the Kingdom of Natra.

“We exchanged formalities earlier, but allow me to congratulate you again on your coronation, Empress Lowellmina.”

“Hee-hee. Why, thank you, Prince Wein.”

Soft light streamed through the window of a room within the Imperial Palace while a young man addressed Lowellmina. He was Natra’s crown prince, Wein Salema Arbalest.

“I feel like it’s been ages since Your Majesty’s last visit to Natra.”

“Indeed. However, I believe I was only able to come this far because of the time we spent together, Prince Wein.”

Natra and the Empire had a surprisingly long history as allies, but their significant differences in national strength meant the two were never equals. Most of Natra’s neighbors once viewed it as a vassal state to the Empire. However, in the chaos following the Emperor’s sudden demise, Natra rose in power under Prince Wein’s command.

Lowellmina, who'd been Wein's greatest supporter, had been left to fend for herself in the War for Succession. Despite her lack of public achievements, Wein recognized Lowellmina's wisdom and offered aid. It seemed like a foolhardy venture since everyone else had always assumed one of the princes would become Emperor. Now that Lowellmina sat on the throne, it was clear his decision had been correct.

And so the relationship between Natra and the Empire entered a honeymoon phase. There wasn't the slightest hint of darkness between the prince whose finesse had led his people to prosperity, and the young princess turned Empress. That was how it appeared to outsiders anyway. Those well-versed in politics knew it wasn't so simple.

"...With all due respect, Your Majesty, there is something I wish to ask," interjected a third voice, which echoed across the room.

"Oh my. What is it, Ninym?"

*Ninym.* The name Lowellmina spoke belonged to Wein's aide. She had the distinctive white hair and red eyes of the Flahm.

"Exactly how long do you intend to hug me?" she asked wearily from between Empress Lowellmina's arms.

"Come now, why the long face? We haven't seen each other in forever."

The two were so far apart on the social ladder that Ninym shouldn't have even been allowed to speak to Lowellmina, let alone touch her. Regardless, Lowellmina clung to her like an oversized lapdog. It was no wonder since Lowellmina, Ninym, and Wein had spent their days at the military academy together and formed a bond far beyond rank.

However, that was a long time ago.

"Lowa, you are the rightful Empress now. Even if you are only playing around, please show some restraint," Ninym said.

"Don't worry, I trust everyone here. Even my guard," the Empress replied.

Ninym's eyes moved to a corner of the room where Lowellmina's aide, Fyshe, stood. However, she subtly refused to meet Ninym's gaze. Perhaps she saw no



harm in looking the other way if tightly squeezing an old friend brought the Empress a bit of happiness.

“...Wein.”

Seeing there would be no salvation from Fyshe, Ninym instead turned to her master for rescue as she felt a lock of golden hair tickle her nose.

“Think of it as your congratulations gift to her. Hang in there.”

He abandoned her just as quickly.

*You’ll pay for this later, Ninym swore.*

“Let’s set Ninym’s problems aside for now.” Wein’s previously polite tone evaporated. “You really showed your brothers how it’s done, eh? Despite an initial disadvantage.”

“Indeed. Many fortunate circumstances aligned, including the public’s feelings, my brothers’ hubris, and my own good luck. Of course...most of this is owed to my excellent efforts!”

“None of this would have happened if you hadn’t taken action, Lowa. I can’t argue that.”

“Quite so! Feel free to praise me more, you two.”

“Super,” Wein said.

“Great,” Ninym added.

“Put some heart into it!” Lowellmina poked Ninym’s cheek in disapproval. Ninym offered no resistance, having given up.

“So how does it feel to finally sit on the throne?” Wein asked.

“It is a profound sensation,” Lowellmina answered. “After all, I’ve finally been able to prove my abilities.”

Many had done everything in their power to keep Lowellmina off the political world stage merely because she was a woman. Her journey began with that first proactive step to challenge a society suffocated by social norms and tradition.

“And yet despite my successful rise as Empress, I must continue to demonstrate my political acumen. This is no time to relax.”

If all went well, Lowellmina's reign would last for the next decade or so—far longer than Earthworld's recent inheritance dispute. Besides, every nation in history had anecdotes of its own trouble with political corruption over the years.

"In that regard, you're like a mentor to me, Wein."

Wein was both Natra's crown prince and, for the past several years, its true leader. Lowellmina calling him her mentor wasn't too far-fetched.

"Seeing as you have more experience, might I ask for a bit of advice?" she asked.

"Advice, huh?" Wein mulled this over for a moment. "You should do some light exercise, or your body will break down."

"That has become very apparent in recent days," Lowellmina said with a deep nod. "Endless paperwork, reconciliation of interests, then more paperwork on top of that. When I consider what life as an Empress means, I can't help but sigh."

"I'm up to my eyeballs with work in Natra," Wein replied. "So I can only imagine Earthworld's responsibilities as the East's greatest superpower. Still, you've got a whole team of capable officials to handle the extra load."

"It's true, they're quite helpful, but..." Lowellmina trailed off as she lazily rubbed cheeks with Ninym.

"Becoming Empress was difficult enough, and it's only going to get worse. You've chosen a thorny road, haven't you?" Ninym remarked, her exasperation only partly masked.

Lowellmina nodded. "Most certainly."

"But it was your own decision, so you have no one else to blame," Ninym said.

"Also true!"

Wein smiled gently. "You'll find a steady number of trustworthy subordinates to fill in the gaps, so hang in there."

Lowellmina gave Ninym a very serious look. "Ninym, how would you like to come work for me?"



“And now I’m suddenly being scouted...”

“I’ll pay triple, no, five times your current salary!”

“This lady sure is generous with the Empire’s budget...!” Wein shuddered.

Ninym shot him a sidelong glance, then sighed. “I can’t leave Natra, so I must decline.”

“Well then, what if Natra joins the Empire, Wein?”

“That ain’t funny comin’ from you, Little Miss Empress!”

“I’m not joking. I mean it.”

The air immediately shifted, and Lowellmina released Ninym. She turned back to Wein, and Ninym felt a silent, uneasy spark fly between them.

“...Sorry, but I’ve got no plans for that.” It was Wein who finally broke the silence. “I believe the Empire and Natra are firm allies, but that narrative will change fast if you want us to become one nation.”

“Fyshe told me you were eager to sell out to us at one point.”

“That might’ve been true before your previous ruler passed away, but Natra has grown much stronger since the Empire was plagued by civil war. It would be tough to convince our people to join the Empire now.”

As Wein said, Natra’s strength and influence had advanced drastically both at home and abroad since he became regent, and that development showed no signs of stopping. It still paled in comparison to an Eastern giant like the Empire, of course, but every politician on the continent now understood Natra was not to be trifled with.

“...I see,” Lowellmina muttered. Ninym gleaned true disappointment from the woman’s expression.

*That’s a bit surprising...*

Lowellmina held feelings of love and friendship for Wein, but she also saw him as a worthy rival. To prove herself against him in battle and reign victorious was one of her dearest desires. It was peculiar that she’d instead asked him and Natra to come into the Empire’s fold. Had the Empress had a change of heart?

However, Lowellmina's radiant smile returned before Ninym's question could be answered. "In that case, I suppose it cannot be helped. I look forward to our fruitful alliance for many years to come."

"Me, too," Wein replied with a smile. "To that end, I'll work hard and continue to meet with Earthworld's dignitaries during my stay."

"I'm the same, though my line is much, *much* longer!"

"That's what you choose to compete over...?" Ninym shot Lowellmina a tired look, even as her friend seemed to swell with pride.

"By the way, I heard you met with Ernesto, Wein," Lowellmina remarked.

"Hm? Yeah, a little while ago."

Ernesto.

He was the leader of Eastern Levetia, the East's main religion. Although Wein had been involved in the resolution of the Empire's civil war, he'd originally come to the region to meet with Ernesto.

"What sort of person is he? I'm supposed to meet him next, so I'd like a point of reference."

"He looks like your average old guy. You'd never guess it, but he was a teacher back in the day. Still..."

"Still?"

"We had an interesting conversation." Wein smirked. "To be honest, I think you two will really hit it off."

"Oh dear..."

"What do you mean, 'Oh dear'?" Wein asked.

"Well, surely that means he's an eccentric, right?"

"Oh. I didn't think you were so self-aware."

Suddenly, Fyshe stepped forward from her corner of the room. "Your Majesty, it's almost time for your next appointment."

"Aww, already?" Lowellmina muttered reluctantly, then turned back to Wein.



“Unfortunately, I must take my leave... What will you do next, Wein?”

“I’ve been away long enough, so I think it’s high time I head home.”

Summer was drawing to a close, and Natra’s northern climate undoubtedly already hinted at the approaching icy hand of winter. As important as it was to rub elbows with the Empire’s elite, Wein wanted to return before his carriage could get stuck in the snow.

“But before I do, I’d like to catch up with Glen and Strang,” Wein added.

“I see... Yes, that’s an excellent idea. We’ll likely have very little opportunity to meet each other in private from here on.” Lowellmina’s tone was tinged with melancholy. As she said, meeting in the future would be more difficult. Not only did Wein and Lowellmina belong to the most esteemed families on the continent, but they also led their respective nations as crown prince and Empress.

Ninym had a duty to support Wein, and Glen and Strang were loyal to Lowellmina. Not only that, Lowellmina and her retinue had no time to waste as they rebuilt the weakened Empire. At least for now, their paths would not cross outside the realm of politics.

“This may be our last farewell in this lifetime,” Lowellmina said.

Ninym sighed. “Come on, Lowa. No need to be dramatic.”

“Hee-hee. I’m only joking.”

“Well, let’s do our best to make sure that doesn’t happen,” Wein suggested.

Lowellmina smiled. “It was lovely speaking with you, Prince Wein. I earnestly look forward to the day we can fulfill our duties and meet again.”



“Unfortunately...” Lowellmina mumbled wearily not long after her talk with Wein and Ninym, “...that’s only if such a day ever truly comes.”

This caught the attention of the slim man beside her.

“Are you concerned about something, Your Majesty?”

“No, no. I’m fine, Keskinel.”

Keskinel had been the Earthworld Empire's Prime Minister before the civil war, and although still quite far from old age, he didn't have a shred of ambition or authoritative power in him. His exhausted demeanor resembled a withered tree's—certainly not the type anyone would picture as the highest official in the Empire. However, in truth, this man was an exceptional figure who'd aided his nation since the previous emperor's reign. He'd taken great pains to help the leaderless Empire through the civil war without taking sides. Keskinel's abilities were recognized once Lowellmina took the throne, and he was reinstated as Prime Minister.

"Please continue your report."

"Of course."

At Lowellmina's insistence, Keskinel skimmed the documents in his hand.

"Thanks to Your Majesty's ascension, a degree of stability has returned to the public. We intend to seize this opportunity and increase our revenue."

In the few years since the war broke out, the Empire's economy had steadily declined. The civil officials, led by Keskinel, tried everything in their limited authority to fix the situation, but the government's widespread instability did little to ease people's fears about the future. And when things looked uncertain, the public's purse strings naturally tightened, along with their hearts.

Empress Lowellmina's arrival brought about a transformation, though. The populace saw a new glimmer of hope. Of course, whether her reign proved to be boon or bane was yet to be seen, but the citizens could finally let out a sigh of relief. Not to act on this fresh chance would be foolish.

"Fortunately, the harvest was plentiful this year. There is no reason for anyone to claim your coronation has angered the heavens."

"That is indeed a blessing. If a natural disaster had struck as soon as I became Empress and rumors began to circulate of divine retribution, panic would abound."

Needless to say, no politician in the world could manipulate the elements. Regardless, people would make their own assumptions about any such events. Lowellmina was in a precarious situation because her political authority was not



yet unshakable. One large-scale natural disaster could ruin everything.

“I’m afraid I have some bad news as well, Your Majesty,” Keskinel said.

Lowellmina scrunched her face and groaned as the Prime Minister continued, “The first matter concerns the factions of Prince Bardloche and Prince Manfred.”

Second Prince Bardloche and Third Prince Manfred. Lowellmina had fought both for the throne and had emerged victorious upon their arrests. The next issue was how to deal with their factions.

“We’ve dealt with their supporters as leniently as possible, and I’ve ordered each group to disband and join us,” Lowellmina remarked. “However...”

“Yes. On the whole, they have obeyed Your Majesty’s command. Regrettably, a percentage has masked its whereabouts, and it seems others who claim to have accepted you secretly plot to reinstate their princes.”

“...Well, that’s no surprise.”

Lowellmina was history’s first female monarch. Her brothers’ factions had had their political dreams dashed. That was more than enough for them to seek revenge. Their cherished leaders yet lived, too, which surely emboldened them.

“Perhaps it would be best to execute Prince Bardloche and Prince Manfred after all,” Keskinel suggested.

Lowellmina’s brothers were confined and under tight surveillance, but she treated them with respect as royals.

“We’ve discussed this a thousand times. I will not execute them. Once my position is secure, I’ll send them off to live in the countryside or the like.”

“I still think you are too lenient,” Keskinel asserted. “Especially Prince Bardloche, who collaborated with the West’s Teachings of Levetia and has been criticized by Eastern Levetia for it. Many firmly believe only the harshest punishment will suffice.”

During the war, a desperate Bardloche had accepted the aid of the Empire’s Western rival, the Teachings of Levetia faith. Once Manfred discovered this, he’d appealed to Eastern Levetia, which swiftly leveled harsh censure upon the

Second Prince.

“I have a meeting with Eastern Levetia’s key representative, Ernesto, soon to discuss Bardloche. We’ll get that sorted out. I guarantee their heads will not roll,” Lowellmina stated.

“Does your compassion run so deep?”

“Goodness, no.” The Empress sniffed. “In the public eye, I am a merciful ruler who’s bested her useless brothers. If I executed them the moment everything became official, people might believe I was revealing my despotic tendencies now that my position was secure. Politically speaking, that would leave us even more vulnerable.” She paused for a moment. “Besides, we can use those Western Levetia connections to our advantage. This dispute has sorely tarnished the Imperial Family’s influence, and the palace is under greater suspicion. Instead of fools beaten by their little sister, we can portray Bardloche and Manfred as victims of the West’s schemes. By making the West the true mastermind, we can deflect anger and garner sympathy.”

Keskinel hummed. “To accomplish that, we must minimize the chances of a factional revolt from either side.”

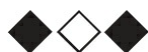
“It’s *already* minuscule,” Lowellmina replied with an overwhelming air of self-confidence. “No matter how many times my brothers turn their swords against me, I’ll always win.”

Keskinel groaned quietly at the once helpless princess-turned-Empress’s bold declaration. A brilliant flame burned in this young sovereign, and the Prime Minister thought to himself that perhaps that was precisely what had allowed her to succeed in the first place.

“If you insist, then I have nothing more to say on the matter,” Keskinel conceded. “However, we have more to discuss. Present issues include the Empire’s diminished military, the agenda of each province, and our alliance with Natra.”

Lowellmina subtly reacted to that last word. Keskinel understood the deep connection the Empress had with Natra, and that was precisely why that subject couldn’t be ignored.

“I believe the time has come to reconsider our alliance,” he stated.



At last, the day came for the Natra delegation to leave the Empire. Now that everything was set, each member of the group felt a vague sense of melancholy as they bade farewell to their temporary home during the recent trouble. Even so, the thought of their true home waiting to the west lifted everyone's spirits.

“My head is *killin'* me...” Wein moaned as he writhed on the sofa.

“Didn't I warn you not to go overboard?” Ninym asked exasperatedly. She offered him a glass of water.

“Don't blame me. They're the ones who insisted I try different Earthworld wines since I 'won't get another chance for a while.’”

The individuals in question were Glen and Strang, Wein's friends who now served as Lowellmina's vassals. They'd met with him the other day. Ninym had elected not to join, since there were departure preparations to see to, and she'd thought a bit of male camaraderie would do Wein good. The sight of him in his present state left her wondering if she should've come along, however.

“All the same, a hangover means you had too much,” Ninym stated bluntly as she poked Wein's cheek with her index finger. “Will you be able to ride like this? We'd be the laughingstock of the world if you drunkenly fell off.”

“I'll manage...”

People fell from their steeds all the time. Picking yourself up and laughing it off wasn't so terrible. There was always a risk of injury or death, though. A delay in their departure because Wein failed to sober up *would* earn him plenty of mocking.

“There's still some time, so let's just get you as close to 'normal' as possible,” Ninym said.

“*Fwaaah.*” Wein yawned wearily before emptying the glass of water.

“By the way, how were those two?” Ninym asked, hoping to distract him.

“They seemed well enough. We couldn't have polished off all that wine together otherwise.”



“I’m glad to hear it.”

During the war, Lowellmina, Glen, and Strang had each belonged to different factions and showed no mercy. When Ninym considered how one or all of them might have perished, it was a relief to hear the three were still friends.

“Even though those guys lost and serve Lowa now, they complained she’ll probably make ’em do all the crazy stuff,” Wein said.

“I have no doubt about that,” Ninym agreed.

Moving the Empire forward meant Lowellmina couldn’t afford to hold back. Naturally, this meant she’d work reliable friends like Glen and Strang to the bone. Ninym broke into a small smile at the mental image.

“Nonetheless, it will be all worthwhile. A new Empress, a new era... It’s now up to Lowa and her vassals whether they’ll leave a mark on history for better or for worse,” Ninym added.

Wein nodded. “You got that right. Knowin’ those guys, they’ll do just fine and stabilize the Empire.”

For most, Lowellmina’s abilities as Empress were an unknown variable. However, Wein understood her passion, ambition, patriotism, and support network. Barring some natural disaster, these factors guaranteed that the Earthworld Empire would flourish under Lowellmina’s rule.

“Still, that’s not necessarily great for Natra,” Wein mused.

Ninym lamented this as well. A stable Empire was a welcome change for its citizens, but over in the West, the revival of an Eastern superpower was an obvious threat. This was particularly true of Earthworld since the previous emperor had had broad expansionist policies and made no effort to hide his hunger for the West. With the civil war over, the West anxiously wondered if those desires would return.

Even Natra, the Empire’s ally, couldn’t afford to be complacent. It was common knowledge that the small northern nation’s initial alliance with Earthworld was meant to last only until the latter’s invasion of the West. However, those plans had fizzled out, owing to the previous emperor’s unexpected passing. The alliance itself survived, but its continued existence

seemed precarious.

“Everyone knows Natra supported Lowa early on,” Ninym said. “If our alliance falls apart now, people will question the Empress’s abilities, and Earthworld’s anxious vassals will start jumping at shadows again.”

It was true. Wein and Lowellmina often clashed in pursuit of their own self-interests, but that was only behind closed doors. To the general public, they were thick as thieves. If Earthworld recklessly abandoned Natra, everyone would surely accuse Lowellmina of straying from the path of righteousness. Furthermore, her subordinates, upon witnessing such treatment of a longtime ally, would fearfully wonder if they were next. Since most had sworn fealty to their new sovereign only recently, the unease would spread like wildfire.

Thus, the general consensus was that the Empire ought to reward Natra for its assistance, regardless of Lowellmina’s feelings.

“Strang said it best,” Wein said. “Lowa needs to wow ’em all at once if she wants to demonstrate the Empire’s post-war military strength.”

Ninym looked conflicted. “That’s...”

The fires of Earthworld’s civil war had been quelled, but its embers yet smoldered. If Lowellmina displayed any weakness, the flames would rise again. She needed to show the world that the Earthworld Empire had returned to its former glory and wouldn’t be an easy target. Strang had mentioned earlier that Natra was an easy stepping stone to that end.

“...We can’t discard all that Natra has done for the Empire, though. Any invasion would need justification,” she finished.

“If there isn’t a reason, they can always make one up,” Wein replied with a smile. “Don’t forget that we’re playing nice with the West, too. The Empire can say whatever it wants. True or not, you’d be amazed how fast people will buy into any idea of justice.”

“How heartless...”

It was unclear whether Ninym’s comment was directed at the people or Wein’s opinion of them.

Regardless, there was no denying Natra couldn't afford to rest on its laurels.

"We need to avoid whatever trouble might come up," Wein explained. "It's why I used this trip to get friendly with as many big shots as possible."

Natra needed to maintain a few allies among the Empire's elite to help fight against future anti-Natra policies. These political objectives would meet no resistance if no one came to the smaller nation's defense, but some backlash would delay any Imperial decisions long enough for Natra to negotiate.

"There's no telling how far that will take us," Ninym argued.

"Yep, that's the kicker. I could easily deal with any surprises if I stayed here, but—"

"Don't be ridiculous. You've been away from home long enough."

"No kidding." Wein smirked. "Well, there's always the chance we're worried over nothing. Right now, our only real option is to head back as planned and hope nothing happens."

"...You're right." Ninym sighed quietly and stood slowly. "Do you feel any better yet, Wein?"

"Enough."

"In that case, I'll let everyone know we'll be departing soon."

Ninym left the room. With no one else around, Wein muttered to himself as he prepared to do the same.

"A new Imperial Empress, the West is on high alert, Eastern and Western Levetia harboring secret ambitions, and the kindled embers of my own nation..." His mouth twisted into a smile. "I really do wonder if this can end quietly..."

And so Wein's delegation left for Natra. Little did its members know that the unprecedented trouble on the road ahead would define their nation's history.





*What in the world is this boy?*

That was Ninym's only thought as she gripped her knees in a corner of the expansive parlor.

The boy in question was Wein, who read silently in the middle of the room.

"Do as you please." Those were Wein's exact words after Ninym had stumbled out of the forest and into his villa. Then, seemingly considering his duty fulfilled, Wein had turned away to return to his book. He ignored Ninym without sparing her a single glance.

*What should I do?*

She was the one who'd appeared out of nowhere and been allowed to stay in the manor when she normally would've been forced back outside. For her to offer a complaint now would be outrageous. Yet she had no idea what to do now that she was left to her own devices.

*He said his name is Wein Salema Arbalest...*

Almost everyone in Natra knew that name, and naturally, Ninym was no exception. After all, only one person in the whole nation carried that moniker.

That made the situation feel only more incomprehensible.

*If his claim is true...why are we the only ones here?*

Everything from the manor itself to Wein's attitude and clothing spoke of a noble lineage. However, if what Ninym had heard was correct, Prince Wein would never read alone in the middle of a forest or casually invite a suspicious visitor inside.

Ninym had to wonder if this boy was actually someone else.

Suddenly, a sound came from the entryway. Footsteps. Ninym was quick to hide herself upon sensing this new arrival's approach.

"I've returned, Your Highness."

The young man was about ten years Ninym's senior. His face looked gentle,

but his tall, muscular build was evident from a single glance. Perhaps he was a guard.

More importantly, what did he just say?

“I was able to catch a deer, so I’ll prepare dinner soon... Oh?”

The man, having noticed Ninym’s presence, looked her way. His expression betrayed caution for this new visitor but also confusion over the fact that she was a child. He turned to Wein for answers.

“Apparently, she was lost in the woods,” Wein stated plainly.

“Out in a backwater—I mean, secluded place like this?” Although still bewildered, the man slowly knelt to meet Ninym on her level. “I am Raklum, a soldier of the Kingdom of Natra. May I ask your name, young lady?”

“...I’m Ninym,” she replied timidly.

Raklum smiled. “Such eyes and hair tell me you are of the Flahm. What brings you so deep into the forest? Does your family know you’re here?”

“Um...well...”

Ninym had entered the woods for a reason but refused to explain. She couldn’t, even if it meant being cast out for suspicious behavior.

““ ...””

Ninym wouldn’t answer, yet Raklum had a responsibility to ask. The conflict between them formed a tangible silence.

The light *pap* of a closed book cut the tension.

“You don’t have to tell us if you don’t want to. Just drop it, Raklum.”

Raklum was quick to express his disapproval. “But, Your Highness, we can’t possibly—”

“It’s not like she’s an assassin. Besides, it’s almost dinnertime.”

“...” Despite his perpetual grimace, Raklum relented and sighed. “In that case, I shall prepare our meal. Please wait here for a moment, but do not set your expectations too high. It will be quite modest fare.”

“That’s fine.”

Raklum turned on his heel to leave, but Ninym called out, “Um...”

“Hm? Ah, worry not. I’ll set aside a portion for you as well.”

“Th-thank you. But there’s something else...” Ninym turned to Raklum. “You called that boy ‘Your Highness.’ Does that mean...?”

Raklum gave a look that said, *Oh crap*. Unfortunately, it was too late to fool Ninym. After a brief internal meltdown, Raklum answered, “I cannot say much, but...the truth is as you presume.”

“I knew it. He’s...”

Wein Salema Arbalest was the name of Natra’s crown prince. This young man standing before Ninym was heir to the Natran throne.

“...”

Just then, a thought struck her. Why was the prince in a remote location with only Raklum? Whatever the reason, this presented her with an opportunity.

“Um, I can help in the kitchen. Please, I insist. I’ll do whatever you ask and tend to the prince’s daily needs,” Ninym said. “So...might I stay here for a while?”



Natra’s royal capital of Codebell was presently on the rise, but at one point, it had been impossible to believe such a desolate town could serve as the nation’s capital. This had been due to its location near the northernmost tip of the continent and hostile relations with the West.

However, Wein’s ascension to regent changed everything. Natra quickly repelled foreign invaders, expanded its territory, and formed diplomatic alliances. Moreover, this momentum brought people to Natra in droves. An upward spiral of new immigrants was established, and Codebell soon became a vibrant hot spot.

“Wow, it’s like a whole different town,” one person remarked.

“You ain’t kiddin’,” said another. “The population and economy are boomin’. We never could’ve imagined this back when we were kids.”



Most citizens favored the change, but unsurprisingly, the additional foreigners, trouble, and disruption to their daily lives frustrated some. Still, Natra clearly flourished under Wein's rule, so the changes were mostly welcomed.

"Come to think of it, His Highness the Crown Prince will be returning to Natra soon."

"Oh yeah. He was in the Empire, right? Prince Wein is always runnin' off to one country or another."

In the citizens' eyes, the royal family stood on a different plane of existence. Most believed they resided within a brilliant world too fascinating and dazzling for common folk to conceive of. Nevertheless, news tidbits did occasionally leak, so everyone was vaguely aware of Wein's frequent excursions.

"I'm sure takin' over for His Majesty ain't easy, but Prince Wein oughtta put his feet up once in a while."

"Yeah, but there's really nothin' for it. Prince Wein's global politics have breathed new life into Natra."

Wein's numerous accomplishments made it clear he wasn't simply running around the continent to fulfill his wanderlust. However, he was also a leader whose presence in the homeland set Natra at ease. This left people conflicted.

However, they remained confident in their nation's new trajectory.

"Hey, no worries. Now that Natra's got a backbone, we won't be shaken so easily."

Natra had been clawing its way higher for several years, the citizens enjoyed a new sense of pride and faith in their kingdom, and Wein was not the only symbol of those feelings.

"Besides, we've got another reliable leader while Prince Wein is away."

Yes, a second individual had captured the public's heart and become their anchor.

And that person was...

"Here you go, Falanya."

“Yay! Thank you, Nanaki.” The princess happily accepted the food from her servant. “Mmm! It’s delicious!”

Falanya munched on her boiled egg. The simple, poorly seasoned thing paled in comparison to the palace’s lavish cuisine, yet to a sheltered young noblewoman like Falanya, the very idea of food from an outdoor stall gave it a rustic flavor and charm beyond compare.

Indeed, Falanya was not currently in the palace but standing on a crowded thoroughfare in the castle town.

“Don’t let your guard down. You never know what might happen out here,” Nanaki cautioned as he watched his mistress eagerly nibble the egg.

“Yes, I know. Still, this disguise should be enough to keep me hidden,” she replied.

Falanya certainly looked unlike herself. Her hairstyle was different, and she wore plain clothing that allowed her to blend in. Her natural elegance was impossible to mask, but any normal stranger would only think to themselves, *What a nice young lady.*

She’d stick out like a sore thumb to anyone who paid close attention to the princess. Even clueless thieves would think her the daughter of a noble family and harbor ideas of easy prey. Falanya had been forewarned, of course, but how well she heeded such advice was a separate issue.

Just as Nanaki wondered if a minor threat might prompt his lady to be more cautious and therefore be to her benefit, Falanya gave him a radiant smile.

“Besides, you’re here with me, Nanaki. I have nothing to fear.”

“...”

“Um, why are you making that face? Have I annoyed you?”

“...I’m more annoyed with myself.” This was true. A single smile from Falanya had so easily left him speechless. “All right. What next, Falanya? We’ve still got time to walk around, but...”

“Hmm...” The princess fell into contemplation when Nanaki changed the subject. They were here only because of her request.

*“I want to visit the castle town and observe the people.”* That was what she’d said out of the blue several days ago.

Needless to say, her attendants and advisors had immediately expressed reluctance. A noble among the masses—the public would relish such a story. However, it was any guard’s worst nightmare. Falanya was also an elite among the elite and one of Natra’s top three leaders. Heads would quickly roll if she suffered even the most minor scratch, yet assigning a guard retinue made it difficult for her to travel unnoticed. Thus, everyone agreed that such an excursion was too dangerous for the princess and suggested Falanya instead send servants in her place if she wished to better know the people.

Falanya had remained uncharacteristically insistent, though, and ultimately, the vassals were forced to yield to her demand. After disguising herself as best she could, Falanya had left with Nanaki, along with a few guards, who kept their distance.

“.....”

As her protector, Nanaki thought their covert investigation had gone well thus far. The objective of their outing wasn’t what worried him, though.

“Hey, Nanaki, has the town always been like this?”

“Lately. Although the main road wasn’t as busy before.”

Falanya watched passersby as she spoke with Nanaki.

Most of the officials involved considered this nothing more than a leisurely stroll born from the whims of their gentle princess. And they weren’t necessarily wrong. Falanya thought it would be a good way to relieve her recent stress, but very few knew the truth of what actually troubled her.

“...Thanks to my brother, Natra has prospered,” she muttered.

How much emotion could one whisper hold?

Falanya had yet to explore the town for even half a day. She didn’t understand every facet of the citizens’ lives. Like her servants had said, she’d gain a more complete picture by reading their gathered reports.

The princess was acutely aware of this, but she still wished to view things in



person. She wanted to look upon this nation that she'd likely be responsible for soon. If anything, this outing was a ceremony of sorts.

"...Let's return to the palace, Nanaki."

"You've had enough?"

"Yes," Falanya replied, her mind set. "I've seen plenty. The rest...is up to me."



The Flahm were a people known for their distinctive white hair and red eyes. Their history was steeped in turmoil. After a generations-long enslavement, they rose up and established their own prosperous nation. However, several vengeful attacks on neighboring countries led to backlash that doomed the Flahm country. The religion that would become the Teachings of Levetia quickly branded the Flahm people as the descendants of demons, ushering in a new era of cruel oppression.

This insufferable reality persisted even into the present day. Although the Flahm of the past had surely meant well, the end result had been a torturous bloodbath no one asked for.

Prosperity and stability were but distant dreams.

"...And I suppose we'll soon face a new era of hardship," a man in his prime mumbled to himself as he slouched in his office chair.

He was Levan, one who bore the white hair and crimson eyes of the Flahm and served as head of the Rolei family, who represented their people in the Kingdom of Natra. About a century prior, a group of Flahm led by a man named Rolei had arrived in Natra after years of wandering. They won the king over by offering skills and knowledge acquired during their nomadic travels, and he accepted the Flahm as citizens—an unthinkable development in the West, where the Flahm suffered endlessly under the crack of a whip.

However, that hadn't been enough to set Rolei and his people at ease. For all the king's benevolence, Natra's vassals and citizens carried deep prejudice against the Flahm. Unless their opinions changed, it was only a matter of time until Rolei's group was chased out.

For the next century, the Flahm entirely devoted themselves to Natra and

continued to prove their value. Thanks to this, present-day Flahm enjoyed lives of freedom in Natra. Their place in the nation was a priceless crystallization of many years of work.

Regrettably, it seemed as though that delicate peace would soon crumble, thanks to none other than the Flahm themselves.

“A Flahm nation? After all this time?”

Hopeful whispers of independence and a new homeland were spreading among Natra’s Flahm. They had once established their own country, and the legend of it burned within every Flahm soul. It was their dearest wish to rebuild someday.

Reality was not so kind as to merely allow it, though. Everyone knew this. And with no other alternative, they could only pray for a better future that might never come.

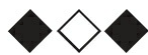
—Until now.

“Ninym will soon return. And then...”

They’d come to a crossroads. Levan could feel it.

The Flahm’s history was well-intentioned yet intensely bloody. Would they reach their lofty goal this time? Levan brooded, searching for the answer in an empty room.

Wein’s delegation arrived in Natra several days later.



The vassals greeted the returned party with great enthusiasm. The delegation had officially visited the Empire to meet Ernesto, the leader of Eastern Levetia. Unfortunately, it had been dragged into Earthworld’s civil war and wound up assisting with Empress Lowellmina’s rise to the throne. Although the vassals knew everyone was safe, thanks to letter correspondence, they were relieved to confirm the truth with their eyes.

This was no cause for Wein to be complacent, though. Lowellmina’s coronation had stirred things up on the continent. Between reviewing intel gathered in the Empire, hearing what had transpired in his absence, meeting

with dignitaries who'd been left waiting, and keeping the citizenry at ease, the list of tasks was endless.

"Phew...I can finally take a breather." Back in his familiar palace office, Wein, who'd finished his work for the moment, threw himself on the sofa in a show of exhaustion. "Life over there wasn't half bad, but there's no place like home."

"I couldn't agree more," Ninym replied from beside him. She'd usually correct Wein's slovenly appearance immediately, but after the stress and fatigue of their long trip to the Empire and catching up on all the missed work, Ninym was feeling lenient.

"I'd say we deserve a little vacation, Ninym."

"And how long would this 'little' vacation be exactly?"

"Half a year maybe?"

"Absolutely not."

"Wha?!" Wein cried as Ninym instantly shot him down. "Come on! I've been working really hard! I deserve a lazy day!"

"Half a year is still out of the question. We've finished today's responsibilities, but there will be plenty more tomorrow."

Like the ocean's ebb and flow upon the shore, no one could stop it. Sure, you might succeed if you drank the entire ocean, but such a feat was beyond mere mortals.

"*Sigh.* I love free time, but the feeling is never mutual," Wein mumbled nonsensically.

Ninym watched her liege in exasperation. "Well...I suppose a *week* wouldn't hurt."

Wein's surprise and excitement were visible. "What winds doth blow this way?"

"Don't make such a big deal. I just mean that Natra can afford it right now, thanks to Princess Falanya," Ninym said. "It looks like she and the vassals really did their best while we were away. We're still checking the reports, but there haven't been any issues so far. Even if you took some time off, they should be

able to handle everything.”

“I see. In other words, I can gradually leave the work to them and kick my feet up.”

“However you look at it, a brother who dumps his responsibilities on his little sister is the absolute worst.”

“I just want to see her grow up strong.”

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Wein’s shenanigans earned him a scowl from Ninym. “This isn’t just about moral principles. Don’t you know what will happen if her role as your substitute grows any larger?”

“She’ll probably shoot up and tower over me.”

“Wein, I’m being serious here.”

Just as Ninym took a step toward him, a hesitant knock tapped on the office door.

“Do you have a minute, Wein?” Falanya, the very subject of their discussion, suddenly stepped inside. Wein had already corrected his posture, and he offered a magnanimous nod.

“Of course. What is it, Falanya?” he said.

“Um, I’d like to discuss something if you don’t mind.”

Those words alone revealed Falanya’s adoration for her big brother. Their close bond was common knowledge, and Wein had just returned from a prolonged stay in the Empire. Falanya’s lonely desire to make up for lost time came as no surprise.

However, an odd feeling struck Ninym out of nowhere.

*Princess Falanya...?*

She was usually cheerful and energetic whenever she saw Wein, yet her present expression swirled with confusion, fear, and anxiety. And there was something else. Another dark, complex emotion kept her rooted, a tragic yet firm resolve.

“Ninym.”



Wein's voice broke the Flahm out of her bewildered trance.

"R-right. I will prepare tea."

"No need," Wein replied. "But do give us a moment alone. It looks like Falanya is hoping for a private conversation."

"...?!"

Ninym was left speechless. Although she was Wein's public and private confidant, there were naturally occasions when he required privacy. However, Ninym could not recall one instance where she was excluded from a conversation between the two royal siblings.

Falanya surprisingly raised no objections. Ninym understood the princess had an important matter to discuss with Wein, but normally she'd ask Ninym to stay and provide sisterly support. Instead, Falanya simply stared at Wein and gave no indication that she needed Ninym. The princess seemed to take no notice of her. Falanya's inexplicable behavior and motives confused Ninym more than Wein's unusual order.

"Ninym." Wein called her name again.

"...Understood. Please excuse me."

She quietly left the room after a bow, leaving the two most important figures in Natra to themselves.

"So what did you want to talk about?" Wein asked in a rather pleasant tone.

His sister, on the other hand, responded with fiery determination, "Natra's future."



Outside the room, Ninym gave a small sigh. What were they about to discuss behind the heavy door at her back?

*I know the princess has matured quickly these days, but...*

Ninym loved and admired Falanya as both a princess and a younger sister. Falanya likewise saw Ninym not as a mere servant but as an older sibling and role model. They weren't linked by blood, but Ninym took pride in their tight-knit relationship and unspoken understanding.

That had changed.

A sense of alienation throbbed in her chest, but it was presumptuous to meddle in a conversation between royals. Unlike Wein, Ninym had failed to detect the meaning behind Falanya's odd behavior. So she stood in the hall and stewed over her thoughts.

"You don't look too good," a voice suddenly called out beside her. When she turned to face it, Nanaki had appeared out of nowhere.

"Nanaki, you..."

Ninym was about to ask, "You know something about this, right?" but stopped herself. Wein or Falanya would share any vital information later. To question Nanaki just because she felt excluded was spineless.

"What's wrong?"

"It's...nothing."

"Okay," Nanaki replied without another word.

He usually shadowed Falanya, so his presence here had to mean he'd been dismissed, too. However, unlike Ninym, Nanaki didn't appear bothered in the slightest. In retrospect, he alone stood unfazed even as Natra's people struggled to catch up with the rest of the world. Ninym envied his consistency.

While thoughts raced in her mind...

"There you are, Lady Ninym."

...a human shadow approached her and Nanaki while they waited outside the door. It was a Flahm official.

"Do you have some business with me?"

The man nodded. "Yes. The meeting of representatives will begin shortly. I shall escort you."

"A meeting?"

There was no need to ask for what purpose. Natra's Flahm were well aware of their tentative position and thus gathered periodically to secure a contingency plan. However, Ninym regarded the official questioningly.

“I wasn’t aware of any meetings today.”

The Flahm were traditionally assigned as aides to members of Natra’s royal family, and their leader served by the king’s side. As Levan’s successor, Ninym should’ve been informed of new gatherings immediately.

“Did you hear anything about this, Nanaki?” she asked.

“Does it matter?”

Right on cue. Despite his duties as aide to the crown princess, Nanaki had zero interest in the Flahm’s dealings.

“You’ve been quite busy these days, Lady Ninym, so Master Levan has handled certain matters.”

*That makes sense,* Ninym thought.

While in the Empire, Ninym had received word of suspicious activity among Natra’s Flahm. She had intended to discuss the situation with Levan, but there hadn’t been an opportunity even upon her return. After all, Ninym struggled just to catch up on all the missed work. She’d managed to meet with Levan once for a brief moment, but he simply said, *“Please leave this to me.”* Ninym had complied since she already had enough on her plate, plus Levan *was* the Flahm’s leader. However...

*I haven’t received any reports, so the participants are probably still deliberating.*

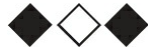
...this suspicious Flahm activity was, in all likelihood, an independence movement. Ninym had sensed the rising momentum earlier and opposed it from the outset. Levan shared Ninym’s opinion, so she’d left the situation to him. Had it been too much to handle? Ninym was still on the clock, but she thought it would be wise to make a quick appearance and confirm the situation firsthand.

“Understood. Let’s go.” Ninym turned to Nanaki. “I won’t be long. Please guard Their Highnesses and tell Prince Wein where I’ve gone.”

“Got it.”

Ninym was still concerned about Wein and Falanya’s conversation, but the

Flahm couldn't be ignored. She reluctantly headed to the assembly.



Every muscle tensed nervously as an icy chill washed over Falanya. She was only talking to her brother, yet her heart hammered like an alarm. She struggled to breathe and fought the urge to rush out the door.

However, that wasn't an option. No one else was in the room, and she wouldn't allow herself to leave.

*Resolve*, she thought. *That's the only reason you're here right now.*

"Natra's future, huh?" From his chair, Wein mulled over Falanya's answer. "An interesting topic, although a bit vague."

Perhaps, but this was only the beginning. She'd get into the finer details soon enough.

"Wein, Natra has flourished since you became regent."

The annexation of Marden. Reconciliation with the West. An improved relationship with the Empire. Thanks to Wein's acumen, Natra enjoyed many blessings. It was the undeniable truth.

"Our lands, people, and industries have flourished... The citizens respect you for such benevolence and feel a sense of pride. Of course, I am no different."

"Aww, you're making me blush," Wein replied with a smile. "That respect is proof my civic abilities have been well received. I'm over the moon."

*"However,"* Falanya cut in. "There is something else I came to understand while acting as your substitute. It's true you've brought great riches to this nation, but many struggle to keep up the pace."

Natra was developing at a remarkable rate, and countless citizens relished the windfall. However, some had been left behind amid the radical changes.

"Yes, I'm aware of that," Wein replied, unfazed by Falanya's veiled criticism. "Still, it can't be helped. I can't make every last citizen happy."

"There's a significant distinction between *can't* and *won't*," Falanya asserted. "The public regards you as a generous ruler, but once you see the whole picture, it's obvious the laws, tax system, customs, and industries you've



established promote competition and survival of the fittest.”

That was no coincidence. Wein had instituted those aspects deliberately. The chill Falanya felt upon that realization still echoed in her heart.

“I love this country and wish nothing more than for everyone to live peaceful, happy lives.”

Which was why Falanya had to ask her beloved brother the following question.

“Wein, what do you think of Natra and its people?”



As soon as Ninym entered the meeting chamber, she was struck by the room’s jumbled, bizarre atmosphere.

*This is...*

About twenty people sat in the room. They were usually locked in a heated debate by now, yet no one said a word. Nevertheless, the intense atmosphere persisted.

What could be the cause? As Ninym asked herself this and walked farther into the room, all eyes suddenly fell on her.

“Oh, it’s Lady Ninym.”

“Now we can finally get somewhere.”

“Right this way, Lady Ninym.”

Everyone spoke with only the deepest awe and reverence. As the group’s future leader and the crown prince’s trusted confidant, Ninym was an elite figure among Natra’s Flahm. The attendees’ reaction wasn’t particularly odd, yet Ninym experienced a powerful aversion.

She would learn why soon enough.

“Ninym!” Levan, the group’s current head, raced over to her. Concern swam in his eyes. “Why have you come...?!” He spoke so no one else could hear, but his voice held unmistakable tension.

“I’m as clueless as you are. I was told about today’s meeting and brought

here.”

It was the only answer Ninym could provide. Levan’s expression suggested he’d hoped to keep her far from this. If so, did that mean the Flahm who’d found her had acted against him?

“...I suppose there’s nothing for it now. Stay on guard.” Levan’s agitation was palpable.

Ninym took her seat, and Levan sat next to her and addressed the room.

“Well, let us begin our usual meeting. Today’s topic of discussion is—”

As the group looked to Levan, a voice cut him off.

“Master Levan! What more is there to talk about?!” a young Flahm man demanded.

Others were quick to offer their agreement.

“He’s right! We’ve already discussed everything under the sun!”

“If we miss this opportunity, there won’t be another!”

“Now is the time to fight for our independence!”

Ah, Ninym thought. It was just as she’d expected.

The Flahm’s greatest ambition, to create the utopia of their dreams, was the height of idiocy.

“Such goals are unrealistic,” Ninym stated sharply.

The Flahm had suffered enough trying to establish and maintain their current status in Natra. Why couldn’t this pack of hotheads understand they’d be throwing that away?

*No, that’s not our main concern. First, Master Levan and I must crush their foolish enthusiasm once and for all.*

The Flahm’s current leader and his successor could quell the majority if they directly opposed the idea. Both had carefully encouraged peace in the past, but it was time for more drastic measures. Ninym had nonetheless underestimated them, and such action was long overdue.

“Lady Ninym, you mustn’t think that way,” one attendee objected. “After all, you are the heart of our fight for independence.”

Ninym frowned at this odd comment. She sensed the belief extended to something beyond her role as the future leader of Natra’s Flahm. Which could only mean...

\_\_\_\_\_!

A shudder raced down her spine. Ninym shot Levan an incredulous look, and he nodded bitterly.

“Yes, the Founder,” another replied. “As a direct descendant of our great Founder, Lady Ninym is the icon of our independence.”



Ninym Rolei's parents died in an epidemic, although she was too young to remember. Natra's tightly knit Flahm community ensured she never felt lonely, though. No orphan was left behind, and everyone worked together to create a supportive environment and educate children. The most promising students were given the surname "Rolei" and sent to the royal palace to work for the good of their people. The Rolei Family had been established a century prior, and Ninym quickly blossomed within the organization. Other Flahm showered her with love in place of her birth parents, and she enjoyed her days as a child.

However, Ninym had felt something was off. Her skills were remarkable compared to her peers, and rumors assumed that she would one day serve the newborn Princess Falanya. The thought made Ninym swell with pride and confidence. However, that same excellence was the cause of so many peculiar stares she received from adults.

At first, Ninym believed it was due to her talents, but she swiftly realized that wasn't the case. They saw beyond her skills. No ill intent hung in their gazes, yet they also held more than mere affection. Their looks were complex and twisted—like acts of worship.

Why did they treat her that way? Ninym felt lost and confused until the elders summoned her one day.

"You carry the blood of the Founder."

The Founder. The heroic, red-haired Flahm who'd established their kingdom. His legend kept hope alive in the hearts of countless Flahm persecuted around the world.

Now Ninym finally understood. People gazed at her with such worship and adulation because her ancestry was practically divine.

She had one thought about this revelation.

*Gross.*

She was the descendant of a bygone hero. A Flahm of precious heritage.

That's why everyone praised her.

It was completely ridiculous. If her lineage could be traced back so accurately, surely the same was true of other Flahm. She had no doubt others carried a connection to the Founder. The "direct descendant" part was suspicious, too. The Founder's line probably ended somewhere. The Flahm had likely decided to pass off an unrelated child as his scion. No one bloodline could be expected to last forever.

*It's disgusting...*

If children Ninym's age had revered her as a chosen one, she would've been innocently delighted. However, all the praise came from adults, and their words were paper-thin lies and delusions.

If Ninym was a true descendant, what would it change? Did the Flahm expect her to make a castle out of thin air or resurrect the dead with a word? Ridiculous. She was a child who possessed no such magical power.

*It's so revolting, I can't stand it!*

No one understood. They wholeheartedly believed the young girl was the latest in a line of divine treasures passed down through the ages. As long as her blood survived, the Flahm would rise again someday.

"Until our holy capital is rebuilt, Your Ladyship's duty is to take care of your health and carry on the bloodline."

The ugly truth dawned on her.

To the Flahm, Ninym wasn't human. Sham or not, she was only a vessel meant to symbolize the Founder's lineage.

Ninym fled the village that same day. She had no destination. Her only objective was to escape. Eventually, a forbidden forest came into view...



Several days after Ninym had stumbled upon the mansion in the forest, she rose before the birds, got dressed in her new bedroom, then hurried to prepare breakfast and draw a bath. She had yet to learn the ropes, so the results were admittedly clumsy.



All the same, Ninym managed to finish and quickly made her way down the hall. A man was waiting for her—Raklum.

“Good morning.”

“Morning,” he replied.

Raklum was a Natran soldier and the mansion’s only guard. His position by the door indicated its importance.

“The prince’s... His Highness’s bath and breakfast are ready.”

“Understood.” Raklum nodded and rapped lightly on the door beside him. “Pardon me, Your Highness.”

Ninym watched Raklum disappear behind the door and waited. Although it was plain fare, she’d put a lot of effort into breakfast and wanted Wein to eat first while it was still hot. She stood patiently while wondering if Raklum and the prince would ever come out.

The two appeared a few moments later, and Ninym gave an energetic bow.

“G-good morning!”

“Yeah,” the boy, Wein Salema Arbalest, answered flatly. He was the lord of this mansion and Natra’s true crown prince.

“Um, your meal and bath are ready. Which would you like first?”

Ninym was certain the prince would choose the former. She’d only been taking care of Wein for several days and knew very little about him. Furthermore, his blank expression made him impossible to read. Even so, Ninym had to constantly prove her usefulness if she hoped to stay.

Thus, Ninym did her best to glean Wein’s character. She didn’t get very far but at least understood he was someone who preferred to eat first thing in the morning.

“Guess I’ll take a bath first.”

*Huh—?!*

Ninym’s heart wailed as Wein defied her expectations. This was no time to let a surprise unsettle her, though. Wein set out down the hall, and she hurried

after him.

*I don't get this boy at all...!* She thought back to several days earlier and recalled his behavior as she pleaded for refuge.

"I'm against it." Raklum bluntly refused Ninym's request. "Even if you are just a child, I cannot allow someone of unknown lineage to remain by His Highness's side."

He was absolutely right. If it had been anyone else, Ninym would've agreed.

"Your name is 'Ninym,' correct?" Raklum asked. "Might I assume you left home to escape danger?"

"No, not exactly..."

The man's concern of abuse was understandable. He was entirely mistaken, though. Ninym was a cherished, priceless treasure. If she returned, she'd likely be confined for her safety.

"In that case, you may stay here tonight. I'll return you to your parents tomorrow; I'm sure your family is worried. They'll be upset, but fear not. I shall do my best to ease the situation."

Raklum's practical, well-intended suggestion troubled Ninym. Had she run off because of a fight with her parents or something similar, she would've already given up. But that wasn't the case. Ninym refused to become the Founder's vessel to perpetuate everyone's selfish delusions.

*But...*

She'd left on impulse with no destination, and there were very few places a child, particularly a Flahm, could go. Ninym couldn't flee the country and didn't stand a chance outside civilization. If she had not found the mansion in the woods, it would have been no surprise if she'd turned up dead a few days later.

Regardless, the Flahm would catch up to Ninym soon enough, even if she moved between villages. Her people's network in Natra alone was far-reaching.

Ninym's back was to the wall. Her only options were to return home either under protest or stand on her own two feet. Still, her emotions wav—

"Do you really want to stay here?" Wein asked, interrupting Ninym's doubts.

She gaped at him slightly, but the boy didn't bother to repeat himself and simply stared back. His expression was as undecipherable as a mask, but the question was plainly no joke.

"Yes! Please, let me work here!" Ninym exclaimed eagerly.

"I see," he said softly. "Okay, I'll allow it."

"Your Highness—" Raklum hastily tried to cut in, but Wein would not be dissuaded.

"Raklum, I'll expect you to train her."

A mere soldier wouldn't dare refuse his prince's command.

"...Understood," he replied solemnly. Raklum turned to Ninym. His gaze bore no hostility, instead offering exasperation and admiration for this insistent young girl. "Come with me. First, you'll help me in the kitchen."

"O-okay! I'm ready for anything!"

And thus began Ninym's life as a maid. Frankly, she wasn't much help in the kitchen back then.

Ninym stood beside the freshly bathed Wein and waited on him attentively throughout breakfast.

*He's always so indifferent...*

She often thought as much of the prince as she observed him. Of course, her current basic recipe repertoire of bread, meat, and vegetables couldn't compare to the palace's diverse, elaborate meals. Wein chewed each dish disaffectedly, without a single remark on how it tasted. Ninym couldn't help but wonder if he'd react similarly to a plate of dirt.

*I wouldn't say he's difficult, though...*

Ninym had wandered into the mansion lost and confused, yet Wein allowed her to live and even work there. Objectively speaking, he was magnanimous. However, Ninym felt something beyond goodwill in his presence. This prince was truly an enigma.

"Pardon me, Your Highness." Raklum appeared following a knock on the door.

“This just arrived from one of our spies.”

Wein accepted the sealed envelope, scanned its contents, and then exchanged a few words with Raklum.

“It would seem the Imperial Court is uneasy.”

“Who’s on the move?”

“According to this report...”

From what Ninym could hear, it involved the Imperial Court.

“Will you return to the palace?”

“No, I’ll stay here for now. Let them know.”

“Understood...”

Wein turned to the girl, who’d been eavesdropping.

“Ninym.”

“Y-yes? Umm... Oh.”

Wein motioned to his dishes and silverware. Ninym hurriedly cleared them away, bowed, and excused herself from the room. As she closed the door, Ninym heard the conversation continue behind her. Was she dismissed because the discussion involved sensitive information? Honestly, Ninym was clueless about the situation but knew better than to stick her nose into it.

Afterward, Ninym washed the dishes then started on the housework and laundry, all the while pondering what to prepare for lunch. Cleaning this vast mansion by herself was a monumental task, but such extravagant furnishings permitted no carelessness.

*Now that I think about it, how did they manage until now?*

Raklum couldn’t possibly have served Wein, run the household, and managed outgoing and incoming goods and information on his own. The responsibilities demanded at least three or four people, yet Raklum and Ninym were the only staff members. Ninym had inquired about this before but had never been given any details.

Just then, Raklum appeared at the other end of the corridor.

“Sir Raklum.”

He looked up, emerging from a mire of his own thoughts.

“Ah, Ninym. Are you cleaning right now?”

“Yes. I’ll polish the mansion until it shines.”

“That’s the spirit. Don’t push yourself, though. His Highness said we can prioritize the rooms in active use.”

“Understood! Still, I’ll do my very best!”

Ninym had asked to stay, so no task was too big. Raklum recognized her innocent intention, of course, and didn’t chide her for it. Instead, he smiled wryly and changed the subject.

“By the way, there’s no need to call me ‘sir.’ After all, I’m just a soldier.”

“But you serve His Highness...” Ninym didn’t understand the circumstances, but Raklum was the prince’s sole attendant. Most would deem *sir* to be appropriate.

“I have been by His Highness’s side for less time than you might think,” Raklum confessed, shaking his head. “The prince summoned me out of the blue only a short while ago. He said he planned to spend some time in this mansion and put me in charge of day-to-day matters. At first, I thought that meant I would command the guards and servants, but...it’s really just me.”

“Wow...” Ninym looked at Raklum curiously as he groaned. “Then, what was your previous relation to His Highness...?”

“The prince had commended my sharp eye and intuition when he came to observe Natra’s troops. I felt truly honored, and... Well, that’s about it. That’s likely why he remembered me.”

In short, Prince Wein had brought a soldier he hardly knew into this forest mansion, despite the potential inconvenience. By this point, Ninym suspected Wein was more than just an eccentric. He was after something, though she hadn’t the slightest clue what.

“Well, I can’t begin to guess His Highness’s intentions,” Raklum said humbly. “Regardless, I shall remain forever loyal and diligent in my duties. Ninym, you



are also a citizen of Natra. Never forget your allegiance to Prince Wein.”

“O-okay!” she replied enthusiastically.

Raklum nodded and continued, “Pardon me for changing the subject, but...a report has arrived concerning your village.”

Ninym’s shoulders tensed, shaking slightly. Running away hadn’t been enough. Her life had returned to haunt her.

“It would seem everyone has been looking for you. They were relieved to hear you’re safe, but you must reflect on the trouble you’ve caused.”

“I know...”

A suddenly enervated Ninym hung her head. She realized how much her impulsive outburst continued to affect people.

“We’ve sent word that you are under a noble’s protection. Your kin insist on sending someone to collect you right away, but...”

“U-um...”

“I know. You wish to remain here. Unfortunately, it will be rather difficult to persuade them,” Raklum said with a note of concern. “Needless to say, you cannot reveal that His Highness is practically alone in this forest, nor can we invite anyone here. However, the other party will not back down until they confirm your safety firsthand. Nothing is set, but our plan is to meet their representative in a neighboring village.”

“I see...”

“In any case, I won’t let them take you by force. However, you must be the one to change their minds. Prepare yourself.”

Ninym gave a tiny nod. Considering this was a predicament born of her recklessness, Raklum was being awfully generous. It was fortunate that Ninym had stumbled upon this manor in the woods.

“...Well, I’ve blathered long enough. My apologies for interrupting your work,” Raklum said.

Ninym promptly shook her head. “N-no, not at all. Thank you for everything.”

“You ought to thank His Highness,” the guardsman answered with a smile. “I’m going out for a bit. Please watch over Prince Wein until I return.”

“Y-you can count on me!”

Raklum waved good-bye and left.

*Change their minds...*

She was supposed to speak with a Flahm representative. Who would it be? Someone who knew her circumstances? Someone unfamiliar? Either way, Ninym’s future was up to her.

Evading the issue wasn’t a solution. Ninym would have to return eventually. Still, she wanted just a little more time to sort out her feelings.

She could spare no effort to end this. After all, His Highness had kindly granted her refuge.

*There’s no telling why he did, though...*

Wein had intentionally settled deep in the forest with a single servant, seemingly to be alone, yet he took in an unexpected stranger. His actions were contradictory but made some kind of sense to him. Ninym had questions. However, there was no one to provide answers.

“All right, I’ll clean this place top to bottom!”

Ninym turned her mind back to her work, lighting a fire in herself.



Then she woke up.

*Another dream of the past.*

Ninym rose slowly from bed and stretched her limbs. They had grown since the time in her dream. Ten years had passed, so it was no surprise she didn’t dream much of those days anymore, but today, one had bubbled up from the depths of her memories.

*It’s obvious why.*

As Ninym dressed, she recalled the Flahm assembly from yesterday. As the push for independence grew, its proponents called upon Ninym and the blood

of the Founder within her. To potential Flahm revolutionaries, she was an ideal symbol. Whether or not she was a true descendant was irrelevant. Enough people believed, or wished to believe, so it became the truth.

*This has seriously gotten out of hand.*

Only a select few within the Rolei Family knew that Ninym was a descendant of the Founder. Not even Natra's royals were privy to the well-kept secret. How did such classified information spread among the Flahm? She doubted those who guarded that information had revealed it to fan the flames of revolution. Whatever the case, now that every Flahm knew a direct descendant of the Founder was alive, Ninym would become their unwilling symbol. With all eyes on her, it was no longer possible to covertly preserve the Founder's unbroken legacy. For those who watched over Ninym, it was a nightmare scenario.

Who among the few in the know had revealed the secret? Ninym would have to dig deeper for answers and ask around.

"...I should get going."

Ninym finished dressing and left her private bedroom. Through the door were her personal quarters, which doubled as an office. As Wein's aide, she had her own rooms in the palace like the high officials. She did very little in her chambers but sleep, though, owing to hectic days spent with Wein or running in and out of the palace for one ministry or another.

Ninym passed through as usual, entered the hallway, and set out to meet not with Wein, but another.

"Master Levan, it's Ninym."

"Ah, come in."

She stepped inside to find Levan in his chair. These were his private quarters; as Flahm leader and aide to the king, he, too, had been granted space in the palace.

"My apologies for asking you to come so early."

"It's no trouble. I haven't started work yet, so the timing is convenient," Ninym replied. "Let's get straight to the subject at hand. What in the world

happened yesterday?”

“Right...” Levan groaned in dismay. “You must be aware that the call for independence has been steadily growing louder among Natra’s Flahm.”

It was one result of Natra’s rapid development. A nation required larger administration as it gained new territory, but Natra had historically been a tiny northern settlement. The delights of progress and an influx of immigrants wouldn’t conveniently offset its severe lack of resources.

Natra’s Flahm filled the gap. Thanks to their group education system and established civil official program, the Flahm could be sent anywhere short on personnel. However, Natra’s situation was so dire that even the extra support was quickly exhausted. The Flahm had always taken care not to overstep their boundaries or tinker with the balance of power, lest they draw the wrong attention. However, they’d broken that tradition upon deciding to become Wein’s go-to resource during his time stewarding the kingdom. The Flahm’s efforts had undeniably paid off, as evidenced by their expanded interests and firm place in Natran society.

Ninym had advised caution but made no attempt to criticize her people’s enthusiasm. After all, she understood that the Flahm’s position and influence in Natra hinged on their faultless reputation.

The real problem came later.

“I never thought a single stroke of success would make them so arrogant...”

Everything would’ve been fine if the Flahm had remained content to grow alongside Natra, but self-restraint was a challenging request after such a stroke of good fortune. Everyone hoped to take advantage of this opportunity to test how far their dream could soar.

The dream of Flahm liberation.

“Independence is nothing more than a pipe dream, of course,” Levan said. “Even the loudest know deep down that it’s not feasible. They’re just venting, so to speak. We’ve been reasonably tolerant in order to prevent violent outbursts, but—”

“The reveal of my heritage sparked fresh enthusiasm,” Ninym finished. Like a

gift from heaven, Ninym had suddenly appeared to answer the Flahm's prayers. She, however, felt more like a log on the fire and let out a deep sigh. "Do you know who exposed me?"

Levan shook his head. "We're looking into it but haven't found anything yet. They committed the deed and vanished without a trace."

"How annoying." Ninym clicked her tongue in irritation. Without a culprit, she had nowhere to exact her rage. That was not to suggest she had no suspicions, though. "Master Levan, this is most likely—"

"I know. It's doubtful a random Flahm accidentally found out and decided to share the news," he replied, his expression solemn. "The culprit acted for a very specific purpose."

*An attack*, Ninym thought.

Someone must have orchestrated this to upset the Flahm's position in Natra. This wouldn't end here. They would seek to urge on the revolutionists even further.

"I highly suspect it may be someone who has contacted our youth and offered support," Levan said.

"The 'backer' from earlier..."

This mysterious benefactor had come up during the earlier meeting. Even the biggest activists who saw Ninym as a symbol of independence had argued she alone wouldn't be enough. A mere symbol couldn't replace basic essentials like food, clothing, and shelter. Without those, failure was imminent. And yet the Flahm youth still rallied behind Ninym and the legacy she represented. They had support.

"Who could it be?" she asked.

"I'm not sure. I haven't met them yet," Levan replied.

"Neither of us know this person even though you are our leader and I your successor. Yet they've befriended the young, radical Flahm and gained their trust. Perhaps they're still laying the groundwork?"

"It looks like this trouble hasn't spread beyond the Flahm yet."



“Considering the haste they’ve shown in advancing their plan, it would appear they’re not concerned with stealth.” Ninym exhaled hard. Still, it would prove difficult to track down the mastermind in time. Such an apathetic attitude toward their involvement could suggest they carried a trick up their sleeve.

“We still need to work out the details, but I plan to meet with this benefactor soon enough. I’d like you to join me, Ninym,” Levan said.

Ninym agreed to the request. As both an individual and the future leader of the Flahm, she couldn’t refuse.

“To think the idea of independence would reawaken like this during my tenure.” Levan sighed heavily, and Ninym sensed his exhaustion. He must have gone to great pains to pacify their zealous brethren while she was away in the Empire. She detected something else, however. Levan believed revolution was a reckless notion, but he didn’t entirely despise the notion.

“Master Levan, I’ve stated this before, but I am against the idea of a Flahm revolution,” Ninym stated, voicing her discomfort. “We have no military, no justification, and no land. How will we achieve independence? Uniting under my name won’t change anything.”

“With the rights and interests we’ve gained, it would seem our youth believe the Flahm can acquire land and autonomy from Natra.”

“That’s ridiculous. It’s a hopeless plan,” Ninym argued. “Struggle as we might, we’ll always be the ‘other.’ Our white hair and red eyes forever separate us from the rest. If we settle in one area and keep to ourselves, we’ll quickly be labeled a freakish minority.”

History had long proved that people often took out their pain and frustration on smaller groups. To prevent themselves from becoming such victims, Natra’s Flahm had to live each day as model neighbors.

“I’ve never once believed humanity blessed of infinite goodness. Minorities like us must fight to squeeze in the margins. We need others to understand us, so our best hope is to promote awareness and make a good impression.”

“I’d expect no less from an aide.” Levan’s tone carried no sarcasm. He spoke from the heart and seemed to admire Ninym’s growth. “I also believe this push

for independence is foolhardy. For the sake of Natra and the Flahm, we should remain model citizens. However..." A shadow crossed Levan's face, but he spoke again before Ninym could react. "The bigger question is how we can realistically halt this movement. Your position has become quite precarious."

"...Yes, the situation can no longer be ignored. We must pacify the Flahm by any means necessary."

But how? Ninym had a feeling her words would fall on deaf ears, and any forceful attempt to silence the revolutionists would only fan the flames.

The pragmatic aide within her found the answer immediately.

*The quickest method...would be my death.*

The revolutionists carried high hopes for Ninym, their symbol. Her demise would surely drop them into despair and crush their momentum for decades. Regrettably, Ninym had no death wish, so that idea needed to be discarded.

"Ninym, I intend to gather other anti-revolutionists. Our protests will be drowned out unless we unite," Levan explained.

"In that case, I, too—"

"No, stay put. You've already expressed your disapproval, and the pro-independence faction might act recklessly if you push harder. Your best bet is to keep the dialogue open and convince everyone there is still room for persuasion."

Ninym reluctantly agreed.

A stampede of freedom-crazed Flahm. Fractures. Internal discord. She wanted none of it.

"I'd like to keep this matter between us, so please do not discuss it with anyone, Ninym. Even Prince Wein."

"That's—" Ninym began, but Levan cut her off again.

"This matter is extremely dangerous. It could even be considered treachery against Natra. The Flahm's growing influence has already captured the nation's attention. To avoid potential interference, we must hide all weakness."

Levan's words were eloquent yet firm. "Ninym, I understand you are loyal to Prince Wein. Yet at the same time, you wish for your people to be happy. Once this is over, I will reveal all to His Highness, take responsibility, and step down as leader. Until then, keep this matter to yourself."

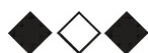
"..."

Ninym's gaze wandered to the ceiling before she closed her eyes and frowned for a little while. She tried to reconcile her frustration with the predicament. When she couldn't, she let out a heavy sigh.

"I am not His Highness's only source of information. If he asks about it, I'll give an honest reply. Until then, I'll say nothing."

"That is enough. I appreciate it."

Levan bowed his head, and Ninym quietly sighed again.



Ninym excused herself from Levan's room and hurried to Wein to perform her usual duties. The recent upsets in the Flahm were severe, but no worry excused her from work. Ninym vowed to carry on as usual.

That didn't last long, though.

"What's up, Ninym? Why the long face?"

Ninym pursed her lips at Wein's sudden question. "...There is contention among the Flahm." It wasn't a lie. Since she was Wein's aide, deceiving him was unthinkable. Besides, he'd see straight through her. "There's no need to worry. Master Levan and I will handle it."

Ninym concealed her bitter feelings behind a smile. It seemed to work, and Wein's reaction was lukewarm.

"A disagreement, huh? Well, Natra's speedy progress has brought increased reports of trouble across the country."

"Exactly. It's a shame that our prosperity hasn't brought happiness to everyone."

Still, a bit of extra coin in people's pockets doubtless solved a problem or two.

The worst could be avoided so long as Natra's good fortune persisted. A few skirmishes might even lead to future harmony. How would a true period of adversity affect the kingdom, though? Would it spell the end for the nation's windfall?

"Speaking of arguments, Falanya and I had an interesting conversation yesterday."

"Huh? Oh, come to think of it..."

Ninym had been preoccupied with the earlier meeting, but Wein's talk with his sister was also a matter of concern. It couldn't have been too dire if Wein's indifference was any indication.

"Falanya declared war against me."

"...What?" Ninym all but choked out the word.

And who could blame her?



"Arghhhhhh."

While Ninym was stunned, Falanya was writhing on her bed.

"I can't believe I said it... I actually told Wein..."

Falanya wailed as she suffered the agony of yesterday's conversation over and over.

"Can you please get over it already?" Nanaki asked tiredly from his spot leaning against the wall.

Falanya wore her heart on her sleeve, which meant she had trouble getting out of a slump. She'd done all she could to prepare herself for the talk with her brother, yet she now anguished over it. She couldn't carry on like this forever, though. Falanya was only hurting herself.

"Do you regret yesterday?" Nanaki questioned.

Falanya went still. "I don't," she replied, her answer muffled by the pillow she pressed her face into. "It was essential for me, Wein, and Natra."

The memory of Wein's response when she'd asked what he thought of Natra

and its people remained fresh in her mind.



“Have you been talkin’ to Zenovia?” he asked lightly despite Falanya’s serious tone. “Politicians all think of the citizens differently. Some view them as cattle or possessions. To others, they’re like adorable pets. In any case, most regard the public as lesser. A politician’s authority, influence, and bloodline place them above ordinary people, after all. But I’m different,” Wein explained. “I consider us accomplices, Falanya.”

“Accomplices?” The unexpected word threw her off guard.

“Yes. The people are not cattle, possessions, or pets. Without them, we’re powerless, our authority is revealed to be smoke and mirrors, and every noble lineage becomes a sham. There is no hierarchy between politicians and the rest. Our roles may be different, but we stand side by side.”

“...”

“Does that mean the two sides can get along as friends or kindred souls? The answer is a resounding ‘no.’ Although we stand next to each other, the gap between us is wide. Politicians cannot pay attention to each individual, and the politicians’ troubles are too great for the masses to understand. One cannot understand the other. They are neither master and servant nor friends. However, something needs to connect them.

“The solution is mutual benefit, where each side can tip the scales. We take any opportunity to make a profit, then abandon ship if things don’t pan out. That’s what makes us accomplices. This intimate yet tenuous relationship between legislators and the public is ideal, and I think both have a duty to maintain it.”

Falanya sensed no lies in her brother’s speech. She had no choice but to accept that Wein had spoken from the heart.

“So you’d allow the citizens to fight one another until the weakest are eliminated?”

“That’s right. Competition makes a group stronger, smarter, and wealthier, plus it keeps the politicians in line. This type of harsh surveillance is best for

everyone.”

Were such intentions noble-minded or pure arrogance? Most rulers opposed the idea of strong, intelligent citizens who might threaten their power and authority. This meant those in charge had to keep one step ahead, which proved a considerable challenge.

Deep down, every politician sought a weak, docile, and efficient population. However, Wein insisted he didn’t mind how strong and learned people became, since it would lead to further prosperity. Anyone would’ve taken him for an honest soul untainted by ego. And while it was true that Wein didn’t cling to social rank, he also boasted absolute confidence. A million citizens could rise against him, and he’d see them as no threat.

“That’s just like you, Wein...”

Finally, Falanya understood. A few years ago, she would have been overwhelmed by her brother and unable to comprehend his words. She was different now, though. Her studies and experiences allowed her to unravel his argument.

Thus...

“Do you think I’m wrong, Falanya?” Wein asked.

*“Yes, I do.”*

...Falanya’s response was swift and true.

“Oh...?” Wein replied, his eyes wide. Surprise, curiosity, and delight danced in his gaze. “Interesting. How so?” he questioned as if testing her. “You’re not just saying that because you feel sorry for the people, are you?”

“Of course not.”

Previously, Wein would’ve been right. Falanya had pitied those unable to keep up with Natra’s rapid progress. There was no denying that her brother’s methods had uplifted the majority, though.

Falanya had fumbled after a way to refute Wein’s policies, perhaps even prove him wrong. She’d pondered, searched, and investigated, then at last had come to a conclusion.



“It’s true your methods have empowered our people. Many will surely flourish, but only for now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m talking about our current era. As Natra prospers, there will be demands for greater strength as people grow acclimated to the new normal. We both know firsthand how the systems of an era, culture, or society are ever-changing and often drastic. Those needed in times of war differ from times of peace. That strength might not be enough in the future.”

Falanya forced herself to remain resolute. “Wein, your policies focus on survival of the fittest and specialization. They have served Natra well so far, but there’s a dangerous chance we’ll fail to adapt to the next era and break apart.”

Adaptation was an organism’s first step to success, and excessive conformity dulled that ability. A butterfly that drank only the bold, nutritious nectar of a single flower would perish if that blossom did not grow after a change in environment.

“You support those who have adapted, and I have no objection to that. I’ll even agree that it’s necessary. However, everyone else still has value. When change inevitably arrives, they’ll shine and uphold the nation.” Falanya paused to collect herself. “Of course, reality isn’t so simple. Keeping citizens who would otherwise be pushed out will increase the burden on society, and the strongest will protest. We’ll have to keep them in check, but that’s what wealth and politicians are for.”

As Natra’s fortune rose, it gained the ability to aid the downtrodden. Well-adjusted citizens would undoubtedly scorn those efforts and all who benefited. It was only a matter of time until people with superior positions, abilities, and achievements created their own societal hierarchy within the non-ruling populace.

“The only ones who can act as a link between the haves and have-nots are rulers who oversee millions and chart the course for the next century,” Falanya declared with confidence. “This isn’t about compassion. It’s a necessary effort to guarantee the future of our nation. To watch in silence as that promise disappears is nothing more than negligence!”

Falanya's shoulders heaved as she finished, and Wein clapped lightly in admiration for his sister.

"Wow, Falanya. I never expected such a detailed answer."

He smiled, but Falanya stared at him sternly. She'd normally lift both hands in delight at his praise, yet she found herself wondering how much sincerity there was behind that grin.

"Come on, don't make that face. It's an honest compliment. You've really learned a lot," Wein said. "Which means you know, right? You know why I can't accept your philosophy."

"..."

Of course she did. Wein could recognize her proposal but never accept it. Falanya spoke to the fate of Natra and its people, whereas Wein spoke only of the latter.

The reason was obvious—Wein had absolutely no attachment to Natra itself.

"Like you said, Falanya, a cooperative framework is essential if we're to use the riches gained from our more flexible citizens to support the rest. One village, town, nation, and people. It's the only way citizens will agree to share the wealth. But why plan so far ahead?" Wein asserted. "Sure, our strength might fail us someday. But if Natra is destroyed before we can find new power, doesn't that just mean it was our time?"

"..."

She understood what Wein meant. Her brother was an advocate of total individualism, where everyone contributed to society as they chose.

It was an apt position for someone like her brother who, despite his noble bloodline, laughed off the idea of inherited power and insisted anyone could be king. To Wein, Natra was not a land of eight hundred thousand citizens, but eight hundred thousand individuals. A kingdom was a mere disposable container.

"A unified body isn't meant only to assist the unfortunate," Falanya countered, already aware of her brother's feelings on this subject. "Standing

beside one's comrades under the same flag bolsters the heart, contributes to societal advancements, and serves as a pillar in times of hardship. Whenever people come together, the impossible becomes possible. Even if someone falters for a moment, others will protect them until they're back on their feet. A kingdom is a precious connection between many and the key to our future. I can't permit such ridicule, even from you!"

"In that case," Wein began, "permit me to say one more thing, Falanya."

"Ngh..."

"When two sides cannot agree who should hold one seat, a certain declaration is inevitable."

Falanya had hoped to avoid this, but the die was already cast. Neither she nor Wein would be swayed. He was right. What came next was inevitable.

"I love Natra and its people. I want them to lead full, happy lives in our kingdom for many years to come. However, that will never happen under your rule, Wein. Someone like you, who considers everyone an accomplice, will one day become an enemy of the kingdom. And so I..."

She took a breath.

"I will surpass you and rule Natra."

Wein broke into a triumphant smile.

"Marvelous. You have my full support, Falanya."



"And that's the story."

As Wein finished, he nodded in satisfaction. "Ah, they grow up so fast. The little Falanya I know now exists only in my memories. How bittersweet."

The delivery of this news had left Ninym dumbstruck.

"I—I can't believe Princess Falanya would do such a thing..." This was the last problem they needed. As Wein's close aide and a citizen of Natra, Ninym knew a messy inheritance dispute like the Empire's would be the worst sort of nightmare. "We must urge Princess Falanya to change her mind immediately!"

“I doubt she’ll listen. Falanya wouldn’t make a half-hearted bid for the throne.”



“That...that’s true! But still!” Needless to say, this dire twist of events had shattered Ninym’s usual composure. “How can you be so calm, Wein?!”

He acted as though removed from the situation, yet it had everything to do with him. Wein seemed no more bothered than if he’d been kissed by a gentle breeze. Ninym hadn’t meant to shout at him for it, but...

“Because I’ll win.”

“...!”

Ninym gasped when he answered with plain, perfect confidence.

“Calm down for a second and think it over, Ninym. Do you honestly believe I might lose?”

“Well...”

It was inconceivable. Wein and Falanya had different policies, but Wein was clearly an effective leader. He saw to his people’s needs, treated his civil and military officials well, and even boasted a list of accomplishments domestic and abroad. He was the antithesis of ineptitude.

Of course, Wein believed anyone at all could run the show. This was just his strange way of avoiding an angry mob, but for those unaware of his hidden motivations, Wein was the ideal prince. A small percentage supported Falanya because they either disagreed with Wein’s policies or considered him dangerous. However, their numbers posed no threat to his rule.

“It’s impossible, right? I doubt she’ll even manage to whip up an army, and a clumsy attack will mean the end of her uprising. For now, I’m content to quietly stand ready as I watch Falanya’s progress.”

“...”

Upon further consideration, Ninym realized that Wein was right. She’d overreacted a bit. Despite Falanya’s bold declaration, her support base was weak. Moreover, the princess was a pacifist by nature and surely wanted to avoid a vicious power struggle. Since Wein was her opponent, he really only needed to placate his rebellious little sister.

Despite Wein’s reassurance, Ninym’s heart remained uneasy.



*Wein...*

Falanya couldn't win. That much was certain. So why did Ninym remain so anxious?

The answer was her master sitting before her.

*Will this really be okay?*

Was it a trick of her nervous mind or intuition born from years of experience?

Ninym sensed an ulterior motive behind Wein's claims. She hoped it was her imagination, but she knew he might be hiding something from her.

"What's wrong, Ninym?"

"It's nothing."

Ninym shook her head and gazed at the man she'd known since childhood. At that moment, he radiated the same bizarre aura as when they'd first met in the forest mansion.



Ninym's days in the forest mansion continued. Although always inscrutable, Prince Wein was never irrational, and she grew accustomed to his aloof demeanor. She still fumbled at work, but Raklum offered constant support. In short, her new life was rather lovely.

Still, Ninym couldn't deny a murkiness in her heart. Her recent comforts served only to deepen the unpleasant shadows.

"Both sides have come to an agreement. Tomorrow, someone from your village will confirm your health."

Raklum's announcement solidified her phantoms.

"I've rented a room in a nearby town that will be our meeting place. I'll accompany you, but I believe you should be the one to persuade them if you wish to remain here."

Young Ninym had chanced upon work and shelter after running away without a word to anyone. The northernmost kingdom of Natra was a dismal land spurned even by thieves and kidnappers, but that wasn't to say all its people harbored pure intentions.

Ninym was fortunate to have avoided trouble so far. Wein and Raklum wouldn't object if she wished to be escorted back to her home with the Flahm. Only Ninym's selfishness kept her here. These tranquil days forced her to look at the hard truth.

*What do I want?*

She'd constantly asked herself this question while in the mansion but still had no answer. And now, time was up.

"I understand your hesitation," Raklum said. "However, they will only grow more concerned if nothing is done. Whatever the end result, at least prove you are alive and well."

Ninym nodded.

"Furthermore, His Highness shall join us," the guardsman added.

“Prince Wein will?”

“Forgive me, but I am reluctant to leave His Highness alone for your sake. Upon review of the matter, the prince decided this was for the best.”

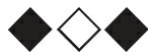
Raklum was the mansion’s only guard, so he could protect only one of the children at a time. Wein was naturally his highest priority. It would be presumptuous of Ninym to consider herself on the same level. She was grateful for their company nonetheless. Still, she thought it would’ve been better if Wein had brought more guards with him.

“In any case, you needn’t worry about His Highness or myself. Focus on you.”

“...I understand.”

Raklum’s suggestion raised old questions.

What did Ninym want to do? Would she know by tomorrow?



The trio departed as planned on the following day. Thanks to a hectic work schedule, Ninym hadn’t left the mansion since she first arrived. The forest’s vastness dawned on her as they walked along the path, and she realized just how lucky she’d been.

After a while, they reached the edge of the forest, where a splendid horse-drawn carriage awaited them.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Not at all.”

Raklum spoke briefly with the man who’d brought the horses, then glanced behind himself.

“Your Highness, Ninym, please step inside.”

“Me? A-are you sure it’s all right?”

Raklum chuckled. “Do you plan to walk there?” He mounted a horse not hitched to the carriage.

Wein climbed in, and Ninym hastily followed suit. The courier was also apparently their coachman.

“Right, let’s be off,” Raklum announced.

Soon, the carriage was on its way.

“Wow...”

Ninym had never ridden in a coach before and felt instantly overwhelmed. The sway of the portable room was a foreign sensation. She’d heard carriage rides were bumpy, but the high-quality cushions or some unknown device absorbed most of the shock.

Ninym leaned forward to admire the passing scenery but quickly remembered she wasn’t alone.

“P-pardon me. I got carried away.”

“It’s fine,” Wein replied crisply.

Ninym sheepishly sat back down. His coldness might’ve once been mistaken for disfavor, but experience had taught her that Wein’s words were sincere.

“...Um, Your Highness?”

“What is it?”

“Well, I just wanted to thank you for everything.”

She had no idea why a prince like Wein lived in the middle of nowhere, but whatever the reason, he’d rescued her in several ways. Ninym couldn’t begin to express her gratitude, and yet...

“You asked, and I agreed. That’s all.”

Another brusque response. She’d expected no less, but Ninym quietly sighed. It made sense, of course. As the unilateral recipient of Wein’s generosity, she really had no right to complain.

All the same, Ninym’s feelings were mixed. Such an underwhelming reaction made her thankful heart feel like a pebble on the roadside.

What was his motivation?

“...Your Highness, did you help me out of noble obligation?” she asked abruptly.

If Wein's charity had been born out of a privileged duty to aid the unfortunate, she could understand why he'd freely do so without compensation.

However, Wein blindsided her.

"Noble?" repeated the boy whose lineage was the greatest in all of Natra. He acted as if she'd suddenly spoken in a foreign tongue, then he gave a small smile. "Hmm. 'Noble,' huh? Is that what this looks like? I suppose it's reasonable to think as much."

"Um..."

Flustered by her first glimpse of the prince's brief, inexplicable smile, Ninym anxiously wondered if she'd said something wrong. However, Wein continued unaware.

"People have desires and fantasies. Things they want to have or be. I can grant both. That's why."

"Uhhh..."

Ninym's confusion deepened. She mulled over his words for a few moments, then timidly replied "Then...you helped me because I asked?"

This made Wein sound like benevolence personified, but she could tell there was more left unsaid. At first, Ninym thought it might be akin to noble obligation after all, but that felt off the mark.

"Make of it what you will," Wein replied as if reading her mind.

His baffling, dismissive answer frustrated Ninym. She sighed again. Despite her mature demeanor, she was still only a child.

"...What if I had other requests? Would you grant those, too?"

Ninym's petulant comment was made only in passing, but Wein regarded her seriously.

"What do you want?"

"Huh?"

"What. Do. You. Want. From. Me?"

All at once, fear struck Ninym. Wein's tone was no different than usual, but this was a dangerous question. She understood that one wrong answer could irrevocably ruin everything.

"U-um..."

What should she say or not say? Ninym's mind reeled.

"Pardon me, Your Highness," Raklum interrupted. He'd pulled up alongside the carriage window. "The town has come into view, and we'll be arriving shor... Is something the matter?"

The peculiar atmosphere didn't escape Raklum's notice, and he gave a perplexed look. Wein shook his head lightly.

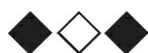
"Nothing to worry about. Just silly kid stuff."

"I see."

Raklum rode away without prying further. Wein's gaze returned to Ninym, who immediately sat up straight. However, the prince had apparently lost interest, because he closed his eyes and said no more.

What was Wein *really* after? Despite her lingering questions, Ninym felt a wave of relief. She couldn't afford to upset her benefactor now, not on the precipice of her biggest battle.

Ninym anxiously stewed over her thoughts as she imagined what lay ahead.



*Inhale. Exhale.*

Ninym repeated this two and three more times to ease her nerves. It didn't help much.

"Relax. They're not going to eat you," Raklum assured from beside her.

It was no use. Acknowledging that fact only stressed her out more.

"...Is it just up ahead?"

"Yes, I believe they're waiting for us."

The carriage arrived in town and stopped before the appointed inn. Once



Wein was safe in a separate room, Raklum and Ninym headed to the meeting. They now stood in front of the door.

“...”

She took another deep breath and exhaled. Finally, Ninym gathered her courage and knocked.

“Pardon the intrusion.”

They entered to find two people. One was a wizened Flahm woman, an elder who knew Ninym’s secret lineage.

“Ohhh, Ninym...!” The woman hobbled over upon catching sight of the girl. “I heard you were safe and sound, but let me take a look at you! You’re not hurt, right? Are you eating enough?”

“Yes. As you can see, I’m quite well, Elder. More importantly...” Ninym turned her attention to the other person in the room. “I didn’t expect you to come, Master Levan.”

“One of our lost children has been found. As leader, it is only natural that I confirm your good health.”

Levan was the head of Natra’s Flahm. Ninym had spoken to him only a handful of times, but this was no surprise. As aide to Natra’s King Owen, he carried a responsibility to the nation, and his days were understandably busy. No matter how capable, he couldn’t afford to meet a child like Ninym on a regular basis.

It was, therefore, strange to find him here. Levan insisted otherwise, but in truth, coming all this way to check on Ninym was unwarranted. Had Ninym glanced at Raklum and seen his wide-eyed expression, she would’ve understood.

The reason for his presence was simple—Ninym carried the Founder’s legacy.

“My heart is lightened to know that you’re okay. This was the divine protection of our great Founder, no doubt.” The old woman spoke with a sigh of relief. “My poor heart. When you suddenly vanished, we were all downright sick with worry.”

For young orphans like Ninym, who were raised by the entire village, everyone was like family. She hadn't forgotten that, but hearing how her disappearance had upset people racked her with guilt.

"Everyone felt a smidge better once we learned you were safe."

"I've caused you a lot of trouble. Sorry."

"You can apologize to the whole village later. So who's this lad?"

"Oh, yes. This is the gracious noble who took me in. I've been working for him."

"...I am Raklum."

Raklum bowed but remained cautious. His eyes were on the old woman, but his real concern was Levan. His behavior was understandable for someone unaware of Ninym's lineage. After all, why would one of the nation's foremost leaders make a sudden appearance just to check on a runaway?

Raklum would surely accept the truth, but the Flahm couldn't simply give up their greatest secret.

Just as Ninym wondered what to do...

"Be at ease. I know whom you serve."

Levan's words sent a jolt through the guardsman.

"His Highness is also here, correct? I would ask for an audience later."

Raklum and Ninym interpreted this request differently. To Raklum, it made sense that someone of Levan's status would know his master. Ninym, on the other hand, realized Levan had mentioned Wein in order to shift the subject away from her importance.

"We've got other business first, Levan," the old woman said, either unaware or perhaps indifferent to the strategic battle in progress. "This fine young man is Ninym's savior."

"Indeed. As the leader of the Flahm, I am sincerely grateful for the care you've shown one of our children."

Raklum fidgeted as the illustrious Levan lowered his head. "I did nothing,

really. It was my liege's decision."

"I will be certain to thank His Highness as well. All the same, it's quite clear you've treated the girl well."

"Y-you honor me."

Levan and the elder could easily tell Ninym was trying her best to hide behind Raklum. She never would have done so if she'd been mistreated.

"I'm curious to hear about your days together," the elder remarked. "But there's plenty of time for that once we get home. And don't think you'll avoid the lecture of your life, missy."

"I feel the same, though I'm afraid I must return to the palace today," Levan said.

"Always the busy one, aren't ya? That's fine. I'll take Ninym back myself."

"..."

Ninym's shoulders trembled ever so faintly, and Raklum looked over at her. He hesitated but ultimately spoke up. "Well...about that. There's a matter I wish to discuss."

"Oh?"

"I don't know how to word this, but...might we keep the girl for a while?" Levan and the elder's eyes immediately narrowed. Raklum grimaced beneath the gaze of one who far outranked him in age and another in status. "You see, my master's estate lacks proper staff. She is a diligent worker and has been a great help with the housework."

"And so we should just hand her over to you?" the elder shot back. "Regardless of Ninym's work ethic, she's still far from adulthood. Why not hire enough people? Consider my advice as a small token of gratitude."

Her proposal left Raklum at a loss for words, and his eyes signaled to Ninym that there was nothing more he could do. She gave a small nod and steeled herself.

"Please wait," Ninym said, her expression earnest. "I don't want to go home."



Wein read his book, quiet and expressionless, in his room at the inn. His figure was picturesque, and only the occasional movement of his index finger with each turn of the page indicated flesh and blood.

An abrupt sound outside the door broke the silence.

“Pardon me, Your Highness.”

Raklum appeared with another man alongside him. Levan.

Wein closed his book. “Has your meeting concluded?”

“Not yet,” Raklum replied with a concerned expression. “We’ve stepped out for a short while. There is a sensitive matter I’m not privy to, and Sir Levan wishes to speak with you on it in private.”

“It has been some time, Prince Wein,” Levan said as he fell to one knee. “I am delighted to see you in good health. I received word of your health after you left the palace, but it is a relief to confirm the truth with my own eyes.”

“Same to you,” Wein replied curtly. “Is His Majesty well?”

“Yes. He is in good health,” Levan answered with a nod. “However, I did not come today simply to inquire about Your Highness. I am also here to convey the king’s feelings.”

Levan’s objective was unquestionably to ensure the safety of a “normal girl” like Ninym, and he had used Wein’s presence as a cover-up. However, he was also on a mission to deliver the king’s will.

“His Majesty is concerned for your well-being. It’s not safe outside the palace, and you hardly keep any attendants. Although he hasn’t said so outwardly, the king wishes for you to return home.”

Any relationship between a parent and a child could sour. Thankfully, King Owen and Prince Wein were quite close. His Majesty was hounded by royal duties and couldn’t carve out much family time, but Wein understood this and still held his father in high regard. Owen was likewise impressed by his son’s talents. At least that was how everyone else saw it.

As a king and a parent, Owen was naturally worried about his son and heir. Levan had served the nation for many years and could read the king like an

open book.

“Of course, I am aware of Your Highness’s concerns,” Levan said. Prince Wein wouldn’t leave the palace for a pleasure trip. “The unsettling air that has permeated the castle since the queen’s passing is quite palpable.”

The queen—King Owen’s wife and mother of Wein and his sister, Falanya. Her death was still fresh in everyone’s hearts and minds. Her health had deteriorated soon after Falanya was born, but all prayers for her swift recovery went unanswered despite the physicians’ best efforts. The queen was the daughter of a minor noble, but it was said King Owen fell for her at first sight. She was beloved by the people, and they deeply mourned her passing. However, dark ambition brewed in the vacuum she’d left.

“How many have acted?” Wein suddenly asked.

Levan frowned. “Countless are vying to become His Majesty’s second wife. Among them, two or three houses intend to remove you from the picture.”

“I see.”

Vassals were after Wein’s life. The prince’s face betrayed very little, but the tension was surely unimaginable. As Raklum listened, he put the pieces together.

*Is this situation holding Prince Wein back?*

Natra was a diminutive nation, but all admired the royal family. It was no surprise that nobles were scrambling to replace the queen. However, Crown Prince Wein stood in their way.

King Owen was still robust. It was entirely reasonable for him to take a second wife. The birth of another child would undoubtedly cause an inheritance dispute, though. A promising heir like Wein already had the king’s full support. This made him a prime target for any woman who succeeded the late queen. She would need to eliminate any future competition if she gave birth to a boy.

“I’m currently working with General Hagal, and we are prepared to apprehend any malfeasants. The issue will be resolved soon enough, and loyal guards stand at the ready. You will not be harmed, even within the palace walls.”

Hagal was one of the king's most outstanding and well-trusted generals. He could easily snuff an insolent scheme or two, but his very involvement spoke to the severity of the threat.

*I'd heard the palace was on edge but never thought it'd be this bad.*

Raklum at last wholly understood why Wein had confined himself to that remote forest, retained only a single attendant with no connection to the palace, and kept the situation private.

He felt no dishonor over being left in the dark. Wein had acted appropriately to preserve his own life, and Raklum admired the boy's courage and ingenuity. Wein hadn't even reached his first decade. Were all royals so clever, or was he an exception?

"Your Highness, I would ask your thoughts." Levan bowed his head. Wein remained silent as if in deliberation.

Raklum didn't know the prince's mind, but he would remain by his master's side until the day he was relieved of his duties. Internally, he gave a wry smile and felt a wave of fresh conviction.

*Still, what a strange turn of events.*

His thought wasn't in reference to how he'd been chosen by Wein.

Images of young Wein and Ninym rose in Raklum's mind. Both were kids who ran away from home. Despite their different circumstances, a boy and a girl who shared no connection had fled their homes and met deep in the forest. Who wouldn't find it odd?

*Come to think of it, how is our other discussion going?*

Raklum's attention strayed to outside the room, when suddenly...

"Forget it! I don't care!"

...the familiar yet unusually infuriated voice of a young girl echoed past the door. Raklum gripped the sword at his waist and rushed out. The Flahm elder stood in the hall with a bitter expression as she watched Ninym hurry away.

"What's going on?!" Levan exclaimed from behind Raklum.



“Sorry, Levan. I told her a million times we’re going home, but...”

Far from convincing the woman, it was obvious Ninym had managed only to antagonize her.

“Your Highness...” Levan looked back at Wein with unease. “My deepest apologies. We were in the middle of a conversation, but I ask that you allow me to pursue Ninym.”

It was a sheer miracle that nothing had happened to Ninym after she ran away the first time, but there was no guarantee she’d get lucky twice. If nothing else, the girl needed to be returned to the inn, and quickly.

“It’s fine. Do as you please.”

“Thank you!” Levan bowed, turned on his heel, and raced out of the inn. Wein, Raklum, and the old woman watched him leave.

“What shall we do, Your Highness?” Raklum asked.

“Hmm...”

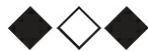
While Raklum wavered between his compassionate desire to bring Ninym back and his duty as Wein’s protector, the young prince fell silent for a moment.

“Her answer might be different now.”

“What...?”

“Let’s go. I have a hunch as to where she’s going.”

Wein stood and left the room.



After fleeing the inn, Ninym came to sit beneath a large tree she’d found on the outskirts of town while wandering aimlessly.

“...”

Her earlier conversation with the old woman played repeatedly in her head. Ninym had confessed she didn’t want to return to the village and tried to persuade the elder, but it was no use. The woman adamantly refused to listen, and Ninym ran off as frustration gave rise to anger.

Yes, she was a two-time runaway even though her first attempt had already shown this would solve nothing.

“What am I doing?” Ninym mumbled. All at once, her heart was overcome by a surge of emotions.

Sorrow at being misunderstood. Irritation over her failure to express herself. Self-hatred and shame for the way she’d fled in a childish tantrum even though she knew it would fix nothing. All three converged to form tears that ran down her cheeks.

“What should I do?” The girl’s vision blurred, and her eyes stung. Suddenly, she sensed someone’s approach and looked up. “...Your Highness?”

Natra’s Prince Wein stood before her.

“Why are you here...?”

“You’re pretty easy to figure out.”

No one else knew where Ninym was. Levan was still searching high and low, yet Wein had found her in no time. Knowledge of the local area, insight into stress and the child psyche, and remarkably keen perception had led him to the answer.

Ninym was oblivious to this and thoroughly confused, of course. All she knew was the prince had seemingly appeared out of nowhere.

Wein watched her unwaveringly as he spoke. “People cling to their one-sided expectations of what others should do or be.”

“What?”

The boy’s cryptic remark served only to befuddle Ninym even more. He pressed on, untroubled by her confusion.

“Parent and child, friends, lovers, teacher and student, master and servant—it happens in any kind of relationship, but this isn’t necessarily good or bad. It’s just human nature. And while the extra pressure inspires some, you can’t blame others for rejecting the burden put on them.”

Ninym finally realized he was talking about her.

“However, sometimes it hurts to betray those pushy opinions. Which means your heart needs an anchor beyond that rebellion.”

“An anchor...?”

“Whatever the reason, you rejected the path your guardians set for you. So now you must decide for yourself. What will you do? What do you *want* to do?”

His words weighed heavily on Ninym’s heart.

What would she do? What did she want? Such was the challenge put to her.

“I—I...” Ninym tried to answer but found herself tongue-tied.

For her, there was never an option. She couldn’t stay under this tree forever, yet she had nowhere else to go. She’d have to crawl back to the inn eventually. Ninym understood that the issue was far from resolved, yet her body wouldn’t move. Her heart screamed, *No! You can’t make me!*

“That’s why your heart needs an anchor.” Wein seemed to be reading her thoughts. “What about the weakness and misery you feel? That bleeding heart is a death sentence. You could always give up, but you’ll need to think outside the box otherwise. Figure out what works for you, not others.”

Ninym would push herself into a corner if she dismissed every little thing; Wein was pointing out that she needed a goal to allow for self-love and a positive mind-set. There was no question his words sought to guide the lost girl.

“But...” Ninym’s voice trembled. “I-I’m not sure...what I want to do.”

*Ah, I knew it.*

Her mind was blank. How would she convince Levan and the village like this? Excuses aside, Ninym once again realized her behavior amounted to kicking and screaming.

It was embarrassing. Pathetic. She wanted to stick her head in the sand.

However...

“If you don’t know yet, then just keep thinking it over,” Wein said airily. “If every problem had an immediate solution, humanity wouldn’t have to suffer. Time isn’t a cure-all, but sometimes it’s the right tool for the job. I’d say this

qualifies. Knowing that, there's something you need and someone you should ask."

Wein had made his intentions crystal clear. Ninym understood his persistence and what needed to be said, yet she hesitated.

Could she really say it? Did she have the right?

Perhaps sensing that doubt, Wein spoke for her.

"It might seem insignificant, but you cut your own path in that forest." He brought up their coincidental encounter at the hidden mansion. Their shared connection could have ended right there, but Ninym had decided to keep it alive. "Which means you can repeat it again and again."

Wein looked directly into Ninym's eyes. He was waiting for a reply, and she had the right and responsibility to oblige.

"...I'm not sure what I want yet. I know I'm causing a lot of trouble for my village and other people. Still, I can't go back," she said. "Please, give me more time."

Part of Ninym knew this had likely been her only option all along, but she'd made a conscious decision. Although the choice was ultimately ambiguous, she felt it had some value.

"You heard her, Levan."

Wein glanced to the side, where Levan stood. The man had arrived at some point during the conversation. Raklum was right behind him. The prince must have called them both.

"Ninym...I won't deny that we have high hopes for you." Levan gave a small sigh. "It was never our intention to push you into a corner...but it would seem we've done so inadvertently. I apologize."

"Master Levan..."

"I will explain the situation to everyone. You should spend more time outside the village and find yourself."

Ninym broke into a faint smile as Levan's words sank in.

“I hope you’ll forgive the inconvenience, Your Highness,” Levan said to the prince.

“It’s no problem.”

“I’m sincerely grateful for your kindness.” Levan bowed as leader of the Flahm and one of Ninym’s guardians. “Well then. Night will soon fall, so let us return to the inn to discuss the matter further. Ninym, please rest in the provided room for now.”

“O-okay!”

Everyone followed Levan back to the inn, but Wein froze mid-step when someone tugged his sleeve from behind. It was Ninym.

“Ah, um...” Unable to put her emotions into words, she simply stared at the ground.

“No need to thank me,” Wein stated. “I had the authority; you had the willpower. That’s all.”

They’d been together long enough for Ninym to realize such words were not spoken out of false modesty. They came from the heart.

“Still...I’m really happy.” This time, Ninym found her voice and conveyed her feelings with a bow. “Thank you, Prince Wein. I won’t ever forget this kindness.”

“Like I said, there’s no need for that.” Wein sighed and turned on his heel. “Well, don’t let me stop you.”

“Thank you!”

Ninym smiled, and they set off together, side by side.



*This illness is worse than I thought.*

Ninym awoke in a daze, filled with niggling, lingering feelings.





She'd been reckless in the past. Despite her mature intentions, it frustrated Ninym that she'd failed to act any differently than an ordinary child. This was usually the part where she'd hide under the blankets in shame, but not today. Ninym wasn't focused on the one dream, but instead on the nightly, repeating pattern.

*The reason is obvious enough...*

Wein.

He was Natra's crown prince, her master, and the childhood friend she'd met in a forest mansion. Ninym knew he was important to her; however, his recent behavior left her anxious. That was likely what had rekindled her memories of their early days together.

*What is Wein really thinking?*

Ever since Ninym met Wein, she'd made every effort to understand him. As a result, they could now communicate almost entirely without words.

Perhaps that was only an illusion, though. Ninym had been shocked by Falanya's bid for political power, but Wein actually supported it. And although Ninym accepted his rationale, part of her remained unsatisfied. Besides, the situation with Falanya wasn't the only instance where it felt like they weren't on the same page.

These issues had slowly accumulated and transformed into the darkness that churned within her.

*We should talk, but...*

Open dialogue was the best answer to a rift rooted in unspoken intentions. Ninym knew this yet struggled to take the first step. She was afraid. What if they spoke and Ninym concluded they'd never see eye to eye?

*"...I've only matured on the outside. Inside, I'm still a child."*

By failing to take necessary action, Ninym was no more decisive than the girl in her dreams. However, Wein couldn't guide her this time. She was on her own.

Ninym felt torn over this. There was a push for independence among the

Flahm, and their leader, Levan, had asked Ninym to keep the details from Wein. It seemed hypocritical to wonder what he was thinking while also keeping things from him. Ninym's heart tumbled in conflict.

"Ngh..."

Endless speculation wouldn't fix anything. Ninym needed to speak with him, but she lacked the resolve. Curious where she might find it, Ninym tossed and turned two or three times before giving up and rolling out of bed.

"I'll just have to sort it out at work."

An aide's duties wouldn't wait for her troubles. Careless or incomplete work would besmirch her good name, so she'd find a chance to speak with Wein in the meantime. There was still time...probably.

As Ninym dressed, the reflection of her face in the mirror suggested to her that she was being too optimistic.

Sure enough, the situation worsened several days later when a messenger arrived carrying a missive from the Levetia faith. It would set in motion a meeting with the director of the Gospel Bureau, Caldmellia.



“Caldmellia wants to meet, huh?” Wein groaned from his office chair, his chin resting on the palm of one hand. “Any guesses as to her objective, Ninym?”

“...”

“Ninym?”

“O-oh, sorry. I didn’t hear you.” Ninym shook away her thoughts. “You asked about Caldmeilia’s motive, right?”

The message from Levetia claimed she wished to meet Wein to discuss Natra and Levetia’s future relationship. Wein was obviously the nation’s regent, and Caldmeilia governed the Levetia religion in the elderly Holy King’s stead, so such talks promised to be crucial. This would be no tea party. Several key issues were on the line.

“I would assume she hopes to win over Natra,” Ninym said.

Wein nodded lazily. “No surprise there, now that the Empire’s civil war has concluded.”

The Earthworld Empire dominated the East, while the Levetia faith largely ruled the West. Natra was caught in the middle of their constant conflict. In his time as regent, Wein had maintained a delicate balance as he seized new territory. Diplomatic efforts with the West and the Empire’s own internal woes kept him out of hot water.

However, Earthworld had returned to relative peace, thanks to the recent coronation of Empress Lowellmina, and the nation would inevitably shift its focus back to expansion. Something had to change if the situation was going to improve. Every power, including the Empire, knew this. And so a meeting between Wein and Caldmeilia had been arranged as a precaution.

“Three main roads connect the East and the West, and Natra sits on the northernmost one. Everyone sees us as a huge pain in the butt,” Wein remarked.

“However,” Ninym began, “an alliance with us is a convenient way for either

side to keep the other in check.”

“Right. The Empire sees Natra as a foothold to the West, and the West sees us as a shield against Imperial invasion. Besides, we’re known opportunists. Milking us dry won’t cost either any sleep.”

“You took advantage of upheaval to gain new territory, and now everyone is after our heads. Perhaps we’ve gone too far.”

Wein shrugged. “A puny little country like Natra will topple from the slightest push, yet both sides have realized it’s a pest worth courting instead. Not a bad deal, right?”

“It’s still a pain,” Ninym replied with a frown.

“I can’t argue that,” Wein replied with a wry smile. “In any case, it looks like we’re on the same wavelength, Ninym. I bet Caldmellia will try to get Natra to break up with the Empire and become an indisputable part of the West.”

“You’ve dodged the subject so far, but time is running out.”

“Exactly. If we reject the West now, it’ll decide its only other option is to nix our relationship.”

“And it’ll act before the Empire is ready.”

The gist of the plan was surely to declare war on Natra and assemble every Western nation to subjugate it before the Empire could act. Natra would then serve as an official line of defense against the East. Despite the small nation’s impressive progress, Natra had no chance of victory if the West’s other nations decided to gang up on them.

“Of course, the Empire won’t just stand idly by and watch its ally and buffer get slaughtered...” Wein noted. “But there’s no way its reinforcements will reach us fast enough in an emergency.”

The Empire was currently exhausted, and until it recovered, it was unclear how long it would take their forces to reach a foreign nation. The risk was too great.

“We’ll invite a hopeless, multi-front war if we turn down the West’s request, and we can’t depend on the Empire’s reinforcements. Natra has to go along

with the West and Levetia,” Ninym said, dissatisfaction written all over her face. As a Flahm, she couldn’t help but fear that Western oppressors would reach her people in Natra.

“By the way, do you remember what Strang said?” Wein asked. “About how Lowellmina will need to demonstrate her military might?”

“I do. Ah, I see your point.” Ninym grimaced. “If Natra allies with the West, that will give the Empire justification to declare us traitors and attack.”

“I believe that’s probably Caldmellia’s objective.”

The West feared drawing Earthworld’s eye; meanwhile the Empire needed the perfect scapegoat. Both sides sought to make Natra a treasonous sacrificial lamb.

To the West, Natra was the Empire’s longtime ally. The various countries would grow hostile if nothing was done, but they’d be pleased to see the Empire strike Natra down.

To the Empire, Natra was a foothold to western expansion that should’ve been annexed ages ago. No one would protest a traitorous neighbor’s due punishment.

“We’ll be crushed by the Empire if we join the West and crushed by the West if we join the Empire...” Ninym said.

Wein nodded. “I bet they’ve already secretly teamed up to take us out.”

“...That’s not funny.”

It was truly a life-or-death situation for Natra, but for better or worse, Wein and Ninym were familiar with the Empire’s situation and understood the threat. No one else in Natra would’ve agreed. A majority of the citizens happily expected a bright future ahead ever since Wein’s longtime ally Lowellmina became Empress.

“I’m not a mind reader, so I can’t say for certain how either side will act,” Wein stated. “If Natra gets caught up in Lowellmina’s military antics, she might realize we’re sitting ducks and rush to send reinforcements, even though it’s pointless. On the other hand, if we join with the West as a shield against the

Empire, we might be welcomed gladly. That being said, I personally think everyone except Caldmellia is probably on the fence right about now.”

*Do we ally with Natra or destroy it? Should we aid the opposition or go it alone?*

Given the choice between advantage or disadvantage, people would always pick the former. If both sides showed potential profit, however, they’d hesitate and wonder which was better.

“Plus, no government expected Lowellmina to become Empress. She’s rattled the continent, and everyone is only now considering their next steps. Caldmellia’s ahead of the game,” Wein added.

“...Which means she’s operating on her own, and the West isn’t involved,” Ninym concluded.

Caldmellia was taking decisive action while everyone else dithered in order to turn things in her favor.

“Now that pain in the neck has room to play.” Wein smirked. Nothing could deter the confidence and ego in his arrogant smile.

“What do you propose we do?”

“First, let’s meet with Caldmellia. She’ll probably try to tempt us with a sweet deal, so we’ll use that to sniff out her scheme.”

Did she intend to ruin Natra or work together? The estimated value of Caldmellia’s proposal would reveal the truth. Of course, Wein assumed it would be nothing too lavish if he was right about the lack of Western support, but it was food for thought.

“If Caldmellia’s hand wasn’t worth squat to those in charge within Levetia, I figure they would have dumped us already. But perhaps they feel we’d make a good ally if that same hand involves considerable bloodshed.” Wein suddenly looked troubled. “Knowing that woman, she’ll probably make a weird deal just for the fun of it...”

“Sadly, stakes and calculations don’t work with a menace like her...” Ninym agreed.



Caldmellia was a key figure in the Levetia order, but she also had a destructive personality. Even Wein couldn't predict what she'd say upon her arrival in Natra.

"What will you do if it's obvious she intends to cut ties with Natra?" Ninym questioned.

"That would pretty much guarantee a war with the West, so I'd drag out negotiations while laying the groundwork for Imperial reinforcements behind the scenes. At the same time, I'd also try to split the Western opposition, if possible."

"And if she truly wants to win over Natra?"

"Then I'll join the West." A slight grimace flitted across Ninym's face, but Wein gave her a smile. "*Then* I'd conspire with the Empire and look for the right moment to sell out."

"...You'd remain loyal to the alliance?"

Wein nodded. "I trust the Empire's strength on principle. Even if every country in the West joins forces, they won't stand a chance."

The Empire's power went beyond its military. Between a meritocratic nature, a tendency to adopt the people and cultures of conquered nations, and a tolerant distribution of new techniques and concepts even at the cost of existing ideas and methods, Earthworld would continue to evolve as a superpower. Wein had realized the bigoted West couldn't keep up forever.

"It'd be a different story if the Empire's ruler were a numbskull, but—"

"Earthworld has a bright future ahead, especially with Lowa as Empress," Ninym finished.

"Exactly."

These two knew Lowellmina's nature and talent intimately, so they were in perfect agreement.

"However, even if the Empire wins, a lot could happen. Natra might be destroyed, so obviously, we'll have to fumble for a way out of this alive. That's why I'd only *pretend* to side with the West."

A wave of relief washed over Ninym as she listened to Wein's explanation. As his aide, she understood she must remain neutral in every circumstance. However, it was almost impossible to keep her composure where the Flahm were involved, especially given the current trouble among her people. If something big upset things now...

"...!" Ninym was beset by an indescribably terrible sensation. "Wein, are you sure you haven't overlooked anything?"

"Have I?" Wein mulled this over for a few seconds but ultimately shook his head. "I don't think so. For now, at least. Are you worried about something?"

"Not really, but..." Ninym winced as the words caught awkwardly in her throat, while Wein pondered again. "Sorry, I realize that was vague," she added.

"No problem. We've still got some time before the meeting. I'm sure we'll find out more, so let's keep up our investigation," Wein replied.

The Flahm woman gave a slight nod.



Preparations proceeded without incident. With an agenda decided and the entertainment ready, the only thing left to do was await Caldmellia's arrival.

"*Hahhh...*" Ninym breathed a sigh of relief after single-handedly overseeing the arrangements. The outcome of this meeting was vital, and an ineffective host could bring it to a screeching halt.

"I still don't even know..."

Amid her hectic schedule, Ninym had sought the reason for her anxiousness, yet she still came up empty. Maybe it really was all in her mind. She hoped so.

Levan arrived to pull her from her mind. "Ninym, we're prepared to meet with the backer we discussed earlier."

"...At a time like this?"

The backer. The mysterious figure supporting Flahm independence.

To the youth who dreamed of freedom, the benefactor was hailed as an ally, but those like Ninym and Levan saw the backer as a foe who aimed to sow dissension. Ninym would have to probe their true identity in person eventually.

For now, she wondered why the decision to meet with the backer had been made right before Caldmellia's arrival.

"To be more specific, we'll meet once the negotiations with Caldmellia are over... Does that work for you?" Levan asked.

"I don't really have much choice. All right, I'll be there," Ninym said before lowering her voice. "More importantly, how is the council, Master Levan?"

"I'm loath to admit my own incompetence...but it's been an uphill battle."

Levan was working to stifle the push for Flahm autonomy, but the outcome looked bleak. Thanks to Ninym's status as a living symbol and the Flahm's cherished desire for their ancient kingdom to be reborn, the long-awaited movement could only pick up speed. As Levan had said, the flames were spreading fast.

"Perhaps I should actively oppose the movement after all," Ninym offered.

"...I agree that we may need to review our options," Levan concurred, his frustration evident. "Let's discuss this again once we've discerned who the benefactor is."

"Understood. It's a relief to know we feel the same way, Master Levan."

"Certainly..."

The Flahm people would settle if Levan and Ninym chose to confront them directly as the leader and the symbolic successor. That, at least, was a small comfort.

*I need to find out Caldmellia's objective, uncover the backer's identity, and figure out a way to help Natra survive the tensions between the East and the West...*

Ninym felt more than a little troubled as her lengthy to-do list grew longer yet and the important meeting loomed.



Director Caldmellia of Levetia's Gospel Bureau was over fifty, according to official records, yet easily appeared to be in her twenties or thirties. Whether she'd inherited the name from someone else or secretly cast a spell of youth

remained unclear.

Despite the Gospel Bureau's discrimination against women, Caldmellia had become a top leader in the religious organization and was renowned for her political finesse. She handled administrative affairs in the elderly Holy King's stead, and it was said Levetia's influence had expanded by leaps and bounds since she took over.

And now that very same person was on her way to Natra.

Word quickly spread through the kingdom, and the public's response was generally favorable. Natra's heritage was rooted in an ancient nation to the West, but historically it had maintained closer ties with the East. Once Wein became regent, Natra—after several wars—found greater opportunity to visit its various Western neighbors and negotiate. Tensions had eased in the public's mind, and Wein's rare position as host to Caldmellia and the West further validated this point.

Of course, outward appearances failed to reflect the true state of affairs.

"It's been quite some time, Prince Wein."

"Natra welcomes you, Lady Caldmellia."

Wein, who represented Natra.

Caldmellia, who represented Levetia.

The pair's discussion began amicably enough, and Ninym and the other attendants watched expectantly.

"You must be exhausted. It's quite a long distance from the old capital of Lushan."

"Yes, I suppose. This is my first visit to Natra, so the journey was unfamiliar... I'm a bit embarrassed to say so, but I've heard much about Natra and couldn't wait to see it with my own eyes," Caldmellia replied with a smile. "Such excitement has warded off any fatigue."

"Marvelous. As Natra's representative, I'm delighted to hear it." Wein mirrored her smile. "Lady Caldmellia, I pray you'll enjoy our nation to your heart's content. However, personal experience compels me to suggest you

should return home before winter.”

“Do you refer to Natra’s harsh winters, where even shadows freeze? Indeed, it’s still early fall, yet I already sense an icy chill.”

“The very same. If it were possible, Natra would catch spring with a rope and never let go.”

“Oh my. Winters must be dreadful for you to go so far.”

“Oops. Please don’t speak a word of this to anyone. I wouldn’t want the general to tease me.”

The two exchanged smiles more frigid than any Natran winter.

“Well then, perhaps we should hurry and settle a few important matters,” Caldmellia said, cutting to the chase. “Your Highness is wise. I’m certain you’ve already realized how Earthworld’s new Empress has affected our respective circumstances.”

“Of course. The citizens refuse to let this blissful spring slip away.”

“Is it spring, though?” Caldmellia asked with a mysterious smirk.

Ninym felt overwhelmed merely standing on the sidelines, yet Wein dealt with the inscrutable woman head-on. Caldmellia certainly was intense.

“The Empire is powerful. You might say *too* powerful. However, it, too, must be cautious.”

“Are you talking about a multi-front attack from the West?”

“No, I mean you, Wein Salema Arbalest.”

The air between the pair tensed abruptly, but Caldmellia continued undaunted.

“I am not at liberty to make an official statement due to my position, but it matters not how much personnel, time, and money the West devotes to its militia. To the Empire, victory is a simple matter of calculation. Even if the expense is astronomical, it is ready to pay. You, Prince Wein, are different.”

“ ... ”

“You are an accomplished leader and golden child of this era. A hero whose

name will be recorded in this continent's history. Undoubtedly, people on both sides have wondered if you can beat the Empire."

"You overestimate me," Wein argued. "I am no magician, Lady Caldmellia. I might be a match for the Empire in some aspects, but the difference in power is too great. Natra could never win."

"Maybe so. However, take care to remember that a considerable number of people believe otherwise," Caldmellia insisted. "The West is bitter toward the Empire, but many within the Empire itself also share that resentment. You are much like their symbol. It will lead the Empire to think eliminating you before you gain too many allies is best."

"Have you forgotten my alliance with Earthworld?"

"Certainly not, but the Empire will stab you in the back as soon as your guard is down. Once you're gone, the Empire will be free to unify the continent under its banner."

Ninym shuddered at Caldmellia's argument. Wein had cast his lot with the Empire, yet suddenly, the West seemed like the better option. Ninym tried to brush these thoughts away but to no avail.

"What do you think, Prince Wein? Doesn't it feel like the fangs of winter are closing in?"

The air in the room was heavy. Before anyone knew it, they'd been led straight into a deep mire.

"Whether they are or aren't"—Wein's voice remained steady—"Natra cannot turn against the Empire. As I've said already, we lack the strength."

"Indeed, that would be true if Natra were alone," Caldmellia challenged. "The story would surely be different with every military in the West under your command."

"..." For the first time, Wein was left speechless. Everyone else watched with bated breath. They realized far too late that this meeting would determine the future of the continent.

"...That's far too unrealistic." Wein shook his head at last. "Why would the

West allow a novice like me to command its forces? I lack the qualifications and status.”

“You are a heroic and highly decorated prince. Such qualifications are more than enough. As for the issue of status...” Caldmellia paused for a moment. “You can become a Holy Elite.”

A Holy Elite.

The Holy King sat atop Levetia’s hierarchy while the Holy Elites served as his executives. Since each new Holy King was chosen from the Holy Elites, one could also say they were Holy King candidates. Most were active within Levetia and the political sphere, making them the West’s indisputable spiritual and moral leaders.

Wein had been endorsed as a Holy Elite candidate once before. A lot happened, so it was never finalized, though.

“Are you serious, Lady Caldmellia?”

“I would not jest, Prince Wein.”

Ninym had to agree.

Caldmellia was on an official visit as Levetia’s emissary. Her words would naturally be recorded for posterity, so she couldn’t put on airs or make suggestions on a whim.

If taken at face value, her offer was enough to catch Wein’s ear. Perhaps the Empire’s progress truly was a threat, but...

*It’d be too risky for him to blindly accept her offer,* Ninym thought.

...this was Caldmellia. Not only was she an influential figure in the West, but she also easily topped the list of most unpredictable people. It was best to assume the woman had a trick or two up her sleeve.

“Have the others accepted me as a Holy Elite?” Evidently, Wein had similar concerns and spoke cautiously. Several conditions had to be met first, and his main focus was the approval of the Holy King and the majority of the Holy Elites. This plan was dead in the water if only the Holy King and his trusted confidant Caldmellia recognized Wein.



Wein assumed this sudden trip to Natra was Caldmellia's renegade plan unauthorized by the Holy Elites. However...

"Yes, we are fine in that regard. Although not unanimous, the majority has accepted you. This document is proof."

...her reply shattered Wein's supposition.

Ninym shuddered. *This is moving too quickly!*

Caldmellia couldn't have forged so many signatures. Had she sought out the Holy Elites' approval immediately after hearing of Lowellmina's ascension to Empress? Or perhaps she'd concluded that a conflict between the East and the West was inevitable no matter who ruled the Empire and had laid the groundwork to make Wein a Holy Elite beforehand. Either way, the director's decisiveness and proactive efforts were nothing less than a marvel.

*What will you do, Wein?*

The table was set. If Wein accepted, his becoming the newest Holy Elite would spread across the continent. However, it would serve as an irrefutable public declaration of Natra's solidarity with the West. Wein had assured Ninym he'd collude with the Empire, but...

"I'm honored by the Holy Elites' goodwill," he said. "All the same, I cannot make such a momentous decision without conferring with my vassals. I'd like some time to think it over."

This was obviously meant to buy time. Caldmellia's proposal had shocked everyone, and they needed a minute to decide on an official response. At the same time, it was proof Wein had been cornered.

"That is reasonable enough." Caldmellia nodded with a sharp glint in her eye. "However, Your Highness must understand that the situation is tense. The true work will start once you become a Holy Elite, so there is no time to waste. I ask that you provide an answer before my return."

Having deduced Wein's plan, Caldmellia had issued a firm warning. If he carelessly wasted time, the West would consider it a betrayal.

"...Understood. Allow me to consider it briefly, and I'll have a response ready

soon.”

“I look forward to it, Prince Regent.” Caldmellia smiled. “After all, winter is on its way.”



“Yowch... She got me good.” Wein groaned loudly as he and Ninym reconvened after their first meeting with Caldmellia. “Never thought she’d try and make me a Holy Elite.”

“We’ll need to make sure it isn’t a bluff.”

“Nah, she was dead serious.”

Ninym agreed, but that meant Wein was truly a stone’s throw away from joining the Holy Elites.

“Well, no point in draggin’ this out. East or West, we’ll have to decide while Caldmellia is here,” Wein said.

“Your policies haven’t changed, right?”

“Nope. I’m still with the Empire. Caldmellia’s ‘Holy Elite’ idea threw me for a loop, but all I could think was, ‘That all you got?’”

“Didn’t she say the West would give you full command of its forces?” Ninym asked.

“Who cares? That sounds like a massive pain,” Wein replied with a shrug.

His reaction didn’t surprise Ninym, but the mental picture of her master acting as supreme commander in a battle that might split the continent made her heart race nervously. Nonetheless, she chased that emotion to the back of her mind. Ninym believed the Empire was a better choice, and it was vital that Wein stand firm as well.

“Still, some vassals might be tempted,” Wein remarked.

To become an ally of the Empire or accept a proposal to be made a Holy Elite. No one would find the choice easy.

Some vassals would side with the East while others were liable to staunchly defend the West. Wein and Ninym could already predict the ugly debate ahead.

“Perhaps her plan is to divide Natra’s royal court,” Ninym suggested.

“Maybe, but I sure wish we could just avoid this mess altogether.”

The Flahm woman sighed. “We can only hope nothing else goes wrong.”



Needless to say, those prayers went unanswered as their discussion with the vassals spiraled out of control.

“Our nation is a longtime ally of the Empire! Moreover, Prince Wein and Empress Lowellmina share a storied history! To join with the West would be to abandon everything we’ve established! It’s outrageous!” cried one pro-Empire official.

On the other hand...

“A permanent alliance can only exist between nations of equal strength! The Empire’s ambition to unite the continent under its banner is a well-known fact! Its expansionist greed will eventually spell our doom, so we should protect ourselves while we still can and side with the West!” argued the opposition.

These grievances alone made it hard enough to reach an understanding, but underlying anxieties such as Earthworld’s novel Empress and wariness regarding Wein’s possible Holy Elite status made the sea of opinions unbearable.

*I wonder if we’ll really settle this by the deadline.* Ninym shook her head, awash with a mix of fear and confusion. This was a matter of *if*, not *when*. Even so, Wein couldn’t afford to make heavy-handed decisions lest he further divide the palace politics. He had to reach an endgame while keeping a very delicate balance. Ninym steeled herself in preparation, yet no sooner had she done so than Levan arrived.

“Ninym, I have two matters I wish to discuss.”

“...What’s happened now?” Ninym asked sullenly. It wasn’t the warmest welcome, but she couldn’t help it. Levan had given her nothing but bad news lately.

Levan’s answer only deepened her frown. “I trust you’ve heard the Flahm have been talking about Caldmellia’s visit?”

Ninym expected as much. She also had concerns about the treatment of the Flahm if Natra sided with the West.

It was only natural for the local Flahm to worry. Levan had done his best to keep everyone calm, but there was only so much to be done.

“There’s hearsay that Prince Wein will pledge loyalty to the West and abandon the Flahm.”

“...!” Ninym’s expression went from outrage to panic.

The Teachings of Levetia viewed the Flahm as a sinful race and allowed others to treat them like slaves. However, Natra was the complete opposite and guaranteed the Flahm the same rights as everyone else. Yet even with this in mind, it seemed entirely plausible that Natra might cast the Flahm aside as a show of solidarity with the West.

Wein hadn’t announced an intention to do anything of the sort, however. Caldmellia hadn’t suggested it, either. The rumors were pure fiction.

“Who started this rumor?”

“There are several sources. It could have been domestic powers who loathe the Flahm’s recent progress, pro-independence Flahm activists, or a result of controversy born from citizens who fear for the future.”

“This will be a difficult fire to put out.” Ninym had anticipated a frenzy among the Flahm should a plan to join the West become public. However, she had hoped careful preparation could mitigate this.

What could be done now, though? Caldmellia’s sudden appearance had forced Natra to choose between East and West while a fire blazed directly beneath them. Who knew what chaos would ensue if Wein announced an alliance with the West?

*We were too optimistic.* Ninym understood that painfully well. Calming Natra’s increasingly restless Flahm would be no easy task. *There’s one quick way to settle this, but...*

The answer was simple. If Wein announced his intention to remain with the Empire, it would ease the Flahm people’s fears, at least temporarily. Should he

wish to side with the West, even only temporarily, Ninym believed she could convince him to reconsider, if nothing else.

*However...*

That plan guaranteed only the Flahm's happiness. Ninym prioritized her duty as Wein's aide above loyalty to her people, and she couldn't say for certain that provoking the West was in the nation's best interest.

*What should we do?*

Levan interrupted Ninym mid-crisis.

"I'm sorry, but there's more."

"Yes, you did mention that. What is it?"

*Whatever it is, it can't be good.*

"Our rendezvous with the backer will be held three days from now."

"...!" Ninym's expression darkened, and she sighed. "Is it safe to assume this timing was intentional?"

"Indeed. Considering events thus far, word of Prince Wein's potential collaboration with the West likely played a part."

"...All right, I'll come. I'd rather focus on the discussion between Prince Wein and Caldmellia, but my hands are tied."

Levan nodded lightly.

Between Ninym's duty as an aide and her position as future leader of Natra's Flahm, Ninym would always choose the former. However, that didn't mean she could just ignore the latter's issues.

"I wonder who awaits us," Levan mused.

"Not anyone we can trust," Ninym spat.

And she was correct.

"Greetings to you both. Shall we begin?"

Three days after Wein's negotiations, Ninym and Levan reeled as Caldmellia favored them with a smile.



Since Ninym and Levan hoped to keep their meeting with the Flahm revolutionist benefactor under wraps, it was covertly held in a building located in a corner of town. This had been done to prevent exacerbating the situation and to make eliminating this backer easier, if necessary.

*I have no doubt they're against us.*

With all this in mind, Ninym had carefully combed the familiar streets as part of a preliminary investigation. She'd quickly picked the ideal venue and readied a contingency plan in case the backer needed to be dispatched.

Come what may, she and Levan would be ready. Or so she thought.

"Wh-why are you...?" Nothing could have prepared Ninym for Caldmellia's sudden appearance. She didn't know what to say.

*Master Levan!*

Ninym looked to the man frantically, only to discover he was just as astonished.

Caldmellia was a high-ranking member of the Teachings of Levetia, a religion that promoted persecution of the Flahm. Neither could even begin to fathom why she was here.

"Must you even ask?" Caldmellia grinned like a young girl who'd played a clever trick. "I'm the Flahm's benefactor, my dear young lady."

"...!"

Yes, that had to be it. There was no other answer. This was the designated spot where the two Flahm representatives were supposed to meet a backer pushing for Flahm independence. No stranger could have stumbled upon the site by mistake. Yet although Ninym and Levan understood this, they struggled to accept it. Caldmellia was an enemy to their people in every conceivable way.

"It would appear my little surprise worked. However, we'll get nowhere like this. You really must relax. How about some tea?"

Caldmellia's servant set three cups on the table. Ninym didn't move a finger, but Levan broke the ice.

“My apologies, Lady Caldmellia. We never expected to meet you in a place like this,” he said, reaching for his cup to take a sip.

Ninym instinctively tensed, and Levan gave her a sharp look that bade her to be calm. Caldmellia wouldn’t try anything here.

Whatever the woman’s objective, there was no question she wanted to talk. Thus, she wouldn’t resort to anything like poison. Even then, the worst could be avoided so long as Ninym survived.

“Allow me to formally introduce myself. I am Levan, a mediator for Natra’s Flahm population. This is Ninym. I’ve invited her along as my successor.”

“I am Caldmellia. I’ve heard much about you both. You’re talented individuals who aid the king and crown prince.”

“We are humbled by your praise, Director. I never imagined word of us would reach someone like yourself.”

“...” Ninym tried her best to keep placid as she watched the discussion. Caldmellia was the biggest imposter on the continent and could easily win over a troubled heart. Ninym had to gather herself while Levan was talking.

“Forgive my forwardness, Lady Caldmellia, but let me ask once more... Are you truly our benefactor?”

“Of course, Sir Levan.”

“And are you supporting the Flahm in an individual capacity?”

“No,” she replied. “Although this is not an official meeting, I speak as director of the Gospel Bureau.”

This unexpected conversation grew more shocking still. Learning she assisted the Flahm only as an individual would’ve been almost understandable. What did it mean that Levetia was involved?

“Might I ask why?” Levan questioned.

“The Teachings of Levetia is a kind, peaceful faith that promotes justice and equality. Yet although that is written in the scriptures, we have long debated our tolerance toward the enslavement of the Flahm. That’s why Levetia has recently decided to support the Flahm in their independence and push for social



recognition,” Caldmellia explained with an enigmatic smile. “Of course, that is purely the official standpoint.”

“Then what is your true purpose?”

“The Empire.”

Ninym’s eyebrow twitched.

“Earthworld has gained a new Empress. The scars of civil war are slow to heal, but it won’t be long before the Empire invades. The West must unify against it.”

“I see,” Ninym said, joining the discussion at last. “In other words, the Empire has troublemakers who, like we Flahm, might pose a threat. However, the enslaved Flahm are also a labor force and a valuable asset. If you discard us casually, you risk a Flahm uprising and weakened militia. Such a thing would grant the Empire an advantage, so you hope to win us over and use the Flahm as pawns.”

“What a keen observation,” Caldmellia agreed without the slightest hint of guilt. “First, we’d have you persuade Prince Wein. Since Flahm voices have gained recognition within Natra lately, he’ll concede swiftly if you endorse the West. However, if Prince Wein does join the East, he’ll need to be stopped immediately. I hope your people will serve as our vanguards and later rule this land as your own.”

Caldmellia offered no pretense, preferring to blatantly encourage the Flahm to betray Natra. There was no question Levetia intended to use the Flahm to win over Wein, take him down if need be, and act as a shield against the Empire.

“The Empire is a threat to every citizen in the West,” Caldmellia asserted, beaming. “Let us cast aside past misgivings, join hands, and fight as one.”

“Absolutely not!” Ninym shouted furiously.

“Ninym,” Levan reprimanded.

However, she couldn’t stop herself.

“You know how much the Flahm have suffered under the West’s oppression! We’re not about to wage war for you!”

“Ah, that’s where the direct descendant of the Founder comes in.” Caldmellia’s comment felt like a knife between her ribs. “The person in question lurks in Natra, if I’m not mistaken.”

“...!” Ninym froze. “Wh-what are you talking about?”

She tried to play dumb, even as her tongue twisted into knots. Meanwhile, Caldmellia’s eyes sank into Ninym. She’d already figured it out. This woman was the backer who’d exposed Ninym’s identity in the first place. She’d known long before the trouble began.

“With the Founder’s direct descendant as their symbol, the Flahm would fall into line. They’ll even cooperate with their hated enemies of the West if told to do so. It’s a miracle the Founder’s lineage has survived. I have no doubt it is the descendant’s destiny to help us overcome our bloody history.”

Ninym fought the urge to jump up and punch this woman in the face. She couldn’t, of course. It was a hopeless wish. She made a tight fist and chained back the rage burning in her throat.

“All right. Suppose there *is* a living descendant,” Ninym replied. “Why should they join the West? This person could just as easily convince everyone to join the Empire.”

“Heh-heh, I’d expect no less from someone who has countless friends in Earthworld.” Ninym felt a chill in Caldmellia’s taunts. She was being analyzed. “Nonetheless, there is no future for the Flahm in that.”

“Wh-why not?”

“Because of Eastern Levetia,” Caldmellia explained. “Eastern Levetia is a rival sect of the West’s faith. Those apostates twist the scripture and insist they are the true believers. Of course, I have my own position to consider and would *never* condone such drivel.”

The last bit seemed to be a joke. Neither Ninym nor Levan laughed, but Caldmellia seemed to relish their reactions.

“In any case, Eastern Levetia followers have demonstrated that they consider the scripture to be absolute and believe the Flahm deserve eternal bondage. And they are right next door to Natra, as is the Empire. They will only bring you

grief.”

“The Empire values an individual’s abilities over heritage,” Ninym asserted.

“That’s true for the moment. However, there is no question that the Teachings of Levetia will be cast out once the Empire unifies the continent. Eastern Levetia will become the main religion, and its dogma will spread rapidly. Do you think the Empire will protect the Flahm then?”

“...”

As the image of Lowellmina, her friend and Earthworld’s Empress, crossed her mind, Ninym found herself incapable of replying. She couldn’t believe Lowellmina would ever seek to oppress the Flahm. However, Ninym understood that sometimes a leader couldn’t go against the powerful will of their nation. There was no guarantee the Empire wouldn’t spurn the Flahm.

Then Caldmellia played her final hidden card.

“We shall revise the scripture and better the lives of the Flahm.”

“Wha—”

Ninym and Levan stared at her in wide-eyed shock.

The religious doctrine was the root of Flahm discrimination in the West. The persecution had been born of the deeds of long-gone Flahm, but the present-day populace was oblivious to that. The Flahm suffered because the sacred text demanded it. Followers wholeheartedly believed their discrimination and cruel behavior were justified.

However, that rationale would vanish with a revision of the scripture.

Of course, the people of the West had been molded by the Teachings of Levetia since their earliest days, so a mere rewrite was unlikely to convert anyone immediately.

However, the effects would slowly begin to show in future generations.

“Lady Caldmellia, do you speak the truth?” Levan asked. His tone was a mix of hope and tension.

“Of course. I’ve even prepared a written oath which includes the joint

signatures of the Holy King and the Holy Elites,” she replied fluidly. “Needless to say, this is something Eastern Levetia cannot provide.”

What terrible irony. The Teachings of Levetia, the faith that embraced secularism and twisted its own holy scriptures whenever convenient, was the only organization that could secure equality for the Flahm.

“So what will you do?”

It was all or nothing. Acceptance or refusal were the only options.

Ninym thought giving such a black-and-white ultimatum was less than wise. However, this wasn’t her offer to refuse. Levan had the final say. After a drawn-out silence, he spoke with a look of anguish.

“I’d like some time to think it over.”



“Why didn’t you refuse?!”

Levan and Ninym returned to the palace after their meeting with Caldmellia but did not part ways. Instead, Ninym lashed out at him.

“Caldmellia is trying to divide Natra! We’ll either have to convince Wein or, if all else fails, help subjugate him. It’s obvious she wants us to turn traitor!”

“Yes...you’re right.” Levan accepted Ninym’s rage with a solemn nod. “We were only supposed to negotiate, yet Caldmellia made her intentions clear. There is no question we will become her expendable pawns. And when we’re used and discarded, no one will show a shred of compassion for the wretched Flahm.”

“If you understand that much, then wh—”

“They’re willing to rewrite the scriptures, Ninym,” Levan interjected. “I’m sure you realize the significance of this opportunity.”

“It’s nothing more than an empty promise! We can’t trust her!”

“The Holy Elites are involved. Even the director of the Gospel Bureau couldn’t afford to tell such a careless lie.”

“...Fine. Suppose it’s true! Regardless of any revisions to the scripture, the

West is after more than just the Empire. It wants Wein out of the picture. We'll be used to that end and lose our place in Natra forever! Is it worth all that?!"

"..."

Levan fell silent, although Ninym's impassioned speech wasn't the cause. His expression spoke to the fervor in his heart while he searched for the right words.

"...I feel guilty."

"What?" Ninym was taken aback by his ludicrous statement.

"I always have, Ninym."

"For what?"

"For our peaceful life in Natra."

Unease rippled through Ninym's heart.

"We've worked hard to earn our position since coming to this land a century ago. Why should you feel any shame or guilt?" Ninym said, but her assertion proved feeble. She already knew what Levan was trying to say.

"When I think of the other Flahm who still live in oppression, this peace weighs heavy on me."

Natra wasn't the only place the Flahm called home. Many more were scattered across both the East and the West, where their distinct appearance inevitably garnered attention. In truth, only a minority of the Flahm lived safely under Natra's protection.

As Ninym said, Natra's Flahm had carved a path for themselves and bore no reason to apologize. Even so, it was painful to know their brethren suffered the whip merely for existing a foot beyond Natra's borders.

"We couldn't do anything about that!"

"Previously, yes. But now a chance has presented itself."

Ninym saw Levan's eyes blaze with an intense light.

"I agree that we should walk the same path as Natra if we concern ourselves only with the Flahm of this nation. However, it is a different story if the

scripture can be rewritten. That will be the salvation of every Flahm on the continent. Ninym...I know you understand. You saved our people in the Ulbeth Alliance.”

Ninym’s expression twisted. She had accompanied Wein on a diplomatic mission to the Ulbeth Alliance in the farthest reaches of the West. The Flahm there knew terrible hardship and injustice, but thanks to some good fortune and Ninym’s determination, they were invited to become citizens of Natra. Ninym was thrilled to see those who accepted the offer now living happily.

Yet at the same time, she understood that Ulbeth’s Flahm hadn’t necessarily wanted to leave their longtime home. If they had been treated with more kindness, everyone would’ve elected to remain. A new interpretation of the scripture could make that a reality.

“Still, I’m against it,” Ninym argued, her voice tight. “It’d be different if only you and I bore the risk. This decision could impact every Flahm in Natra, though. I cannot condone disrupting everyone’s peaceful lives to save the rest of the Flahm.”

“...”

“Besides, this proposed betrayal has one more fundamental issue.”

“And what is that?”

“We’d make an enemy out of Wein.”

This time, Levan’s face contorted.

Wein was, without a doubt, the continent’s greatest modern-day hero, and Ninym knew exactly what he’d do if betrayed. He’d mumble and grumble at first, but soon enough, he’d quietly mount a counterattack. There would be no anger, sorrow, or resentment over their treachery; Wein would just tell himself that his once-faithful allies had switched sides. He’d mercilessly strike down the Flahm who’d tirelessly served Natra for a century without hesitation.

“I don’t think anyone could match Wein except for me. Besides, what chance do throwaway pawns of the West stand against a hero? Antagonizing him would only earn us scorn as the filthy, ungrateful people who betrayed Natra’s royal family. We’d doom every Flahm to eternal shame and lead them to ruin.”

“...”

“Please, reconsider. We’ve made great progress in the last century. Let’s keep going.”

Had Ninym’s earnest plea reached Levan’s heart? The silence preceding his reply was long and painful.

“...I’ll think about it. Leave me for today.”

Ninym hesitated to comply. She wanted to talk further but sensed herself growing too heated. Was it better to continue anyway or pause to cool down? She deliberated with herself for a moment.

“Understood. We’ll discuss this later.”

Ninym chose the latter. This debate was inevitable, but it risked becoming an emotional argument if she and Levan didn’t allow themselves time to gather their thoughts. Allowing their relationship to sour because of impatience would be troublesome.

*We can pick this back up once we’re both a bit calmer.*

In any case, it had been an eventful day. Too eventful. Both sides needed time alone.

“Please excuse me, Master Levan. I’ll be in my room if you need anything.”

“Yes, understood.”

Ninym left the visibly tortured man behind.

She’d quickly come to regret that decision.





Time passed, and Ninym's routine life in the forest mansion continued. Wein spent his days reading quietly, and she helped care for him and the household.

Ninym often wondered about her future. The current arrangement was made possible only because of Wein's kindness. It couldn't last forever. She pondered what to do while carrying out her usual duties, and sometimes she scoured the library when she had permission. No amount of consideration or research provided an answer, though.

Still, Ninym's efforts weren't entirely wasted. She learned quite a lot about Wein.

*His Highness isn't very particular.*

Before, she'd thought he was incomprehensible. It was rude to think of him as such, yet she couldn't help but consider him an enigma wrapped in an enigma.

However, that opinion was coming undone. Ninym couldn't say she had Wein completely solved, but she did grasp one aspect of his character—he wasn't picky about much.

*He couldn't care less when it comes to his food or clothing.*

Anyone with eyes could see Wein was a noble. It was no exaggeration to say he was of the most aristocratic bloodline in the nation. Yet he always accepted Ninym's mediocre efforts. She even secretly reduced and then doubled his meal size as a test. Wein always ate whatever he was given, never commenting on it. She was wise enough not to go past five times the usual amount, but she didn't need to. Ninym understood that his disinterest in such matters was simply his character.

*I don't get the sense this is self-imposed poverty.*

Wein's behavior didn't suggest high-minded temperance. Rather, he merely seemed to lack interest, awareness, and desire. He wasn't indifferent to everything, of course. For one, Wein loved to read, yet even that, he appeared to do dispassionately. It was somehow otherworldly. One could've mistaken

him for an illusion.

*You could even say he's...strange?*

From mysterious to strange. It was debatable whether this was a step forward or backward in regard to his character. Any assessment was liable to change again as Ninym's days with the boy continued.

*I know I need to think about what I want to do once this is over, but...*

If possible, Ninym thought she'd like to remain with her savior the prince a while longer.

A fire broke out in the mansion several days later.



"Ninym's taking the day off?"

"Yes. I understand this is a critical time, but she is mentally exhausted and asks that you allow her to rest."

Levan had come to Wein's office to inform him that his ever-present aide was indisposed.

"I see... Well, that makes sense. I'm always asking a lot of her." Wein nodded despite his bitter expression. He had previously collapsed because of overwork and didn't want her to suffer the same fate.

"I appreciate your consideration, Prince Wein," Levan said with a reverent bow. "Worry not. Today I shall act as Your Highness's aide in Ninym's stead."

"I'm counting on you, Levan. This next meeting with Caldmellia is the final curtain."

The director had been in Natra for some time already, and after several rounds of negotiation, the end was nigh.

"Forgive my forwardness, but how will you answer Lady Caldmellia's proposal?"

Would Natra join the West or the Empire?

The vassals had already discussed this at length. They naturally played a part in Natra's future, but the gap between them and their sovereign had grown in

recent days. The vassals intended to undermine his authority and take matters into their own hands. Surprisingly, Wein himself was far from displeased and actually supported this.

However, the vassals failed to come to a consensus. Although one would assume Wein had the final word, he'd deferred, yet his officials' skittishness over this momentous decision that promised to change Natra forever became a roadblock. It was a sad state of affairs. Regardless, Wein regained authority to finish the business with Caldmellia.

"Right, right. Well, my policies haven't changed. I'm going to accept her offer. For now anyway."

"...But ultimately join the Empire."

"You got it. I've already said this to Ninym, but my bet is on the Empire in this East-West showdown. Until then, Natra needs to play its cards right while staying on their good side."

Wein knew both the Empire and the West were formidable, yet he boldly declared he'd pull their strings. Such a harebrained idea would be absurd if it had come from anyone else. But in Wein's case, it sounded crazy enough to work. He could absolutely pull it off.

"..."

"What is it, Levan?"

"It's nothing... We should head to the meeting room."

Wein nodded and stood from his chair.



*I wonder if the meeting has already started...*

Ninym's eyes darted around the room as she fidgeted nervously in her seat. Thoughts of Wein filled her mind. She'd usually be at his side, but Levan had taken her place today since she felt under the weather.

In truth, her condition wasn't too severe. Although recent events had indeed left her weary, Ninym could still function. She wouldn't normally leave Wein for something like this.

This had come about per Levan's request after he asked to speak with Wein alone as head of the Flahm and attend the meeting with Caldmellia. He took over Ninym's duties for the day after she claimed to feel unwell, so now she had no choice but to lie around.



*I hope Caldmellia and Wein's discussion goes well...*

This thought kept Ninym on edge. She wanted to make herself useful somehow but couldn't concentrate at all. If only she'd stayed with Wein.

*There's definitely something very wrong with me...*

Burning herself out and being incapacitated during an emergency was no laughing matter. Since troubled sleep was surely healthier than frenzied impatience, Ninym collapsed on the bed and chose to relinquish consciousness. Squeezing her eyes shut, she pushed aside a river of worries, let time pass, and drifted off to sleep.



"Yeah, not bad at all."

Ninym gave the food she'd prepared a nod of approval in the kitchen. Then she walked down the hallway toward a room farther within the mansion—the study.

"Your Highness, I've brought lunch."

When Ninym opened the door and called to him, Wein's shadow stirred in a corner of the room.

"Hold on. I'm almost finished," he replied, a book in one hand.

When instructed to wait, a proper servant quietly obeyed. A young apprentice like Ninym could follow orders well enough but had difficulty remaining silent.

"What are you reading today?"

It was a forward question, but Wein didn't seem to mind and answered regardless. "A book about the Empire."

"The Empire? Isn't that the big country to the east?"

"Yeah. You can read it later if you want. This book goes into Earthworld's history and its culture. Might be useful if you visit someday."

"Me, visit the Empire?" Ninym pondered the notion.

There were countless places and regions within Natra that she'd never seen,

let alone the Empire. Plus, a foreign country would be, well, *foreign*. Ninym broke into a sweat at the thought.

“Have you ever been to the Empire, Your Highness?”

“Nope. I might someday, though.”

“In that case, I bet we’ll go together.”

Ninym gave a tiny smile. If fate was kind, she hoped their “somedays” would cross and permit them to travel together.

Wein turned a page, as though to say he had no interest in the subtleties of a young girl’s heart. However, Ninym was used to this and paid it no heed. In fact, she kept talking.

“Your Highness really does love books.”

This was Ninym’s honest observation. She didn’t dislike books but couldn’t read around the clock like Wein. “Bookworm” was a common taunt, but it fit him perfectly.

However, his response was unexpected.

“Not really.”

“Oh? You don’t?” Ninym blinked. As far as she knew, Wein spent most days with his nose in some volume or another. How could he claim not to like reading?

“I’m just giving the people the illusion they want,” Wein explained. “A diligent, academic prince.”

“So, what *do* you like?”

“Nothing.”

“‘Nothing’? That can’t be.” Ninym wanted to laugh it off but remembered he’d never tell such a joke. Was there truly not a single thing he enjoyed?

What a depressing thought. Ninym fiercely wanted to say something to this boy in front of her, but...

“Wait.”



...Wein's attention shifted. He stood noiselessly and approached the study's window to peer outside.

"Have the scales tipped in their favor?"

"Your Highness?"

His voice was hardly a whisper, and Ninym tilted her head in confusion.

"Look over there but don't show your face."

At Wein's insistence, Ninym peeked out from a corner of the window.

"I think I see someone..."

There was a stranger outside, and they weren't alone. From what Ninym saw, at least three were hiding in the trees' shadows.

"There's undoubtedly more of them. We're surrounded," Wein stated.

"S-surrounded? What for?"

"To kill me."

An arrow broke through the window.

"Eek!" Ninym almost fell as she instinctively leaned backward, but Wein caught her arm.

"Be careful. I'm their target, but they're not above getting rid of anyone in their way."

"Wait, um, ah..."

Ninym was hopelessly confused and unable to comprehend the situation. However, she was still aware enough to recognize that the arrow that had flown into the mansion was alight.

"Your Highness, the fire. We need to put it out—"

"Don't bother. The entire mansion is under attack. Come on, this way."

Wein half-dragged Ninym from the study; a burning smell already choked the hallway. As Wein had suggested, it was too late to stop the growing blaze.

"Aren't they going to storm the building? Maybe it's a siege to prevent any chance of escape," the prince muttered.

“U-um, Your Highness.”

“It must’ve been easy since Raklum is away.”

“Your Highness!” The quiver in Ninym’s voice finally caused Wein to turn around.

“What is it?”

“What in the world is going on?!”

There was no time to waste. Fire was rapidly consuming the estate. However, Ninym wanted an answer more than anything.

Wein took a moment to think it over.

“I’ll leave out the specifics, but some powers in this nation would benefit from my death. They’ve found me and made their move. Now, here we are.”

“S-so why are you so calm?!”

“Because I saw this coming.”

Wein entered a storage room, and Ninym watched as he heaved a shelf out of the way to reveal a cellar door.

“Beneath here is a path that leads out beyond the forest. It’s an easy escape.”

Ninym’s lost, terrified heart knew a touch of relief. She still had no idea what was going on, but this was a sliver of hope.

“Then let’s hurry, Your Highness!” She tugged Wein’s hand, but he didn’t move.

“You’re going alone, Ninym.”

“What?” she asked, baffled. The mansion was on fire. They had an escape route. And yet he refused to go. Ninym couldn’t help but question Wein’s reasoning. “Wh-what do you mean? Then what about you, Your Highness?”

Wein’s answer was swift.

“I’m going to die here.”



“‘Die here’...?”

There was a part of Wein that Ninym never wholly understood, and she'd always found him a bit strange.

This, however, was beyond anything she'd ever seen from him.

"What's the point in that...?!" Her anguished cry echoed against the narrow storage room walls, threatening to attract some of the assailants. Still, the prince remained unfazed.

"Because those who wish for my demise came here."

"Those who wish for your demise..."

Obviously, Wein referred to the people attacking the mansion.

"I don't get it at all! Why would you let them kill you?!"

"Because it's what they want, and I have the power to give it to them."

"...!"

Lightning surged through Ninym. Although she tried to deny it, the prince's broken logic began to paint a bigger picture.

It couldn't be. There had to be some mistake.

"F-fine!" Ninym shouted in desperate protest. "But there are other people who want you to live!"

"Yes, and both hold equal value to me. So I've prioritized the side with more enthusiasm," Wein replied plainly. "That's why I spent my days here—to avoid needless casualties once the fervor of those who seek my death won out."

Pieces of the puzzle rapidly assembled themselves in Ninym's mind. She'd always had questions.

Why had a nation's prince chosen to live in such a remote place? And why had he brought only one guard? Was it truly to make his death easier? Could the truth be so absurd?

"...Are you stupid?!" Rage tinged Ninym's shaking words. "That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard!" In that rage, sorrow. "Don't you care about your life?!" She knew the answer but had to ask anyway.

"Not at all."

Now Ninym understood.

Wein was like the magic lamps from old stories. They granted every wish and desired nothing. A lamp was just a tool, after all. Its sole power was to serve others.

Unlike most people, Wein could become a magic lamp. It was his only strength and authority, so nothing felt precious.

If asked for gold, he offered it. If told to scorch the continent to a flat plain, he obliged. If instructed to become a diligent prince, he would. If ordered to hand over his life, he relinquished it. For someone as detached as Wein, every desire was equally worthless.

“You’re such an idiot.”

Once, Ninym had considered Wein to be her kind savior. It was sad to know he saw no difference between her plea for rescue and the assassins’ attempt on his life.

She was furious. Ninym had cherished their days together, even though they were too few. It wounded her to realize Wein cared nothing for that time. More than anything else, though, his bleak reality left her rattled. How could the boy who saved her endure such heart-wrenching loneliness?

“You can think about it later,” Wein said dismissively. “You’ll never find your path if you get caught up in this.”

He was right. Ninym was only a young girl. She couldn’t put out a fire or defeat the assassins. And she lacked the strength to drag Wein to safety against his will. No one would condemn her for fleeing alone.

And yet...

...Ninym nonetheless took Wein’s hand.

“What’s this about?”

“Don’t accept death so easily.” The intensity in Ninym’s voice surprised her.

“It’s what the people want.”

“That doesn’t mean you have to go along with it.”

“I have no reason to refuse.”

“You do!”

If Wein was indifferent to everything because he cherished nothing, then a single grain would be enough to tip the scales. Ninym held his hand tightly.

“I’ll become important to you!”

This was her own naïve arrogance. Such an act would demean Wein’s divine nature.

However, in that moment, Ninym vowed that no matter who stood in her way, she wouldn’t allow the prince to die alone.

“How?” Wein asked after a brief pause. “How will you become important to me?”

“You think I know?!” Ninym shouted. “You tell me! How should I win you over?!” Wein gave her a perplexed look, but the girl pressed on. “If you don’t know, either, then we’ll put our heads together and figure it out! So don’t die here, Wein!” Her eyes blazed, yet the boy’s expression remained a mystery.

This latest silence felt longer than any before it. All the while the flames crept nearer.

“...I’m not sure,” Wein muttered finally.

His response struck Ninym like a boulder. Was that scale truly so immovable? Her heart churned with disappointment, vexation, and sorrow. Anger soon followed.

Ninym was absolutely incensed. How could Wein say that after hearing such despair? He had to be mocking her. She thought he deserved a slap for it.

“Wait, just calm down,” Wein interrupted as though he’d sensed Ninym’s intent. “I meant I’m not sure how we should escape.”

“What...?”

“Once the assassins realize my body isn’t here, they’ll search the mansion more carefully and discover the escape route. We’ll need to find another way.”

In other words...

Ninym beamed as Wein's meaning dawned on her.

"Your Highness!" came a deafening roar from outside the mansion. "Are you all right, Your Highness?! I'm here to save you! So please, hold on a bit longer!"

The children couldn't see the situation beyond the storage room, but the voice belonged to Raklum. Help had arrived. Ninym almost sobbed with relief, but Wein grimaced.

"So Raklum's back...and he's probably outnumbered."

Ninym gasped. Yes, even a man of his skill hardly stood a chance against the many killers who surrounded the mansion.

However, a second voice soon followed Raklum's.

"Hurry, His Highness is inside! His safety comes before pursuit of the enemy!"

It was Levan. Numerous others could be heard, too, as well as the clash of swords.

"I see. Levan had a few extra soldiers stashed away," Wein remarked.

The endangered prince had preferred minimal protection, but that didn't mean his vassals had been content to do nothing. And although Wein didn't know it, Levan considered Ninym the key to the Flahm's future. Of course he'd assign a secret unit to keep a close eye in case of an emergency.

"Um..." This sudden good fortune left Ninym dumbfounded, yet she still held Wein's hand tight. He urged her forward.

"Come on, Ninym. We'll be safer outside with Raklum and the others."

"R-right."

The two escaped hand in hand and didn't let go until they reached the adults.



When Ninym awoke, she stared at her hand and clenched it several times. Years had passed since then, but she could still feel the sensation of Wein's hand squeezing hers back.

"I need to tell him everything."

Just like that, Ninym's mind was made up.

Wein's mysterious behavior of late had worried her, and there was no easy answer to the situation with the Flahm. So Ninym had taken everything on herself.

However, that had been a mistake. Ninym needed to share all her problems and frustrations so they could rack their minds and stew over them together. The faint sensation in her palm confirmed this was the right answer.

"I should hurry."

Ninym sat up. The meeting was likely still in progress, but she'd go to him regardless. The very thought made her heavy heart feel lighter.

However, a knock came at the door as she dressed. It was Levan.

"Master Levan? What is it?"

Ninym immediately harbored two concerns. The first was for Levan's presence here when he ought to have been with Wein, and the second was for his grave expression.

"Did you run into a problem with Caldmellia?"

The young woman paled. Experience had taught her that even Wein wasn't infallible. Levan shook his head, though.

"No, our negotiations just ended. Once several conditions have been met, Natra shall side with the West."

"As part of Wein's plan, correct?"

"...Indeed."

Ninym sighed with relief, yet she couldn't help but notice Levan's frown at the mention of Wein's name.

"Master Levan, did something happen between you and His Highness?"

"..."

His silence was telling. The meeting with Caldmellia had concluded without obvious incident, yet Wein and Levan apparently came to a disagreement afterward. Even so, Ninym remained positive.



“Master Levan, let’s speak with Prince Wein together. I’m sure a solution will present itself if we’re completely honest.”

Her words sang with confidence and fresh optimism. Even the most clueless outsider would’ve agreed her approach was for the best. Levan shook his head, however.

“That won’t be necessary. Rather, it’s impossible.”

“What do you mean?”

An unshakable foreboding threatened to overwhelm Ninym when she saw Levan falter. The man forced himself to meet her gaze.

“Prince Wein died moments ago.”

“.....What?”

Ninym didn’t process a single word.

“Wh-what? Died?”

“To be more precise, I killed him.”

Levan had killed Wein.

The simple confession took Ninym several seconds to process. Her blood ran cold, and she began to tremble violently.

“Y-you’re lying. Right, Master Levan?”

“I am not.”

He flatly dismissed her desperate, choked denial.

“Th-then it must be a joke or mistake.”

“Does that sound like me?”

“Ngh... Ah...”

She couldn’t argue.

As Levan said, he would never lie or make a joke in such poor taste, nor would he mistake reality so terribly.

Did that mean he’d really killed Wein?

“For the sake of the Flahm’s greatest wish, I had to remove any threats swiftly. And Ninym— No, descendant of the great Founder. From now on, you shall be our symbol.”



Levan's words seemed unreal but rooted Ninym to the spot nonetheless. She only understood this wasn't her chosen path.

Future generations would call this era "the Great War of Kings."

As news of Wein Salema Arbalest's death spread like wildfire, the continent faced its darkest days yet.



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## ↑ Epilogue

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“Your Highness! Forgive my impudence, but such danger was due to your reckless judgment!”

“I must agree with Sir Levan. I cannot bear to imagine what might have happened if he hadn’t stationed hidden reinforcements nearby...”

After they fled the fire, Wein and Ninym safely reconvened with Raklum and Levan. The assassins were driven back and the fire extinguished, but remaining in a half-destroyed mansion was risky. The group thus decided to abandon it for the time being and seek shelter in the town inn where they’d met previously. Upon arrival, Raklum and Levan had immediately reprimanded Wein.

“We’ve reached the town without incident, but our presence is a distraction. Soon enough, everyone will know an esteemed individual resides here. For the sake of your well-being, I wish to return to the palace as soon as possible...!” Levan insisted.

“We drove back the earlier assassins, but there could be remnants. The terrain is unfamiliar, and it will be difficult to maintain proper defenses here. I understand that a foot soldier like myself has no right to speak up, but I don’t believe it’s realistic for Your Highness to hide away in another villa.” Raklum offered his own candid advice as well, and Wein gave a small sigh as both adults drove him into a corner.

“Yes, you’re right. I won’t leave the palace again.”

“Your Highness...” Levan could not mask his surprised delight.

“Prepare for our return immediately. We’ll leave once everything is ready.”

“Yes, of course!” Levan hurried out of the room.

“...Are you sure about this?” Raklum questioned. It seemed odd to him that Wein would so easily accept.

“The question of whether we’ve seen the last of them aside, those who seek my death suffered a harsh failure. There is no longer any need to hide. Am I wrong?”

“...No, it is as you say,” Raklum replied with obvious displeasure.

“Besides, I think highly of your loyal service. You’ll be rewarded once we return, so look forward to it.”

“Yes, Your Highness. Thank you very much!” Raklum offered a deep bow and took Wein’s hint to excuse himself. Ninym immediately appeared as if next in line.

“Um, may I come in, Your Highness?”

“Sure.”

Once she had permission, Ninym approached, took a deep breath, then gave an aggressive bow.

“I-I’m so sorry! I said something unbelievably rude to you!”

Her head had cooled once the adults took her and Wein to safety. Upon realizing what she’d said, she made up her mind to apologize.

“It made for a change of pace,” Wein replied.

Ninym’s stomach flipped. Such a vague comment skirted the edge of forgiveness and condemnation.

She looked up timidly, hoping to judge the prince’s mood.

Wein was smiling.

“...Wow.”

“What is it?”

“Well...I think this is the first time I’ve ever seen Your Highness smile,” Ninym said.

Wein gave a look of surprise and touched his lips, suggesting he’d never realized as much. It was a peculiar sight, and Ninym couldn’t hide her own smile.

“Anyhow, what will you do next, Ninym?” Wein asked. “You said you want to become important to me. Does that mean you’ll join the palace staff?”

“No, I’ll return to my village for now,” Ninym answered readily. “I’ve

considered what I should do, but I'm not sure yet. At this rate, I'll only be a burden if I stay by Your Highness's side. First, I need to become someone you can depend on for support."

"Well then, you'd better go home and train."

"Yes. As Your Highness knows, the Flahm serve as aides to the royal family. I was a candidate to become Princess Falanya's aide, but I've decided I'll be yours instead, Prince Wein!"

Ninym spoke with firm resolve. Her previous confusion and despair had been replaced by a vivid glow.

"Traditionally, a male royal is assigned a male Flahm, and a female royal is assigned a female Flahm. It won't be easy."

"I'll work hard for what I want!"

"I suppose I could grant it in a heartbeat."

"No thanks!" Ninym briskly refused.

"In that case, I'll await the day you return to serve me."

"Okay! I'll do my best!"

The dramatic fate that first began when a boy and a girl ran away from home thus became a dear promise. Memories faded, but the bond between them would forever shine brightly.





“Also, Your Highness, um, if I become your aide...”

Ninym whispered the rest in Wein’s ear.

“Hmm? I see. I don’t mind, so long as no one’s around. Visit anytime.”

“Really? Okay—I’ll see you soon, so wait for me, Wein!”

“I look forward to it, Ninym.”

Ninym nodded enthusiastically, and Wein smiled once more.

## Afterword

It's been a while, hasn't it? I'm Toru Toba. Thank you very much for picking up the twelfth volume of *The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt* (*Hey, How About Treason?*).

This time, the spotlight is on Ninym! She's been with Wein since the first volume, but the stakes are higher than ever! I knew I needed to write a story like this at some point, and I think a lot of readers felt the same way. I hope you enjoyed it!

By the way, what did you think of the anime adaptation? Those twelve episodes seemed to fly by. Watching Wein and the others come to life was so much fun, but I was also sad to see it end. I hear a lot of creators are struck by a sense of loss after the final anime broadcast and feel out of sorts. I wondered if that was true, and it totally is. I'm out of sorts.

In any case, I'll pick myself up and keep writing.

Now, on to my usual thanks and apologies.

First, to my new editor, Sugiura. I'm so sorry for already causing you so much trouble! We're approaching the climax, so please stick with me until the very end!

I'd also like to apologize to my illustrator, Falmaro! Still, your illustrations were as wonderful as ever. Thank you so much!

I'm also very grateful to you, the readers. It's exciting to know the anime has inspired so many to check out the source material. I'll continue to do my best for old and new fans alike.

Emuda's manga adaptation is also a huge hit on the *Manga Up!* app, so please be sure to check it out!

I have plenty of surprises in store for the thirteenth volume. Will a ray of light shine down on the tumultuous continent as powers and motives collide? I'll put my heart into every word, so please look forward to it. See you next time!

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The Genius Prince's Guide to Raising a Nation Out of Debt (Hey, How About Treason?) 12

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Translation by Jessica Lange

Cover art by Falmaro

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TENSAI OUJI NO AKAJI KOKKA SAISEI-JYUTSU *SOUDA, BAIKOKU SHIYOU*  
volume 12

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