
OKOBORE HIME
TO
ENTAKU NO KISHI

The Leftover Princess and the Knights of the Round

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Translator's notes:

The Japanese honorifics were kept in the translation of the dialogues of the characters to show the respect or adoration shown by the characters. Footnotes were provided upon the first appearance of the honorific in the chapter to explain it.

Thoughts are signified by '*italics*'.



CHAPTER III THE KNIGHT AND THE ASSASSIN

The Royal family of Sommevesle, the high ranking officials of the Royal Chivalric Order and all knights not on guarding duty gathered in the Great Hall of the Royal Castle for an important ceremony. The atmosphere inside the Hall was tense. An event as grand as this was very rare and all those in attendance would serve as witnesses as their future queen knighted the Knight of the First Seat of her Knights of the Round.

Astrid, seated at the back in the audience seat, gazed from afar his senior and the princess he so admired.

'This is my first time seeing a knighting ceremony.'

When Astrid heard that Duke accepted Leti's invitation to be her knight, he asked his senior why because Duke had hated the notion before. And Duke's answer was, "—because she is a master worth offering my life to."

That was probably the answer Astrid was hoping to hear all along. When he asked other knights why they swore loyalty to their masters, most of their answers were because of duty or because they were invited.

'They will truly mean every word in the Knight's Oath.'

Leti wanted Duke to be her knight. Duke wanted Leti to be his master. This was how the Knight's Oath should be, both parties wishing for the other. Astrid enviously looked at the two persons he respected.

Leti, in her beautiful white dress, stood in front of Duke, who was kneeling on one knee with his head bowed deeply.

“With a sword on thy right and a shield on thy left, dost thou swear loyalty to me till the day thou die?” The master’s dignified voice filled the Great Hall like a wonderful melody. Then the knight, with an equally dignified voice, answered his master’s call.

“With a sword on my right and shield on my left, I swear loyalty to thee, my master, till the day I die.”

“Thou art my knight.”

Leti passed on the half-closed sword to Duke. Duke then returned the sword to its sheath, and this metallic sound declared to all that the knighting ceremony was over. The crowd cheered and applauded. Astrid joined in his hands as well.

‘...But I wonder why...’

Astrid couldn’t comprehend why he suddenly wanted to stain Leti’s immaculately white dress scarlet.

Leti could no longer be the carefree princess she was before. In other words, she couldn’t let herself be occupied about the assassin incident any longer. She had to prioritize her responsibilities as the crown princess, and today’s tea party was part of that.

“Duke, stay here. A maid shall come to show you the way to a drawing room where you can stay for the while.”

Leti left Duke and opened an ornate door with her one hand since the other was occupied with a big basket.

“A good day to you Prince Guido, Prince Friedhelm, today’s weather is perfect for a tea party, is it not?”

The weather was a heavily clouded sky, as if representing the relationship between the three eldest royal children of Sommevesle. Leti was the one who suggested for the three of them – Friedhelm, Guido and her – to have a private tea party on their own without any outsiders. However, even Leti was not sure whether they could really hold a simple conversation that was even long enough for the tea to go cold.

“What is inside that basket?” asked Guido, the prince with the classic beauty despite his normally grumpy face.

Guido, the Second Prince of Sommevesle, shared the same steel-blue eyes and golden locks with Leti. Even Leti, who was undeniably confident about her own beauty, openly admitted her defeat to Guido. Both the jovial, amiable Friedhelm and the cold, serious Guido were Leti’s half brothers. But Leti and Guido looked so similar one would forget they were born from different mothers.

“I baked a cake for this particular occasion. I knew for certain you would be serving us tea alone.”

Leti took off the white coverlet of the basket and took out a small wooden box.

“Sweets are banned here.”

“Stop nagging, you’re a man. Try and learn something from Leticia,” Friedhelm jokingly said to his fussy younger brother.

Guido warned them again not to litter cake crumbs in his villa, and then asked the maid to bring out some plates and cutlery for the cake. Leti deftly cut it into six slices and placed a slice on a plate for each of them. But no one dared to lift a fork and taste the cake.

“...How about taking a bite? I did not poison it.”

“Then why don’t you take a sip of tea? I didn’t poison it either.”

“Well... I just remembered there was this recent poisoning incident that happened and... *Aaabbb*... I knew this would happen!” Friedhelm gruded, slouching on his chair.

It was already expected that the three of them couldn’t possible have a peaceful tea party. The only reason Friedhelm agreed to Leti’s suggestion of harassing Guido with cakes and tea was because he still felt guilty about the last incident¹. He also understood what Leti wanted to achieve with this tea party and he

¹ See Chapter II.

was in perfect agreement that they had a lot of patching up to do with regards to their filial relationship.

“I shall be eating the same cake as you will. So if you die, I shall as well.”

“You baked the cake and cut it yourself. Of course I’d be cautious.”

“I could not possibly do such a complicated thing of separating the poisoned portion with the normal one. If anything outside of the recipe was mixed in to the batter, the cake would no longer rise.”

Leti, irritated how things were going, dumped the slices of cake on their plates into the box and shook it.

“Oi!”

“If I do this, you would no longer mind at all, would you? If this cake is truly poisoned, then they shall find our corpses together.”

Leti continued on shaking the box, producing unpleasant, squishy sounds that perfectly reflected the chaos happening inside the shaking box. Her two older brothers said not a word to stop her.

“I guarantee you the taste. It will be the same as before but I doubt it will be presentable.”

Leti divided again the squished cake for the three of them indifferently. Friedhelm looked at the pitiful cake and whispered to his younger brother.

“Hey, I already feel bad for what I did, better be one too. *Geez*, why do *I*, of all people, have to eat a cake like this?”

“...Me too...”

Friedhelm took a bite of the cake and couldn't help exclaiming his surprise to its taste. True, the cake no longer looked appetizing, but it was delicious.

“Didn't think you could bake. This is good.”

Guido nodded in agreement to Friedhelm's compliment.

“What's today's business?” asked Guido.

“We shall only have small talk for today's tea party, Prince Guido. I do believe you are aware that I have gained my first knight a few days ago.”

“Yes. I see you have started to settle in.”

Guido thought that the topic would be a bragging contest about their knights, but Leti's small talk didn't end in small talk.

“I have a suggestion, and I think this will be fair for everyone. What do you say about giving me some of your knights, four from Seventh Heaven² and five from Valkyrie³?”

“I refuse,” said the two princes.

“What a pity,” was Leti’s nonchalant reply to the immediate rejection of her brothers. She took a sip of tea. She didn’t feel any sting to her tongue, so she was sure the tea was not poisoned.

“That ain’t small talk, that’s business. Small talk means more trivial topics such as asking how things are going with your lover, or something along those lines,” explained Friedhelm.

“Lover?” Leti asked, tilting her head to one side.

“Duke?”

“Oh. Well, his face is a little different from my tastes.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. Your ideal face is that of Lion King Alexander, right? I really don’t get what you see in him. I mean, that portrait he has in the Gallery could warrant him the title, ‘Serial Killer King.’”

“Well then, in the living, who is the best one you like? I shall search for the one that will best fit your tastes.”

“Play fair, Guido!”

² Friedhelm’s private chivalric order

³ Guido’s private chivalric order

And in the end, their supposedly casual tea party ended up to be a business meeting over tea and cake.

While the tea party of the eldest royal children was becoming a true business meeting, Duke was waiting for his master in the drawing room usually used by the knights of Valkyrie. However, the room today was empty, so Duke simply took a random book to pass time. As he was absent-mindedly reading a line of poetry, a knock echoed in the room.

“Please excuse me... Oh, Senpai⁴!”

Astrid’s head came peeking in from the door. The two knights were surprised to see each other in such an unlikely place and asked the other what they were doing there.

“I’m on escort duties to my master. I’m waiting here till their tea party ends. How ‘bout you? Since when did you enter Valkyrie?”

“Ah, no, I was being recruited and they told me to take a look at how they work.”

Duke then understood why Astrid was called to Guido’s villa. Astrid was the number one unaffiliated rookie of the Royal Chivalric Order. He was also being recruited to Friedhelm’s

⁴ Senpai – a Japanese honorific used in addressing one’s senior

Seventh Heaven and Duke thought Astrid might be joining either one in the near future.

“Then, Her Highness is here?”

“Surprised? I did not believe it either, but ‘tis true, and even Prince Friedhelm is here.”

Duke wanted to add that such a gathering would be more believable if Leti said they’d have a confidential meeting or matters to discuss with each other when he noticed the change in Astrid’s eyes.

“Princess Leticia... is here.”

Astrid’s normally gentle green eyes turned into a murky moss color upon uttering Leti’s name. Duke thought it might just be his imagination, but his instincts told him to be on guard.

“You’re waiting for Prince Guido, right? Why don’t you accompany me for a while?”

Duke did not want to leave Astrid alone. He threw his book away and tapped his fingers on the chess board.

After some time – enough for two servings of tea to get cold – a maid came in relaying a message that the tea party was already over. Duke stood up, deciding in his mind what to say to Leti, whether he’d express his surprise that it ended early, or his congratulations for being able to keep a normal conversation for that long.

“Next time, I shall bake cookies that are so identical to each other; you will not be able to tell the difference. So brace yourselves for that.”

Duke raised his hand a little to inform Leti of his presence as his master was leaving her brothers with her gruesome goodbye.

“Oh, Astrid, since when did you join Valkyrie?” asked the surprised Leti when she saw Astrid standing behind Duke. Astrid blushed and violently shook his head sideways, clarifying that he was just there to observe Valkyrie and had not joined them.

“And here I was thinking to have Astrid fill in the seat I reserved for Duke in Seventh Heaven. Hey, Duke, why don’t you help me in convincing him?”

“Unfortunately, I am the type who lets my juniors fend for themselves. Princess Leticia, if you would excuse me, I’d like to ask for a few moments with Prince Friedhelm.”

“You may.”

“Until I return, please stay by Prince Guido’s side.”

It was the best way Duke could think of to warn Leti about Astrid since he could not say it directly. He then took his leave and signaled Friedhelm with his eyes to follow him.

“What’s the matter? Is this something you don’t want Leticia to hear? Like some problems on your night life?”

Duke sighed deeply at Friedhelm’s misunderstanding and told him it was something serious.

“It’s about Astrid. You already have him investigated, don’t you? You are recruiting him for Seventh Heaven after all.”

“Of course I had. I’m recruiting him.”

“...What about his past?”

“Clear.”

“...Clear? I see.”

Duke was already starting to feel relieved when Friedhelm clarified his answer.

“Clear, as in blank. No matter how much we searched and investigated him, we found nothing. You do know what this implies, right?”

‘Nothing’ meant Astrid did not come from normal society.

“From the scarce information we got, it seems like he was a former mercenary, though unaffiliated to any guild. But that still warrants him as ‘criminal’ in this world.”

“And yet you’re still recruiting him for your Seventh Heaven?”

“Better to have him on my side than the enemy’s. Guido obviously thought of that as well.”

The ever-so-meticulous and careful Second Prince definitely already had Astrid investigated and came up with the same conclusion as Friedhelm – that Astrid would a better pawn than any other normal knight. Or to put it in a different way, if he was not yours, then you'd better be careful around him.

With Duke and Friedhelm having their own conversation, the three – Leti, Guido and Astrid – were left to their own devices. Astrid, being considerate, took a few steps away from the royal siblings and did not join in their conversation.

Leti positioned herself somewhere near Guido so she could shield him if anything happened, and she could still keep an eye out for Astrid.

“Is Queen Sophia doing well? I have not had the time to visit her recently.”

Leti began a conversation with Guido while monitoring Astrid's actions. Guido, as requested by Duke, decided to accompany Leti until her knight returned.

“The last time I had visited her was four months ago.”

“Then there is no point in me asking you since the last time I visited her was three months ago.”

“Do visit her more often. I'm sure she'd be glad to see you.”

“I really want to, but things have been difficult and complicated ever since I became the crowned princess.”

Guido’s mother, the Second Queen Consort Sophia, used to adore Leti. She treated Leti like a much younger sister when Leti’s mother died. She was a very warm and kind person and used to tell Leti to “take care of Guido.”

I am sure it meant to help Guido once he became the king... But...’

Leti did not return Queen Sophia’s kindness with resentment, but she was doing something near that so it was hard to face her.

“You could have easily come up with a clear decision for this,” whispered Leti. She wanted to be like Guido, who could clearly divide things between their merits and demerits, between what would be advantageous for him or not. But she couldn’t make herself think that way despite knowing it was the best way for a ruling queen. Leti silently admitted the only common thing she and Guido shared was their looks.

Duke and Friedhelm came back only a few moments after they had just left.

“Prince Friedhelm, Prince Guido, if you would please excuse me...” Leti bid her brothers goodbye and let Duke carry the emptied basket.

“...I would not go as far as to call it meaningful tea party, but it was not meaningless either,” continued Leti.

“Well, I think it was meaningless since we did not come up with at least one agreement of sorts despite having the three of us present,” Friedhelm declared, despite knowing Leti’s true intentions for the tea party. Guido did not say anything, but he was most likely in agreement with his older brother.

“I did not suggest this tea party to have any agreements between us. But if you feel it to be so meaningless, then let me make it meaningful now. I shall tell you a hint for my ideal husband. You did ask me about that earlier,” Leti said to her brothers with a confident smirk on her face.

“My first love, or rather first loves, were Friedhelm-onii-sama⁵ and Guido-onii-sama. A pleasant day to you...” Leti curtsied and was about to turn around when Friedhelm grabbed her arm to stop her. He looked at Leti with eyes full of sincerity that any other lady would have swooned and fell for him with his gaze alone.

“Leticia, no, Leti. I...I have hidden this for the longest time. I am actually my mother’s illegitimate son. She had an affair with a different man and I was the fruit of their relationship.”

“I do not have anything against your perfect delivery and timing but I find it irritating,” Leti rebutted immediately to her brother’s joke. Friedhelm was nothing else but an older brother to her.

⁵ Onii-sama: Onii =Older Brother | Sama = formal honorific for a high person

“There was actually a rumor during the time of my birth that I was switched at birth and...” Now, it was Guido taking his turn.

“You should practice more in your delivery of jokes because you make it sound truthful,” was Leti’s reply.

Leti was trying to figure out in her head whether Guido said his spiel because he thought it will be profitable for him or if he was just simply going with the flow of the moment. Leti sighed, feeling the heaviness of having stupid brothers. She signaled Duke to get ready and they soon left Guido’s villa, leaving behind Friedhelm, Guido, and Astrid.

“Aaaah! Please don’t worry about me! I promise not to mention this to anyone! I swear!” exclaimed Astrid.

Friedhelm suddenly felt all the tension in him disappear with Astrid’s unexpected reaction. Guido, on the other hand, was already analyzing the hint Leti gave and tried to come up with any point of similarity between them. He came up with the conclusion that Leti probably liked blondes.

Meanwhile, Astrid felt relieved upon hearing Friedhelm’s explanation and had his misunderstanding, about Friedhelm being an illegitimate son and Guido being switched at birth, cleared. Then he heard a voice whisper to him.

“Today’s not the best time to do it. Kill her some other time.”

The voice did not belong to either Friedhelm or Guido, but Astrid did not find anyone else around.

“Huh?”

“What’s wrong, Astrid?”

Astrid took another look around, but there was no one else in the area.

“I thought I heard a voice but... it might just be my imagination,” Astrid replied, his hands sweating coldly for some unknown reason.

Duke immediately took his leave from his master after he had escorted her back to the Royal Villa. It would be his shift soon, and he had to return to the Royal Chivalric Order’s camp. However, he remembered something and turned around to ask Leti.

“Your Highness, what’s your opinion on Astrid? Do you want him as your knight?”

“As I had said before, taking him in will be troublesome. Any master who wishes to have him must be fully prepared to accept him.”

Astrid was someone who unconsciously killed the sound of his footsteps despite jumping down from a high place. That feat alone

showed how much he had absorbed in his person the habits of an assassin. To add to that, he was currently the most likely suspect as the Ghost Energy's host. Leti could not make him her knight even if she wanted to.

“I see.” Duke's eyes clearly showed relief in Leti's answer.

Leti wanted to dig deeper into the topic because it was Duke who had kept on recommending Astrid to be her knight in the past.

“Is there anything wrong with Astrid?”

“No, nothing.”

Duke still was not certain and had no proof that Astrid was the one who targeted Leti recently. It was nothing but a hunch, and he could not tell Leti about it without any proof. It was just one of the countless possibilities.

“Your Highness, if you have any business with me, don't go to the camp alone...no, don't go there even if you're not alone. Send a word and I will come here as soon as possible.”

Leti obediently nodded to Duke's warning and they parted ways – Duke to the camp and Leti to her room. Upon coming back to her room, she went by the window and looked out to where the Order's camp was, thinking about her knight and her knight's junior.

‘Duke is trying to prevent any contact between me and Astrid. I see he has noticed already.’

Duke would most likely investigate and monitor Astrid as much as he could. Though it was the right thing to do for a knight, his actions might limit the Ghost Energy’s activity and this would work against Leti’s plan to finish this case as early as possible. Leti liked smart men, but a less smart one would have been better for this situation.

“Well, if that is the case, this will be the best opportunity for me to see how far he would go.”

How far would Duke go as her knight?

Leti did not want to involve Duke any further with the Ghost Energy, but since he was already having his own suspicions, it would already be impossible to stop him. So the best way to deal with this was to use Duke and let the Ghost Energy move as it pleased. That way Duke would have to choose between her and Astrid, in the end. And if she was not chosen, the wound from that would not be too deep.

“No, Leti! That is *not* how you want yourself to be... You do not want to be that kind of queen!” Leti reprimanded herself.

‘You chose him to be your knight, the person you can trust. It is the weakness of your heart that stops you from trusting him.’

“Do not *use* Duke... *believe* him.”

If Astrid was really the Ghost Energy host, then she would not let Duke be connected to it, even if she had to order him so. If Astrid was just a former assassin, then she would give Duke the freedom to do as he pleased until he was satisfied, and she would not utter a word about it. The most important point for this case was to move as carefully as possible, even if she had to rely on Duke.

‘Please give me the courage to the step forward and the strength to believe, not the weakness to doubt.’

Leti decided to make a bet and shake Astrid a bit to see if he really was the Ghost Energy’s host. She asked her servants to investigate Astrid’s patrol shift and route. Based on the information they gathered, the best spot for her to wait for Astrid was by the North Cemetery – the place where the royalty of the past were to rest, and no one could enter it without permission. It was the best place to do something that should not be seen by other people.

Rain had poured incessantly down on Sommevesle for the past few days. So when it stopped this morning, it was the perfect day for Leti to put her plan into action. She left the castle and headed towards the North Cemetery, but upon arriving there, she heard lively and energetic voices.

“Perhaps they are visiting someone. But none of them look familiar to me.”

The clothes of the six children clearly showed they were simple commoners who thought of the cemetery's big stones and lush bushes as the perfect place to play hide and seek.

Leti was not particularly bothered with children playing in the cemetery, but she still decided to warn them like any adult would.

“Children, you should only play here during the day because monsters and ghosts come out here in the night.”

The children looked at each other, then at Leti with an unimpressed expression.

“Adults always say that, but we have never seen a monster!”

Leti was used to dealing with children because of the number of younger brothers and sisters she had. She was not annoyed nor irritated with the children's innocent impertinence, and she smilingly agreed to their observation.

“Yes, indeed. Monsters do not come out here, but a scary knight will come after you instead.”

Leti was thinking of the former assassin Astrid when a different “scary knight” appeared.

“Yeah, she's right. This isn't a playground. This is the Royal Cemetery. Go somewhere else to play.”

Leti heard a low, threatening voice from behind. She quickly turned around and found Duke, sharply glaring at her and the

children. His face was so scary and threatening, a crying child would cry louder if his face were seen. Astrid, few steps behind Duke, was surprised to see Leti outside of the Castle.

With the appearance of the scary knight, the disgruntled children left the cemetery, leaving Leti pressing her temples at how things complicated had become.

‘This is all because I was not able to fully read Duke’s actions. It was an obvious move on his part. He would change shifts to match with Astrid’s to keep an eye on him. I should have anticipated this much.’

“Are you, perhaps, alone Your Highness? I don’t see any of your guards.”

Leti thought it best to give up for now and willingly let Duke scold her and send her home.

“Yes, I am. And yes, I know. I will obediently go back to the castle,” Leti said, raising her hands in defeat, and then walked towards Astrid, who was approaching them.

“...A pleasant day, Astrid. I am glad to see you are working hard.”

“Ah... ah... It’s a pleasure to meet you here, Your Highness!”

No one would ever suspect that the stupidly blushing Astrid was a former assassin. His personality was his biggest weapon. No one could doubt him because of it. Even Leti admitted to herself

that she might have been deceived and not found out about his true identity if she did not chance upon the opportunity.

“Astrid, I will escort Her Highness back to the castle.”

Duke casually went in front of Leti to shield her from Astrid when a child tugged at Leti’s skirt. Duke was about to reprimand the child – even if he did not know who Leti was, what he did was still inexcusable. But Leti told Duke with her eyes that it was fine, and she bent her knees to meet the child’s eyes.

“Hey, have you entered the grave chamber, Miss? Do monsters really come out there?”

“There? Ah, you mean the Underground Burial Chamber where the kings lay? No, monsters do not come out there, but it is like a labyrinth, so promise me you will never go inside even if the lock is broken.”

“A labyrinth?”

“Yes. So promise me you will never go inside.”

The child nodded to affirm his promise, though his eyes were not filled with fear, but with a sparkle of curiosity instead. He ran back to his friends and shared his newly gathered information. The children were already beaming at the door to the Chamber, but decided to leave since Duke kept on glaring at them. Duke was certain those children would come back, so he explained to Astrid why no one was allowed there.

“Make sure to warn off the children whenever you see them playing around here. They are not just being disrespectful. They are putting themselves into danger. This area is secluded, and if ever they get caught up in a kidnapping incident, it’ll be difficult to get any testimonies from around here. Got that?”

Astrid soundly replied to Duke that he did. Astrid was the type of junior who obediently listened to what his seniors would say, so he was generally treated well and kindly, not only by Duke, but by the other knights as well.

“Astrid, I shall be borrowing Duke for a while. Sorry for taking him while he is still on duty.”

“No, it’s fine, Your Highness! I can do the patrol alone! Please take care on your way,” Astrid said as he waved his hand, sending Leti and Duke off.

“The master and her knight...” Astrid sighed, gazing at them walking towards the castle.

Duke was just recently knighted, but seeing them side by side was so natural that it looked like they had been together for a much longer time. He felt proud seeing his senior that way and wished that someday, maybe he could also have a master like that.

And then a voice spoke.

“Why didn’t you kill her? It was just one useless man! It was the perfect opportunity to do it!”

Astrid looked around but found no one who could be the source of the voice.

“...Who...said that? Was that...me?”

Astrid had been hearing this strange voice recently, and he knew not who owned it. Or maybe he did.

Will I just really be an assassin? Can I not be a knight like Senpai? Astrid thought, and his fists clenched until his knuckles turned white. He thought the voice was from the deep darkness in his heart because it was the only explanation he could think of.

Duke followed the ever-so-elegant Leti as they walked back to the castle. He wanted to reprimand her about several things, but decided not to waste his energy. He knew full well that his words would fall on deaf ears. So instead, he pointed out a different thing.

“What you said earlier was not a good warning at all.”

“Earlier?”

“You told those kids that the chamber was like a labyrinth, so they should never enter it. That was like telling them to go inside and explore it! Fortunately, the door to the Royal Burial Chamber is tightly locked, and there is no chance of them getting inside.”

Even if the children wanted to explore the Royal Burial Chamber, it was protected by sturdy doors and locks so they children could not possibly get inside it even if they wanted to.

Duke told Leti not to worry much about it, but she still cast her eyes down in thought, contemplating whether she should tell him about a certain secret only known among the royal family. In the end, she decided to leave it for now and changed the topic.

“You talk to me respectfully when we are public.”⁶

“I put at least that much distinction in public. But if you wish, I shall speak with you in such a formal manner from now on.”

“I have not reprimanded you about it recently, have I? I have my reasons.”

“Now that you mention it...” Duke wondered what made Leti change her mind, and his master proudly provided him the answer.

“At first, I thought you should act becoming of your status, but then I changed my mind. You are just a *youngster* son of a lowly baron.”

“I agree with the lowly baron, but I can’t accept you, a seventeen-year-old girl, calling a three and twenty year old man like me, a *youngster*.”

⁶ The distinction in Duke’s speech is not that obvious in English (sorry for the lack of talent to deliver). But in the Japanese original, it is quite distinct. In public, his language is formal and respectful (*keigo*) but when they’re alone he speaks casually to Leti like they are friends.

True, the world may still consider him a youngster, a newbie or upstart, but Leti was much younger than him – so much younger that she might not yet be still considered under the same category as him. But Leti was not bothered by Duke’s roundabout way of saying she was just a kid and even dared looking at him with teasing eyes.

“Is that so? But I do know something about you.”

“What?”

“That your face is somehow well-liked among the matrons of high society. And that your scowling face is purely intentional to intimidate and drive them away.”

Duke’s shock was stronger than the time Leti slapped him.

“What the—! Who told you that? Prince Friedhelm!?”

“No one. I just knew it. That is the reason why you are called a youngster. But if you could at least seduce or tempt a lady with that face of yours, I shall take back what I said.”

Duke wanted to answer back, “I don’t want to be told that by someone who got flustered with a pretend kiss,” but decided to swallow it all down. He did not know where this might lead, so he just backed down and scolded himself to act as the adult here.

“Ever since you, the youngster, officially took the First Seat in my Knights of the Round, I was worried whether you were being looked down on by the other knights. So I thought that if I could

show the public right from the start that you are special, we could avoid meaningless arguments.”

Leti had satisfied the minimum requirements for the “Best Knights of the Round” when she knighted Duke. All that was left was to work hard to be the *best*. However, due to her choice, some people would think that they should also be appointed as her knight due to different things, such as the influence of their family or their status in society. These self-important people were the ones that might look down on Duke as nothing but a youngster or an upstart son of a lowly baron.

“You are the only one allowed to talk to me in such a casual manner. So be thankful for having a thoughtful master willing to protect her retainer with a weak foothold.”

“Is that so? Then it is my honor to have such a generous master. But I have my own concerns as well. Take, for instance, your sweet smiles for Astrid.”

“Are you forgetting that I am the kind-hearted princess to the public? The only people I do not put up a show to are those who are close to me.”

“Close to you? How come I never encountered the kind-hearted princess? You were the haughty, high-handed queen with me right from the start.”

The first words Leti spoke to Duke were, “I appoint you as my knight. Gratefully accept the first seat in my Knights of the Round

and bow down to me.” It was Duke’s first time to encounter such hauteur. He had not even encountered that much from the arrogant Friedhelm.

“I already meant for you to be part of my inner circle from the beginning, so there was no need for pretense,” Leti asserted.

Duke was about to answer something in return when Leti continued on and asked him an unexpected question.

“...I want to confirm something. Who is stronger, you or Astrid?”

“Our results will be even for a match... at least for now.” Duke indirectly indicated that Astrid would be stronger than him in the future.

“I see,” Leti said, and looked at Duke directly, her eyes piercing and sharp.

“To judge your own abilities objectively is one of your good points. The two of you are evenly matched in a battle between knights...”

Leti’s hair swayed and danced in the wind. She quietly asked Duke, “...How about in a real battle for life?”

Duke felt the weight of Leti’s question.

“Do you remember me saying that any master who wished to take in Astrid would need much confidence and preparedness to

appoint him as a knight? I am considering taking him in. And that is because you are here now.”

Leti openly showed Duke her trust. And Duke, in turn, understood the meaning behind his master’s words – she believed Duke would be able to protect her from Astrid, and that when the need arose, Duke would be able to kill him without any hesitation.

The wind grew stronger, blowing Leti’s golden locks further, covering Duke’s sight. The wind passed and Leti’s shiny hair ceased its dance, but Duke still hadn’t answered.

“I shall give you time. Let me hear your answer then.”

Leti had asked Duke if he was prepared. He thought he was the moment he accepted the First Seat in the Knights of the Round, but...

‘I’d hesitate, for sure, but I...can kill him. But do I really have the strength to do so...?’ Duke shook his head, correcting his thoughts.

‘No, I should not even hesitate or falter, for I am the Knight of the First Seat of her Knights of the Round.’

Leti did not say anything more. She turned around and continued walking towards the castle. Duke silently followed behind.



Later that night after Leti asked her knight's resolve, she found herself in the Knight King's Space and the only other guest was the Lion King, King Alexander.

“Hey, when are you in?”

Leti answered she had just taken in her first knight. Alexander hummed silently and stood up by the window.

“Today's goodbye for me. You do know what I mean, don't you?”

Leti understood the Lion King's complicated yet simple words and asked to confirm, “Is today the eve of...”

Alexander nodded. Tomorrow was the day he would be killed by his own knight, prime minister, and best friend who would be later on known as the Revolution King.

“No! Don't go!”

“But that can't be. I will wake up and face tomorrow. I have long accepted this fate.”

Alexander did not live in Leti's time. If not for the Knight King's Space where the consciousness of the reincarnations of King Christian, the Knight King, gathered and the concept of time did not exist, they would have not known each other. But hearing Alexander would die the next day was not something easy for Leti to swallow.

“...Then promise me.”

“What?”

“That... you will live. You will live and become a pirate who will conquer the Southern Seas and be the king of a country there. That theory existed in my time so promise me you will do just as I said!”

Alexander laughed heartily and commented that it was an interesting theory.

“If I do get past this ordeal and live, I will do as you say. I’ll be a pirate, take over a country across the Southern Seas, and be their king.”

Alexander reached out his little finger to Leti, and she wrapped her own to his, making a pinky swear – just like how children sealed their promises.

“Seeing you makes me think maybe I should have had children. We may not be directly connected by blood, but having descendants ain’t bad at all.”

Alexander reprimanded Leti a lot of times, but despite his harsh words, they were still overflowing with warmth and kindness, for he considered Leti as his great-great-great-granddaughter. Leti was happy and a bit sad to be parting with Alexander, and she wanted to convey this to him.

“I...”

But her consciousness was suddenly drawn back to reality.



“Princess, we are deeply sorry to disturb you, but Sir Duke is...”

Suddenly waking up to her knight’s call caused Leti to be in a foul mood. She was in a middle of an important conversation with Alexander, but then she was able to gradually turn her temper around upon hearing the gist of the situation.

I know it was King Alexander’s last moments...but I have my own reality to prioritize!

She told her maid to ask Duke to wait as she changed her clothes and let him in once she was ready.

“Sorry for disturbing you this late.”

“Quit the niceties. Our priority right now is to search for the children. Where exactly is the place you need permission to enter?”

“The North Cemetery. We gathered all the available knights of the Order to search around the vicinity. They were playing in that area this afternoon, so we might be able to find clues there if they were really kidnapped.”

Duke had disturbed Leti this late in the night to ask for permission to search in the North Cemetery to find any clues regarding the lost children. Technically, it was the King's permission they needed, but it was already late and they were not sure if it was acceptable for them to disturb the King. So they thought that maybe Leti, the heir to throne, could give them the permission instead, so he asked her maid to wake her up, all prepared to receive her anger.

“You may go and enter the cemetery and just report to me later.”

“If we're going to simply remind children to stay away, we wouldn't have bothered asking for permission. But if we're going to do a search, our actions might disturb the place and we need permission for that.”

“I see. I understand. I also have the biggest responsibility for this incident because of the warning I gave them which sparked their curiosity.”

“Responsibility?”

Leti nodded but did not explain any further.

“Let us hurry. Prepare me a horse, not a carriage. There is also no need for a lady's saddle.”

“Thought you'd say that. It's all prepared.”

Duke already knew Leti would join the search when he saw her maid prepare an overcoat and walking boots for her before he even went inside her room. At first, he thought he should stop Leti from coming, but decided otherwise, since he was certain she would find a way to go there. So it was better to let her go under his watch than to let her go on her own.

“Oh? You are not going to stop me?”

“If you want me to, I will. *Your Highness, please stay here because it's dangerous outside,*” recited Duke monotonously.

“Only the King, my father, can order me. We are going.”

Duke smiled wryly, thinking how Leti-like her answer was, and threw her the coat. Leti caught it easily and followed behind Duke's brisk pace without lagging behind with her long, elegant strides. They hurried outside, walking together, side by side.

“Have I ever told you I can ride a horse alone?”

During this time, ladies in their dresses were not supposed to ride horses astride nor alone. They usually rode horses side-saddled with gentlemen leading the horse. A lady of noble birth who could ride horses was considered strange for trying to accomplish an unnecessary skill for a lady. Leti simply learned how to ride one so she would not lose against her older brothers and knew it would be embarrassing for the whole kingdom if their ruler could not even ride a horse alone.

“You’re just a princess on the outside, right? I mean inside, you are exactly like Prince Friedhelm during our Academy days. Your incognito walks and the inconveniences you cause me. They are identical.”

“You know your master well.”

“If there’s anything different, you’re a good actress playing the princess you are truly not, making you the more troublesome one.”

“You really do know me well,” Leti said again, her voice laced with amusement, no trace of her being offended.

“Princess!? Where are you going at this hour?”

“To the North Cemetery. Also...”

Leti gave orders and instructions to her servants who came after her, and she told her guards that they may come if they wanted to. After she had said everything she needed to, she hastened outside.

Leti and Duke, accompanied with three of her guards, headed toward the North Cemetery. When they reached their destination, everyone in the party except for Leti was creeped out by their first experience of a cemetery at night.

“Senpai! By the West Forest... huh? Your Highness!?”

The only knight from the Order awaiting them was Astrid, who could not hide his surprise at seeing Leti outside in the middle of the night.

“Her Highness will help with the search... More importantly, why are *you* here, Astrid? Aren’t you off-duty tonight? Where’s Grantz?”

Duke’s partner for the search was his other colleague, Grantz, but he couldn’t be seen anywhere. Duke took a step forward, shielding Leti with his back.

“Grantz-senpai went with the others heading towards the West Forest. They have gathered information that someone saw the children go that way earlier today. So he asked me to stay here instead and relay the message to you. Will you also head to the forest?”

“Let me think...”

According to the report, the children went to the West Forest, but Duke did not know how reliable the source of information was. While he was weighing his options, whether he should go to the forest or stay in the cemetery, Leti came to a decision and started moving on her own.

“Duke, Astrid, could you try to move that stone away? I would like to check all possibilities I can think of before I go home.”

“Stone?”

Leti was pointing towards total darkness, and they could not see anything. They only knew that the door to the Royal Burial Chamber was somewhere around that direction. Leti held out the lamp and started walking there without even minding the dark. As the lamp lit up the area, everyone saw the stone she was referring to. It was round, and moving it would need some force.

“Even children can move this stone if they do it together.”

“Have you ever tried it?” asked Duke.

“Yes. I am *that Prince* Friedhelm’s younger sister, after all.”

Astrid, the youngest in the group, volunteered to try and move the stone, which was still damp and wet due to the rain last night. He placed both of his hands on it and pushed with all of his might. The stone rolled off easily, revealing a hole behind it.

“What the...?” Duke exclaimed.

Everyone, except for Leti was surprised to find a hole big enough for children to pass through.

“Just as I thought. This hole is connected to the Burial Chamber. I think that this was a hole naturally created due to weathering by the wind and rain. As far as I know, only the royal children know about its existence. The other children might have heard it from someone or found it on their own.”

Leti brought the lamp closer to the hole and examined it.

“A corner of the hole collapsed. I guess the stone rolled back on its own, covering the hole again and maybe trapping the children inside.”

Just as Leti said that, there was a trail on the ground of something sliding in.

“There are also small steps here, and these are yet to dry. Quick, we should confirm if my theory is true.”

“Can you even see it?” Duke asked curiously.

“Yes, I have confidence in my eyes.” *Or rather, confidence in the dark.* Leti could see things clearly even in the night, thanks to one of the Swords of Promise, the Sword of Black Darkness.

“We cannot go inside through this hole. We are going through the front.”

“The front...?” asked Astrid.

“Through the front door. The key has arrived anyway.”

And as if on cue, a white bearded old chamberlain on a horse approached them.

The instructions Leti gave to her servants before she left the castle was for them to fetch the key to the Royal Burial Chamber that was managed in the castle. With her complete preparedness, Duke saw Leti’s other brother, Guido, in her.

“Sorry for calling you this late.”

“Do not be Your Highness. I’m willing to stretch out these old muscles of mine for children the same age as my grandchildren. This is also the other item you have requested.”

Leti checked the small pouch the chamberlain delivered.

“Thank you. You have been very helpful. I shall return the key so you may go back to the castle and rest.”

“No, no, no, no. Taking care of the key is my job. I will wait here for your return.”

The old chamberlain opened the intricate lock and pulled off the chains wrapped around the antique door handle. Astrid and Leti’s guards pulled the doors open, revealing the stairs going down to the Royal Burial Chamber where the past kings of Sommevesle were laid to rest. Astrid took a look into the darkness where the stairs lead and found his knees shaking at the eeriness of the sight. No one would want to stay inside any longer than necessary, for the winds sounded like howls of voices in pain.

“I shall take the lead so we will not get lost. A small search party would be better. Duke, Astrid, come with me. The others should wait here in case the children find their way out on their own.”

Leti’s guards did not really want to leave her alone, but thought it would be fine since her knight, Duke, would be with her. Leti nodded as they told her to take care. The party proceeded down the stairs, Leti leading the way with a lamp in her hands.

“Watch your steps. The floor is slippery due to last night’s rain,” warned Leti. She was followed by Duke and Astrid.

No natural light could reach the underground chamber. The lamp’s flicker was only enough to lighten their steps. It was so dark that they could no longer see the end of their hands if they stretched it out.

“Your Highness, you are the most knowledgeable about this place, so please continue on taking the lead. Astrid, take the rear and be alert in case anything happens.”

“Roger!” said Astrid.

Duke strengthened his guard due to the current situation. In truth, he wanted to take the lead with Leti in between him and Astrid to secure her safety. But with his suspicions, he could not afford having Astrid near Leti.

Her Highness has already noticed the danger around Astrid. I’m sure she’s on her guard as well.’

Duke could only believe in whatever it was Leti possessed. He was prepared, on his guard with his hand on his sword, ready to draw it out anytime. In contrast to the tensed knight was his relaxed master, her voice normal and calm.

“This underground chamber is vast and complicated. I only remember the way inside here because I have been coming here

ever since I was a child, but anyone who would enter here for the first time would definitely get lost.”

Knight King Christian designed this place to be complicated and confusing to prevent the place of rest of the kings from being violated in any way. The path towards the chambers was never straight. There would be numerous turns to make, and drawing a mental map would be difficult. Even Leti did not have a clear map inside her head. It was more of a knowing because of the number of times she had been in the place.

“But in the end, this is just a grave. Getting there would not take much time once you know the way.”

“Ahhh... But this place creepy, isn't it?” Astrid let out in a weak voice. The place was a grave, after all, and something might come out at any moment. Duke was also feeling uneasy being inside the deep, deep darkness, and thought he should have at least brought holy water with him.

“Uhm... have... have you ever encountered anyone not of the living in here, Your Highness?”

“Not of the living? Ghosts? I have not seen one ever, though I really wanted to meet one. I have a lot of questions to ask the Revolution King – like why he killed his master.”

Astrid shrieked and swallowed his breath.

“Se-se-senpai! What should we do if we meet one? Wouldn’t it be treason if we raised our swords against the kings of the past?”

“Worry first if a sword will work against them. We should’ve brought a priest with us. Your Highness, do you have any amulets or holy water we could use?”

“Do not talk to me at the moment. I am currently regretting bringing the two of you here. I should have just searched for the children alone.” Leti couldn’t help but be a bit disappointed at the stupid things the two fully grown knights were saying.

“If I were you, I would be more scared of the living. Which do you think is more frightening? A bloody assassin targeting your life, or a ghost of the past simply floating around? The living is a whole lot scarier.”

“Oh. If you put it that way...” Duke said, agreeing with her opinion just as Astrid butted in.

“I don’t think the bloody assassin can defeat me, so the ghost is still scarier.”

Duke decided to scold Astrid later and tell him that he should agree with the lady for those types of situation even if he had to lie, but Leti, on the other hand, was not even bothered by Astrid’s words.

Silence followed their exchange. Only the sound of their footsteps echoed in the darkness, and the lamp elongated their

shadows into creepy shapes. The two knights couldn't help but truly respect their Princess Leticia, who was fearlessly leading the way. After walking some distance, the group heard the sound of a human voice. Astrid shrieked and started to panic even before he could comprehend the situation.

“A-a-a-a-a voice! There's someone here!!!”

Astrid turned blue and Duke was shaking, already thinking of whether or not there really was a ghost. Leti, on the other hand, gave the two shivering knights a cold stare. The voice they heard was unlike the howls of the wind earlier upon entering the chamber. It was distinctly a human voice.

“...Are you two forgetting the reason why we came in here?”

“Eh? Why? Uhm... To save the children...” answered Astrid.

“Ah!”

Duke and Astrid looked at each other, the cause remembered, and started to work. Astrid ran first towards the direction of the voice, followed by Leti and Duke. Leti pointed the lamp towards their direction and told them help had come. Then a small shadow emerged from the dark and ran towards the search party. The child grabbed Leti's gown, crying and shaking. Leti knelt down and gently hushed the child to calm down.

“Are you alone?”

The child sobbingly answered *yeah* to Leti's question. Duke then urged everyone to hurry outside when Leti told him to wait and passed the lamp to him.

Leti took out the small pouch the old chamberlain delivered to her. The pouch contained a water bottle and some biscuits Leti asked to be prepared for the children.

“Have some water to calm you down.”

Leti gave the child the water bottle, and he gulped everything down. Leti followed up a biscuit to his mouth before he could even ask for it. Leti stood up again and took the lamp from Duke.

“You're surprisingly kind to children...”

“And to women too. Even I share the chivalric spirit of knights.”

The party started to walk again towards the exit. Leti, with the lamp in hand, once again took the lead, followed by Duke with the child in hand, and then Astrid. On their way back, Leti asked the child how he ended up inside, and the story he told confirmed their theory. The child was able to move the stone and then he found the hole and went through it. However, the stone slipped back on its own, trapping him inside, so he searched for a different way out and ended up getting lost in the complicated labyrinth. They continued to walk on towards the exit, and when they saw the door, everyone felt relieved at they could finally get out of the creepy chamber.

“Duke, I will light up the steps, so carry the child and go up to the door. The steps are wet and too steep for a child,” ordered Leti.

Duke did as his master said and went up the stairs carrying the child. Astrid was looking at them from behind, keeping guard at the back when his gaze focused on Leti’s defenseless back and the *voice* once again spoke to him.

“Her back is wide open! Go and kill her! NOW!”

Astrid felt something crawl inside his head. He unconsciously covered his mouth and gritted his teeth to stop any sound from coming out. He also did not realize that he took out the knife he normally hid under his sleeves. Inside his head, a gruesome scene played. He sliced Leti’s white neck with the knife, her blood gushing out from the wound he had just delivered. The blood dyed her elegant dress into a beautiful shade of scarlet. After seeing her writhe in pain, he took out his sword and pierced it into Leti’s stomach, keeping her down on the floor, agonizing in pain as he left the sword inside her. Astrid’s head throbbed in pain as he fought against that scene in his mind, and kept on telling himself that he did not want to do such a horrible thing to Leti.

Then the voice spoke again to him, “Hurry! Fulfill your desire! Your desire to kill the Knight King!”

Astrid shook his head to drive the voice away.

I would never do that. She is the next queen, the master Duke-senpai swore his loyalty to. She is a very kind person and I would never want to kill her.'

Leti, wholly ignorant about the turmoil happening inside Astrid's head, was telling Duke that she was coming up next when they heard something crack. The next moment, Leti found herself thrown out of balance, and Duke instinctively reached out his hand towards Leti. Astrid moved before he could even say look out.

“Your Highness! Astrid!” Duke shouted as Leti and Astrid floated through space and hit the ground. They were both shocked with the sensation of falling down, like their stomachs had flipped. Pain followed upon hitting the ground, with debris falling after them.

Drops of water falling down on Leti's head woke her up. Small rocks rolled down her dress as she stood up.

“Ouch...”

Fortunately, Leti had the Sword of Iron Steel – the sword of protection against physical attacks – so she did not have any wounds or broken bones.

“Now I see why I cannot give this sword away,” Leti whispered as she dusted off her coat.

“The floor collapsed and it will be impossible for us to climb back up.”

This accident was already bound to happen based on how the floor cracked. Weathering due to natural forces had already taken its toll on the old structure. It had not been a problem before, since no one normally came in the area, but due to tonight’s incident, the floor suddenly had to support the weight of three fully grown adults. Gladly, there was no need to worry much since Duke was outside and he saw exactly what happened. He was probably already organizing a rescue party for them.

“Astrid, are you alive?”

“Aw-aw-aw-aw...Your Highness!?”

Leti heard Astrid’s answer somewhere near her. He quickly stood up when he heard Leti’s call and looked around, trying to remember what happened to them. He then realized everything when he saw the hole above them. The voice vanished probably because of the shock he received due to the fall.

I will not do such a thing. As long as I keep my head clear, I will not fall and give in to the assassin in me. Astrid reiterated again in his mind his resistance against what the voice was telling him. He dusted himself off and straightened.

“Astrid, you do have a knife with you, do you not? Could you lend it to me for a while?”

“Eh...?”

“I broke my nail and I would like to fix it before it gets any worse. I only have a spoon with me.”

A confused Astrid handed to Leti his knife, wondering how she knew about it. Leti carefully took the knife and slowly trimmed her ring finger.

“Rest assured, I will not tell anyone about it.”

“Uhhmm...” Astrid took a step back, not knowing what to do now that he had been found out.

“Your abilities were not due to a talent for swords. What you have is an ability for killing. My eyes are very discerning.”

“Eh... ah... ah... I-I see.” Astrid was relieved to know that what Leti referred to was his past and not the murderous thoughts he was having about her recently. But he soon realized he had to deny it.

“No, Your Highness, I am not. Really, I am not.”

“If you insist, then you are not. Though I have a question for you, out of curiosity. Why did you want to be a knight? I am certain you could have taken over your family trade.”

Leti obviously did not believe Astrid’s denial and continued on.

“You are supposed to be a commoner of Sommevesle, are you not? But your obviously learned manner of speaking is giving you

away. You should try and adapt more of the downtown accents. Better be more careful in the future.”

Leti casually threw back the knife to Astrid, and she clearly saw with her *eyes* how he caught it easily despite the darkness.

“I also think you are a bit too flashy for someone in an undercover mission.”

“No... I am not. I just simply wanted to be a knight.”

“And that is the mysterious part for me. Why would someone like you, born and bred to be a part of that trade, want to be a knight?”

Leti continued on with her interrogation, completely ignoring Astrid’s denial. Astrid saw how much Leti knew. He decided to give up the pretense and honestly answer her questions.

“...The most important point for an assassin was for no one to suspect that you are one. So in order to do that, we undergo training and education to be able to disguise ourselves. It was during one of those classes that I came across a picture book about the story of a gallant knight. Ever since then, I dreamt of living in such a world where power is used to protect and not to kill.”

Leti knew that the knight world was not that clean and ideal. And she was sure Astrid knew about it as well, but despite that, he still looked up to that ideal knight.

“Your Highness, have you ever longed for a fairytale’s world because it was something completely different from what you know? I sure did. I longed about it because I knew it was impossible... I truly wanted to be the Astrid I wished I could be, so I left my home and family.”

Astrid tried before to tell the other assassins about his dream of becoming a knight. However, they laughed at him and mockingly told him to give it a try. Hearing that particular sarcastic remark made Astrid realize that it was exactly what he should do, to give it a try, so left his organization as the first step in fulfilling his dream.

Leti acknowledged Astrid’s resolution to make his dream come true. “I understand that feeling.”

“But I am always worried. Worried whether I am smiling correctly or talking properly. I underwent training on how to smile, but I was not really sure whether my smile was how it should look like,” Astrid said with his usual refreshing smile on his face.

Seeing Astrid’s expression, Leti realized that Astrid only had one smile. It was likely because he did not know that there were other kinds of smiles, like a smile hiding sadness, a smile with a tinge of hurt, or a smile that had accepted everything that fate might throw at them.

“Everything about me, my smile, my words, my personality. All of these were created for people to like me... I was not sure whether someone like me had the right to live in this world.”

“The Knight Academy’s course is for two years, correct? That means you are only on your second year of quitting being an assassin. So what are complaining of, youngster?”

Leti, only a year older than Astrid, called him a youngster. If Duke was there, he would have probably blurted out, “Aren’t you as well?”

“I have been called the perfect princess, though that title has recently been degraded to Leftover Princess. Anyway, that title of being a perfect princess was not given to me when I was born. It was something I earned for trying and being one for the past seventeen years. My smiles and my words are all created to be liked by everyone.”

“Is... that so?”

“Yes. Tell me Astrid, do you like Duke?”

“Yes! Duke-senpai is strong and everyone relies on him. He’s amazing!”

“Have you ever felt happy when you are with him?”

“Yes. Just recently, he praised me for good work done and...”

Astrid continued on telling stories of what he did with Duke and the other knights. He probably did not notice, but his expression was different than his usual smile. He looked kind of embarrassed, but still happy, an expression befitting his age.

“Let me ask you one last thing. Do you know anything about the Ghost Energy?”

“Ghost Energy? I’m sorry, I know nothing of it.”

“Do not mind it. I am sorry asking such a strange question.”

‘He does not seem to be lying. Besides, if he really was the host, I am certain he would not have let this perfect chance go to waste. Maybe it is safe to say that he is not the host.’

Her suspicions against Astrid were not yet completely cleared, but there was also the possibility that he was a just a former assassin. The conversation Leti had with Astrid made her think it might be safe for now to trust him and watch him grow. He was doing his best to be his ideal self, and he was currently on his way in making the necessary connections needed to achieve his goal in the Royal Chivalric Order.

“Remember that feeling you have now and never forget that. Try imitating me and what I have done these past seventeen years. Some are still for show, but some had already found their way in me making them a part of who I truly am,” Leti advised.

“Seventeen years...” Astrid looked at Leti with respect, and that respect was already turning into adoration.

“Looks like our rescue has come.”

Small stones started to fall from above and they could hear noisy activity going on outside.

“Your Highness! Astrid!” shouted Duke.

“We are fine! No need to worry!” Leti answered back.

The hustle coming from above suggested there were more people present. Duke might have returned to the castle first to organize a rescue party for them. A rope ladder came down next, and Leti climbed up first.

“...So Her Highness is a senpai doing it for seventeen years, huh...”

Astrid thought maybe he should just try and do what Leti advised him – to just do what he could and be patient. There was no need to rush. Sure, he might still get caught up in the darkness inside him, but someday, just like Her Highness, doing it for seventeen years, and just like his knight-senpai whom he admired, he would reach his goal and be the person he wanted to be.

“Do you want power?” A voice asked.

“Power?”

“Yes, power. Power to be the person you aspire to be.”

“...To be the person I aspire to be...a knight like senpai...”

Astrid’s senpai was a Knight of the Sixth Rank in the Royal Chivalric Order—Duke Barchet. He was desired to become the knight of a wonderful master, Princess Leticia, and Duke himself

wished to be Leti's knight. Duke was exactly like the knight in the picture book he read when he was a child.

“Yeah... I wanna be like him... I want to have that power.”

“Then allow me to grant you that power. The contract has been sealed.”

No matter how much urging the *voice* did to make Astrid kill Leti, it did not work. But when he was asked whether he wanted power to become his ideal knight, he showed a chink in his armor – he showed the desire to have power. Honest and straight people like him were weak against intricate deceptions, and the voice did not let this opportunity pass. It had finally succeeded.

Astrid's body started shaking, shuddering. Something was slowly crawling inside him, taking control over his body. His nails clawed on the wall, screeching as it moved, but the sound was nothing compared to the storm raging inside him.

“I shall become one with your body and will grant you the power you wished for... in exchange for your life!”

Astrid opened his eyes, confused, not only what was happening to him, but also about the unknown memories that were filling his head. These memories belonged to the Ghost Energy, the true identity of the voice inside him.



“No! I did not wish for this power. I don’t need your power! I only wanted to be a... true knight... with my own... strength...”

Astrid’s consciousness cut off, and he was forced into a heavy slumber, like he was slowly sinking down to the bottom of a murky swamp. The stiletto turned paper knife that Astrid did not even know he was carrying slowly entered into his body and set his insides burning.

“Astrid, you may come up next!” shouted Leti in her beautiful voice, echoing inside the pit where Astrid was left alone. He silently climbed up the ladder, and Duke welcomed him, worriedly asking whether or not he was okay.

“...Yes. I am fine.”

The lamp’s light set Astrid’s body aglow, and that sight was reflected in Duke’s eyes. However, a different person was reflected in Astrid’s piercing emerald eyes.

“Oi, Astrid!”

“A steaming hot shower will be refreshing, won’t it, senpai?” Astrid said in his normal cheerful voice, but Duke was not at all convinced and knew he should not let his guard down against Astrid.

“Astrid, stay here. I’m certain the children will no longer dare come back, but still stay for a while, just in case something comes

up. I will send additional members once I get back to camp,” ordered Duke.

Duke was aware that Astrid was off-duty, but he did not want Astrid anywhere near Leti, so he gave that unreasonable order. Astrid nodded in acknowledgment and sent them off, watching them as they headed back to the Castle, leaving him all alone.

“I... I have finally taken over this body! This is truly wonderful! The best body compared to any other bodies I have taken in the past! Burning his life force is such a waste!”

There was no one left to witness Astrid laughing like a lunatic in the middle of the cemetery.

“Your Highness, did anything happen down there with Astrid?” Duke asked as soon as Leti got off the horse in the Royal Stable.

“A conversation. Besides, I do not think Astrid is someone who would do this and that to a lady.”

“Not that. I know you know what I mean. Astrid is...” *planning to kill you*, finished Duke in his mind and conveyed it to his master with his eyes. He knew Leti’s life was in danger, but he did not have any proof, so the most he could do was to warn her and remind her to be careful.

“Anyway, I’ll escort you until your room. And if anything happens again, call me.”

Leti’s villa was filled with maids and servants. If anything happened, there would be an immediate witness. They were on guard all throughout their walk back to the villa, but in the end it was not at all needed, and they reached Leti’s room.

“I’m sorry for disturbing you today. Leave the rest to me. I’ll report to you tomorrow, or rather later. Tomorrow is already coming.”

Hearing Duke say “tomorrow is already coming” made Leti remember a conversation she was having with a certain king before all of this commotion happened.

—“I’ll wake up and face tomorrow. Then I’ll be killed.”

‘Tomorrow is already coming,’ Leti mused. Her time and the Lion King’s time were different. For Leti, it was supposed to be a thing of the past, a part of history, but it felt to her like it was only going to happen when the morrow came.

“Duke, stand right there,” ordered Leti and then she blew off the candle’s fire.

“Oi!” Duke was about to turn around and ask her what she was doing when Leti scolded him to stand still.

“Tomorrow is coming.”

“Yeah, it is.”

“Have you ever, in your life, wished for it not to come?”

“Maybe.”

Then Duke felt something land on his back with a soft thud. Judging from the height and feeling, it was probably Leti’s head.

“...You will never betray me, won’t you?”

The Revolution King was King Alexander’s cousin, best friend and trusted knight. He was the only person who lived after going against the Lion King’s opinion. That showed how much he was trusted, and yet he still betrayed his own master and killed him.

“...You know what, I can’t do it even if you ask me to,” replied Duke.

Leti softly whispered, “I see.”

There was no better answer than the one Duke gave her. Leti thought King Alexander might have had these kind of moments with his knight, and he would never know why he lost it; Leti, too, had no means of knowing.

“Thank you. Good night,” Leti said and her knight took his leave.

Leti would probably no longer drift to the Knight King’s Space tonight. She would simply have a normal dream and hope that the Lion King would fulfill his promise.

“The child did not have any wounds and is completely fine. He was already scolded by his parents, so the Order no longer added to it. As for the West Forest...”

The next day, Duke came back to Leti, reporting what happened afterwards. He was relieved to see she was already back to the princess he knew she was and not the young lady who showed weakness last night.

“Lastly, for the Royal Burial Chamber, we have talked with the Chamberlain regarding the hole and the collapsed stairs. The Order shall take shifts in guarding the place until everything has been repaired. That’s all for the report.”

“Thank you for your work. Take this with you.”

Leti took some papers on the table and gave it to Duke.

“What’s this?”

“A list of candidates for my Knights of the Round. They are persons worthy to be taken note of. They range from being commoners in the Order to high ranked stupid and brainless nobles.”

“What is worthy in taking note of someone who’s stupid and brainless?”

“I did say *high* ranked. They are more useful than *low* ranked fools.”

“Oh. I see.”

Duke looked at the paper and scanned the list.

“I already have the background check of the top ten candidates. The reports are attached there. They will be your future subordinates, so you’d better take a look at those.”

“I understand.”

Duke finished looking at the list and was about to read the background check when the first name he saw was very familiar, and he unconsciously addressed Leti with a simple, “Oi.”

“I remember telling you that the only person allowed to address me that way is my husband. Do you have any questions about the list?”

“Astrid’s name is in here.”

“Astrid Gale is one of the best candidates skill-wise. The rest is up to you.”

Leti first thought that having Astrid as a knight was troublesome, but her opinion was starting to change. Astrid’s desire to be a knight was strong. Maybe she could look over his dark past and see where his future would go. If left free, Astrid would probably end up in either Seventh Heaven or Valkyrie. For

Leti, it would be better if he would choose Seventh Heaven, because Friedhelm could accept him for who he was, including his past.

“That is all for now. And one last thing. Do not forget the evening ball hosted by Lauenstein ten days from now. You will be coming as my knight, so remember to come in your formal uniform.”

“Roger that... Though I feel that it'd be more of a marriage meeting under the pretense of being escorted by Prince Friedhelm.”

“I agree. He has been preparing for this and has been annoying me ever since. We shall take our leave as soon as I can think of a good excuse, so make sure to do whatever it is you need to do and strike conversation with any lady you fancy early in the night. You are currently not in a relationship with anyone, are you not? I suggest you find your partner now, for we shall be very busy in the near future.”

Duke wanted to answer back with, “Are you my mother?” but restrained himself and simply said that he did not have one for now and took his leave to go back to the camp.

“Good morning senpai! Last night was terrible, right?” cheerfully greeted Astrid when he saw Duke approaching the Camp.

Duke, fully alert to Astrid's presence, greeted him back and told him to do his best for the day. As he passed by Astrid, his junior slipped something in his hand. He gave Astrid a questioning look, but Astrid simply looked back, as if he did not do anything.

After walking a few steps, Duke looked around to check if there was anyone nearby and straightened the small piece of paper Astrid gave him.

“A message? — ‘Please don't throw this away.’ What does that mean?”

Duke checked the paper if there was anything else on it but he found nothing. Astrid acted like he didn't know anything about it, so Duke could only guess at the meaning behind the paper.

The next day, the same thing happened in the morning, and then again at night. Now that he had received three pieces of paper, he finally understood what they were for. Each piece was part of a letter.

Please don't throw this away.

I have a favor to ask.

Please protect Her Highness. I will...

Duke could not comprehend why Astrid was doing this. He could have just directly relayed his message or wrote a normal

letter instead of piecing it out. And every time Astrid gave Duke the letter, he always played innocent about it. Duke was completely lost at where, exactly, this was heading – until he received the fourth piece of paper.

“Please don’t throw this away. I have a favor to ask. Please protect Her Highness. I will...” Duke recited from memory, as he had read the messages a thousand times trying to decipher it. And the purpose of the letter was unveiled with the fourth paper.

...tell you how you can kill me.

Duke was a noble, but he had always worn the knight’s formal uniform whenever he attended balls and gatherings as a knight. The formal wear of a Knight of the Royal Chivalric Order consisted of their black uniform, white gloves embroidered with the Order’s emblem, and a cloak showing the knight’s rank, which for Duke was of the Sixth Rank.

Leti said before that Duke was a little different from her tastes, but the way his handsome face complimented his dignified look in his formal wear would make her admit that he could make ladies gather around him. However, his eyes were a bit – no, they were rather sharp and intimidating, and ladies with faint hearts would dare not to go near him.

“Oh, Duke! Dressed up, aren’t we?”

Chapter III – The Knight and the Assassin

“Work. It’s work. I’ll be attending a ball as Her Highness’s guard for the ball at Marquis Lauenstein’s mansion.”

He was leaving the camp’s quarters when he passed by Astrid. Astrid was surprised to see his senior in his formal wear.

“Senpai! You really look like a gentleman! Are you going to a ball with Princess Leticia?” Astrid asked Duke with his usual smile, but it did not reach his eyes – his eyes that looked like that of a predator waiting for the perfect chance to catch his prey.

“Yeah, I am. Could you relay a message for me? Tell him to relax and don’t worry.”

“To whom shall I...”

“To whom it may be indeed. See you later, Astrid,” Duke said, with Astrid sending him off with a freezing glare.

Leti was never one to be swayed by other people’s moods and usually ignored them. But since the person sitting across her in the carriage was her knight, she felt she should at least inquire about him.

“...Is there anything wrong?”

“Nothing,” was her knight’s reply, despite the fact it was written all over Duke’s face that he was in a foul mood. Leti

decided to let the matter go and not press him about it, at least saving her and him from a debate from happening.

The two of them kept their silence until they reached Lauenstein Mansion. Duke finally broke the silence as he assisted Leti in going down the carriage.

“Stay with Prince Friedhelm as much as possible.”

“A true blue member of Prince Friedhelm’s faction, aren’t we? Did he tell you anything?”

There was no need for Leti to stick with Friedhelm, for it was he who would be the one coming to her and introducing her to countless gentlemen he thought were worthy to be her husband, pestering her for opinions regarding them.

At first, Leti thought of going home as soon as she greeted all the necessary people, but as she looked at the gloomy night sky reflecting her mood, she thought she might have to stay longer than necessary.

“Welcome, Princess Leticia. I am honored you have accepted my invitation. Now, I’m sure my wife here would be more than grateful to make her special berry pie for you if you would come and visit us more often, just like how you usually came to play here when you were a child,” greeted the current Marquis Lauenstein. After greeting him, Leti proceeded on to greet his wife, then their

son, and then the other members of the host family and then... and then... and then finally done just right in time before Leti's throat completely dried up. Now that Leti was taking a break from greeting people, Duke, who was watching Leti's interaction with the guests from afar, approached her.

“Your Highness, I would like to leave my post for a moment. An acquaintance is in attendance and...”

“You may go and do as you please. I give you my permission.”

Duke, though a knight for this night's party, was still an heir of a baron, and Leti was sure he had his own share of greetings to do.

“Thank you. Please stay by Prince Friedhelm's side during my absence.”

“He will. I need not come to him; he shall be the one to come to me no matter how much I avoid him.”

“True enough,” Duke wryly agreed and addressed Leti once again before he leave.

“Your Highness, I shall give you my answer here. I will not hesitate to clear any danger lurking around my master... even if the said danger is my adorable junior.”

“Duke?”

“A Knight's vow to thee...” With that, he left.

Leti had asked Duke before if he was truly prepared to be her knight, and he gave her the best answer, but she did not feel joy. What she felt was worry and concern that something was wrong and that she had to stop Duke from going wherever he was headed to.

“Your Highness, how do you do? I hope you are enjoying the night. Your headdress suits you perfectly,” complimented a young lady.

“...Ah... thank you.” The appearance of another conversation partner prevented Leti from calling out to Duke. She searched for him with her eyes and saw him tip his head to her before he vanished into the crowd.

‘I shall catch him later and ask for an explanation.’

But Duke never came back after that.

Leti chatted idly with the other guests, elegantly holding a goblet in her hand and casually looking around, calculating the best escape route. She had already spent enough time not to be rude and wanted to search for Duke already.

“Behind that door is a rose garden full of untamed thorny rose bushes. It’s gonna be painful.”

“Would you please stop reading other people’s minds, Prince Friedhelm?”

Leti had distanced herself from Friedhelm all night, but he had finally caught her. Leti put her goblet down on a tray held by a servant and accepted that her fate was in Friedhelm's hands.

“Hey, have you seen Astrid? I wanted to introduce him to Seventh Heaven tonight.”

“No, I have not.”

“I guess my invitation was too weak. I should have given him a proper one.”

Leti took a side step to the left, but just as expected of her brother, he already knew what she was up to and casually grabbed her sleeve, unnoticed by anyone, and dragged her back to the party.

“How 'bout that gentleman wearing the blue coat? The one to your right.”

“...He seems picky, and that is a too-good reminder of Prince Guido, so no.”

“Aren't you picky too?”

“Do not group me with that sweets-hating-man.”

Leti's words made Friedhelm remember that Guido's villa had banned all types of sweets inside, and he shivered at the cold thought. He shrugged off that horrible idea and continued on marketing his husband candidates to Leti.

“Then how about that man with the golden cuffs? The one with red lining on his coat. He’s the oldest son of Earl Eckerd.”

“A capable person... but do you expect me to marry a person two decades older than me? I might mistakenly call him father.”

“Your complaints are endless. Well, tell me, who’d be good enough for you?”

Leti replied with her usual answer, “the looks of Lion King Alexander, the abilities of Administrative King Karlheinz and the personality of One-armed King Oswald.”

“In what novel did that King Oswald come from? I already tried searching, but I haven’t come across him yet.”

“You may come across him in the near future. He is a gloomy person, but he is capable of finishing things once he decides to do it. Now, if you could please excuse me.”

Leti ended their conversation there and tried to escape, but he already knew her plan, so he grabbed her and brought her to the dance floor. He then signaled Seventh Heaven to bring in gentlemen that could be Leti’s partner.

“It is an honor to dance with you, my future queen.” Friedhelm bowed and took Leti’s hand for a dance.

“Give me a clumsy lead and I shall step on your foot without any hesitation,” threatened Leti.

The crowd cleared the floor for the waltz of the First Prince and his sister, the Crowned Princess. Leti showed them the perfect dance befitting her crown – her feet were silent in their steps, and her form was graceful and elegant.

“You know what? We should show the world that we are actually in good terms sometimes.”

“Really? I thought the world has already given up and dubbed our relationship cold.”

“A steamy, hot relationship is impossible, but we can always have a warm, fluffy one, right?”

They quietly conversed throughout the dance, and Leti, just as expected of the perfect princess, had her princess smile on her face the whole time.

“Rain...?”

A different sound mixed in with the music of the waltz. The sound of water drops and the scent of rain filled the room, but the musicians played harder and louder, keeping the music alive and drowning out the sound of the rain.

The roses in the garden bent their stem, the flowers heavy with rain water, but not Duke. He kept standing on guard outside in the garden, waiting for someone, even after it had started to rain

heavily. He took off his wet gloves and threw them away, but they did not land on the rose bushes where they should have.

“You finally came.”

The gloves did not fall on the bushes because they hit a man. Duke’s hand was already resting on his sword, ready for whatever might come.

“...Senpai? Is there anything wrong? You’d catch a cold out here. Prince Friedhelm invited me so I came to greet him and...”

“Quit your lies.”

Duke did not want to fool around, so he cut Astrid’s obvious lie and asked him directly, “Astrid, who am I?”

“The Knight of the First Seat of the future queen’s Knights of the Round... or so I heard.”

“Yes, I am Her Highness’s knight and I am most sensitive to the murderous intents directed at my master.”

The sun had already set and it was difficult to see in the dark. The strong rain made it harder to see, and Duke depended only to the faint light coming from the mansion. But despite all of this, Astrid kept his smile.

“Who are you? You are not the Astrid who gave me that letter. So who are you?”

“Letter?”

“A letter he probably wrote by taking back his body for a few moments to write and give it to me. A letter that said I should protect my master from himself, from you.”

“*Hahaha!* That explains those few moments I lost consciousness! This boy was doing that! What a heroic deed! But futile! He was asking for the impossible! *Hahaha!*”

This did not provoke Duke and he simply kept his cool. The real Astrid, his junior and not the murderous Astrid in front of him, taught Duke a way to defeat him. Included in that action was his junior’s wish—for him to be able to stop whatever the other Astrid was planning to do.

“Don’t worry, Astrid. I will make it happen. I will stop you.” Duke took out his sword and charged at him.

“Let’s do this Astrid! A fight till death!”

Astrid took out his sword as well and their swords clashed, and fought against each other, deciding who would live.

The music of the waltz and the pouring sound of the rain isolated the ongoing battle in the rose garden. No one heard the metallic clangs of the clashing swords, nor did anyone see the two knights fighting for their lives.

“You brute!” groaned Astrid.

Astrid's body was still that of a growing adolescent. It lacked the defined muscles that provided the older Duke his strength. Duke's thrusts and charges at him left his body shaking. But that lack of strength was countered by his agility and speed he had acquired through his training ever since he was a child.

Frontal attacks won't work on him!' thought Duke. He may have more strength, but Astrid, though barely, still had the upper hand in the battle with his experience. If the battle was drawn out, Duke would definitely lose once his stamina started waning. He had to finish this battle before that, for if not, death was the only fate awaiting him. Gladly, Astrid himself told Duke about his weakness.

My weak point is reacting too much.

Try and throw a small stone at me at a close distance and I will always try to evade it, making an opening for myself in the process.

Duke decided that it was about time to do that. He feigned that he could no longer hold off all of Astrid's attacks. Then he removed his left hand from his sword and slid out the coin he hid in his sleeves. Once the coin was in position, he flipped it towards Astrid.

Getting hit by a coin was not painful, and there was no particular need to avoid it, but Astrid's body moved instinctively,

creating an opening in his stance. Duke would not let this perfect opportunity get wasted.

Duke's body moved all on instinct. His heart was yet to follow on what he was about to do, but he knew he had to.

'...Do it, Duke! Don't hesitate!' Duke told himself. He held his sword tightly with both hands, raised it up and slashed down Astrid's body from his shoulders across his torso. The move was enough to make a mortal wound and cause Astrid to lose blood... or so it should have.

“What the...?!”

Duke felt like he was slicing through a boulder. Astrid's uniform was clearly cut, and blood was dripping down, but the wound was supposed to be deeper and blood should be gushing out.

“I see it does not work as well as the Knight King's Sword of Iron Steel.”

Astrid touched the wood and looked at his fingers, dyed red with blood. Duke's attack should have been fatal, but no, it was nothing but a shallow cut.

“Have you finally realized your foolishness?”

And the rain grew even stronger.

Friedhelm let his guard down after seeing Leti dance with three gentlemen, and his sister saw this as the perfect opportunity to run away and escape the ballroom. She went directly out to the corridor and headed towards the door leading to the rose garden, walking as quietly as possible while gazing at the rain pouring outside.

“Marriage... I guess he does not understand that *that* is my last trump card.”

Ever since Leti accepted her fate of becoming the queen, she had already given up on marrying for love and prepared herself to marry for the country’s sake. She could use it as a peace offering should there be a war, or for negotiations, or to calm down any internal conflicts.

How can you expect me to waste that?” Leti thought indignantly.

“Your Highness, there are still a lot of dashing men hoping to dance with you tonight.”

“Making a lady dance the whole time is not a good thing. Your thoughtfulness for ladies is not enough, Prince Friedhelm.”

“I know you’re not someone who’d get tired with that.”

Leti sighed. “You came to search for me, did you not? I shall only dance three more dances and that is the end of it. If not, I shall go home right at this instant faking an illness.”

“Three? Why not make it five?”

“I want to end this before my feet hurt. It takes much effort to dance gracefully.”

Three more dances and that was it. Leti made Friedhelm accept that condition, and they were about to go back inside when they heard noises in the Rose Garden. They rushed out to check when something fell on a puddle, splashing water on Leti’s dress.

‘What the... Duke!?’

Duke Barchet, Leti’s knight, lay unconscious on the stone floor. Friedhelm, utterly shocked at what he saw, willed himself to check on his friend and prevented his sister from coming near her knight. He knelt down to check on Duke, but even before he could fully examine him, he saw something shiny and smelling of steel flowing out from Duke’s body. He touched it and knew at once that the liquid was not rain but Duke’s blood.

“Go inside! Don’t stray too far away... from... me...”

Friedhelm fell on top of Duke’s body and lay unconscious as well.

“Onii-sama!”

Someone was definitely inside the mansion. Leti looked around for the attacker. Leti thought that as the crowned princess, she should run back inside and warn everyone to runaway. Both Duke and her brother were strong and wouldn’t die that easily. She

convinced herself that it was the right thing to do and turned around to go inside when she felt a strong murderous aura upfront.

“We meet again, Knight King!”

In front of Leti stood a man drenched in rain with a bloody sword in hand. He was someone she knew well. He was Duke’s junior, the genius rookie of the Royal Chivalric Order, and a former assassin.

“Astrid?”

“Surprised? *Ahababa!* I have wanted to see that face on you for a lo---ng time.” Astrid laughed like he was mad.

But Leti did not even flinch. Rather, she kicked off her heeled shoes so she could move more freely on bare feet.

“Were you the one who attacked Duke and my brother?”

“Duke? ...Ah, you mean that foolish man? He held out for a while, but there was no way he could win against my body.”

“...Ghost Energy. Was Astrid your host?”

“Yes! I had finally found you and should have killed you earlier, but this boy kept on resisting me. It took a lot of pain to take over this body. But ‘tis of no consequence, for the things I can do with this capable body are limitless!”

Leti clenched her teeth, regretting her oversight. True, Astrid “did not know” about the Ghost Energy, but that did equate to “not being the host.”

“Your weapon is not a paper knife today, is it? Is the real one scared and hiding somewhere?” Leti provoked the enemy as she veiled the turmoil broiling inside her.

“You’re wrong! This body is now mine. This boy is me. When I attacked you with the slave, we were still not yet completely assimilated, but it is different now! I can fully utilize my powers!”

The Ghost Energy’s powers and Astrid’s abilities made an invincible enemy. Leti knew that more than anyone, but she did not cower and focused her energy to her right hand.

“Come! Knight Sword!”

Leti’s palm grew hot and light gathered around it. The Knight Sword was the same sword wielded by the Knight King, and it would answer her call wherever and whenever she needed it. She was preparing to charge at Astrid, but Astrid had made the first move and was already charging towards her. The most Leti could do was to defend herself from his ceaseless attacks.

“Useless, useless, useless! I will cut your throat even before you can call any of your Swords of Promise!”

Astrid’s attacks were so relentless that Leti could not even have a moment to think. She tried distancing herself, but Astrid

would always be right at her neck without even ceasing his attacks. Astrid, now one with the Ghost Energy, was even smiling, probably because he found the situation interesting – the Knight King losing while he was not even giving everything he had.

“To not have a knight with a Sword of Promise worked against you, Knight King! How much have you fallen?!”

Leti’s breath was going shallow and rapid due to the Ghost Energy’s merciless attacks. She knew her feet were reaching their limit but she could not back down. She stood her ground, raised her sword, and attacked.

“This era is different from the time of King Alexander and King Karlheinz! There is no need for such power!”

The sword fight continued. Astrid’s sword grazed Leti’s left shoulder, but she was not bothered.

“What this time needs is trust! Too much power would just cause war and chaos!” Leti, standing firmly on the stone floor, again wielded the Knight Sword like it was nothing, for the sword was a part of her – it was simply like lifting her arms, effortless and light.

“I had my share of doubts and insecurities. I could have easily surpassed my brothers with this power. But I chose not to and *that* is the only wise decision I have made my entire life!”

Both of Leti's brothers were excellent in their own ways. It was because of their greatness that the problem of who would succeed the throne came up. Leti knew, and still thought that her brothers, Friedhelm and Guido, were worthy of the crown. If she revealed her identity as the Knight King's reincarnation, the people would have easily accepted her as the heir. But she did not want to do it. It was wrong.

“I am fine being the Leftover Princess! I shall make it as the best praise in the kingdom! And even the title Leftover Knight that Duke was gaining lately!

Astrid! If you are a bit of the knight you wish you were, fight against that power!”

Lack of exercise and practice had finally taken its toll on Leti. Her chest was painful and she was already having hard time breathing. She regretted not training her body before. But she could not give up. She acted like her body was already giving in and knelt down with one of her hands on the floor. Astrid charged at her, and she threw mud at his eyes at the perfect timing. On that moment, Leti called one of the Swords of Promise.

“Lightning! Come forth!”

Lightning cut through the dark rain clouds and hit Astrid. The direct lightning strike and the deafening sound of thunder paralyzed Astrid's body, and he lay motionless on the floor. Leti pointed the tip of her sword at Astrid's neck.

“What? Are you going to kill this boy, Knight King?”

“No. I cannot. He is an important junior to my knight. Duke will be saddened if I do.”

“Then let me go. I shall finish you in an instant.”

“I cannot do that as well.”

There was no known way of saving a person taken over by the Ghost Energy. Knight King Christian fought with these countless of times during the war and he had chosen every time to end the host’s life. Lion King Alexander and Administrative King Karlheinz followed suit. But Leti...

“I shall make a miracle happen! I believe in Astrid’s pure heart and his desire to be a knight that was so strong he willingly threw away everything.”

Leti grabbed Astrid’s shoulder with all her might and told the Ghost Energy not to underestimate Astrid’s admiration, his wish to be a knight, and the new bonds he had created with his colleagues in the Order. Astrid was brought up to be an assassin. But then he met a persona that was his complete opposite.

“—In the name of the Knight King, I shall knight you.”

The Ghost Energy asked with his eyes what Leti was planning to do. And he needed not wait for the answer.

“With a sword on thy right and a shield on thy left, dost thou swear loyalty to me till the day thou die?”

Leti hoped fervently for Astrid’s answer. She held his shoulders tighter, willing the true Astrid inside to answer her call.

“...Ah...” Astrid’s eyes faltered and Leti saw it as another opportunity. She repeated the Knight’s Oath once again. Astrid’s body started struggling, fighting himself.

“Wake up, Astrid Gale! Were you not going to be your ideal knight!? Wake up!”

And as if in answer to Leti’s reprimand, Astrid opened his lips, free from the Ghost Energy’s control, and mouthed, “I swear.” The words Astrid silently uttered were not the formal answer to the Oath, but it still meant his promise of loyalty, and that was enough. Leti closed her eyes, removed her hands from his shoulders and forcefully pressed her palm on his chest.

“Thou art my knight!” *I grant you the Sword of White Light to prevent the darkness from swallowing you.*

Leti’s eccentric history teacher told her that the Swords of Promise might have been a work of fiction for not even one sword remained, unlike that of the Knight Sword. But the truth about them was only known by the reincarnation of the Knight King. The truth was that the Twelve Swords of Promise existed, but they could never be found, for each of these swords lay inside the body of the Knight King.

A sword bathed in light and shining brightly appeared out of Leti's hand. Its glow was different than the cool, white light of the Knight Sword. The Sword of White Light was warm and gentle. Leti brought the sword to Astrid's chest and pushed it inside him.

“Stop that, Knight King!”

“I am granting Astrid the Sword of White Light, and I am driving you out from his body!”

What Leti was doing was a true Knighting Ceremony. It was the same one that King Christian, King Alexander and King Karlheinz did. The Knight King would grant his knight one of the Swords of Promise, which would in turn give the knight the strongest power imaginable. Leti did not plan on giving away any of the promise swords, but this was a special case, and she had to do it to save Astrid.

A normal knighting would have finished quickly and smoothly, but because the words for the Oath were simplified and Astrid's consciousness was still under the Ghost Energy's control, there was a lot of struggle and resistance.

“Astrid Gale! You are not the Ghost Energy! You are Astrid Gale!” called out Leti.

Her call reached Astrid, and Leti felt him respond. The paper knife, the Ghost Energy's true form, slowly went out of Astrid's body and fell on the floor, and the Sword of White Light fully

entered inside Astrid. Leti's arms gave way and she fell over him. She was exhausted, but she had one more thing left to do.

“...Just one last thing...”

Leti reached out her hand and hovered it over the Ghost Energy. She called the Sword of Hell Fire to purify it, burning it to ashes. Leti turned herself over and lay down on the stone floor filled with rain. The rain cooled down Leti's body, hot with all the action that transpired a few moments ago.

I can no longer wear this dress... and it was my favorite...

She was down and did not even have the energy to lift even a finger.

“...Your... High...ness?” Astrid's voice broke Leti's reverie. Astrid seemed fine already, so she asked him for a favor.

“If you can move, go and fetch a doctor for Duke and Onii-sama. As for me, let me rest for a while. I'm exhausted.”

The rain soon stopped. Once the rain clouds cleared up, the stars would definitely be mesmerizing.