

Avoiding
Disaster in
Another
World

The Economics of Prophecy

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Author: Norafukurou

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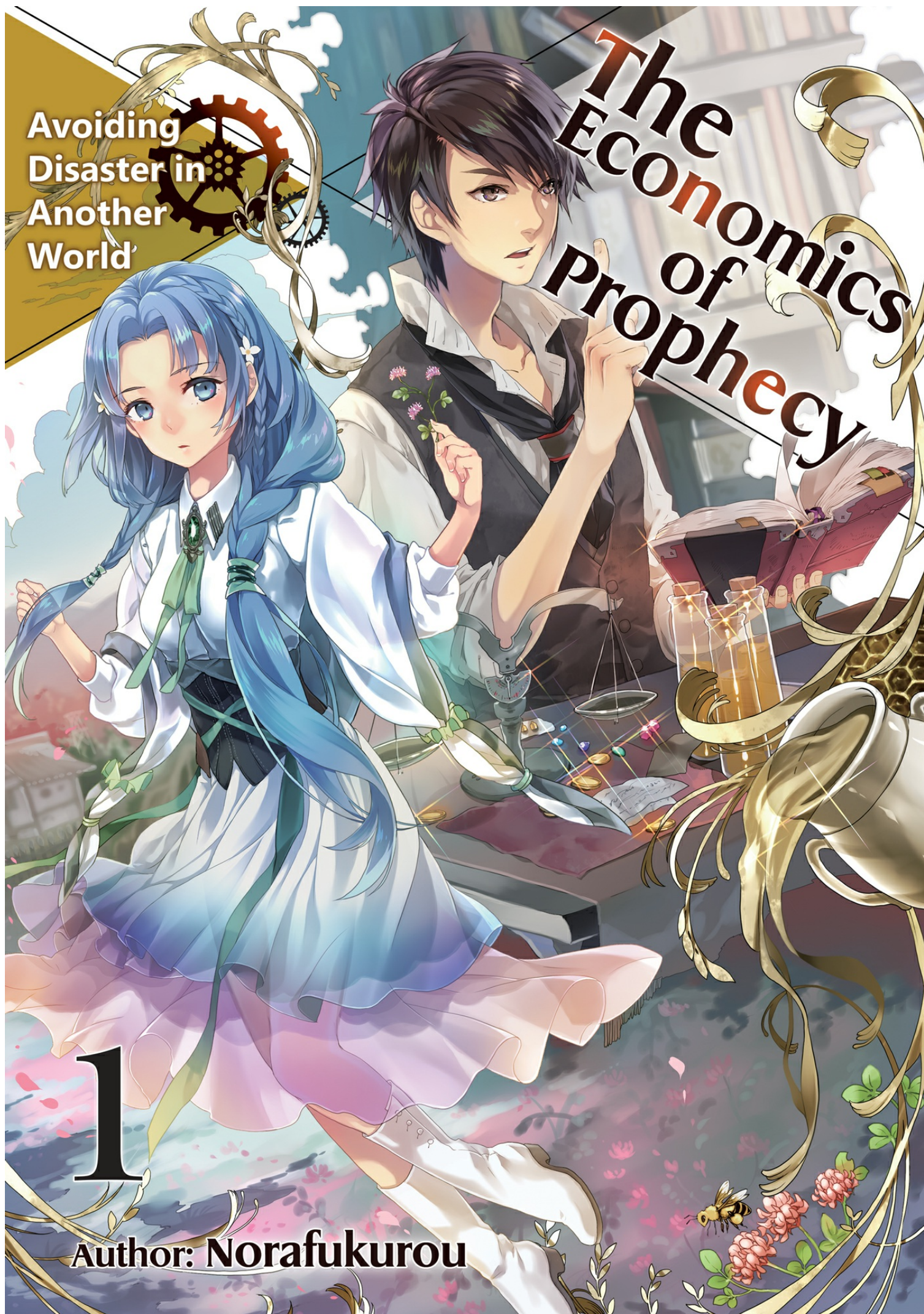


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Prologue 1

White flowers with a pink gradient and a shape resembling the wheels of a carriage fluttered in the air. The muddy flowers broke apart like a torn necklace, and their petals fell to the ground.

Mud-smeared boots running away from something trampled over the flowers. There were over a hundred of them, people of all ages wearing humble clothing. As they ran about, they were gradually driven to the outskirts of the village. The abundant fields of wheat, the fruits of their labor, made the gravity of their situation all the more conspicuous.

A man leading his wife by her hand came to a stop, his eyes filled with despair as he looked around him. His wife had their child in her arms, and the child began crying. Another young woman had a brightly colored sash around her waist, and she clung to the man who seemed to be her lover. This man held a spade in his hands at the ready, but his arms were trembling.

However, the girl watching all this couldn't see what was chasing them. She tried turning her gaze towards what was surrounding the pitiful villagers, but her vision was suddenly obstructed by a black fog.

Even though the sun was shining down in the middle of the day, she couldn't see anything at all. The only thing she could see was the glimmer of a faint light peeking through the fog.

And so, the black fog surrounding the villagers slowly closed in. Right to the end, she couldn't see the culprit behind this tragedy.

Prologue 2

Clink...

A quiet, gentle, yet stiff sound reached my ears: the sound of a teacup being placed on a saucer. It was elegant and refined. If I had done the same action, the sound would've been far more crude.

The ground occupied about sixty percent of my field of vision as I knelt there, gazing at a butterfly resting on the calm spring grass in front of me. A schoolgirl carrying a silver tray walked past me towards the source of the sound. I carefully looked up right about when she began lining two glass bottles atop a white table sitting in the middle of a gazebo.

The bottle on the right contained an amber liquid, my household's merchandise. The one on the left contained a yellow liquid, my rival's merchandise. Next to them was a plate of rectangular baked sweets. Judging from the color of the batter, they were biscuits made of refined flour that didn't make use of any brown sugar. I see... so they planned to compare the taste of the honey by dabbing it on those biscuits.

To think I would be taking such a big risk at a tea party in the courtyard after school—one that could influence my entire future. *This is why high society is so...*

The girl waiting on them bowed before excusing herself, and the one sitting at the center of the table came into sight: a girl with platinum hair that went down to her waist. This was a classmate of mine.

The ones sitting beside her were noble girls wearing the same Catholic school-style uniform as the one who was waiting on them, but they still gave off an elegant air which made them look like they were from a completely different world. To use a term from my previous world, they were like idols. Setting that aside, the image of them sitting together was like a work of art.

The girl at the center was the source of this competition. Strictly speaking, she

was my classmate, but classifying her so simply would probably get me executed. I fundamentally lack any social connections to begin with, and adding on the fact that I'm not a native of high society, she's far too volatile a person to deal with.

That's exactly why I kept my distance. She had all sorts of official duties to handle and didn't attend school much, so I never even talked to her to begin with. That's why I had a critical lack of information regarding her during this critical moment. *What reason does she have to intervene in a quarrel between two commoners, anyway?*

And just as I looked up as far as I could to confirm what sort of expression she was making...

"How about composing yourself a little, Ricardo Weinder? You're being ill-mannered." The one criticizing me with a sharp gaze was a fellow male student, on his knee on the grass right next to me in the same posture. He wore a uniform made of far nicer fabrics atop his plump body than what I had on. His chestnut hair was well kept to the point where it didn't move an inch, but I could see a slight contortion to his expression.

He surely didn't like this situation at all, either. As the heir to the Dreyfan Company, the representative of the Culinary Guild, which also happened to be the largest of all mercantile guilds in the Kingdom, just having my merchandise lined up next to his on the same table was surely an unforgivable disgrace.

Even so, I was in complete agreement that this sudden competition was a bit of a nuisance. Actually, this was way more serious for me than it was for this rich boy. This wasn't because I lacked confidence in my own merchandise—our Weinder Company's "copper honey" and the Dreyfan Company's "gold honey" differ in retail price by a factor of ten. However, there was no actual difference when it comes to the pure quality of the merchandise itself. That's because I carefully guided its reputation to be like that on purpose.

I don't care if you're a royal princess, or an oracle, or an oracle princess, or whatever, you got some nerve to mess with my business strategy on your own like this...

And so, I recalled the hardships of starting up a beekeeping business here in

“this” world.

*

About one year ago in early autumn, on the western border of the Kingdom.

A pink carpet covered the grassy plains. It was a natural field of wildflowers native to the Kingdom with a pink tint to them, which I went on to arbitrarily name lotus flowers. The sound of buzzing honeybees busily flying about could be heard above the flowers in full bloom. And as the little girls filled their bellies, they went and returned to a beehive-like stack of boxes on the embankment.

To the west laid the Loewer Wald, a crimson forest located right on the border. I lived in a small village that almost nobody in the Kingdom even knew the name of. And this grassy plain between the village and the forest that nobody ever visited was the production area of our Weinder Company’s flagship product.

“Mm, it’s looking good.”

I dipped my little finger into the amber liquid, produced by centrifuge using a water wheel, and took a taste. A rich and sweet flavor without a single hint of eccentricity or bitterness to it tickled my tongue. This was honey, an extremely high-class product here in this world, where refined sugar didn’t exist.

Wildflowers are capable of growing with vigor, even in lands with poor soil and no source of water nearby where any form of agriculture is normally impossible. And the fruits they bear, their pale nectar, can be collected, concentrated, and processed without any human intervention. This is the fundamental energy cost behind the theory of apiculture.

The beehive I reproduced here using modern beekeeping knowledge is overwhelmingly superior in terms of production output and productivity compared to the way my rival collects honey in the wild. Moreover, the unit cost of my honey weighed to its quality is without peer. It can even be stored long-term. In other words, I can make a profit even if I’m secretly manufacturing it all the way out here in a border region.

To exaggerate a little, it’s close to turning a worthless grassy plain into a gold

vein. It could be said to be the perfect enterprise for the Weinder Company, who were nothing but smalltime peddlers who dealt with the local villages. That's precisely why I spent four years of hardship to bring it up to this state.

"It's not really my own achievement, though," I mumbled. The structure of the beehive is one thing, but even the economic model I designed this enterprise on all came from the other world.

A triangular cloud floating through the sky reminded me of the beard on my old professor from university. I barely managed to squeeze into my local university and chose a course in the economics department for no particular reason. The professor there happened to be quite the eccentric. His catchphrase was "Economics is the physics of the individual, the chemistry between people, and the ecology of society." Normal economists simply classified things in the boring categories of micro and macroeconomics. To my professor, on the other hand, "economics" meant nothing more than viewing the entire world as a model and optimizing the flow of money.

Even after three years of studying under him, I was still just a worthless student who never even showed my gratitude. I didn't even get the chance to apply all the profound knowledge and concepts I learned from him to the real world.

Knowledge that remains in one's head but is never properly fostered in practice is literally like a bladeless sword on a battlefield; a weapon with zero attack power. All I could do after going into the working world barehanded was try my best every day. And those days simply passed by in a haze, one by one, as I pushed both my body and mind to their limits.

Crushed by the volume and variety of work pushed down on me, I lost my ability to control my personal relations, meager as they were to begin with. I was labeled as useless, and couldn't even deny it, having never produced any real results. In my desperation, I even tried to read some "How to Succeed in Business" books, but all it did was give me more knowledge that I couldn't even put to use.

The last memory I had over there was the pain from striking my brow against my desk, which brought back my consciousness for an instant, and the

sensation of a mountain of unfinished papers piling over my head. One could say that I was literally crushed by my work.

When I came to, I was lying here in between this village and the Loewer Wald. Perhaps because it had just finished raining, there were puddles on the ground, and in the reflection of those puddles I saw myself, rejuvenated to a young boy who couldn't even be through elementary school yet. I looked just like I did in a picture from an elementary school sports meet when I slammed into the ground and had a swollen cheek. Be it by teleportation or reincarnation or whatever it was, when I got here, I apparently slammed right into a tree.

However, at the time, I didn't have the leisure to think of any of that. That's because there was a beehive in that tree, and I desperately ran away from the angry swarm of honeybees.

"Thanks to that, I did end up remembering the time I helped my granddad out with beekeeping over the summer break to make some loose change. I never thought all that time I spent in elementary school making a miniature mockup of a beehive would actually come in handy..."

The weight of the jar in my hands brought me back from those memories of Earth, which now seemed like a distant dream or illusion.

Ironically enough, what made it possible for me to tie together the knowledge I had in my head from university with the weight of the goods in my hands was my coming here to this world. I feel like it was precisely because the environment around me was so different that I was able to digest each bit of knowledge one by one and turn them into reality. The weight in my hands was proof that they were no longer empty theories.

"We'd be able to raise our production output if we got a little closer to Loewer Wald though..."

"We're already pushing things out here, sir."

After I muttered upon coming back to reality, a petite girl had come up next to me before I knew it and replied. She had her black hair in braids and held a ledger in one hand. She pointed at the trees sprouting red leaves in the vicinity. They looked like autumn leaves, but they weren't. They were this color all year round.

It was proof of Loewer Wald's influence over the area. The honeybees didn't care, but the villagers were too frightened and never crossed over this embankment.

"But you know, Mia, nobody's ever seen a monster around here, right?"

I stubbornly looked to Loewer Wald, and Mia silently shook her head. If this cool-headed girl wasn't yielding, then my only choice was to give up. Even if I'm accustomed to being here, I'm dragging over twenty years of knowledge from the other world with me, so my common sense isn't reliable.

"Well, I guess the more important matter to resolve right now isn't the output, but the market. Berthold is approaching its limits already." Even the city which lay in the center of the Kingdom's western region had a depressingly small market for high-class goods. What's more...

"The merchants over there are beginning to get irritated at honey being delivered at fixed intervals when it's supposed to be something we 'found by coincidence.' That's the president's assessment," Mia pointed out.

"There's no mistaking it if my father's the one saying so. If that amount is already considered a storm of shares, then we have no choice but to expand our distribution area. We managed to gather enough funds to enroll in the capital's academy anyway."

The plan wasn't quite hiding a tree in the forest. We were going to blend in with students to gather information in the capital, and slowly expand our personal connections and market. In any case, my final plan for honey output doesn't just stop at ten or even a hundred times the current output.

"...We're going out of the way to send a mere village girl like me all the way to the Academy. I'll put in the work so that it isn't a loss for the company. That includes managing your usual careless self, sir."

This girl was once my student in mathematics, but she had long surpassed her teacher, and was now joyfully flipping through the ledger in her hands.

*

A crowd of students wearing uniforms, closer in standard to mine than this rich boy's, surrounded the gazebo, and I spotted a petite girl among them.

Surrounded by her friends, her eyes were telling me to focus on what was in front of me.

They started by pouring Dreyfan's yellow honey onto a biscuit. A small amount of tension seized the rich boy's body. Anybody would feel tension when it comes to the royal family. Incidentally, the one blocking our Weinder Company's expansion into the capital is none other than this boy's family, the Dreyfans.

The capital lies in the center of the Kingdom, and is the only place with a significantly scaled market for high-class goods. I know full well that the shares in this market are dominated by hereditary trading relations built ages ago. Well, heavily influenced as I am by Japanese sensibilities, I might not actually truly understand it.

Nevertheless, I've naturally thought of countermeasures to this. My plan wasn't to penetrate into the market of those big merchant houses, built on tradition and status and composed entirely of the noble class. It was to build a new niche for honey to avoid any sense of competition.

My hint for this came from the difference between raw goods and processed goods. For example, fruits are classified as a raw good. Meaning, they're meant to be consumed as they are. But if we plan to process the goods and make juice or candy out of them, the same fruit enters a different price category. In this case, it's close to the difference between wine and cooking wine. By the standards of the other world, honey here is priced like fine wine. And no matter how abundantly available resources were over there, fine wine wasn't meant to be boiled down or used in a cocktail.

I tried to create a new market for honey meant to be used as a substitute to sugar for flavoring liquor, confections, and other such things. Of course, my target market wasn't the noble class, but the richer commoners. The scale of that market is several times larger than the super high-class market of the nobles, and my expectations are to even further expand that market as well.

Compared to Dreyfan's "gold honey," Weinder's "copper honey" can't even be called silver. This was my so-called reverse branding strategy. This was also a means of making it more convincing that an unknown, smalltime company

could sell honey at a tenth of the normal price.

Nevertheless, the goods our company began peddling out of nowhere were still high-class goods. I went through many hardships spreading our customer base, going practically door to door. And the moment that work began to bear fruit, the larger companies suddenly began obstructing us. Seventy percent of our customer base, and verging towards eighty, all turned down business with us at once.

Such was the influence of the Dreyfan Company, the representative of the guild which controlled the distribution of foodstuffs throughout the Kingdom. Apparently, they got their information on us from Berthold. Though I guess that's to be expected of the company supporting so many others under their umbrella.

At that time, it seriously had me trembling. It happened immediately after I purchased the small shop I was renting in the capital to spread my roots.

Fortunately enough, the remaining customer base was enough to keep us out of the red in the Weinder Company's venture out to the capital. Our profit ratio is just that large. However, it put us in a situation where further growth was out of reach.

Even after that, they went as far as paying a surcharge to interfere with already prepared orders, and even when they were finally delivered, we've had cases of jars suddenly being broken. We really went through a lot. I took great care not to break into their share of the market, and this was the treatment it brought me. Thinking about it from another perspective, if I didn't take some sort of countermeasure, the reputation of my company would never recover.

Well, it was enlightening. Thanks to them, I got more than enough of an understanding of the way business here was conducted. It gave me a real sense of the merits and demerits of the trade system here in this world, as well as its strengths and weaknesses. In the sense of collecting information over the course of a single year in the capital about the way the guilds functioned, you could even say that it was efficient.

In other words, I got a sense of reality, and found the means to be able to change it. I became able to clearly picture how I could apply the knowledge and

concepts in my head. In that sense, I could honestly thank them.

Well, going along the lines of the dilemma of innovation, my eventual plan was to overturn the entire market, including their super high-class market, so the Dreyfans were going to become an enemy either way.

In any case, as an extension to that little quarrel in the market, the Dreyfans' heir picked a fight with me here in the Academy, though it really was just a fight between children. I did manage to claim some new customers, however, so we've been able to keep their obstructions under control, and this is what they resorted to.

This rich boy was probably hoping to keep me in check. The Dreyfans largely deal in enormous quantities of grain, as well as a variety of high-class goods. Honey is actually just a small portion of their business. Their primary goal in this quarrel is likely to keep face concerning the worth of their brand aimed at nobles.

However, there are limits. Going around the halls of the Academy, filled with potential future customers, claiming that my product was diluted halfway with water was going too far. Evaluating it based on traditions and social status is one thing. Doing so using its taste and depth of flavor is another. But making the false accusation that we were watering it down left me with no choice but to object.

After all, the responsibility a company has to their customers has nothing to do with whether they're a big or small company. Moreover, they're my precious customers that are dealing with me despite all the pressure this rich boy's family is pouring on them. I couldn't possibly let them down.

And since I refused to back down, this rich boy grew more irritated, and threatened to use his connections in the business world; such was his habit. And just as he did...

A classmate of ours who didn't attend school all that often just happened to pass by. It would've been fine to ignore us, but apparently it pained her sixteen-year-old heart to hear what was going on. I suspected this all to be an act, though.

And so, that's how the two of us ended up in this tremendously uncertain

situation that neither of us wished for.

The girl's slender and pale fingers lifted her teacup from the table. She brought the porcelain cup to her small, pink lips with movements that made you wonder if there was some sort of auto-balancing mechanism built within it, and took a sip.

After putting down her cup with a most gentle sound, her slender and pale fingers reached out to a biscuit covered in amber honey, our merchandise. She pushed back her silky, platinum hair behind her ear, and brought the biscuit gracefully from her fingers to her small lips as her thin jaws slowly opened.

Tension filled the air. Just how would someone who belonged to the very peak of high society, accustomed to the most luxurious goods, judge our merchandise? It really did pique my interest, even though I knew it wouldn't show on her face, and even though I knew she wouldn't say that my goods were better out loud.

I held my breath and observed her, and she smiled ever so slightly. Her face, which had a porcelain beauty to it, suddenly had an innocence to it befitting her age. It had a charm that made me forget the situation at hand.

The schoolgirl with a red ponytail standing behind the princess glared at me. Incidentally, this one had a slender sword hanging from the waist of her uniform. I ducked my head in a hurry. Well, that was dangerous. This is a society where just admiring a beautiful flower out of reach is akin to plunging to one's doom.

"That was rather enjoyable," the princess said, as she once more took a sip from her teacup.

The tension in the air immediately reached its peak. This was the time for "judgment." From a business standpoint, all she had to say was, "The second one has no brilliance in its color, and the taste is lacking. It's not even comparable to the goods of the Dreyfan Company. One cannot even consider this honey."

All I was hoping for was a soft landing. And after wetting her glossy lips with tea, the princess spoke in a tender, yet somehow translucent voice.

“I am unable to discern any difference in quality between the two. Both of them are delicious.” So the princess said as she smiled at the two of us.

There was nothing better or worse about either product. That was the same evaluation I had of the two. Having it assessed as such brought me great joy.

In the capital, the high-class market is firmly dominated by hierarchy and social status. As such, it’s “determined” that goods sold by a large company with history and social standing are far superior to that of a small company with neither of those prerequisites. And here, contrary to all expectations, a member of the royal family, who stands atop the very summit of such order, honestly evaluated both goods. As a matter of fact, the noble girls around her all looked bewildered.

Even though it was a necessity, I had our prized merchandise ranked as second-class, so such genuine praise had a sweet ring to it. ...*Wait, no, this isn’t the time for that.*

I had no room to make such an honest response. *Look, that rich boy who was so steadfast next to me up until now is trembling, and his face is completely frozen.* Having it end in a draw wasn’t the worst-case scenario, but it was more than enough of a problem.

“Your Highness. We must begin heading towards the cathedral. The time for prophecy approaches,” the knight with a red ponytail whispered in her ear, and the princess tensed up for just a moment.

“I truly thank you from the bottom of my heart for granting us your time during such an important period where you must face your duties as the Spring Festival approaches, Your Highness.”

The rich boy somehow managed to stand on decorum. Deep down, he was surely cursing her just as I was, but his ability to change gears like this was quite admirable. It was a skill that I didn’t possess.

It was almost amusing that it just sounded like he was saying “If you’re so busy then don’t do something so damn unnecessary!” Not that I had the leisure for any of that. The simulation that my brain decided to start running was in full-on panic mode.

I placed our merchandise as second-class goods aimed at commoners instead of nobles to create a niche market and a clear delineation between gold and copper honey. And here a princess of all people had labeled them as equal. If it was anybody else, we could get away with claiming that her palate was simply lacking. But because of who it was, even the noble girls who were shaken earlier were all politely keeping their silence.

My reverse branding plan was at risk of failure. This could only lead to the business world's representative, rife with funds and influence, pressuring us even further. Their negligence in going as far as spending money to uphold their brand will vanish. It's a problem that they will have to put the full weight of their influence behind to solve. Furthermore, this compounded the issue of her being a difficult person to deal with.

The beautiful girl with platinum hair stood from her seat while directing a gentle smile towards us. She behaved herself like an impartial judge. However, in truth, this princess was surely under the impression that she had greatly put me in her debt. My complete lack of know-how at dealing with such a problem hurt my head.

And this was the state of affairs just a few days away from spring break. I remained down on my knee to hide my sour expression. Dreyfan spat some sort of insult at me, then left. It was probably something along the lines of "don't get cocky." I wasn't, by the way. *While you're at it, give me some more realistic advice.*

I could see Mia hurrying over to my side. Unusually for her, she looked worried. I shook my head and expelled my formless anxieties.

It's alright. Regardless of whether the source is my environment, my opponent, or myself, a problem is a problem. And a problem just needs to be solved.

What I need to do is the same as always. First, I need to arrange these two enormous problems in my head until they're sorted out. Next, gather information and decide on the crux of the problem. And finally, take action to resolve that point. See? It's simple.

Chapter 1: Influence

“So the volume of orders hasn’t changed?”

“It hasn’t, sir.”

Three days following the competition, after classes had ended. The students were now hurrying to the courtyard to fulfill their secondary duties. Having no relation to social intercourse, though, I was walking in the opposite direction while discussing the orders we received over the last few days with my dear secretary Mia.

Her docile hairstyle matched her still-childish features. She was plain compared to the cheerful schoolgirls from the upper echelon of society, but she had a sweetness to her like a flower blooming in a field, and the strong will of a wildflower. She had a tendency of displaying the latter towards me, though.

The girl referring to me as “sir” was a fellow student at the Academy in the same grade as me. Apparently she referred to me as such because of our positions within the company, seeing that I joined before her. It’s not clear when exactly I was born, so she may in fact be one or two years younger than me too.

The Catholic school-style uniform she was wearing now was a huge difference from the rags she had when she was just an orphan in the village. It got to the point where my foster father was seriously worrying that some pest would latch on to her.

On that point, a peddler in town who was interested in my calculation abilities and my stories of apiculture ended up adopting me. This is a world where a boy with an unknown past could never be trusted. If I was to act in the company’s stead, I had to inherit his name.

There were also discussions of adopting Mia, but apparently that decision was being held off until I was married. I was told it’s because it seems like I’m going to be tricked by some useless woman, and she didn’t like the idea of calling

such a woman her sister-in-law. Her reasoning is so indirect that I didn't really get it, though.

"So nothing's changed despite that happening..." I mumbled doubtfully.

"Yes. There have been no shops turning down our business. Conversely, we've had new customers showing interest in copper honey. Also, there haven't been any inquiries from the noble market like we were worried about."

My secretary was so capable that one would suspect that she had our entire account book committed to memory, so there was no mistaking her analysis.

"We'd be unable to cope with a massive amount of orders we can't turn down, after all. Moreover, none of this would damage Dreyfan's share in the market. Is that the reason they haven't been putting more pressure on our current clientele?"

"But their heir did threaten you today, as per usual."

"That he did. He's apparently been boasting about his new connections. Seems like lately he's been getting along with an upperclassman named Rowan or something. He went out of his way to deliver me the information himself, so I guess I should thank him." This was something he told me just before I left the classroom.

"That would be Earl Rowan's son. The earl himself is the vice-commander of the Second Chivalric Order. Incidentally, *that* girl's father, Viscount Adel, is one of the order's commanding officers."

"That girl's called Claudia, I think? Don't say that in front of her." I recalled the schoolgirl with a red ponytail who scowled at me during the competition.

"Don't worry, sir. I'm not like you, going out and picking a fight with the heir of the guild's representative right in front of the princess," Mia said as she looked up at me with squinted eyes.

"Ahem. So his new connection is related to the military, then? All of them up until now were administration-related, so this is a new trend..."

Two kids having a squabble would inevitably lead to the parents squabbling as well. It was necessary in this world to consider the family name as a close

existence to the person themselves. Using political marriage as an analogue produces a poor image, but in short, they had arrangements for inter-enterprise relations and amalgamations. Thinking of it like that, it was generally accepted that the interests of the family were more important than personal interests. We couldn't afford to pick our business partners based on personal emotions. Only through one's kith and kin, including one's vassals, does the family name live on.

"He can't possibly be thinking of crushing the Weinders using the knights' military force, right?"

"If the Dreyfans were inclined to do so, there are far simpler means of accomplishing it," Mia remarked.

Setting aside the reputation of the guild representative, just looking at it from a cost-effectiveness point of view it was out of the question. It was like using dynamite just to squish a single bug; nobody would do it. I, at the very least, trusted in President Dreyfan's sense for profitability.

"In which case, it's business related. So what's got them diving into business with the knights?"

"Sorry, I've yet to find that out..."

"Oh, fair enough. Military information doesn't leak out all that easily, I suppose."

"However, there is one possibility. Unlike the First Chivalric Order charged with protecting the capital, the Second Order's mission is the suppression of monster floods."

Campaigns which required the order to march all the way to the eastern border were accompanied by costs which were on a different order of magnitude from the trade of luxury items like honey.

"Under that hypothesis, it means they don't have time to deal with the likes of us. That means the lack of movement from the Dreyfans isn't because the princess's publicity had a small impact. In that case, we're okay for now, but..."

"It'll be a problem after they settle their more important business."

It would mean confronting the Dreyfans after they become even bigger.

“What a nightmare... Wait, hang on. What if we think about it from a different approach?”

It's been approximately forty years since the last foreign war. What used to be five chivalric orders were now three. They'd been downsized by forty percent. The prince who took command of the smallest one, the Third Chivalric Order, was the talk of the town at the time of his appointment.

Disarmament of the army is, in short, a reduction of the workforce. Moreover, members of the knights were fundamentally nobles. In which case, it had to happen gradually. As for the merchants who depended on nobles as their clientele, they were watching their shares drop at the same rate as the disarmament. And here we had the largest such company forcing their way into a new market. If they used the influence of the guild representative to do so...

“There's a company shouldering the burden of the demands that come from military campaigns, right?” I asked.

“Yes. The Kendall Company, ranked third in the Culinary Guild. There are stories of President Kendall quarrelling with the Dreyfans in the past.”

“I see. So even if they're still not on Dreyfan's level, they're way more of a big shot than we are...” And so we'd found Dreyfan's enemy. Thinking about the timing of this incident... “I'm still not certain, but it's worth keeping in mind. Even if the probability that this becomes useful is a mere ten percent, if we were to gather ten more leads with the same odds...”

“We'd have a 0.9¹⁰ percent chance of it not being useful. Inversely, that means there's a 65 percent probability that it will be of use.”

Are you a human calculator or something? I guess this is only natural for someone with synesthesia. Numbers are as easily perceivable as colors to Mia, and she is capable of seeing numerical formulas by stereopsis, as if they had depth. I mean, that's kind of why I scouted her in the first place. But...

“...”

“Am I mistaken?” Mia said as she cocked her head to the side.

“No, your calculations are spot on. However, in reality, there are times when those ten conditions aren’t always independent of each other.”

I recalled the greatest financial crisis back in the other world. The entire world suffered a massive economic slump as the result of one large bank, connected to a complex web of financial institutions, calculating the probability of bankruptcy upon going independent.

A punctured tire doesn’t occur very often. If we say the probability of puncturing a single tire is 0.01 percent, then the likelihood of puncturing two tires at the same time is abysmally low. That’s why carrying a single spare tire should suffice until you can get to a mechanic. However, that has nothing to do with splinters covering the road. And what if that happened on the highway where the distance between vehicles is practically nil?

At any rate, genius mathematicians brought about a financial crisis, and I’m not even worth comparing to them. In reality, complex economic analysis only possesses a limited amount of power.

“We’ve gone off track. Umm, everything just now was hypothetical, so...”

“Understood. I’ll gather information on the Dreyfans and the Second Chivalric Order... as well as the Kendalls.”

Even though Mia’s mathematical capabilities far surpassed mine, she also had a much greater social life than me. I mean, she at least had a network of commoners she associated with here at the Academy.

“Sorry for making you investigate a friend’s company.” Mia’s best friend was from one of the companies under the Kendall umbrella.

“It’s alright. Nothing they haven’t done to us. Also... what shall we do about the princess?”

“I still can’t get a read on what she wants. I feel like something should come up any time now, but the person in question never comes to school anyway...” I unintentionally let out a sigh. The one to bring about this situation was none other than that beautiful princess. Even if there was no effect on the market, I couldn’t just ignore her.

“I investigated her some, but haven’t really acquired any worthwhile

information. The only thing I've found is that she's busy with preparations for the Spring Festival."

"The one her guard mentioned during the competition? The Oracle Princess holds a post at the cathedral, right? It's probably just some honorary position though..."

"Lilka and the others were at the Spring Festival last year, so I'll try asking them."

"Thanks."

"Think nothing of it. This sort of information gathering is my job. You just focus on your own job at hand, sir." Mia glanced over to the end of the hallway, and we split ways to fulfill our own duties.

"In any case..."

Now that I was all alone, I gazed out the window in the direction of the gazebos in the courtyard. On the surface, many of the students were happily passing their time with each other. It even looked like a scene of afterschool activities from the other world.

However, in truth, this was a fight for their lives. There were two days of the week where the ban on high society meetings was lifted, and the conversations held in the gazebos at such times were implicitly known to be half-official.

Who invited whom? What did they talk about? These things held great meaning. It looked like a cheerful scene, but this was the battlefield of high society.

And the competition hosted by the princess happened right there, last week.

"She's the fourth born, but still a bona-fide princess..."

It was honestly surprising how little influence she had.

"Well, I'd be lying if I said I wasn't thankful for that. Now then, it's time to get to work."

I turned my gaze from the cheerful gazebo over to the barren corridor in front of me, and proceeded towards the large door at the end. This is the other reason I came all the way out to this troublesome city. Within lies a treasury of

precious information concerning this world. In short, it's the school library.

Just as I reached out to the door of the library, it opened from the inside. A schoolgirl with a red ponytail stepped through.

Watching me immediately step aside to make way, the schoolgirl visibly grimaced at me. Incidentally, I was doing my best not to make the same face right back at her. It was *that* girl, of all people.

It's actually quite rare for the princess's aide to be on her own. What business would she have here, anyway?

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

I held back my urge to respond with "I'm the regular, so what are *you* doing here?" *Wait, hang on.* I turned to look at the library door. *Is the princess herself in there? In that case, it'd be better for me to retreat.*

"Allow me to tell you one thing," she said with a scowl. "Don't come to any foolish misunderstandings from what happened last time."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm telling you not to misunderstand Her Highness's compassion."

I was left taken aback by this. No matter how pretty she was, she was still a flower far beyond reach, where a single misstep would send me crashing to my death. I was just consulting Mia on how we should be keeping our distance from her.

"Or perhaps you plan on scheming to use the princess's position..."

I simply remained silent, and Claudia began coming up with another suspicion. Apparently, she saw me as some scoundrel looking to line my pockets by abusing the princess's authority. That honestly offended me. Of course, it wasn't because she dares to say something like that, despite her princess's publicity for us having no effect. It was because she assumed that I, being pressured by the current system of this Kingdom as I am, being in the middle of making preparations to change it how I like over the course of the next few decades in what could be considered a mild and partial rebellion, would, of all things, get carried away by the system itself.

“What basis do you have so say such sl—”

“Well, if it isn’t Weinder.” Just as I was about to calmly criticize what she had to say—in other words, just as I was about to do something that held no benefit at all—a familiar voice called to me from behind.

“Hmmm, so this is the son of a basket carrier you spoke of?”

And an even more arrogant voice followed it. Incidentally, “basket carrier” was a derogatory term used for peddlers here.

I was now surrounded by three unwanted critics. It put an unnecessary load on my working memory. I turned to look at the newcomers to the siege, and spotted a schoolboy standing haughtily next to Dreyfan with his arms crossed. He looked to be an upperclassman, perhaps a third or fourth year, and appeared to be the type to go to the courtyard at these times. Meaning, this is little Dreyfan’s new patron...

“Indeed, My Lord. He’s the one deceiving the masses by selling watered... pardon, imitation honey.”

He withdrew his statement of it being watered down, evidently because the competition actually did have some effect. But still, imitation honey? Actually, I don’t care. Call it what you like. If you’re going to be that careless, then you shouldn’t notice all the questionable excess profit we make off it.

I am in fact your enemy, Dreyfan, and around ten years later, when you succeed your company, I do plan on dealing you losses that you can’t possibly ignore. However, what’s your cognition of me? Those eyes you’re looking at me with don’t seem to perceive an enemy. Those twisted eyes are those of someone making use of an authority that they take for granted. Shouldn’t you show some irritation at failing to understand that I actually have the upper hand?

Not like I really want him to assess that he’s fallen behind me, though. His evaluation of me belongs to him; he can do whatever he wants with it, and it’d actually be troublesome if he had an accurate assessment of me. But you know, even if he thinks he’s a hundred times better than me, I still think myself a thousand times better than that.

What I really don't understand, though, is that even though he's so openly hostile to me, he doesn't even consider the risk of a counterattack. The fact that he can believe he's in a complete safe zone is somewhat disconcerting.

Realistically speaking, the stronger one's position, the lower the probability of a counterattack. That's simply how the world works. However, no matter how strong one's position, the risk will never be zero.

Having a weakness exposed could lead even the weak to trip you up. And what would happen if another "strong opponent" were to attack while you were stumbling? So taking that into consideration, did an enemy that could be completely ignored exist even for a large company? All it invited was probing into your weaknesses.

Besides, it's precisely because I have value that I became a target worth spending time and resources on. People who possess assets worth spending the time to trick them out of are the targets of the truly formidable swindlers.

I mean, in my case, I do plan to do things through proper business. As long as they don't cross a certain line, at least.

"Oh, and if isn't Miss Adel... Is this man perhaps once more causing trouble for Her Highness the Princess?" Dreyfan winced for the first time since he showed up upon spotting Claudia.

"I was just in the middle of warning him so that such a thing does not occur."

"I would certainly hope so. The Oracle Princess must be awfully busy right now," Rowan remarked to Claudia, as she then averted her gaze.

Here we had the earl and viscount houses who led the knights of the Second Chivalric Order. It seems there's some contention between them. In any case, they're all just saying whatever they want, aren't they?

If I was really planning on misappropriating power, wouldn't my first action be trying to improve my relations with you lot? If you even thought of why I'm not doing that even a little, you should be able to find out why you ought to be more vigilant. But I guess it'd be troublesome if they actually did that, too.

Anyway, it's not the time to be worrying about my schoolmates. Having a go at it in this situation wouldn't be prudent. It'd do me no good, and the risk

would be stupidly huge. It'd be far below the point of breaking even.

However, there are differences in how one pulls back. If I were to do so unconditionally after having my merchandise ridiculed, it would be a mockery to my precious customers. They're precious precisely because they can discern honey which may be an imitation.

And as I searched for a means of retreat, my eyes wandered over and spotted a schoolgirl coming towards us in the corridor. *She looks familiar; if I remember right, that's Mia's friend... I see. If I handle this correctly, it could be profitable.*

"It certainly is true that me being here with Miss Adel could beckon misunderstandings," I said as I bowed to Claudia. It is said that one should not invite undue suspicion upon oneself. "As Her Highness's personal aide, it is only natural for you to be vigilant of those trying to make use of her authority. You truly are a shining example of a loyal knight, Madam."

"Mm. It's only natural for the one charged with assisting the princess." Claudia looked surprised for just a moment, but she affirmed what I said with a proud look immediately.

I then looked to the other group, the strange combination of the sons of the top brass of knights and merchants.

"I'd like for you to teach an ignorant member of but a small company like mine how such further misunderstandings could be avoided... Miss Adel, if I remember correctly, Lord Rowan's father serves as the vice-commander of the Second Chivalric Order, a mainstay of the national army, correct?" I took a glance over at the haughty upperclassman before continuing. "If, perhaps, a merchant was trying to entreat his authority, what would you think of that?"

One could call this evading a compromising situation. The air around us became dangerously cold. My words struck home with Claudia. That was just par for the course. It wasn't something the daughter of Viscount Adel could possibly say to the son of Earl Rowan, from the standpoint of this country's order, that is.

"Dreyfan, why are you together with Lord Rowan?" After confirming that Claudia had stiffened up, I turned to question Dreyfan. The girl at the end of the hallway hid herself and focused her attention towards us.

“The Academy exists as a means for fellow students of different standings to intermingle.” He was clearly shaken, and what he brought out was a front that even he didn’t believe in.

This in itself was valuable information, by direct courtesy of the heir of the Dreyfans himself. It wasn’t enough to attract that girl’s full attention, however. So I made a show of cocking my head in confusion to my other upperclassman, and Rowan’s face visibly contorted.

“What nonsense. It’s only the natural duty of a knight to ensure that supplies are in perfect order. What’s strange about exchanging opinions with a representative of the company who handles those provisions?”

“I-I see. You certainly have a point, My Lord. Thank you very much for teaching one ignorant of military matters such as myself a valuable lesson.” I bowed my head towards Rowan. *Indeed, I truly am grateful to him from the very bottom of my heart.* I then took a slight peek to the side.

I could see that the girl hiding down the hall in my peripheral vision was wide-eyed in shock. It seems I managed to get her to verify this quite clearly. Her parent company couldn’t possibly ignore the relationship between Dreyfan and the son of a leader of the Second Chivalric Order, after all.

“As long as you understand. Let’s go.” Rowan seemed to have lost interest and turned to Dreyfan as he began to walk off.

Dreyfan looked a little worried, but followed after him. It seems they really are headed towards the courtyard. Just what sort of secret talk are they planning on having now?

I turned back to look at Claudia. I truly was thankful for her cooperation. It was enough to let me forget about the slight she made towards me earlier.

“...” Claudia turned around while remaining completely silent.

Just as I was wondering where she was off to, she seemed to be heading even further down the corridor past the library. *Is there anything back there?*

After confirming the knight had turned the corner, I put my hand against the library door. Thinking of the schoolgirl who was surely now in more of a rush than anyone else running down the corridor, I couldn’t help but smile.

Perhaps, from a self-preservation perspective, I did manage to make a slight profit from crossing a somewhat dangerous bridge. I'd need her to meddle with the Dreyfans to the point where they won't have time to meddle with me, after all.

Chapter 2: Library

Upon opening the embossed door, I was greeted by the aroma of paper. What spread out before me was a silent space about the size of a large university lecture hall. Reading seats were lined up along its center, and bookshelves were set up all around them. The reason why there wasn't a single sound to be heard was because practically nobody came here on days where the ban on high society meetings was lifted.

It was really calming... though it was not the time for me to be soaking in my own secure sense of solitude. I needed to gather as much information as I can before the Academy shut down for spring break.

Even if this world didn't have anything like a secret assassination fist passed down in hushed traditions, the transmission of what little technology they did possess was largely passed down in secret within families. The transmission of information was fundamentally done from person to person, and what could be found recorded in books was fairly minimal. Adding on the fact that the literacy rate was fairly low, as well as a lack of technology and timber resources, that made paper fairly expensive.

What material could be found in the library was mostly the collections of writings by eccentric nobles who viewed them as a hobby. The descriptions are inaccurate, and there's clearly been a low amount of effort put into organizing the data. Putting it bluntly, a lot of the books here were written out of personal whimsy and imagination. You could say that it was somewhat like a lack of distinction between science and science fiction.

Nevertheless, a world where everything had to be personally witnessed wasn't all that ideal, so I had no choice but to rely on these books. And there was no other place that has as large a collection of books as this library did, at least within my own reach. That was one reason I enrolled here.

Incidentally, information regarding what was considered macroeconomics in the other world was largely all classified as state secrets. Or perhaps it didn't

even exist in the first place. There were records of warnings towards nobles for tax evasion as well as rough data regarding the crop yields, but it was suspicious how much those could even be trusted.

I picked out a book which caught my eye and took a seat. My search was centered around books which correctly described things that I knew of first hand; for example, information about the western region of the Kingdom. I began by searching for information that I wanted within any such book. If it didn't contain anything of value, I then searched for other books by the same author. Basically, my evaluation standard was centered on people.

Well, even in the other world, where all information was available at one's fingertips, the fundamentals behind collecting truly important information were mostly the same. My professor often said, "there are many more people who are good at writing than there are who can precisely describe the truth." Writing skill might be enough when it comes to writing a thesis, but in the real world, it's clear that he knew what he was talking about.

On that note, the number of people who write about what's right and what's beautiful hopelessly outnumber the people who do the right thing and act beautifully.

I opened the book and flipped through the pages, dotted with sketches here and there. I was looking for details on natural history; knowledge of the flora and fauna of this world.

I was investigating the sources for all manner of commercial goods like cocoa, silkworms, and rubber. There was no guarantee that they'll conveniently exist in this world, but the possibility was there. I was convinced that the source of all the flora and fauna in this world, including the humans, was Earth. I was one prime example of that, but my assessment was based on the fact that there were far too many similarities in the fundamental structure of the living beings here.

They weren't exactly the same. For example, the lotus flowers here bloomed from summer to fall instead of spring. This was likely the result of evolution after being transferred here. Evolution could be said to be like the body's own study course of the environment surrounding it and how DNA adapts to it. The

tuition fee happens to be your life, though. This applies to all living beings.

There were likely several instances of large-scale “teleportations” from Earth to here over the course of history. At the very least, it happened once before the Middle Ages and brought over humanity. There were also several other cases from antiquity; for example, enormous creatures that had gone extinct on Earth can be found here. Over the long ages spent in this world, those creatures had adapted and evolved to fit the environment.

I turned over to a certain page of the book. There were drawings of creatures with a large crystal embedded in their foreheads. A giant wolf. A tiger with fangs as long as an elephant’s tusks. They were likely descendants of the ancient and enormous ancestors of Canidae and Felidae.

And then, there was the enormous lifeform which was closer to a dragon than a dinosaur. If I was to believe what was written here, they were even capable of spitting out fire. It made me lose some confidence that they really came from Earth; just a little, mind you. Going even further, it seemed that there was some sort of giant amoeba living here too.

These creatures all adapted to a natural energy called mana, and were called monsters. They were terrifying beings that any normal human couldn’t possibly compete against. Fortunately, monsters were incapable of doing anything when far from mana-dense areas. The stronger the monster, the more mana they required.

Mana flowed through ley lines within mountain ranges. This country in particular had mountain ranges located both to the west and east, and the habitat of the monsters from those mountains extended to the forests adjacent to them. The leaves of these forests were dyed red like autumn leaves, and were referred to as Loewer Wald. The mountain range that could be seen from Reylia village was the ley line to the west.

On the other hand, the open plains possessed practically no mana. In other words, there was a border between where humans and monsters could live: the open plains and the mountain ranges. There were exceptions where a flock of monsters came out from the forest of the eastern mountain range, however. When they showed signs of doing so, the knights were sent on a campaign to

deal with them.

This could be considered the most important duty of the army in this current age. According to my foster father, who witnessed the knights' departure from the capital several years ago, they had both a flashy departure on their campaign and a celebration for their triumphant return.

I'd seen the severed head of an enormous wolf the knights had struck down before, and judging from the presence of fangs, a tongue, and a gullet, I could conjecture that they survived by using both normal food and mana as their source of energy.

Setting that aside, even if there were any useful resources in their habitat, the region was far too dangerous. It isn't really a place I could just go waltzing into.

Incidentally, the Empire, which lay past the northwestern border marked by a large river, was a mostly mountainous region, and they were apparently quite involved in dealing with monsters. It was possible that they possess knowledge that doesn't exist here.

"Monsters have a certain sense of adventure to them, but I've got to find some new merchandise that's closer at hand."

From a purely financial standpoint, the Weinder Company was perfectly capable of growing in scale from apiculture alone, but my goal was just a little bigger than that. For starters, I needed a bit more ammunition to complete negotiations about expanding the honey business; otherwise it would be too risky.

The people I was negotiating with were in a far stronger position than I was. If they didn't believe we were capable of continuously bringing in profits, then they wouldn't even negotiate with us. We needed to make them think we were the goose who lays golden eggs, not the golden eggs themselves. Even with that, if we weren't careful in picking our targets, it would end in the same way as the fairy tale.

Equal targets for negotiations between both parties didn't exist, and when they weren't equal, the value of negotiations lowered. When one was in the weaker position, as long as one possessed some form of weapon to gain a partial victory, then it was possible to create the conditions for an equivalent

trade. This was a necessity for creating a consistently profitable relationship. It wasn't about doing what's right, but doing what's most profitable for both parties.

So, what did my powerless and tiny company need to acquire to accomplish that? Information in itself is intangible. I needed some ultimate weapon that nobody would be able to discover. The downside of such a weapon was, once it was brought to the fore, it would be easy to steal. But, that's just the kind of fault weapons meant for the weak have.

"Oh, I've seen this one before."

The book described a fruit which resembled cocoa across the river to the north. It was very similar to what I saw in the industrial archives back in the other world. It was a bit inconvenient that it was located to the north, but there wasn't much I could do about that. And so, I continued to flip through the pages.

"Huh, the description cuts off at the most important point."

I got up from my seat and headed further in past the bookshelves. I vaguely remember seeing other books here written by the same author in the archive. A dusty scent tickled my nose as I opened the door further within. The only source of light in here was from a dim skylight. It wasn't not a place people normally come to.

I strained my eyes and looked over the chaotically crammed bookshelves; finally, I spotted a copy of the reference book. I took it in hand and headed towards the corner of the room beneath the skylight. And just then, the slight sound of scraping paper reached my ears.

I came to a stop and listened harder. It was unmistakably the sound of pages being turned. I never thought there'd be another visitor here. *Seems quite promising if they're trying to gather intel over in the corner during high society open season.*

This may be my first opportunity to form a personal connection here in the capital as a fellow loner, or, I guess with the way Mia would put it, as a disappointing student. I proceeded towards the light, filled with hope, yet also caution. Then, my feet came to a complete stop.

A beautiful girl was sitting beneath the light pouring down from above in the corner of the gloomy archive. It was like an angel had descended here unseen. She had a book spread open atop a small table. Unlike the time I saw her back at the gazebo, her long platinum hair was tied to the side and resting over her shoulder. Her slender fingers slowly danced over the pages, and her innocent eyes were wholeheartedly focused on their contents.

Why is she here? The moment I came back to my senses, my hand began to tremble. The poetic scene before my eyes was terrifyingly dangerous. *Isn't this the person I need to avoid encountering the most right now?*

My breathing came to a stop, and I slowly tried to rest my right hand on a bookshelf. However, due to my panic and the darkness, I misjudged the distance and knocked over an old leather book.

"Wh-Who's there?" the girl asked, as she hurriedly closed her book shut.

*

"N-No one suspicious, Your Highness." I raised both my hands, like a salaryman falsely accused of being a molester, and took a single step towards her from the bookshelf.

"You're... Ricardo, right?" The princess put her hand to her chest and let out a sigh of relief upon seeing me.

I was actually surprised she managed to remember the name of a commoner she'd never really talked to. It was a big contrast from me and my general incapability of putting names to faces.

"I didn't mean to intrude. I will leave at once, so please forgive me."

"Oh my, intrude? Is the library not for everyone to use freely?" the princess replied with a gentle smile and a flawless public stance.

How is that kind of stance supposed to be useful in this critical situation, where I'm all alone with a princess in a secluded location? The gazebos in the courtyard were also a common facility for all to use, but there was a tacit understanding of who gets to use what. Kind of like the large gazebo in the dead center that this princess used.

“Your leniency is much appreciated.” *Calm down. If she’s abiding by her public stance, then it’ll be bad if I don’t respect that.* Though I was implying I wanted to get out of here as soon as possible.

“Oh, excuse me. Please have a seat.” The princess pointed the palm of her hand to an empty seat at her table.

And thus, the path of retreat for this idiotic commoner was cut off. The impossible situation of sitting at a table with a princess had come to pass. Well, the fact that this wasn’t happening in the gazebo meant that it was at least theoretically possible, but it still wasn’t supposed to be a situation that occurred in reality.

“What are you doing in such a place, Your Highness?”

Her porcelain cheeks immediately turned red upon hearing my question. *Crap, I stepped on a landmine already.*

“Umm. Actually, this is the time that I usually receive lessons from Professor Fulsig.”

“Professor Fulsig... the library director?” I recalled the old man with a white beard I’d spotted just once before in the hallway.

The princess turned around and pointed out a small door further within. Considering the layout of the building, the director’s office seems to connect to the archives, meaning that the red-ponytailed knight was headed towards the director’s office to confirm her safety.

“Professor Fulsig has his research to attend to, so I often spend my time reading here while I wait for him. I do not get many opportunities to do so during such times as these, after all.” The princess explained her circumstances in an embarrassed manner.

She was apparently getting lessons due to her lack of attendance, owing to her position as the Oracle Princess. As for that director, he seemed to have driven the princess out of his office so that he could focus on his research instead. *How promising... I mean, how reckless of him.*

“Worry not. I won’t speak of what I have seen today. Umm, how do I put it... right. I mean, this place is meant to be used freely by all students, isn’t it?” So

all that happened here was two students meeting in the library.

“Thank you very much. So, Ricardo, what brings you here?” Her gaze turned to the reference book in my hand.

“I was looking for this book.” I showed her the cover of the book, and immediately broke into a cold sweat upon remembering the history of the author. Quator Felbach was a member of Duke Felbach’s family; the same Duke Felbach who had rebelled against the kingdom twenty years ago.

Quator Felbach was the subject of a silly anecdote, where he was arrested during the outbreak of the rebellion while investigating mushrooms in the middle of a public park in the capital. Just as the anecdote would imply, he didn’t seem to be involved with the rebellion itself. But regardless, his misfortune continued and he passed away at the end of the uprising. Honestly speaking, it was a regrettable thing to happen to someone like him, but that isn’t the problem at hand right now.

The Kingdom prided itself on its stability, and the Felbach Rebellion was a major crisis. It was a stain on their history, which even had rumors of collusion with the Empire behind it. Over twenty houses were crushed for being implicated in the rebellion. So just how would the royal family perceive someone sneaking into the archive to read a book written by someone related to the aforesaid rebellion?

“Our company’s merchandise is dependent upon the climate and vegetation in the western region.”

“Are you perhaps referring to that honey?”

“...Yes. That isn’t all, of course. This book writes about the flora and fauna of the western region in fine detail, and it serves as a good reference in multiple areas.”

I didn’t want to leak any information that could be connected to company secrets, but I was left with no other choice. If anything, I thought I deserved a bit of credit for emphasizing how this was all just business. The best thing to do at such times is to just simply speak the truth. I carefully inspected the princess’s expression.

“I see. So that honey is a product of the west...” The princess smiled happily. It seemed the topic of sweets really does hit a chord with girls, even among royalty. Thanks to that, I was finally released from my tension. *How to put it? Despite what her appearance and title would imply, she seems to have quite the honest and docile personality.*

Moreover, even though the conversation moved over to honey, she didn’t touch upon the competition at all. Could it really be that she held that competition out of pure concern over a fight between fellow students...?

No, it was too early to make that assessment. The sensibilities of royalty, whose very existence was political, should be different from my own. If I was capable of making that sort of assessment, I wouldn’t be going through such hardships.

“So, what manner of book are you reading, Your Highness?” I tried changing the topic.

“I’m reading this.” The princess put her bookmark in place and turned the cover of the book towards me. Her white and slender fingers almost looked ethereal under the bright sunlight, contrasting sharply with the brown leather book cover.

“*Cornwall’s Journey*, I see. I’ve actually read this one before.”

“Really?” Her face lit up in an instant.

Cornwall’s Journey was a romance novel written in the style of a travel journal by a minstrel. The story followed the son of Duke Cornwall, disguised as a bard, traveling from town to town as he saves the heroines. It was a tale filled with voluptuous bandits, clumsy manservants and such. The protagonist was a full-on Adonis type who wielded a rapier.

The princess seemed hopeful that she had found a kindred spirit, but I read it as a means of gauging what sort of publicity would be popular with the people of this world.

“It’s because the story is set in the west. The villages and towns my foster father peddled his goods in come up just a little.”

“I see you’re quite familiar with the western region, Ricardo. I’ve never even...

left the capital before. Is it true that there are ‘fields of pink flowers as far as the eye can see,’ just as is written in the book? I have heard from my mother before that small flowers bearing such a color grow in the west.”

Her eyes were practically sparkling. Truly, she was like a bird in a cage. Larger varieties of flashy flowers like the roses and lilies one could find growing in the capital’s gardens were the exception out in the wild. On that note, the roses here are blue.

“There is this small flower called a lotus, whose color gradually changes from white to pink from its center to its edges. It’s quite beautiful. In fact, I have seen fields of them that can stretch as far as the eye can see.”

Judging from the description of the size and color in the book, there was a high probability it referred to the lotus flower. Its natural habitat was limited to a small portion of the western region. It wasn’t all that unusual a sight to the local villagers, of course. And to me, those flowers were my pot of gold.

“I’m sure it’s just as beautiful as a dream...”

I continued to observe any changes in the princess’s expression, now every bit as miraculously relieved of the tension of walking a tightrope as I was... Her eyes were wide open as she listened to me attentively. It really threw me off.

“There won’t be any large fields of them, but you may be able to see some if you go as far as Berthold.”

“Berthold is my aunt’s territory...”

“I-Is that so? Then, there should be an opportunity...”

Well, that’s a princess for you. Even her relatives are abnormal. Berthold is the largest city in the western region. However, she had a lonely smile as she replied.

“It is difficult for me to leave the capital due to my duties. Even coming to the Academy is all thanks to my aunt indulging my selfish whims.”

The reason this flowery princess became a dangerous bomb in my life was apparently all down to this aunt of hers.

Knock, knock, knock.

As I cursed the grand noble whom I didn't know, a knock was suddenly heard in the room. It came from the door connecting to the director's office. My body stiffened up, recalling the sharp gaze of a certain knight, but the door showed no signs of opening.

"It seems my time is up," the princess said in a somewhat reluctant tone, as she then slowly stood from her chair with her book in hand. "Thank you very much for permitting me to hear such wonderful stories."

She slightly bent at the waist, which was accompanied by the sound of rustling clothes, and I stood up as well in a fluster. The sound of my chair being pushed back resounded in the air. It was a stark example of the contrast between a princess and a commoner. However, she showed no signs of criticizing me, and held out her right hand.

"If the opportunity arises, please allow me to hear more another time, Ricardo."

"...It would be my honor."

I couldn't possibly tell her that I didn't want to, so I shook her hand. My consciousness was drawn to the silky feeling in my hand, along with the warmth resounding through my palm. The princess then left through the door further within. And as I watched her from behind, the sense of the heat vanishing from my palm somehow felt regrettable.

Then I realized I was standing there wistfully staring at a closed door. Here I was, having finally been relieved of that whole situation, and what was I even doing?

"I won't make any profits worrying about a girl living in a different world."

Besides, she was a sixteen-year-old girl. Going by the standards of the other world, that's firmly in high school territory. On the other hand, my real age was closer to that of a teacher. *Yeah, she's just around the age of the daughter of a slightly older brother, around that of a niece. That is if we're lying on the same axis of time, at least.*

I was glad I got a slight grasp of her character, but my strategy regarding the princess hadn't fundamentally changed. It'd be best to avoid her as much as

possible.

I took my book and headed towards the normal exit, back to the library. The Academy closed over spring break, so today was my last chance to do any reading here. I couldn't afford to waste any more time.

"...She didn't show any signs of demanding gratitude, huh."

Her actions during the competition were actually quite the bother for me, but as a tried and true coward, it did make me feel somewhat bad for suspecting her.

However, it was still too early to be optimistic. *At the very least, I can't make a decision until I get Mia's report.*

Chapter 3: Prophecy of Disaster

“Whoa.” I shuffled over to the side in a fluster to make way for a man trying to pass me from behind on the road. “The foot traffic here is amazing, huh.”

“Well, this is a once-annual festival.”

With the arrival of spring break, Mia and I spent our days dealing with the large amount of work that had piled up for the company. And as for why we were currently spending our paltry spare time walking through the jam-packed streets of the capital? Well, there’s a reason for that.

“So, the leading actress of the festival is our little princess?”

“It is the duty of the Oracle Princess to announce the prophecy for the coming year, after all.”

“A prophecy, huh...” I sighed cynically at the unrealistic term.

“Sir.”

“I know. We don’t have any idea who could be listening. At any rate, we still need more information.”

We headed towards the central street and the royal palace came into sight. The main gates, normally shut tight, were now open. They obviously hadn’t been opened so people could go sightseeing inside and visit the royal family or anything, though.

The palace grounds had a circular altar set up within its center, and stair-like seats were installed, forming a semicircle behind it. A group of luxuriously dressed men began lining up at the bottom of the seats. These were the honorary nobles, the representatives of each guild.

“Dreyfan...” I recognized a man with a plump physique standing in the center of the honorary nobles and grimaced. Unlike his son, this man was a clear enemy of mine.

“There you are. Mia! Over here... ugh, Weinder.” I heard a familiar voice

drawing nearer to us. This girl, her orange hair tied to the side with a white oval barrette, made a sour face upon spotting me next to Mia.

I think her name is Lilka. Next to her was a freckled girl with green hair, the schoolgirl who was staring wide-eyed at my exchange with Dreyfan and Rowan in front of the library the other day.

Both of them were daughters of medium-sized companies here in the capital, or so-called silver companies. Our company was considered a copper company, incidentally. And Dreyfan was obviously a gold one.

By commoner standards, these two could be considered fairly rich girls who were still quite sociable. Well, at least to Mia. To Lilka, I was just a hopeless, overreaching idiot who was rebelling against the Dreyfans and putting Mia in danger as a result.

“Go on.” I urged Mia towards them. Being hated was a trivial problem if it meant having Mia as my ally.

She stared at me apprehensively, but was pulled away by the hand by her best friend. Incidentally, the customer base I was hoping to target with my copper honey is people like those two girls’ parents. If silver companies like theirs could incorporate our goods into creating new products, we’d be able to secure an unparalleled market.

“Although, *that’s* kind of in the way of getting things done.”

After the noisy girls left, I looked back at the palace. This country, the Kingdom of Crownheight, was an affluent agrarian nation. The climate was stable, and the terrain was even. The last foreign war took place around forty years ago. Even going over historical records, there were no instances of large-scale disasters like earthquakes or floods. Furthermore, the last ten years had seen abundant harvests.

The merchants around me all looked cheerful. This only stood to reason, seeing that both food and stability were guaranteed.

However, I saw things differently. It was a waste to have such perfect conditions with no signs being shown of economic growth. At least judging from what I could see in the farming village of Reylia, the productivity of agriculture

had only gone up by just a smidgen. You could say this was a so-called golden age. There was no guarantee it would continue forever, and there was historical precedence for the end of such an age leading to stagnation.

And there was no better example than the visualization of this country's rigid order right before my eyes. The nobles and royalty monopolized political and military authority; the commoners mostly all pursued agriculture. That's the basic structure. One's social status was practically fixed, and within each class there was an even more detailed hierarchy. For example, the differentiation between gold, silver, and copper companies. It was a structure that prioritizes stability above all else. Or perhaps it was better to say that the rule over the country was stable.

As a former Japanese citizen my senses were somewhat dulled, but maintaining order was definitely not always the correct course of action. Even with all that scientific technology, especially with the means of transmitting information about systems of government and their effects on society at their full disposal, there were plenty of examples of countries that were incapable of keeping a minimum level of order.

Here in this world, knowledge and technology was passed along by hearsay, and the spread of information was devastatingly slow. The emphasis on regional bloodlines was fairly inevitable to an extent. Even though the harvests had been abundant, one small failure could cause starvation in a region. And thinking of it from that perspective, the risk didn't seem worth it.

In other words, it'd be problematic if neither politics nor production were stable. Though it'd be far worse if society were hinged on the idea of "might makes right." Like the way the Shogun took over during the Edo period, and how it led to a decisive battle. However, that's precisely why they should be a little more flexible, at least when it comes to trade activities. It's the duty of a merchant to take on risks, after all.

A stable chain of supply and demand ties together a manufacturer and their consumers. For example, the risk known as a stockpile serves as a buffer in the event of a sharp increase in demand. To take things a little further, information about supply and demand is channeled between the two, and new goods and marketplaces are pioneered to satisfy them. That in itself obviously has value,

but the diversification of the flow of wealth also gives birth to stability.

And as stability increases, the whole of society changes, grows and gives birth to a margin of flexibility. This is economic growth. In short, it's the role of a merchant to take risks in order to create stability. If they didn't do so, there would be no reason for a merchant who doesn't create anything on their own to chase the wealth of anything beyond a smalltime feudal lord.

However, to be able to handle risk, merchants must have the freedom to move around at will, and the ability to quickly react to the flow of information. But there's something standing in the way of those requirements for the sake of maintaining hierarchy.

I took another look at the representatives of each guild wearing their fancy and luxurious clothing. Culinary, Carriage, and Caravan. In the other world, these would be the foodstuff, vehicular, and transportation industries. The fancy CEOs with their popped collars practically looked like nobles.

It was an honorary rank that was only appointed once a generation. The king made such appointments, and doing so required the referral of a grand noble who held interest in the relevant guild. Once the company was passed down to the eldest son, the rank was largely appointed to them immediately, so it was almost entirely hereditary.

By all rights, an honorary rank was supposed to be a system to spur the merchant commoners to come to a mutual understanding with political forces. However, as the current status quo repeated over many years, it produced a nightmarish system where the top of each enterprise acted as their own agents in a completely hierarchical order.

The potbellied Dreyfan glared at me from the lower steps. I really wanted to tell him to take some risks, with all of his political pull and connections. If he could make a profit off of it, it'd definitely increase the size of the pie for everyone.

And if you aren't capable of doing that, Dreyfan, then you can just sit there and do nothing. Just don't get in my way. Don't go using your stupid position to keep the little guys down.

In an exaggerated sense, you could say he was my mortal enemy. Not

because I detested him; it was more serious than that. To him, people like me are unwanted in the status quo that he desired to maintain. There was no place for my ambition here.

Frankly speaking, he wasn't wrong. It's the fundamental desire of any living being to crave stability. And from his position, his actions were probably a matter of course. However, my goal wasn't wrong either. I was simply doing what was a matter of course for me.

It might just sound like sour grapes now, but in the future, I planned to bend the commercial structure of this country to my will. In the terms of the other world, I was looking to establish something like a general trading company.

The bigwig merchants before my eyes were the so-called monopolistic trading firms of the business world. It was stable in the sense that they controlled the flow of people, goods, and money, but it obstructed exchange on a larger scale. Which means, all I needed to do was spur on the exchange of people, goods, and money in a way that could bridge this business world.

The general trading company was the catalyst for that to happen. If I could accomplish that, commercial activity would become the engine to drive economic growth. It was, of course, unreasonable to try and precisely recreate a general trading company from Earth.

At most, I just needed to create something which could satisfy similar "functions" in this current "society and environment." And frankly, I hadn't been able to form a clear picture of what I was aiming for yet.

When I explained the rough outline of my plan to Mia, she commented, "I see, so you plan on creating a country." What an outrageous thing to say. Though, it was hard to ignore the fact that the financial scale of a general trading company in the other world could surpass the scale of some countries. I would prefer to keep my nose out of such troublesome politics as much as possible, though.

Back on topic, the seats around the altar began to fill from the bottom up. Eventually, the second row from the top filled in—with the grand nobles.

Sitting at the center was an old man, flanked by a woman on his left and another man somewhere in his fifties on the right. *Those are the present heads*

of their respective families, right? It was unusual for a woman to serve as the head. And seeing that they were on the highest steps for nobles, they would be the highest-ranking nobles. Perhaps that woman would be the aunt the princess spoke of, Archduchess Berthold.

That would make the old man in the center the prime minister, Duke Grinicius. And the other man would be the feudal lord of the largest city in the eastern region, Archduke Kurtheight. Even I'd heard that the rulers of the eastern and western regions didn't seem to get along very well.

Now that all the retainers were in place, it was time for the house which sat on the highest seats to show up. Sitting in the center was the king, with a golden crown atop his head and a ruby encrusted scepter in his hand. Around him were two young men in their adult years, presumably the princes. Hm? The seat to the left of the king was empty. *I think the left seat is supposed to be the most important one, where his heir, the crown prince, would sit.*

The seat to his right was occupied by a slender young man in robes. One space further to his left was a muscular young man in military attire. Aside from the crest of a blue rose embroidered into their clothing, the crest of the royal family, these two couldn't be any more different.

"So, where's our little princess, then?"

I looked around to try and find my classmate. A little further from the men of the royal family, I spotted the queen and three princesses all wearing extravagant dresses, but she wasn't among them. And as I was looking around restlessly for her, the festival began.

The king, seated atop the highest step, took out a cylindrical roll of paper and handed it to the prime minister a step below him. The prime minister accepted it with both hands, rolled open the paper, and presented it before the crowd. Of course, nobody was close enough to be able to read from it.

"Citizens of the Kingdom," so his speech began. The old man's voice carried well, and seemed to be amplified by some sort of magical device. None of the content of his speech was interesting in the least. In short, all he really said was "God blessed us with an abundant harvest last year." Specifically, the eastern region's harvest had been bountiful, and the western region's harvest was just

kind of good.

The nobles and VIPs to the front, Dreyfan included, were all leaning forwards and listening obediently. The crowd outside the gate, on the other hand, wasn't really reacting.

I stifled a yawn and looked to the sides. The little princess had yet to make an appearance. And then, they brought a chair out to the altar; a simple wooden chair.

The prime minister's speech ended, and a girl wearing religious garb stepped up. They were purple vestments without a single ornament to them, a stark contrast to the gaudy clothes covered in jewels and embroidery of those in attendance. But on the contrary, this only supported her neat and tidy beauty.

Even from far away, her platinum hair appeared lustrous. Her facial features betrayed just a hint of her childishness, and her body drew slender lines, meager as they were in any sort of voluptuousness. She was like a life-sized figure of a saint, or perhaps even more beautiful than that. She was irrefutably cuter than the second or third or whatever princesses who were all dressed up.

Is the simplicity of her chair and clothes supposed to be a presentation of her status as a member of the clergy? The other members of the church standing by the altar were all wearing flashy vestments, but perhaps it was a public face they put forward precisely because she was royalty.

The one I came for was finally taking the stage, but as for what she was doing there...

"The Oracle Princess Alfina will now announce this year's prophecy," the prime minister declared, and Alfina stood to her feet.

"The land will once more bring us blessings this year. Particularly in the west —" Her transparent voice resounded throughout the grounds. The gazes of all the masses converged on the sixteen-year-old girl. They were far more honest than the VIPs sitting on that tiered gallery of theirs. She gathered way more attention than even the prime minister did.

Even if the same farce was playing out here, changing the cast to a beautiful girl was far more picturesque. *But in truth, isn't a prophecy just the very height*

of farce? I couldn't deny it entirely because of the existence of a "physical law" known as mana that didn't exist back on Earth, but what I was seeing right now was merely ceremonial.

From my investigation, the contents of the speech barely changed from year to year. They were largely made to match the current crop conditions across this agrarian nation. Moreover, with the kind of stable weather this country had, it never really changed.

The king's words were "last year was a good year," and the prophecy states "next year will also be a good year." That's all there was to it.

Actually, if the prophecies were truly real, there's no way they would be announcing them publicly. Just what would happen if they went around saying the country was doomed to fall, or that a war would break out? Anybody could answer that.

In fact, unlike the masses who were charmed by Alfina's beauty, the ones seated at the front had no sense of their earlier tension during the prime minister's speech. Dreyfan looked to be just pretending to listen.

Both he and I were incapable of turning this prophecy nonsense into profit. What matters is practical data. If the prophecies really were true, I'd prefer statistics on precipitation and actual crop yields.

"And in the east—" My classmate continued her prophecy-like vague statements, fulfilling her role as the Oracle Princess. In short, the east would have an average harvest, and the west would be somewhat abundant.

The masses were naturally swept up by the atmosphere. A beautiful girl was here telling them that the good days were to continue on this festive day. If not for my occupation I wouldn't be thinking these insensitive thoughts either. I did think she was doing a good job in fulfilling her duty.

After bringing news that the coming year would be bright, Alfina stopped speaking. It seemed her job was now finished. The masses stood at the ready to cheer in joy. All that was left was to bring out the wine, close the palace gates, and let the festival begin in full force.

I needed to give some applause myself. Even if it was none of her business,

she did praise our company's honey. It was fine for me to at least praise her work. Not getting any sort of beneficial information here was well within my range of expectations.

And as I prepared to clap, the Oracle Princess looked straight ahead with sorrowful eyes. Her mystical saint-like air, or more bluntly, the fabricated front she created, had crumbled. She took a single step forward, tightly shut her eyes for a moment, and when she opened them once more...

"Please listen to me." Unlike her transparent tone from before, a voice of desperation now resounded throughout the grounds. "The crystal informed me of one other future event... This year, a great disaster shall befall the Kingdom from the west."

The masses looked around in bewilderment. Some of them had already begun clapping, and awkwardly came to a stop.

"Whoa... should she really be saying that?"

Even being incapable of reading the atmosphere as I was, I could hear the very air in the entire area freeze up. The VIPs atop the tiered gallery were all clearly perturbed. The nobles' faces were contorting, and the robed prince, along with the third princess, were both glaring at Alfina hatefully.

The king didn't have any substantial reaction, but the smile he'd worn up to this moment was gone, and he had the expression of a god of wrath. Perhaps because of the religious meaning behind her words, or definitely because of it, there was no way they didn't verify the contents of her speech before the official announcement.

That meant that her statement was not part of the plan for this state-held event. My classmate standing on the stage had both her hands held up to her chest in prayer as she endured the gazes of all those around her.

She looked like she was silently concentrating, as if she believed without a shadow of doubt that her words rang true, but...

"A disaster?"

"To the west...?"

The murmuring of the masses grew louder. Just as expected, her words had the opposite desired effect. After all, she'd just passed down an ominous future with zero concrete details. One could say it was the worst way possible to announce this information.

This was tremendously bad for the superstitious masses, who didn't believe it all to be a farce from the very beginning the way I did. At this rate, the uproar would just grow and grow.

The royal guards, dressed up in decorated armor, drew closer to Alfina. The prime minister got to his feet. The archduchess next to him headed towards Alfina as well. Alfina appeared to be resisting them at first, but the archduchess somehow got her to give up, and she drooped her shoulders.

"Even if a disaster is to befall us, the Kingdom shall overcome it, and protect our peace and prosperity. Just as we always have." The prime minister addressed the masses, and the VIPs on the tiered gallery began clapping at once. The knights surrounding them all broke into a chant of "All hail the King!"

A step later, the masses outside the palace gates began clapping energetically. The palace attendants began carrying out the wine for celebration. Cheers of joy broke out, and the clapping grew even louder.

I thought back to encountering her in the library. She was elegant, gentle, and so reserved that one would never believe she was royalty. She didn't seem like the type to take part in such showboating to me...

No, thinking of it carefully, that competition was also showboating. I didn't understand at all why she did it, but what did I know about her inner thoughts? What people's actions show on the surface is clearly more important.

"So she really is dangerous to deal with..." I turned my back on the masses swarming together to receive wine, and let out a sigh.

The words "to the west" worried me somewhat, as someone whose production area was located in the western region of the Kingdom, but there was no point in taking notice of a prophecy with no proof to go on.

"Anyway, we should keep our distance."

She was already volatile enough to send someone like me flying away with

ease. And now, she had become even more dangerous.

I turned back to look at her just once more. The palace gates were closing, as if to seal away a troublesome matter, and through the last crevice of the gates before they closed, I spotted the crestfallen girl descending from the altar, escorted by the archduchess.

Chapter 4: Bookmark

“So I asked my friend about it...”

“O-Oh. Wh-What did she say?” Sitting on a bench facing the courtyard and bathing under the springtime sun, I awkwardly smiled back at Mia.

“...It seems the Kendalls have started to become seriously wary of Dreyfan’s relations with the Second Chivalric Order.”

“Well, that’s pretty much what you’d expect when the party in question heard it right from the horse’s mouth.”

“Sir.” Mia lowered her voice. She likely knew about the dangerous bridge I’d crossed in front of the library.

“...Well, you know. It turned a profit, right?”

The Dreyfans surely couldn’t let down their guard against the third-ranked company within the Culinary Guild. I didn’t directly spur them on or anything. Even if I did directly inform them of our suspicions of the Dreyfans, they wouldn’t have taken action quite so quickly as they had now done.

They’re nothing more than the enemy of my enemy of my enemy of my enemy. They aren’t an ally, especially in the case where my enemy is enormous. The weak joining forces to tackle a greater foe has a beautiful ring to it, but it’s just that much more difficult a position. That’s how beautiful things generally go.

“...”

“Anyway, what’s with that?” I also lowered my voice and glanced to the center of the courtyard where the largest gazebo was installed. That’s where the competition took place.

The Spring Festival had come to an end, and school had resumed for one week now. I observed our classmate, who had not attended at all for the past week. The platinum-haired princess was sitting all alone in the center of the

gazebo, and the red-ponytailed knight was standing at attention at its entrance.

There were other students coming to the gazebo. Alfina nodded to her aide with a gentle expression, and Claudia laid bare her anger.

“...Refused again?” Watching the students practically run off as her envoy urged them away, I muttered in a sharp tone, intending to keep my voice down. “Isn’t it weird that their attitude has flipped on its head completely like that?” Reminded by the change in attitude of my customers when Dreyfan began obstructing our business, I instinctively clenched my fist.

“You’re also aware that ever since the new school term began, students who talk about the ‘prophecy’ have been nonexistent, right?” Mia asked.

“Yeah...”

It really was true. The students never even mentioned the word “prophecy.” It was like the Academy had just lost interest in it, but now that we were looking under the covers, the scenery was quite different.

“Church-related business is supposed to be unrelated to any factions. She also only hosts tea parties about once every month. However, the only ones to participate until now were four or five people who are indebted to her guardian, Archduchess Berthold, in one way or another,” Mia explained.

“And those are the ones who just ran away?”

“She’s the only Oracle Princess of the royal family, a role that must be filled at all times. Those with royal blood are the only ones with the disposition to get a reaction from Quell’s Crystal, a magical device which has been passed down in the Kingdom for generations. Once appointed, the Oracle Princess can’t retire for twenty years.”

“Well, that sounds pretty rough. She can’t even get married.”

So it’d be something like the imperial princesses appointed to the Ise Grand Shrine back in ancient Japan? Most girls in this country married between sixteen and twenty years old. It was a necessity, considering the average lifespan and standards of medical care here.

“It seems she was named a Crownheight two years ago.”

“Meaning, she’s adopted...?”

“In strict terms, she’s still a child of royal lineage. Her father was the king’s little brother, the preceding Archduke Berthold, making her the king’s niece.”

“So her father is still royalty. In which case...”

“Yes, her mother was from Duke Felbach’s family.”

“The Felbach who rebelled against the Kingdom?!”

“The duke committed suicide immediately after the rebellion was suppressed, and her mother was his granddaughter. Meaning the princess is the rebel Duke Felbach’s great-granddaughter. Several years after her father’s marriage, he retired and yielded his title to his little sister, the current Archduchess Berthold. Five years ago, he died from sickness, and her mother met the same fate two years after that...”

It really did seem convoluted. The incident in question had occurred quite some time ago. It was like the people in the royal palace were dragging out their antagonism to everyone slightly related to Felbach.

“But if that’s the case, why did they reinstate a rebel’s bloodline into the royal family...? Oh, I get it...”

“Right, it was likely to make her the Oracle Princess; a role that nobody wants to fulfill.”

“In other words, they weren’t all that worried about the prophecies. Plus it’s more a convenient way of forcing her into priesthood.”

Even throughout Japan’s history, it wasn’t strange for rebel families to be sworn into religious positions. Once they were monks and priestesses, they were off-limits for marriage, and their bloodline would stop right there.

“In fact, the princess is not granted any sort of personal stipend. Though their public stance on this is that members of the clergy do not require money, previous Oracle Princesses are a different story...”

“They’re far more inhospitable than I imagined... It’s already been twenty years since the rebellion, so she hadn’t even been born yet when it happened. Moreover, her mother wasn’t officially punished or anything either, right?”

Something feels out of place. With such a string of circumstances around her, even as apathetic as I was towards such chatter, you'd think I would have at least heard rumors about it.

Or perhaps, judging from Rowan's attitude in front of the library back then, it might just be an untouchable topic, and with the festival it simply came to the fore.

"What should we do?" Mia asked.

I unclenched my fist. Judging from her explanation, the princess's influence wasn't just zero, it was in the negatives. The threat she held towards my reverse-branding strategy had completely vanished. In which case, everything would be settled easily if I just didn't approach her. You could even say it was good fortune that what I thought was an enormous problem would get settled by just ignoring it.

Thinking about it rationally and clearly, the scene before my eyes was truly desirable. It drew my consciousness further and further away from the paper bundle in my chest pocket.

"I do believe it would be dangerous to get any closer," Mia remarked.

"My thoughts exactly. Don't worry."

I informed Mia that I'd already met the princess in the library archive by coincidence. I never intended to get close to her in the first place, but now we knew she couldn't even provide the patronage of the royal family. She was actually a landmine that would incur their wrath.

"But... Why did she do something like that, despite her tough position...?"

Only the princess and her knight occupied the gazebo. The noble students all walked about as if they were avoiding her. Even the commoner students looking to curry favor hesitated to draw close. The cheerful afterschool courtyard was completely empty exclusively within a radius surrounding the gazebo in the center.

Memories of my classmate's face bursting into a smile as we talked about flowers under the skylight in that gloomy archive came back to me. The mother she spoke of at the time was likely her real mother.

Also, she seemed genuinely happy that she was able to come to school. Why would she show a strange sense of sympathy for a quarrel between two commoner students...? Perhaps she was just a strange person due to her upbringing? Meaning that the entire uproar with the competition was never intended to force me into her debt at all.

“Oh well. I’ve already gone out of my way to get this prepared already, after all...”

“Sir?”

I stood up and left Mia behind as she quizzically stared at my back. I pulled the small paper package from my pocket and steadily made my way towards the center gazebo.

Back then, this girl stuck up for our company’s merchandise, and for the work I put in. If that was done out of pure kindness, then I need to return the favor. It would only weigh me down if I didn’t repay a debt I owed, after all.

Normally, a debt to a princess would be an unbelievable financial burden. But at this moment, it could be settled with the seemingly insignificant package in my hand. As a merchant, I couldn’t possibly let such an opportunity slip by.

“What business do you have here?”

I came to a stop at the gazebo’s entrance, and Claudia came to greet me with a stiff expression. Upon seeing who I was, she practically spat out at me, unable to hide the contempt in her voice.

“I’ve brought something to thank Her Highness for the other day. Could you please pass it along to her, Madam?”

“The other day...? Oh, the honey? Did you...” Her stern expression was telling me “Did you forget the warning I gave you last time?” I thought she would just drive me away immediately, but her strong-willed expression wavered slightly. She was probably in low spirits over her lady’s misfortune, seeing how loyal she was to her professional duties.

“That voice... is that Ricardo? You’re welcome to enter, if you would like. We have too many sweets and tea here as it is.”

“Your Highness. You mustn’t frivolously allow a commoner to approach you precisely because of the current situation.” Claudia spread both her arms and blocked the entrance, remembering what her original duty truly was. A commoner was approaching in a situation where her lady’s standing was on the wane, like someone trying to make an impression while she was depressed.

“I must decline your offer. I only came to deliver this.” I had no intention of getting deeply involved. I had no reason nor leisure to do so, after all.

The princess had come all the way to the entrance of the gazebo, and I held out my paper package. Claudia snatched the package from my hand and verified its contents. She grimaced, but obstinately handed the package over to her lady.

Inside was a single rectangular piece of paper, and affixed to its surface was a souvenir I got from a village on the border. Upon guessing what it was, the princess’s face lit up immediately.

“The gradient from white to pink truly is beautiful. So this is a lotus flower?”

“Yes. It’s been pressed, but the color and shape have been preserved.”

“This manner of flower blooms over entire fields, right?” Alfina held the bookmark to her chest and smiled, making my cheeks reflexively slacken as well.

“A wildflower on a scrap of paper as gratitude? I assume you’re not ridiculing the princess, are you?” Claudia’s stern expression grew even grimmer.

“Clau. I’m the one who said that I would like to see a lotus flower.”

“But the proper formality for presenting a flower to the royal family is to use roses...”

“I am part of the clergy.”

“Still, it’s not good for someone to approach at such... When did you even have such a conversation to begin with?” Her escort’s wariness continued to grow. And it wasn’t just Claudia. The number of people turning to look at us from the surroundings was beginning to multiply.

“I’m honored that you have found this to be helpful, even a little. Now then, if

you'll excuse me."

"Of course. Thank you very much, Ricardo. I will treasure this bookmark..." This time, it looked like she would actually let me off the hook. However, after looking down at the bookmark once more, her words came to a stop, and her expression was dyed with shock. "Ricardo. You said that entire fields of flowers like this can be seen in bloom in the west, right?"

"Yes. Though, only in a small region to the very west. What about it...?"

Her expression was once more filled with sorrow. *Is something wrong with it? Does she dislike the color of the string on top or something...?*

"...No. Allow me to thank you once more from the bottom of my heart. I shall begin using it immediately." But in the next instant, her smile returned. Her gratitude was now fully overblown. Moreover, she was going out of her way to use it right now...?

"I'm honored you would do so."

Claudia seemed to be approaching her limit. I bowed one more time and turned my back to them. As I did, I could see Mia approaching me from the bench across the building's wall with a sigh.

"Clau. There's no meaning in staying here any longer today. We have some extra time, so let us go visit Professor Fulsig."

"Very well."

By the time I met back up with Mia, I could hear that exchange between the two girls behind me. I felt like my feet would come to a stop, but I forced myself to keep walking. We left the courtyard filled with a fake calm behind us, and entered the school building.

I stopped and looked down the corridor.

"Are you going to the library now? According to the plans for today..."

"Y-Yeah. There's something I want to confirm."

I went down the corridor and opened the door to the library. There were two students seated at the reading tables; one of them noticed Mia and quietly waved to her. After I urged her on, Mia went off towards them, looking like she

still had something she wanted to say.

I headed further in past the bookshelves and towards the entrance to the archive. After school, I was summoned to a place nobody normally sets foot in, by a girl in the same grade. Such a situation had never really happened to me back in the other world. But I guess there was a limit to my excessive self-consciousness. *She's still a princess. She's surely not so simple that she'd be swayed by such a cheap present.*

However, judging from the way she looked at the bookmark, the way she said she would start using it today, and the way she timed what she said after that in a way that only I could understand...

"Even if it's just a one in a thousand chance, creating a grudge here by accident would be the most dangerous thing I could do..." I muttered to myself, as I slowly opened the door to the archive.

I headed towards the skylight within the dim room. Just past the jam-packed bookshelves, a chair was sitting there just like before. And standing before the chair was a single schoolgirl.

"Thank goodness. You came." After confirming it was me, she put her hand to her chest and let out a large sigh of relief.

So it wasn't a misunderstanding. However, it still wasn't the time to be overly self-conscious. What did she want with me? Enlisting me as a supporter in her current situation would be a mistake, since it would definitely backfire on her.

"There is something I would like to ask you regarding this flower." She didn't pay any mind to my expression, and held the bookmark I had just given her earlier in her hand. She seemed to be quite concerned.

I cocked my head to the side with a look of bewilderment. She certainly had an interest in lotus flowers. However, I thought it was because she had so little experience with the outside world, and that she looked up to her mother's homeland.

I shook off the possibility of the flower's strange meaning in floriography, a vow of love. Her serious expression hinted at nothing of the sort. It was the same expression I saw for just an instant at the gazebo, one filled with sorrow

which overturned her usual beauty. I could hardly contain the feeling of unease at just what I had gotten myself involved in.

“I saw it... The sight of people trampling over these flowers as they ran away.” The princess cut right to the chase, as I stood in front of her. This comment threw me off even more. Running away? What is she talking about??

Chapter 5: First-Hand Information is Indispensable

“I saw it... The sight of people trampling over these flowers as they ran away.” Clutching my gift, she pleaded with me desperately. Even though I’d just gotten more information, I didn’t understand a thing that was going on. Though it was at least getting through to me that whatever she was talking about wasn’t good news...

“I’m sorry, I don’t really understand what you are talking about, Your Highness.”

“Huh?! Um, I mean...” Alfina was clearly flustered, and we simply looked at each other in confusion. “Um, did you not come here so I could tell you more about the disaster?”

“The... disaster?” My unease and confusion only multiplied at the sudden mention of the word “disaster.”

Hang on, that came up just recently, didn’t it? And from her own lips, no less. Oh, right, the prophecy of disaster. Since she’s talking about it here, there’s no mistaking she’s referring to the disaster in the prophecy from the Spring Festival.

So why did she come here to talk with me about it? My knowledge of religious ceremonies here in this world was below that of any member of the general public. I didn’t even think the prophecy was anything more than a New Year’s fortune like back in the other world. What are you even supposed to do if your fortune comes out as “Horrible Luck: A terrible disaster will occur?”

“I apologize, but I truly do not believe that I can be of any use.”

“But the flower on the bookmark!” She held out the bookmark towards me.

This wasn’t the princess in the courtyard who was calm and gentle in spite of her loneliness. The girl before me, lit by the unreliable sunlight from above, was looking at me with pleading eyes.

The alarm bells in my head grew louder and louder. Before I knew it, I was

assaulted by a feeling like I was now being forced to make a tightrope walk over hell. Danger surrounded me on all sides. Regardless of whether I decided on running away or going forth, I had to make doubly sure of every single step. Such was the situation I found myself in.

“By disaster, do you mean the disaster that you announced during the Spring Festival?”

“Y-Yes. Precisely.”

“And you’re referring to the pressed flower on the bookmark, right?”

“Yes.”

“Are you saying that this flower is related to the prophecy?”

“Yes. So, um, I thought that... it was some sort of... signal... to me... from you...” Her voice grew quieter and trailed off. We finally came to a mutual understanding, but she realized that it wasn’t going the way she hoped.

“That’s not the case, Your Highness. You seemed to express great interest in lotus flowers, so I simply brought you one as thanks for the other day. They are still not in bloom this year, but I had some pressed flowers on hand which were made at a village I deal with.”

The children of the village simply used the flowers we would send along with our honey as bookmarks; that was all it was.

“...But, if that’s the case, why are you approaching me, even now...”

“You stuck up for our company’s merchandise in front of Dreyfan. Now, was there anything to be gained by lending me a hand in that situation, Your Highness?” The finishing blow. It goes both ways, so let’s just call it even. In truth, my expectations were to simply cancel out the debt I made to a celebrity, so that was all I needed. “Th-Then... you were simply trying to comfort me...” Alfina was practically in tears with a smile on her face.

Urk, this conversation was going in a strange direction. How was I supposed to answer that?

“Sir? What’s going on?”

And as we stood there completely frozen up, a third voice joined in. I turned

around in a fluster, and found Mia standing there looking at me with cold eyes.

Apparently, her meeting with her friends in the reading area had ended. I was curious about what information she now has on the Dreyfans and Kendalls, but this was hardly the atmosphere to bring that up.

*

“So, Princess Alfina did not call you out here for a tryst?”

“Listen, Mia. I was summoned here by Her Highness owing to her duty as the Oracle Princess...” I waved my hands around while trying to explain the situation to Mia in the princess’s stead, seeing that she had turned bright red. Mia’s gaze pierced through me with the eyes of a prosecutor staring down a perp.

“Then what reason did you have for accepting her invitation?”

“U-Um, how should I put this...” Cold sweat ran down my back. If Mia were to tell me she’d been summoned for a secret meeting with the princess and had to be off, I would surely go out of my head too.

As for the princess, she finally realized what this situation looked like to an outsider, and was in a complete fluster. *Boy, am I glad I didn’t say anything.* I was on the verge of seeming like some kind of excessively self-conscious jerk who can’t read the room.

“So you’re saying the bookmark that you so carelessly delivered to Princess Alfina is in some way related to her duty?” After looking at the both of us one after the other, Mia let out a sigh and we returned to the topic at hand.

“My duty as the Oracle Princess is to interpret the prophecy projected by Quell’s Crystal.”

Quell’s Crystal was apparently a transparent globe made of multiple layers. And when it showed omens of a prophecy to come, it emitted a weak light. Apparently, light poured out ever so gradually from the outer layer.

Alfina continued to seriously explain things to us, not that I could get any real impression from any of it. Those individuals chosen as an Oracle Princess secluded themselves within a room in the cathedral when the crystal showed

such omens. And within the so-called Room of Prophecy, they approached the crystal and a vague image was projected directly within their mind.

“The first time, I saw a bountiful field of wheat.”

The image of the future gradually grew clearer and clearer, and the last image seen would be reported as the prophecy. However, this time around, the image apparently changed.

“And what I saw last... was the sight of people desperately running away within the same scenery. Small pink flowers fluttered in the air as they were trampled over.” Perhaps reflecting on the confusion she caused, Alfina’s explanation was thorough and concise.

As I listened to her earnest explanation, the crease in my brow grew more pronounced. There were more than enough problems to deal with as it is.

According to her, the image of the prophecy changing partway through wasn’t ordinary. Apparently, the Oracle Princesses before her only ever entered the Room of Prophecy once before the Spring Festival. However, from what Alfina said, a weak reaction from the crystal which wasn’t conclusive enough to use as a prophecy had occurred several times this year. And since this was her duty, she couldn’t attend the Academy all that often.

In other words, the Oracle Princess before my eyes is different from the ones before her. Thinking of it favorably, it would mean that the prophecies until now were just ceremonial, and this was the real thing.

The girl before me spoke at the festival knowing full well that her position was precarious to begin with. She took on a tremendous risk to fulfill the role that had been forced on her because nobody wanted it. At the very least, she believed it to be the truth. *So let’s believe... let’s assume that’s the case.*

The only one capable of seeing the image is the Oracle Princess. And that image only occurred in her mind. Furthermore, according to her explanations, the cause of the disaster itself wasn’t displayed. It seems all she could feel was that it occurred somewhere in the west. A truly disappointing set of limits, befitting of a prophecy. It had no objectivity at all.

For example, what if the crystal simply had an effect of amplifying its user’s

imagination? It's a far simpler mechanism to implement than showing the future. Even back on Earth, where mana and whatnot didn't exist, it was possible to stimulate such a reaction with drugs. From what I saw of the Oracle Princess's treatment at the royal palace, they're probably thinking something similar themselves.

"His Majesty and the prime minister said that... there was no need to speak of what I saw in the end." The Princess sadly added one more detail.

Mia turned to look at me. I understood. So she really did defy the intent of the nation to announce the prophecy. Getting involved any further would be accompanied by a suitably terrifying amount of risk. It had at least gotten to the point where we should leave immediately. However, there was a reason I couldn't do that.

Common sense from the other world was still deeply ingrained within me. It was dangerous to trust in my senses, incapable of believing in prophecies as I was. I had absolutely no disposition towards it, but an energy known as mana did in fact exist here, and there are people capable of using it. As long as it was an unknown quantity to me, I needed to proceed carefully. Above all else, though...

"The last thing you saw was 'the sight of villagers trampling over pink flowers as they ran away,' right?" I asked again to be sure. This one detail could have a great effect on the Weinder Company's interests.

In the event, however small the chance, that this prophecy really was true, this disaster could very well befall that village. I would lose the entire apiculture enterprise that I tried so hard to create. That village was also Mia's hometown, and I owed them for saving me after "collapsing and nearly dying on the street" around the area. But for now, I needed to tread carefully and take things step by step.

"I see, so knowing where this flower blooms is meaningful information." I pointed at the small flower left on the table.

Alfina sat there blinking in surprise for a moment, as if caught off guard by my comment. However, her large eyes seemed to understand what I was implying.

"Th-That's right. Could you please tell me more about where this flower

blooms?”

I remained silent. *Should I give the information I have on hand to her? In other words, should I acknowledge her as someone I can trust to share this kind of information with?* This was a difficult problem for me.

“I will do anything I can to repay you. Of course, I will also ensure no one else knows that you told me anything.”

With such a large disparity in our positions, the most important part of an exchange of information was whether or not the one party was trying to understand the other party’s position. It was important precisely because there was a gap in understanding that couldn’t be filled no matter how hard we tried. Apparently, she did understand that we’d be taking on a tremendous risk with this. She did in fact scheme to call me out in a way that nobody would know. And from our conversation so far, she never once tried to use her social status as a means to order me around.

On the contrary, after the initial uproar calmed down, she sincerely informed us of all the information we wanted. *For now, I think she passes. The next problem is...*

I felt a tug on my sleeve under the table. *Yes, I know, I need to decide quickly or this will gradually head in a worse direction.*

I glanced at Alfina once more. She had both her hands clasped together atop the table, awaiting my answer. I didn’t see any hubris in her claiming that she’s right, so everyone around her should unconditionally cooperate. I also didn’t sense her trying to swindle us using the common delusion that people who say righteous things are righteous themselves. Incidentally, this scam is particularly dangerous because it didn’t matter if the scammer themselves was aware of it.

“Understood. I’ll tell you about where this lotus flower blooms. However, could I ask you several more questions myself?”

“Y-Yes. Please ask me anything.”

Setting aside her attitude, her naïveté was worrying. Even if we were bearing the risk of telling her what we knew, I felt like there was no point if she only knew that the field of flowers in her head were in fact lotus flowers.

“What do you plan on doing once you know where the flowers bloom?”

“I plan to have the people evacuated, of course.” Alfina answered as if it were perfectly reasonable.

“Who will do that, and how?” And I asked a perfectly reasonable question in return.

“Huh?! Naturally, I will...”

“How do you plan on convincing the villagers to abandon all their nearby fields and run away?”

“B-By telling them that it’s dangerous...”

“And how exactly is it dangerous?”

“Th-There’s a disaster coming...”

“What kind of disaster?”

“I-I don’t know...” Alfina’s voice gradually grew more and more quiet.

“Let’s change the question. Even if they evacuate, how far do they need to run away? When can they return? How will you prepare food and dwellings for them in the meantime?”

“...” Alfina was unable to answer my questions anymore, and I was kicked under the table. Oh, come on. She just put so little thought into it that my tone became a little rougher, is all.

“Ahem. The release of emergency stores of food, appeals for cooperation from the local lords, and depending on the cause, the deployment of the military. There’s a need for the leadership of the nation to plan all of that, right?” Another severe question for a sixteen-year-old girl.

However, the real problem was that Alfina had to convince the king. And the only material proof she had on hand was the vague image in her mind. If they respected the prophecy to begin with, she wouldn’t be in this situation. Meaning that even in this world, a prophecy was unable to move an entire nation. I also believed this was how it should be.

I took a look at Alfina, who had become despondent due to my miscalculation

in restraint. I didn't say so aloud, but there was also a need to consider what to do in the event that a disaster did not occur. Just who will shoulder the enormous cost of a false evacuation and take the responsibility for it? The prime candidate was right here in front of my eyes... But I didn't have the luxury of worrying about the self-preservation of others right now.

"It stands to reason that you cannot move an entire country with such vague words, Your Highness."

"That can't be... But I..." Alfina was about to say something, but once more held her tongue.

In any case, she isn't getting angry, even with me going so far...? On the contrary, she's practically looking at me apologetically.

Mia shot a critical glare at me. *Look, I get it. If I'm going to say such things, it would've been fine to just arbitrarily answer her questions and leave instead.*

I stood up from the table. Alfina reached her hand out to stop me, but her hand stopped halfway, lost its strength, and fell back to the table.

"But it's not to say we lack the means of taking a vague prophecy and turning it into precise information." I took a map and reference book from a bookshelf and returned to my seat.

Alfina let out a sigh of relief, and Mia breathed a sigh of resignation. *There's no other choice, right? I went that far because I planned on cooperating from the start.*

Of course, I had no disposition to mana, the same as any other commoner. And even among said commoners, special topics like prophecies were way outside my field of expertise. However, if we interpreted the prophecy as first-hand information, I could at least teach her how to handle it.

Alfina's gaze fell onto the map and book, wondering what was about to begin. But I left them shut and set them aside on the table. I then looked straight at the Oracle Princess.

The most important thing here is the first-hand information. In this case, it's the image of the disaster in her mind... so the primary piece is just a subjective image that only a single person saw in their own head. It makes me want to cry.

“Please, allow me to confirm the contents of the prophecy once more.”

“Of course.” Alfina nodded nervously.

“About the image you saw, Your Highness. Concerning the flowers specifically, are you certain that they were lotus flowers? Could it possibly be another type of flower of similar appearance? Oh, and no using the bookmark to confirm. Please describe the shape and color of the flower in your head as best you can.” I hid the bookmark on the table under my hand.

“...My apologies. I can’t discern such minute details from the image that appears in my mind. The color itself was definitely pink. As for the shape... it wasn’t anything like the flowers I’ve seen growing in the parks of the capital. It was more like, ummm, the wheels of a carriage...”

Alfina continued as she tried taking glances at my hand on the table. An image in one’s mind is very easy to paint over. It’s entirely possible to use a flow of leading questions to produce a completely opposite answer.

The base characteristics were a match. This girl could basically be said to be a prisoner of the capital. Even if she came to the west, she would surely be no less caged up as she is here. For now, I could assess that the credibility of Alfina’s words are quite high when it came to the flowers. The next step was to verify things from a different angle.

“Next, what manner of clothes were the people who were running clad in? I do believe there would be aspects of their clothing that are somewhat different from what would be seen in the capital.”

Alfina silently closed her eyes.

“...All the women had sashes around their waists. They were a little wider than what I’ve seen in the capital. The sashes had a design with a straight line dyed on them... I think the light green sashes had... a deep blue line along them.”

Perhaps as to be expected, the clothing the women wore stuck more clearly in her memory. I took a look at Mia, and she nodded back to me.

Incidentally, the line on the sash isn’t a dyed design. The women of the villages aren’t wealthy enough to afford dyeing designs onto a piece of cloth,

after all. The women of that region simply tie a thin string atop their sashes. It's something like the decorative string you can see around the obi of traditional Japanese clothing. The color combination of the sash and the string differentiates between married and unmarried women. A deep blue string on a light green sash is the combination for an unmarried woman.

"Were there any other buildings or such that could identify the characteristics of the region?"

"...I think I saw something like a water wheel near the village."

And with that, both Mia and I trembled slightly. This young lady probably didn't think that a water wheel was all that strange. However, timber is quite valuable in this country, so it's peculiar for a small village to have a water wheel.

Lotus flowers growing in the region, the clothing the women wore, and a water wheel. There was in fact a region where all three of those coexist, and it was limited to exactly one place.

We were the ones to install a small water wheel in the village, so that we could collect honey from the beehives more efficiently. Now that we had come this far, I could no longer consider that this was all a trick which had been set up by Alfina from the very beginning. There's no worth in doing so anymore. Of course, it'd be a different story if she knew exactly what I knew in my head.

"..."

"..."

Mia and I silently nodded at each other, and I opened the book.

This book was a collection of customs from various regions. It was actually quite rare, in that it even contains the details of what manner of clothing commoners wore. In the distant future, it will surely become an important book in the study of folklore.

"About the sash you were telling me about... did it look something like this?"

"...Yes. That is what I saw." Alfina replied clearly.

She properly understood the meaning behind the question, didn't mention anything in excess, and answered with only the most necessary words. She was

raised in a completely sheltered environment, but she seems wise by nature.

“Understood.” I set the book aside and opened the map.

I traced my finger along the plains near the mountain range to the west. I had previously investigated the distribution of lotus flowers in the region to plan for the future expansion of our apiculture business.

“That flower, the lotus, blooms along the westernmost part of the western region. Also, the characteristics of the sashes you spoke of are unique to the northern part of that region. There’s about twenty villages around here...” I circled my finger around, continuing to limit the area of the map. And then, I stopped on a single point. “...And among them, the only one with a water wheel is this one, Reylia. So... Y-Your Highness?”

A slender white finger was placed atop my other hand which was holding down the map, and I looked up at Alfina in shock.

“I’m truly glad I consulted you about this. You didn’t only believe what I had to say, but you even...”

“N-No, if I...” I was about to say “If I believed you, I wouldn’t have tested you,” but I was stopped by the strength placed in Alfina’s hand. Her white and slender fingers slipped in between mine. The slight chill of her fingers, perhaps from the tension of it all, was strangely pleasant. And then, the portions of our hands that were touching gradually began to warm each other up.

“Ahem. Princess Alfina, I do believe that you are misunderstanding Ricardo. He’s simple, but he won’t take action if it isn’t in his own interest,” Mia said with a cough.

What kind of messed-up personality are you pinning on me? I’m simply a realist. I only believe in taking action for my own sake, is all... Oh, I guess she’s right. Now that’s my dear secretary for you. There really is a need to warn this princess before she gets her hopes up too much.

“Your Highness, what we’re doing right now is simply the first stage regarding the prophecy of disaster. That is to say, we’re analyzing what information we have. I still haven’t assessed whether I believe the prophecy itself. Keep that in mind.”

“Analyzing...? And you still haven’t assessed...?” Alfina brooded over my words.

Well, I guess you would normally start by choosing whether or not you believe in it. However, what I was doing now was deciding on the point that allowed me to assess whether or not I can believe in it. You could say we were still in the early preparatory phase.

“That’s quite complicated. But I do know that you were willing to hear me out seriously, Ricardo. Even now, you are properly considering what I say.”

“If we consider that the disaster will occur when the lotus flowers are in bloom and the harvest is ready, the latest it could happen is in the middle of August. We have precious little time, so I think we should move to the next stage quickly,” Mia remarked.

“I-Is that so?” Alfina pulled her hand back in a fluster upon noticing Mia’s gaze. One step later, I did the same. As the map was about to close itself, Mia pushed up against me from the side and pinned it down with her hand.

Alfina was the same as before, looking at me full of hope, and the weight of her gaze was heavy. Predicting the future is both the greatest and worst goal in economics. It’s normally decided that you’re better off not doing it.

This time around, we had a fixed goal, so it wasn’t so dire. But nevertheless, we’d be lucky if the probability that we hit the mark is even just ten percent. In the worst case, I’ll be forced to tell his innocent girl that I’ve decided not to believe in her prophecy...

“Let’s move on to the next stage.”

Everything up until now was the analysis of the first-hand information. We managed to trim down the list of candidates for the location based on the prophecy. Next, we needed to trim down the list of candidates for the disaster based on the location.

Chapter 6: Hypothesis of the Disaster

“You’re right. We’ve been able to identify the location, so it’s time to evacuate—”

“It’s not.”

“This is still insufficient to convince the nation.” Both Mia and I cut her off.

They fundamentally haven’t listened to her prophecy at all, so just pinning down the location it’ll occur surely won’t make them evacuate now. Though if we were to present them with this analysis in secret before the public announcement was made, it might be a different story.

“At the very least, I think there is a need to identify what sort of disaster will occur before anything can be done.”

“B-But... the crystal didn’t show anything about the disaster itself.”

“Let’s not worry about the crystal for now. We’ve acquired the regional information of the disaster. Meaning, we’re now capable of bringing up candidates for disasters that are likely to occur in the region.”

Though we didn’t know everything, we managed to isolate the region and time period. That means we had enough info to start considering other factors.

Even if there were only ten places it could occur, and there were hypothetically five types of disasters that could happen in each region, there would be fifty combinations to consider. It wasn’t impossible to analyze the situation with that number, but it wouldn’t exactly be a speedy process.

However, if we just have one place to consider, even if we have ten potential candidates for disasters, we only need to analyze those ten cases.

“Let’s begin by bringing up potential candidates for disasters which can occur. The fact that the villagers were running away is a big hint. So, what can we discern from that...”

“It must be something quite severe for them to abandon their abundant

harvests. I think it will be something which occurs suddenly,” Mia replied.

“Right. An unpredictable event. At the very least, that’s how the villagers would see it.” I nodded back at Mia. As a proper villager of this world, Mia’s intuition was indispensable here. “As for candidates, there are both natural and man-made disasters. Let’s start by considering people to be the cause.”

I pulled out a white piece of paper from my pocket, and Mia’s expression clouded over. Paper counts as expenses. My personal sense of values only priced it at pocket change per sheet, though. Nevertheless, when it comes to handling problems that I can’t settle in my mind alone, I have no choice but to rely on external tools.

I wrote “Invasion by the Empire” on the paper.

Alfina’s expression darkened immediately. To the west, or more specifically the northwest, a large river serves as the national border between the Empire and the Kingdom. The Empire is always in need of more food, since a large portion of their territory lies on mountainous terrain. There had been multiple cases of wars with the Empire where they crossed over the river in the past.

The reason for the current long-lasting peace is because the increase in monster activity within their territory had stolen the luxury they had for an invasion. Negotiations had settled on a trade of agricultural goods for mineral goods to balance things out. Incidentally, trade with the Empire is entirely under the state’s jurisdiction. Only the largest companies have the right to do so.

“Wasn’t one of the reasons for stopping you from announcing anything ‘to not provoke the Empire,’ Your Highness?”

“...It’s just as you say.”

There is no authority above all nations here. Therefore, no country exists that can afford a lack of vigilance towards their neighbours. The Kingdom needs to be wary of the Empire. And of course, the Empire needs to be wary of the Kingdom. Both nations are well aware of this. This is the paradox; relations are healthy specifically because they’re wary of each other.

And precisely because of that, there is naturally a need to avoid any

unnecessary provocation. That in itself isn't wrong. If perhaps news of the Kingdom hardening its watch on the western region unprovoked were to reach the Empire's ears, it would raise their wariness of the Kingdom. And that would in turn raise the Kingdom's wariness. And when this loop passes a certain point, the rumor that the prophecy of disaster refers to an invasion from the Empire could be the final straw.

The forty years of peace we've had would crumble in an instant, and the prophecy would be self-fulfilling. Furthermore, if the prophecy were actually true and didn't refer to a war, we'd have both a war with the Empire and a full-blown disaster on the side. It's relatively possible the entire Kingdom could collapse from that.

However, neglecting to consider an invasion from the Empire entirely out of fear of that exact situation is a completely different matter. That's precisely why we must consider it.

"The probability isn't all that high, right?" I pointed at the map. The border with the Empire lies to the northwest. Reylia is situated in the southern portion of the northwest region of the Kingdom. The path a large army could take across the river and into the Kingdom is further to the north and continues east towards the capital without crossing Reylia.

If their only goal is food, there are countless villages with far more abundant fields. And if their goal is to dominate the western grain-producing region, then toppling Berthold would be enough. It's difficult to think an imperial army could make it all the way from the national border to Reylia without any sort of warning reaching the village as well. Furthermore...

"Let's confirm the image from the prophecy a bit more. Were any buildings collapsing? Did you spot smoke or anything else over the horizon?"

"No, such a scene does not come to mind. The skies were clear as well, which is exactly why the people running away were even more..." Alfina clenched her fist atop the table. It seemed she was recalling the tragic image in her mind as I questioned her.

However, this is important information. If it was war, it'd be strange for there not to be any smoke at all. In the event of an invasion, the village would get

burned down, and if not, it's possible that the fields would be burned as a way to prevent the Empire from acquiring further provisions.

I crossed out "Invasion by the Empire" and wrote down the next candidate.

"The next possibility is the outbreak of a rebellion."

Alfina's face turned pale. It's understandable considering her lineage, but we can't discount the possibility. This region played host to a rebellion 20 years ago, and the capital still hates them for it. Even the tax rates are stricter. However, conditions have to pass quite an extreme point for a rebellion to start. Reylia and the surrounding villages aren't cornered to that extent; particularly considering the abundant harvest in the prophecy.

"That is difficult to imagine," Mia commented.

"Agreed." Mia and I nodded at each other. I might just be flattering myself, but there are many hopes for the future there thanks to my apiculture business.

Of course, the probability of it happening is not zero. We're not capable of acquiring all the necessary information to determine that, and even if we could, such a volume of information wouldn't fit in anyone's head. There is only one correct answer to all doubts: "I don't know."

The only thing we can do is "assess," taking what assumptions we have on hand into consideration. It's not about belief, but choice. We submit ourselves to the risk of making the wrong choice.

"Next is natural disasters. Earthquakes, floods, volcanic eruptions..."

Reylia had no large rivers nearby, and there are no records of previous eruptions from the mountain range. Volcanic eruptions are, of course, unpredictable by nature. Even in modern Japan, it isn't possible to predict them with sufficient accuracy. This also applies to earthquakes. I continued to cross out the possibilities one by one as I traced my finger along the map.

"It's also difficult to picture it being an epidemic..."

In an age where the population density is quite sparse, the first place to consider for an epidemic would be the major cities. It's also difficult to imagine that a village would be abandoned over one. Do people really try to run away

from an epidemic in a panic?

I continued to stare at the map.

“Then let’s think of the next possibility... Next is... Uhhh...”

“Ricardo?”

“Sir?” The two girls stared at me as I held my tongue.

Well, this was troublesome. I’ve largely considered all the possibilities that came to mind. What other natural disasters were there? A tsunami? We were nowhere close to the ocean. A meteorite collision? It didn’t match the image; that wouldn’t be a simple matter of just smoke. Also, it’s not like meteorites possess a will to go world to world just to wipe out dinosaurs. It’s literally a needless anxiety.

Wait, hang on, what if there’s some sort of magic to cause something similar to a meteorite to come down...? Or maybe something like a Demon Lord getting summoned from another world?

There was no way of verifying that, so it wasn’t even worth considering. If a Demon Lord truly appeared, all we could really do is pray that a hero comes along too. I’d like to bluntly refuse being the hero from another world, by the way. I’d much prefer for a Demon Lord’s powers to awaken within me come autumn. Then I can just create a demon country and set up my commerce reform there.

Crap... my thoughts are getting more and more unrealistic. I shook my head as the two girls looked at me with hope and anxiety. Sweat ran down my forehead. My thoughts had come to a stop. Meaning...

I took a deep breath in, and out.

“This is a bad trend,” I whispered quietly to myself.

The fact that I couldn’t find a candidate was proof that I have information big enough that it can’t be ignored. Putting it paradoxically, what I’m unconsciously denying here is the information itself. Be it man-made or natural, my thoughts are always trending towards Earth’s standards.

So the question is: what is the situation that exists in this world that I’m

unable to imagine?

That's it... This is a different world, after all...

I looked at the girls before me. One is the Oracle Princess, and the other had once warned me of a certain something...

"There's... one other possibility that comes to mind."

I stood up, and pulled out a book on natural history. This is what I had been investigating in the archive the last time I was here.

Alfina and Mia focused on the pages as I turned them over. And near the end of the book, my finger stopped on a creature that didn't exist on Earth. My other hand stretched out towards the map, and I traced my index finger along the map to the northwestern region, just west of Reylia.

Right there on the map was a mountain range plastered in vermillion, and a forest drawn in red. This is the domain of monsters that humans don't usually get involved with. However, there is one exception; a phenomenon where monsters pour out of the Loewer Wald en masse.

It's what the Second Chivalric Order goes to subjugate when omens of it occurring begin to show in the east. That thing which may lead to Dreyfan's profits.

"A monster flood..." A term which had no sense of reality to me left my mouth.

I felt wracked by a feeling like I was talking about an event in a game in the other world. However, here in this world, monster floods are a reality. I wrote down "Monster Flood" on the piece of paper and circled it twice.

"Let's try hypothesizing that the disaster in the prophecy is a monster flood."

"A monster flood?" Alfina said with a puzzled expression.

"A pack of monsters will, at the least, definitely not commit arson. There's also no fear of food being stolen or setting it on fire to prevent that," Mia conjectured, then tilted her head to the side. "However, a monster flood has never happened in the west."

She certainly had a point. I've even considered expanding my apiculture

business towards the Loewer Wald. From a probability standpoint, a monster flood could be put next to a regular flood and a volcanic eruption as an excluded candidate. However, I looked at the map once more.

“Now that I think of it, why exactly has a monster flood never occurred in the west?”

At least from what I can see on the map, the terrain on the eastern and western borders of the Kingdom is largely symmetrical. The west has a mountain range as well. In fact, the red trees we can see from Reylia are proof that the mountain range’s mana influences the region.

Both seem to have identical geographical conditions, but a monster flood has occurred in the east once every few years, and none have been recorded in the west for over 200 years.

“Do they have anything about monster floods written in here...?”

I turned over the page which wrote about monsters and skimmed through the book. However, the contents had suddenly changed to an entirely different topic. The descriptions of monsters are meager to begin with, and seeing how humans never enter monster territory, information on their ecosystem is scarce.

“That’s weird. Action against monster floods in the east is proactive, right? So they must have some knowledge behind its mechanisms...”

“Sir. Dealing with monster floods is a duty of the chivalric orders.”

“I see, so it’s military information.”

Meaning it can’t be made public at a moment’s notice. In that case, we’ll need to search for someone who’s well-versed in military information. The image of a certain haughty upperclassman came to mind, but that would be impossible. Then what about Dreyfan? If he’s getting involved with the chivalric order, then he should have some information regarding them... but there’s no way he would share it with me.

In any case, informing the wrong people about this will just make things worse. Even if I intend on remaining neutral here, objectively speaking, we would all get labeled as people supporting the prophecy that threatens the

stability of the Kingdom. And now these suspicious people are trying to get access to military information. Yup, an execution is guaranteed.

Actually, why is it that when I think of my personal connections, I can't find anything but enemies?

"Mia, can you... Wait, I guess that's unreasonable too."

Mia's personal relationships are largely centered around girls from other mercantile houses. And so, I looked to the one other person here.

Alfina had her close aide, Claudia. And if I remembered right, her father was an officer in the Second Chivalric Order.

Strictly speaking, she was also an enemy of mine. If she found out I'm involved, she will definitely refuse to cooperate out of "loyalty for her lady." But in that case, we can keep things simple if Alfina was the one to ask her. The problem was whether Alfina would be capable of asking that without revealing her hand...

And just then, the bell rang. We had to finish this up soon. So first, let's consolidate the information we do have.

Chapter 7: Specialist

“As of now, the disaster is centered on Reylia village, and we’re assuming it is a monster flood. That’s our current hypothesis of the disaster in the prophecy.”

“A hypothesis...?”

“Yes, which means we need to move the hypothesis to the next stage. So, when is the next time you’ll be attending the Academy, Your Highness?”

If the princess were to break her curfew, or if anyone else even saw us right now, the entire plan would crumble to dust.

“I believe it will be in one week.”

“Understood. I do think you’ll be together with Miss Adel during that period. Could you obtain some information from her regarding monster floods?”

“I will try.” Alfina nodded strongly, for her anyways.

“Sir, what will we be doing?”

“Let’s gather information on the vicinity. There’s something I thought of when I was looking at the map. It’s going to need some slightly troublesome calculations. I’ll be relying on you, Mia.”

“Of course.” Mia nodded.

“Well then...”

The two of us stood up, and I informed Mia of the data we’d need. It’s something we’d already gathered before, related to the Dreyfans. Mia immediately understood, and headed to the opposite end of the archive to gather the old materials.

I headed back towards the library to collect some newer materials. I thought Alfina would leave using the small back door to the director’s office, but she followed me towards the library. It was a good opportunity to make sure she understood that giving someone too much of an unnecessary bias was strictly prohibited in information gathering.

“Your Highness. Do be sure that you do not mention us, and especially not me, in your talks with Miss Adel.”

“But... if not for you...”

“We don’t have enough time, considering the possibility of the disaster occurring when the lotus flowers begin to bloom. What needs to be prioritized right now is quickly gathering unbiased information.”

“...Understood.” Alfina nodded after hesitating for a moment. “I must truly thank you for this. I will never forget this favor.”

We arrived at the exit of the archive. I stretched out my hand to the door, and Alfina bowed to me deeply.

“Regarding that matter, please believe what Mia said earlier. We won’t take action unless it involves our interests. The safety of that village is critical to us. If that prophecy warns of danger which is to befall our company, then we should be the ones thanking you.”

“All I did was fulfill my duty as the Oracle. But... as for you, Ricardo...”

“Think of it this way. The Royal Academy exists to allow students of different standings to intermingle. And what we three did just now is exactly that, a little joint strategy meeting.”

And just this once, I took the public stance of things. Putting it this way, it was like a research project being done by students. Though because of the political danger to it, the theme of this project was far too volatile.

“The last time, you said that we were simply two students meeting in the archives as well, didn’t you? A joint strategy meeting, was it? It may be somewhat imprudent of me in such a situation as this, but I feel somewhat happy to hear that.”

I could tell that Alfina let just a little tension out of her shoulders. She was likely carrying this burden all on her own until now. I was frankly still incredulous as to whether seeing the future is really possible. In economic terms, this was a tail risk. I couldn’t possibly ignore it. I think the other name for this is a black swan. The one who brought the news over was a girl more like a white swan, though, so what’s up with that?

And as such idle thoughts passed through my mind, Alfina looked up at me with a bashful smile.

“Um, but in that case... could you maybe... call me Alfina? I think calling me Your Highness all the time is somewhat unsuitable for intermingling.”

And at the very last moment, she made a fairly difficult to handle request. The quiet girl was making a declaration of her will. If I accepted, it would mean limiting the amount of freedom I have over controlling my distance with her.

Well, it really is a little late for that. At the very least, until this project comes to an end...

“Very well. Then...”

Just as I was about to call my classmate by her name, light suddenly poured into the archive. And on the other side of the opened door was a black shadow, the light from the library at their back.

I instinctively stood in front of Alfina. The silhouette of the intruder was projected against the wall. A girl with a ponytail, with the reflection of a long and narrow light visible in her hand.

“Why the hell are you together with the princess?!” She drew her sword before even speaking. Now that I think of it, I think I might have heard knocking earlier. Did Alfina tell her to come pick her up at the archive?

“Stop that, Clau. I’m the one who called Ricardo here.”

“Wha—?! N-No way... Y-You bastard...” Claudia turned bright red. The pubescent lady was discovered alone behind closed doors with a man, so what was her pubescent guard imagining right now?

The sight of the bare blade of her sword trembling in the air was terrifying. Even if done in ill humor, there’s a difference in our social status regardless of my potential innocence.

“Please calm down, Miss Adel. Your Highness, that manner of phrasing will beckon misunderstanding.”

“...Oh! Ummm, uh... Right. Ricardo is familiar with the western region because of his family’s work. So I asked him for advice regarding the prophecy.”

Nothing like a truth that can only be heard as an excuse, is there? Coupled together with Alfina's panic, it had no persuasive power at all. However, Claudia pushed me aside upon hearing that and stepped up in front of her lady.

"Your Highness. You mustn't speak of the prophecy anymore."

"Clau. But... I..."

"Please!" Her attitude towards her lady was far too strong. It even made the hostility she had directed towards me with the point of her sword fly away.

"Sir? What was that shouting just now?" Mia came running over from further within the archive with a stack of account books in hand. Claudia looked at Mia, and the assumption she had in her mind crumbled to pieces.

"Miss Adel. Just as you can see, I was not the only one here together with Her Highness. You may not be aware, but Mia is also a resident of the west. Could you please believe us, Madam?"

Claudia looked at both me and Mia, and finally returned her sword to its sheath.

"Ricardo. You must never disclose that the princess is paying undue attention to the prophecy," Claudia said to me in a subdued voice.

"I promise," I replied immediately. I could see Alfina tremble with a start behind Claudia. However, I put my hand on the half-open door of the archive, and added one more thing. "Then, please excuse us, *Princess Alfina*."

I pushed the door open and left the archives. Mia followed behind me as she glared at Claudia. I could see Alfina suddenly raise her head on the other side of the door. It seemed she realized I responded to her declaration of will with a declaration of will of my own.

*

"So it really was impossible."

"My apologies."

One week later, we gathered once more in the archive. We thought that perhaps Alfina wouldn't be able to come, but she was here with us again. However, it seemed that trying to get information out of Claudia really was a

useless exercise.

On the contrary, Claudia herself wasn't at the Academy today. In her stead was a commoner student who'd just enrolled. Apparently, she was a maid who had served Alfina for a while now. She wasn't in the room with us, but standing by just outside the director's office.

"Clau hasn't returned from her family home since going to confirm things with her father..."

I see, so that meant Viscount Adel didn't want his family to get involved.

"Understood. Then we need to search for another source of information." I groaned at the data in my hand that I put together with Mia.

I couldn't think of any other intermediary we could use. Do we give up and just search the archive for the data we need? It'd take too much time, and there's not much hope that we can find what we need either.

"Umm, actually, I also consulted my aunt about it... In the end, she did tell me to stop prying, but if I had to know no matter what, she did tell me of someone well-versed in monster floods," Alfina said. An unexpected recovery.

"Uhh, and who would that be...?"

"He doesn't really speak of the past much, so I didn't know this myself, but..." Alfina held her palm out towards the door further within the archive that was for her exclusive use.

*

"A monster flood will not occur in the west." The first thing the withered old man, Director Fulsig, said to me was curt and to the point.

When we opened the door in the archive, we found what looked like a regular office. The slate board along the wall, and the large map of the entire Kingdom next to it, really did give the feeling of an educational institution.

The faint smell of chemicals, somewhat like ink, suddenly assaulted my nose. I could see over a dozen black sheets of paper affixed to the wall. Looking closer, the table meant for guests had similar papers all over it.

The owner of the room was an old man who looked like he could crumble to

dust any time now. He was likely over seventy years old. His white eyebrows drooped like fishhooks, and he had thin eyes with a tapered nose, gaunt cheeks, plus a long white beard. His gaze at me practically screamed, “What the hell do you want?”

Apparently, holding the position of Director of the Library here at the Royal Academy was considered quite the successful career for the fourth son of a baron. Although if what Alfina said about this man’s previous accomplishments were true, it’d be a ridiculously leisurely post for him with absolutely nothing to do.

That’s because this old man, through more than twenty years of steady observation and logical investigation, pretty much single-handedly invented the means for predicting monster floods.

“I see. I see, I see...” His first reaction wasn’t bad. The way he listened to Alfina eagerly explain the image of the prophecy and the location of the village we derived from it was the spitting image of a kind old man. What flipped over his gentleness, like that of a grandfather looking over his granddaughter on her first errand, was Alfina introducing me as her friend.

His gentle eyes suddenly took on a sharp glint to them, and were glaring daggers at the commoner who didn’t know his place. There were in fact two commoners here, but Mia was given tea cakes.

And so, when I proposed my hypothesis of a monster flood occurring, he bluntly shut it down. *You really don’t have to glare; there’s no need to worry. I know we live in different worlds. The reason it ended up like this is a product of coincidences and interests twisting together, is all.* Actually, I tried my best to keep my distance, and for some reason I ended up on this insane research project instead.

“Could you please provide your opinion from a purely hypothetical standpoint?” I asked.

“Hypothetical... you say.” He bit at the technical term just a little. It did feel like he was wondering why an amateur dared utter such a word, but it’s still better than refusal.

“As a result of our investigation, we’ve found this to be the hypothesis with

the highest probability to occur among all possibilities we could think of, given the situation. Thus, we would appreciate your instruction regarding the topic as an authority on monster floods, Director.”

I did my best impression of a Buddha to try and not let my sour expression show. There’s an old Japanese proverb that goes something like, “even a Buddha will only tolerate three acts of contempt.” In this world, if a commoner were to look at a noble with a sour expression three times, that would truly be the path to becoming a Buddha. For the commoner, of course.

“If we’re just talking empty speculation, there are countless possibilities. Even if the disaster the princess speaks of truly occurs, what do you think the probability that your hypothesis is correct would truly be?”

The obstinate old man moved his hand from the table to his chin in an annoyed manner. However, the way he cynically had one eye open seemed nostalgic to me. It reminded me of the attitude my professor in university took when he was testing me. And above all else, that’s the perfect question to start with.

“Let’s see... Maybe about twenty percent, I would say?” I looked at the old man’s nails, dyed by what looked like black paint, as I calmly replied.

“Huh?!” Alfina raised her voice in surprise.

Well, I guess that’s fair; probabilities under fifty percent aren’t terribly reliable. Even more so for a situation where human lives are at risk. However, not considering the feelings and circumstances of other people is exactly how people like him function.

Judging from the choice of words this geezer chose, the test he planted behind his cranky attitude, and from what I’ve heard of his accomplishments, I expected him to be a certain type of man and bet on it.

“And why exactly are you considering an event with such a low probability?” He asked, as he pressed his fingers against his chin and began scratching away at a fixed rhythm.

“Just as I said before, twenty percent is still the highest probability I’ve worked out. In other words, if we consider that we had ten different

hypotheses, the likelihood of each of the other nine is less than ten percent. So, the one hypothesis with more than a twenty percent chance becomes our primary consideration. Isn't that just the nature of making estimations regarding the future? That said, though, the biggest reason is..." I pointed a bold look at the old man. "A monster flood is preventable. In short, we know to some extent that there is a mechanism behind their outbreaks. That being the case, the hypothesis is worth considering."

"To some extent... you say." The old man muttered in an unamused manner. However, the rhythm of his fingers didn't stop.

"Putting it another way, Director, if you were to lend us your wisdom, we could reduce the probability to ten percent, or even zero. If we're capable of confirming a monster flood will occur, then that will be fine as it is. And if we can confirm otherwise, then we can move on to the next hypothesis," I answered him without averting my gaze at all.

"And so you came here... I see... I see..." Fulsig finally raised his chin, and turned up one cheek. The wrinkles around his lips were warped with cynicism. "You say that you want to borrow my wisdom. But what you need is neither my wisdom, nor my assessment. In truth, you're just telling me to hand over my knowledge, right?"

"That's not the case. Ricardo is—" Alfina began to cut in.

"You're mostly right. That's the best way to put a specialist to practical use, after all."

"Ricardo?! Um, I mean..." Alfina looked at both me and Fulsig in a troubled manner, while Mia had a "Oh, great, this again" look. Come on, I picked the right partner for it this time.

Fulsig remained silent and stood from his seat, and Alfina rose halfway from hers to try and stop him. The old scholar came to a stop in front of the slate board on the wall. Evidence that it had been written upon and erased many times over could be seen. Numbers that hadn't quite been fully erased were visible in the corners. A large map of the entire Kingdom was affixed next to the slate, and symbols were placed atop several locations on the western mountain range.

“Monsters base their territory on the flow of mana. In other words, they’re located around the ley lines of the mountain ranges and the Loewer Wald adjacent to them. Normally, the monsters never leave these places. In short, the definition of a monster flood is...”

And so, his lecture began.

Chapter 8: Lecture

“A monster flood is when monsters who inhabit regions around ley lines form a pack and attack the open plains; in other words, human territory. Over the course of history, the greatest and first recorded monster flood occurred approximately four hundred years ago.”

Fulsig continued his introduction in front of the slate board supported by what looked like two large easels. The history of the founding of the nation was something we were familiar with as well.

“The ‘Great Flood,’ right? I believe it’s said the old monarchy that was here before Crownheight was destroyed by it,” I replied.

The monarchy that was said to have been destroyed four hundred years ago was at least as large as both the current Empire and Kingdom combined. Incidentally, both countries claim to be the true successors to said monarchy.

The way Fulsig phrased it as “the greatest and first recorded” such flood likely meant that records of floods before that were lost to the Great Flood and the chaos that ensued afterwards. That also implied just how wide a range the flood back then covered. It’s been said that dragons covered the entire sky at the time.

“A flood on that scale has not occurred again, but small-scale floods have occurred to the east about once every five years, and medium-scale floods about every ten years. As for the cause of the floods...”

Fulsig pointed at the right side of the map, where the eastern mountain range was. The mountain range had symbols drawn on it over several locations.

“It’s the fluctuation of the ley lines. The source of energy for monsters is miasma, mana with a clouded color which wells up from the mountain range. Consequently, one could say that the structure of the mountain range itself dictates the flow of the ley lines. As you can see, the mountain range to the east has a very complicated structure.”

Taking a closer look, there were red lines drawn over the eastern mountain range, and the symbols were placed atop locations where the lines intersected. *I see, so the mountains are like rivers where mana flows instead of water? From the way he said mana “wells up,” the fact that mana is stronger in the mountain ranges than on the open fields is a bit of a contradiction, isn’t it?*

Wait, what if we think of it like a mantle floating on the earth? A good example would be ice floating on water. The further up the ice sticks out of the water, the deeper into the water the other side goes. If we think of mana as something which wells up from the core deep down...

Now isn’t the time to be thinking about geology, though. First, I need to worry about what’s happening above ground. Grasping the relation between ley lines and monsters is the vital point here.

“It’s just like a river, you could say. There are times when the flows of mana cancel each other out and stay calm, and there are times when they pile on top of each other and become stormy. And this affects the monsters who feed on mana. Putting it simply, the more mana there is, the more monsters there are. When the increase in mana tapers off, the monsters starve. As a result, they rampage towards the open plains. And that’s how monster floods occur in the present day.”

Both here and on Earth, humans and other creatures relied on energy from the sun as a foundation for activity. However, monsters also depended on the energy from mana, which came from below ground. Even back on Earth, there existed ecosystems deep under the water that didn’t depend on the sun. They got their energy from heated mineral deposits at the bottom of the ocean.

“The monster floods consist of a pack of grausams. It’s said that their habitat is deep in the mountains. Larger and more powerful monsters depend on a proportionally large amount of mana, and it’s thought that the smaller monsters, who increase in population greatly due to their small dependence on mana, are hunted by the grausams.”

Grausam would be the name of that huge wolf whose severed head I saw once before. It was originally an inhabitant of Earth, and its growth to such a massive size over just a few years was perhaps thanks to its hybrid source of

energy over here. I took a glance over to the data Mia had in her hands. This was a point that needed confirmation.

“Now, let’s look at the west. The western mountain range is relatively simple compared to the east. It’s not possible for large fluctuations of mana to occur like it does in the east. In fact, all recorded monster floods in the Kingdom have been from the east.”

Fulsig pointed at the opposite side of the map. The mountain range ran in a single line from north to south while only meandering about slightly. *I get it now. So in terms of the flow of mana, the west is far more stable.*

“So, how’s that? Is this what you wanted to know?” Fulsig’s eyes were practically asking me, “Now what will you do?”

So that’s the mechanism behind monster floods. His explanation makes perfect sense now. As long as the disaster is happening in the west, the probability of a monster flood is quite low. From that perspective, it’d be better to abandon any fixation on my own idea and deny it along the same lines as a regular flood or a volcanic eruption.

Alfina looked at me with a troubled expression. If we were able to amend the probabilities, we could discard the hypothesis and move to the next. I wasn’t lying when I said that, but...

“I do have one question. Monsters don’t only feed on mana, right? They also eat regular flora and fauna?” I cut right to the question I had prepared beforehand.

“Mhm. The victims of monster floods were all found nearly completely devoured. The same goes for livestock such as cows. However, it’s a definite fact that mana is a necessity to them. In fact, before we could predict monster floods like we can today, the grausams were dealt with by waiting for them to exhaust all their mana rampaging about before engaging them.” Fulsig grimaced slightly as he continued his explanation. There must’ve been a tremendous number of victims. And if our hypothesis is correct, that’ll apply to this case as well.

“Understood. Could we borrow the slate board? Mia, please explain the data we have.” I passed my instructions to Mia, and our presentation that we had

prepared at the cost of our own work began.

“Due to the stability of the Kingdom’s climate, the temperature in the area between the east and west is largely the same. The only environmental condition with a certain degree of difference is the precipitation, and the crop yields line up well with the rainfall. The correlation coefficient between them is 0.86.” Mia fixed two hand-drawn graphs to the slate board as she began her explanation.

“What’s a correlation coefficient?” Fulsig tilted his head at the statistical term he was unfamiliar with. Alfina, on the other hand, looked like she had no idea what was starting.

“Putting it simply, it’s a quantification of how strongly two trends are related to each other. What’s shown here is the crop yields and the precipitation. It demonstrates the relationship between the rise in rainfall and the respective rise in the harvest.” Mia pointed her finger at one of the hand-drawn graphs.

The horizontal axis represented precipitation, and the vertical axis represented the crop yields. Each point represented the average yield across the specified region. The graph rose to the right. A region blessed with more rainfall fundamentally yielded more crops, since there was never any rainfall here severe enough to cause flooding. The climate was just that stable.

“It can be calculated with this manner of simple numerology.” Mia wrote down a simple equation on the slate board. Incidentally, this country referred to arithmetic, or all mathematics in general, as numerology.

Fulsig stared at Mia’s equation intently. The formula for the correlation coefficient was actually quite simple. Well, there were some numerical formulas I taught Mia that she called simple, but they were actually quite difficult for me.

“...What an interesting method of calculation. It makes sense. However, can this data on crop yields really be trusted? No matter how many calculations you make based on incorrect numbers, you’ll only amplify the mistakes.”

Crop yields are closely related to taxes. Meaning, it’s something that nobles often try to falsify. On that note, what Fulsig just said was quite politically dangerous.

Mia glanced at me. She was confirming whether it was okay to tread here, and I nodded back at her. If he went so far as to bring it up, then we just have to respond in kind.

“It’s unreliable for the noble territories. However, even in the sense of simply keeping the nobles in check, the crop yields in territories managed by government officials of the Kingdom’s duchies can be trusted. This is also made obvious from the variance in the crop yields.” Mia pointed at a second piece of paper.

This graph showed the yields reported by noble territories and those of the duchies, noted by dots as a distribution from the mean. The duchies’ points for crop yields formed a curved line, meaning they had a normal distribution. On the other hand, the yields from the nobles plateaued into a flat line. You could say they were distorted by some external cause, and by that I mean the nobles’ whims.

“The variance of the crop yields in noble territories is unnatural, whereas the variance of the duchies’ yields is very close to natural. This result is demonstrated by the following equation, and there is a clear difference between the two. As such, the data this time around was collected only from the duchies.”

This data was basically a bombshell, since it was closely tied to optimizing the investigation of tax evasion. Incidentally, this data was something we largely already collected over a week ago. There were two reasons for that.

The first one was to prepare the last-ditch weapon we needed in the fight against the Dreyfans in the future, since the one good the Culinary Guild handles the most by a large margin is wheat. The reason it was a last-ditch weapon was because we also wouldn’t get away from it unscathed. So if possible, it would be best if we didn’t have to use it.

The second, and far more important reason, was to get an understanding of changes in agricultural productivity across the nation. After all, the most fundamental question behind economic development is, “how many people does it take to produce one hundred people’s worth of food?”

“How interesting. It’s expressed as a difference from the averages, but when

you put it together it becomes... Hang on, what if we take this concept and turn something that should be a coincidence into a numerical formula...?" Fulsig was completely drawn into the calculations.

He even began diving into the concept of statistical significance before Mia could explain it. Meaning his senses for grappling with numbers for decades when he analyzed the ley lines are still active? In any case, he certainly seems to fall completely under the category of a genius.

"Let's return to the topic at hand. Dividing the east and west, we can see that the correlation coefficient of the western region is 0.88. Ergo, the rainfall and crop yield almost coincide with each other. In contrast, the eastern region's coefficient falls to 0.7. This is because there are years of 'slightly abundant' harvests which don't match the rainfall. As for their latest occurrences, going by the Kingdom's calendar, they were in 347, 342 and 334. The crop yields during these years were higher than what should be estimated from the precipitation."

Going by today's date, that would be 3, 8 and 16 years ago respectively. And those years all had one thing in common.

"The years monster floods occurred in the east, eh?" Fulsig concluded.

"Precisely. According to Princess Alfina's prophecy, an abundant harvest is to be expected in the west. But on the other hand, there won't be one in the east. This means that both the prophecy of disaster and the prophecy of abundance may support each other."

Fulsig groaned slightly at Mia's explanation, and Alfina gave us a shocked look. We were also surprised by this result. The data, which ran counter to intuition, was actually hiding something quite tremendous behind it.

"Let's go back to talking about the past first. Factors which influence crop yields irrespective of climate only exist in the east." This was where I came in. I stood up and spoke to Fulsig, as he despairingly stared at Mia's equations. "In those three years, the knights crushed the monster flood before it could break out. And nevertheless, the crop yields increased. Why is that?"

Fulsig turned to face me. All the better, now that he was ready to deal with me.

“The important point is the geography. Actually, the abundant harvests we just spoke of...” I affixed a third graph to the slate board. The lines and writing on it were clearly messier than the other two. “They’re stronger towards the very eastern edge. In short, the villages closest to Loewer Wald show a remarkable trend. So, let’s go back to my initial question. Monsters also feed on regular animals; ergo, the fluctuation in the monster population has an effect on the animals in the adjacent region. Right?”

Chapter 9: Possibility of Verification

“There’s a middle ground known as the Loewer Wald between the ley lines and the open plains. So there’s a possibility that the ecosystem of the open plains is influenced by the Loewer Wald. The biggest possibility of such an influence is the animals of prey in the forest. For example, a pack of large rats that move from the forest to the open plains during the fall, and lay waste to crops before the harvest.”

This can even be witnessed in the village of Reylia. There were nocturnal rats about the size of kittens there, who devoured the wheat fields with their tapered teeth. The villagers detested them like snakes.

“...So that’s why you asked if monsters eat normal animals. The grausams starving for mana start by eating the animals of the Loewer Wald. And then the grausams are suppressed by the knights. I see, that may actually drive up the crop yields.”

“That’s our conjecture. At the same time, it isn’t all that unrealistic a hypothesis for the reason behind an abundant harvest in the west, now is it?”

Alfina held her breath anxiously at my words.

“So you’re saying that there’s a possibility the same thing that happened three years ago in the east, that is, an increase in the monster population and their eventual starvation, could happen in the west... I hate to admit it, but you make a valid point. Well, the fact that the disaster from the prophecy is backed up by the abundance from the prophecy is half-cheating, though. But the most important piece is still missing. As long as a fluctuation in the ley lines to the west does not occur, a monster flood will not break out. Am I wrong?”

Fulsig stabbed at the logical flaw in the hypothesis. He was exactly right. With enough circumstantial evidence, people had a tendency to create a causal relationship where it didn’t actually exist.

For example, let’s say you’re walking on the sidewalk. And say there’s a flashy

car clearly ignoring the legal speed limit passing by. And then a few minutes later, say you hear the sounds of an ambulance from that direction. You'd probably automatically conclude that the car you saw drive past got in an accident, right?

The human brain functions as a network, making it tremendously good at forming associations. But in practice, the ambulance could be carrying somebody completely uninvolved. If the car that passed you really did get into an accident, it's also fairly unlikely an ambulance would make it there that quickly. Regardless, you should still be wary of reckless drivers.

And in passing, the inverse of said human psychology—i.e., the chance that it's all a coincidence—is the foundation behind statistical value.

Now then, let's answer the old man's doubts, seeing how he didn't fall into that trap. Just as I said at the beginning, I believe that the twenty percent chance of a monster flood is sufficient cause for investigation. Even now, the probability is still below fifty percent.

There's a mountain of information we don't have, as well as countless completely unknown possibilities. Even the old man before us should possess but a fraction of all knowledge related to ley lines and monsters. And that fraction, even if it is a hundred times greater than what we possess, is close to knowing nothing at all when one considers the entire picture. That's exactly why the next step is critical.

"As such, the next problem is the possibility of verification. Incidentally, how was the monster flood in the east predicted?"

"The color of mana welling out of the ley lines is chaotic, whereas the mana used by people with the disposition for it is stable. Using that, we let mana flow through a magical device used for measurements, and project the amount of chaos onto paper which can react to it. The standards are strictly defined and properly quantified as numbers."

The old man puffed out his chest. The method was even stricter than what I was hoping for. I didn't understand a thing about the color of mana, though, seeing as I have no disposition for it at all.

"So, if the same measurement is performed to the west, we can verify

whether a monster flood will occur, right?” Alfina found some hope, but I shook my head.

“It won’t work out like that. There’s surely a gap measured in years between the fluctuation in mana and the outbreak of a monster flood, right?”

I thought back to scientific documents displaying graphs of the population of predators and their prey. The two of them moved in concert by an offset.

“Exactly. The omens for a monster flood don’t come from the pure quantity of mana, but rather the extended peak over several years and the decline that follows after it. There are three observatories to the east setup in multiple locations a short distance from the Loewer Wald. They have records for over thirty years of ley line measurements. However, there are no such records in the west, since a monster flood has never occurred there. Even if we begin measuring now, the earliest we can make a prediction is in three years. Ergo, we’re unable to predict a monster flood that would occur this year.”

“No way...” Alfina turned pale, in a complete change from her earlier hopeful expression. Even though there was such a sense of reality to the hypothesis until now, there was no way of verifying it using the current method.

However, after hearing this, I did have an idea. The main point was that the mana of this world was a part of nature. Even over here, there were four seasons, so there should be raw data just accumulating on its own without any sort of intervention from humans. When it comes to the sheer quality of data, the ice peaks of the mountains to the west would be ideal. That said, no matter how many lives you had, it wouldn’t be enough to get those. Even Loewer Wald was currently out of our reach. However, I knew full well that those things grew near the village.

The problem at hand now was how much data we could get. Actually, there were a whole lot of problems. Like whether the data would degrade over time, or whether we could secure the data with enough accuracy and sensitivity through indirect measurements. In short, the problem comes down to the experimental skills of the old man before me.

“Let’s say you indirectly measured the mana of those ley lines. Even if the value is a hundredth or less of its original value, how would it turn out?”

“Thinking of it normally, let’s see... we might be able to cover for measurement errors for one hundredth of the value.”

“You really might be able to cover for it?” The sensitivity beyond what I thought it would be was actually quite surprising.

“Mana only reacts to very specific substances.”

“I see... but I’m still a little unsure. By the way...” I looked at Fulsig’s nails. “...What if you were to personally conduct the experiments as the inventor of said method, Director?”

“I thought you only wanted my knowledge.”

“Youths are prone to failure.” It’s a difficult phrase to use with my classmates, but there’s no problem in using it for an old man with a vast accumulation of years under his belt.

“Hmph, it’s been thirty years since I established the method. Yet my successors haven’t changed the way they do it at all, and simply repeat the measurements. Where’s the fun in that? Thanks to them, the royal palace says there’s no need to increase the precision, and they cut my research funds. But... I’ve continued to develop it.”

Fulsig pointed at the black papers hanging from the wall with his blackened fingertip. Taking a closer look, the papers had white patterns on them here and there, and the patterns grew fainter in steps.

“Meaning...?” I unintentionally gulped.

“If I use my specially made manometer paper, I can increase the accuracy by one degree of precision.”

Fulsig put on a glove and pulled out a single piece of black paper while muttering something like, “To think the day would come when I could use this.” *Isn’t that why they slashed your funding? Well, I suppose he is the type to just keep on keeping on until he reaches his destination.* As for its practical application, it was best to just leave it to the specialists.

“Understood. I’ll go retrieve the traces of ley line activity from the past in the west. When I return, please take care of the measurements, Director.”

“Is there really a way of knowing about the activity in the past...?”

“I have no definitive proof that we can know. But if it goes well, we’ll be able to collect records going back a couple decades. We’ll need the same materials from the east to make a comparison, though...”

I opened a book on natural history. The negative control can just be collected from the vicinity of the capital. The problem was the positive control. Also, I’d need a thin metal cylinder to collect what I needed.

“We can rely on my old connections for the east.”

“Thank you very much.”

“Well, I am technically a professor here. Going along with the nonsense of some students should serve as brief entertainment... Plus, the princess requested it.”

The corners of Fulsig’s lips rose. He was acting all haughty, but he was clearly enjoying himself. As for me, I had to test a method when I had no way of knowing whether it will actually work or not, so the pressure was starting to give me stomach pains. I’m a merchant, so this stuff was completely out of my field of expertise to begin with.

There’s no other choice, though. After all, this was a crisis which could crush my entire business.

*

I had Fulsig show me the magical device that would be used to analyze the sample. Astonishingly enough, he had transformed the room adjacent to his office into his own personal laboratory, and it was even bigger than the office itself. In short, the room which one could barely call suitable for hosting guests was just a single part of the overflowing mess.

Mia was currently over there with Fulsig, explaining to him the fundamentals of the analysis of variance. It was a necessity to raise the precision of the project’s verification phase.

“I’ve never seen the professor looking like he’s having so much fun before. Mia is amazing. Moreover, that talk of crop yields... I’m amazed she came up

with all that in just a few days...” Alfina said to me as I returned to the Director’s office.

“She *is* my prized secretary, after all. When it comes to numerology, she’s far beyond me. Also, for a company that deals in food, having data on wheat is essential.”

I can’t possibly tell her that we gathered it for the sake of crushing a fellow classmate’s house, though.

“Is that so? But... Your way of doing things is practically magic, Ricardo. To think you could guide me all the way here when all I was doing was milling about in confusion...”

Alfina’s eyes contained a clear hint of respect to them as she looked up at me. That innocence, or I guess pure hope, applied an entirely different sort of pressure on me than Fulsig’s curiosity.

“We made such an investigation because of your prophecy, Princess Alfina. And it only turned out to be useful because you introduced us to the director,” I said to the girl, who was like a flower on the peak of a cliff which seemed like it could never be reached, no matter how tall a ladder one prepared.

“I simply heard about him from my aunt.”

That wasn’t the case, though. Judging from the state of affairs during the Spring Festival, Archduchess Berthold had no desire for Alfina to further touch upon the prophecy either.

She said I’d guided her, but even after I went so far in saying whatever I pleased earlier, she didn’t let it dishearten her; she honestly accepted my opinion and devoted herself as best she could. Even when she failed, she contemplated what could be done next.

And if I were actually Alfina’s age... I ought to have been telling her she was amazing, not the other way around.

The fundamental design of the analysis up until now was done by me for sure. But that can be pinned on how I’m the only one who possesses knowledge from the other world, and have experienced the failure of being buried in information. Alfina said it was like magic, but truthfully, the flow of the analysis

so far and its abstract structure are actually quite simple.

For a problem like this where the goal was very clear, one needed to expand the information they had, then contract it. Expand and contract, expand and contract, and repeat until everything was naturally in its proper place. Those steps would one by one create a staircase leading to the answer.

There are no humans capable of jumping over a five meter wall with their own strength. However, with a staircase built up to it step by step, even a child or senior citizen could scale the wall with ease.

The important point was to break the problem down into steps that could be processed by one's own mind. Back in the other world, I repeated my failures precisely because I was unable to do so.

This method was truly efficient for someone with mediocre abilities like me, and the result of all my hardships up until now.

And once developed, it has a ridiculously wide range of applications. No matter the problem, even when the unknown energy known as mana was involved, it was possible to apply this method. However...

"The next part is crucial. All the analysis we've done up until now has simply been preparation for being able to verify the hypothesis."

No matter how beautiful the hypothesis, it held no weight compared to producing practical results.

"I suppose so. Um, Ricardo, you'll be going all the way to that village the crystal showed me, right?" Alfina asked, looking at me with an earnest gaze.

"Yes, I want to see it with my own eyes. Some of Weinder's business partners are there, and I'm acquainted with the village chief as well."

"Is that so...?" Alfina brooded over it for a moment.

She then raised her head with resolve, and looked me straight in the eyes. I had a bad feeling about this. When this usually docile classmate of mine shows her will like this, there was a high probability that it would destabilize my self-preservation. I didn't even need to calculate the correlation coefficient for it.

"Would it not be better for me to also personally verify whether that village is

truly the one I saw in the prophecy?”

“Well...”

The assumption that Reylia will be the site of the disaster was the major premise we built our hypothesis on. And the image of the prophecy only existed in her head. That made her the only one in the world who could verify it.

“Is it unnecessary?”

“...No. I do believe that it’s necessary. However, would it not be difficult for you to go so far...?”

“I will ask my aunt to see whether or not it’s possible,” Alfina replied with a determined look in her eyes. I’d like for her to do so in the least ostentatious way possible, though.

“Princess Alfina... Your Highness. Who is that?”

Since it seemed like Mia would need more time, I decided to leave the director’s office ahead of her, and Alfina faithfully saw me all the way to the exit.

When I opened the door, a girl who seemed to be an underclassman was looking at me, clearly finding fault with the sharply contrasting pair before her.

Well, yeah, I guess even if Claudia isn’t here, there’s no way the princess would come to the Academy all on her own. I think she’s Alfina’s maid.

A girl with short green hair and slanted eyes. Her gaze was filled with wariness towards the presence of someone who ordinarily should not be at the princess’s side. Unlike Claudia, though, she didn’t openly direct her hostility towards me. However, when she called the princess by her name, she corrected herself upon seeing me, and her tone noticeably changed.

“Shia. Ricardo is a precious friend of mine.”

The girl called Shia now looked at me with a cold and sharp gaze. She moved little by little, and inserted herself between myself and Alfina.

“Please excuse me. I am a maid in Her Highness’s employ, Alicia.”

No matter how you look at it, this isn’t really the attitude one takes towards

your lady's precious friend. Yup, that's the right choice to make.

"I'm Ricardo Weinder. I've had the privilege of talking with Princess Alfina about the production areas for honey. Now then, Princess Alfina, I will excuse myself here." I politely introduced myself then headed down the corridor, and could feel a piercing gaze stabbing into my back.

I guess this is how it goes when your lady says such dangerous things, right? I was relieved that she had this sort of maid along with her, from a self-preservation perspective, of course.

Chapter 10: Before Departing

“That geezer was quite the find, huh?”

“You’re right. I do think he’s quite a diamond in the rough.”

Near the walls of the capital, in the region of the city where lower-income people lived, stood a small two-story shop. And in this building, the Weinder Company’s shop, Mia and I were upstairs making arrangements for my departure the following day. It had been about a week since I made the decision to go to Reylia back in the director’s office, and our preparations have finally been completed. Incidentally, my foster father, Paul Weinder, was currently on a business trip. The plan was for me to switch places with him when I return to the capital.

“I thought it’d be a problem when that knight up and vanished, but things have gone in an unexpectedly good direction.”

Especially for us. Of course, it was difficult to think of ways that Fulsig could directly lead to a profit for the Weinders, but people like him were truly valuable in this world.

“Is that so?” Mia stared at me with squinted eyes. “So that nuisance of an escort leaving is good fortune to you, sir?”

“Why are you taking it in that direction?”

“And now you’re suddenly referring to her as Princess Alfina as well.”

“...That’s because we are, in a sense, a team.”

“...”

“More importantly, how’s things on the Dreyfans’ end?” I changed the topic, and Mia’s expression instantly turned serious.

“Going by what I’ve heard from Lilka, the case with the chivalric order is applying significant pressure on the Kendalls.”

Lilka was Mia’s friend, the one who glared at me during the Spring Festival.

She's the daughter of a silver company under the umbrella of the third-ranked company in the Culinary Guild, the Kendalls. I think her company handles dairy products, like cheese.

"So the Kendalls are on the verge of defeat..."

"It seems the second-ranked Carlests are closer to the Dreyfans' side of things. They're not direct rivals, after all."

"Now that you mention it, I've seen people who aren't from the neighborhood around the house..."

It'd be nice if they could just forget about some insignificant company in their merriment over acquiring a new customer, but apparently that wasn't the way things were set to go. The fact that even one of their valuable intelligence-gathering personnel was set aside for us meant that it was the father taking action, rather than the son. *This is bad. It means the scuffle between children is over.*

"I guess I have no choice but to ask you to stay behind, Mia."

"..."

"It's not just about Dreyfan. If we're able to verify this hypothesis, we'll need to finish our own preparations, assuming the worst-case scenario, of course."

"You mean the evacuation of the villagers?"

"Exactly. We'll get by one way or another, as long as the people survive."

We were insignificant merchants, and that village was a tiny one on the outskirts of the Kingdom. What's more, this "research project" of ours ran against the will of the Kingdom. Even if our plan to verify it went as well as it possibly could, we couldn't assume the Kingdom would take action the way we wanted them to.

"Of all the times for the Dreyfans to begin gathering intelligence on us..."

In terms of our own resources, we had no other choice but to make the prophecy of disaster our number one priority.

"Jacob and Remy will be with you, but please be careful."

“Yeah. Don’t get too close to the Dreyfans yourself, Mia.”

“I’m not you, sir. I won’t act so rashly. Now then, please hand those to me.”
Mia held her hand out towards the ledgers left on the desk.

“No, this is my job.”

“Who knows how long it will take you to do the calculations at your pace? Do you plan on staying up all night before your trip, sir?”

And with that, Mia grabbed over half of the ledgers. *Even with that many, I guess she’s going to finish before I do. Really, her talent is practically wasted on me.*

Chapter 11: A Picnic on the Precipice

Seven days had passed since my departure from the capital. I looked out the window of the carriage. May had begun, and the season was well on its way toward summer. Fields of wheat spread out over the plains regularly. The skies were clear, and a relaxing breeze brushed my cheeks. Looking to our front, I could see a small village getting closer. It was a tranquil scene that would make any impressionist painter run for their brush. It was accented by the sturdy-looking and boorish two-horse carriages in front of and behind my own, even if they were quite some distance away.

Incidentally, because of how unnatural such carriages looked on this country road, the wagon that happened to be behind us since Berthold had kept its distance from us. I didn't know what company they were from, but they were surely just as bewildered as I am.

"So these are the fields that produce what becomes confections?" My fellow traveler sitting beside me got closer and raised her voice at the scenery outside the window. She was a girl wearing something like a nun's vestments, including a hood. Her platinum hair spilled out of her hood ever so slightly, and her porcelain cheeks did not even have a single bead of sweat on them.

The minimal effort to conceal her identity with these unfashionable and simple clothes was completely betrayed by the person inside. It was quite tough for me in all sorts of ways in this cramped carriage that was also filled with our luggage.

At any rate, her intimacy increased in direct proportion to her dressing up, and it made me unintentionally want to reach my hand out towards her.

Her current behavior could be attributed to the fact that she didn't even get a chance to open the windows in the archduchess's luxurious carriage on the way from the capital all the way to Berthold. My classmate, looking at the fields of wheat with sparkles in her eyes, was extremely dangerous. Apparently, it was her first time seeing the fields for herself, and not through the crystal.

“Such a remark is somewhat troublesome, so please restrain yourself, Princess Alfina.” I warned her of her statement, which put her closer to France’s revolutionary period than the impressionist one. *At least say they’re fields of bread.* Though I suppose the sweet scent of honey from the jars in the carriage made her associate the view with confections.

In passing, the color of wheat flour isn’t normally white. I was actually quite surprised the first time I saw it here.

“You’re right. I cannot afford to be so careless. By the way, Ricardo, if you don’t refer to me as Fina...”

“Isn’t that a questionable choice for an alias...? Very well, Sister Fina.”

“Is the Sister necessary?”

“I mean, even if you’re meant to be an apprentice, you’re still... Understood, Fina.”

“Very good.”

And with the smiling Fina at my side looking out the window at the same scenery I was, I thought back on what brought us into this dangerous situation.

*

The morning after my preparatory meeting with Mia, I departed from the capital towards Reylia village by mixing into a caravan, just as we planned. We passed along the roads made of cobblestone that the ruined Kingdom before us had made, and began by heading towards the major western city of Berthold.

After staying overnight in Berthold, I linked up with Jacob and Remy, guards hired exclusively by the Weinder Company. Both of them are former soldiers that my foster father hired for their professionalism and skill.

Thanks to the apiculture business, we reaped fairly significant profits for a copper company. What’s more, investments into further profits would lead to mounting pressure and restrictions from the guild, so the Weinder Company couldn’t afford to be frugal in terms of hiring personnel.

All the same, everything up until yesterday was going smoothly. That is, until we got to the topic of how these unnatural carriages ended up coming along

with us.

In the early morning, when things were looking up so far, I was greeted by an envoy from the feudal lord, the archduchess, right outside my inn. And thus marked the end of my journey going exactly as planned.

Political power didn't adhere to some insignificant merchant's plans, or rather, they probably weren't even aware of its existence. And as a consequence of that, an apprentice nun from Berthold's church joined us on our journey under the pleasant pretense of visiting the village orphans.

The archduchess proposed this to the royal palace as a way for Alfina to get some rest. And apparently, the king, who likely wanted to keep his adopted daughter at a distance because of the prophecy, agreed to it.

I tried telling them that we had too much luggage, so they should at least prepare their own carriage, but under some manner of misunderstanding, Jacob moved a bunch of our luggage to the top of the carriage and sat the apprentice nun next to me inside. I held back from telling him, "In the unlikely event that something goes wrong, you're fired, and in the worst case, you'll be executed."

Thanks to that, I spent the next five hours being jostled about in the cramped carriage with the Academy's number-one beauty next to me. Even though I was approaching my home, my self-preservation was in shambles.

*

After arriving in Reylia, I lent my hand to Fina as she descended from the carriage and was surrounded by a crowd of children.

"Hey! It's Ritchie! Long time no see!"

"Waah! He brought along a girl other than Mia!"

And thus, their innocent *lèse-majesté* began. *Will you guys stop? Such careless statements can lead to your death, you know? At least leave me out of this. Actually, don't go dying before I can collect on my investment.*

"Here. I did bring along homework from Mia, though."

I used the numerology drills to keep the noisy children in check and headed

towards the village chief's house. Incidentally, these drills link to the potential recruitment of future personnel of the Weinder Company.

After we arrived at the biggest house in the village, a middle-aged man with a balding head showed up along with the sound of bustling footsteps. This was someone who I was forced to... I mean, who I needed to greet in person.

"Oh, if it isn't Ricardo. Long time no see."

"It's been a while, Chief. How's the condition of the water wheel?"

"...Haha. It's moving along in great condition. Yup."

The two of us put on the best fake smiles we could. This village had practically nothing to see except for its exit. *Let's just put on the act and get it over with. He's probably thinking the same thing himself.*

"Well, that's good. You'll shorten your life if you place too much of a burden on yourself, so please take a rest once in a while."

"You're right. I'll do just that."

It seemed like idle gossip, but in truth, this was a signal for him to keep all apiculture matters concealed. I introduced Fina to him as an apprentice nun, and informed him not to worry about me guiding her around the village.

Fina looked like she said something or other to the chief as we left; probably some sort of warning. Her face did suddenly darken upon seeing the sash around his daughter's waist, after all.

I did, of course, plan to inform him to increase the stockpile of emergency reserves, but I left such discussions to Jacob and Remy. We had to keep the bare minimum amount of information from leaking out, so this was all just preparations for the actual preparations, but it still made a difference.

In the case that we could verify an impending disaster, we planned on genuinely beginning preparations to evacuate by having my foster father take action.

So first, I'll have Alfina walk around and see if this village truly lines up with the image from the prophecy. That's the reason we came here treading on thin ice, as we were.

I guided Alfina over to the wheat fields and pastures. The verdant fields, the cows chewing on the grass, the slowly rotating water wheel—the surrounding scene was the very definition of peace, just as it's always been.

The red leaves of the forest in the distance despite being early summer were quite eerie, but the villagers are accustomed to it, since it's always been like that. At worst, you could hear howling from the mountains at the beginning of spring.

However, the Loewer Wald and the mountains behind them appeared to have an ominous aura to me. Is it because of the potentially flocking monsters within that mass of red trees?

We started from the water wheel and took a walk around the village. And upon reaching the eastern field, Alfina came to a stop. I turned back, and saw her looking towards the water wheel with a stiff expression. It was like the smile she had while looking at the fields along the road moments ago was a lie.

The Oracle Princess closed her eyes and tightly held her hands together.

"There's no mistaking it. This is the scenery I saw," she clearly stated as she opened her eyes again.

And so, we managed to verify our first-hand information.

"Understood. Then I'll go gather the materials we need, all in line with the plan."

With this, Alfina's role had ended. That's where I come in.

"By materials, you mean the red trees, right? Are you... entering the forest?" Alfina looked at me with concern and took a step towards me.

"Of course not. I wouldn't do something so rash." I'm just a merchant, after all. My duty is to acquire the necessary materials at the lowest cost possible. "Actually, in villages this close to the Loewer Wald, you can see them kind of scattered about here and there... Look, right over there."

I pointed to the west of the village, where an open field was dotted with red trees and shrubbery. The pigment was fainter than the trees in the forest, and there were both green and red leaves mixing together. It's likely that their roots

ran quite deep and they drew energy from the ley lines, despite the distance.

Even with timber being as valuable as it is, these trees are considered too ominous to cut down. The chief said that those trees had red leaves ever since he was a child, so their age should be more than sufficient.

*

There were two conspicuously large trees to the northwest and southwest. They were both about the same distance from here, but *that* was to the north. No matter who it was, it'd be best to keep the risk to our secrets behind honey production to a minimum. Just the fact that she was coming along with me was outside the confines of my original plan.

“Ricardo?”

“Oh, right...”

Alfina looked to me with a serious expression. She didn't look to be in a sightseeing mood at all. It reminded me of the pained expression she made when she identified this village as the site of the disaster.

There was value in her coming along. The fact that we managed to confirm our primary supposition was a big boon. And if the prophecy really was true, she would be the one who rendered the distinguished service of saving this village.

“Let's start by collecting from that tree over there.” I pointed to the northwest of the village, towards a rising embankment.

In passing, there happened to be a small, caved-in piece of land just over that embankment with a small brook flowing through its center. It may have once been a lake.

I walked up the gentle hill together with Alfina. After arriving at the large tree sitting at the peak of the embankment, I looked down at what lay beneath us and beckoned Alfina over. She walked up to my side in a fluster and then came to a complete stop.

“...Wow!” She grasped her hands together tightly and had her eyes glued on the scenery before her.

What spread out on the other side of the embankment was like a painting of green and pink, a field full of lotus flowers. Unfortunately, they had only just begun to bloom, so it wasn't exactly the pink carpet the princess was looking for.

And yet, the juxtaposition of the completely ordinary countryside scene lined up alongside her figure was just...

She had regained a smile far more appropriate for her age and I forced myself to avert my gaze from her profile. She had managed to play her part here, so this much is surely fine.

"...Now then, time to put my nose to the grindstone."

I pulled a tool from my leather bag. From the side, it looked like a T-shaped metal rod. The vertical portion was hollow, and a groove was cut into its tip. The horizontal portion had rope wrapped around it as a means to give it a better grip.

It was made of a metal with a silvery shine to it. When I told Fulsig I wanted something like this, he managed to get it prepared in just four days. And when I asked him how it was manufactured, he said that there was a subset of wizardry called alchemy. It apparently uses a technique where mana is poured into a special type of metal to shape it. It's largely employed in the creation of the armaments of the chivalric orders.

Now that I think of it, the manufacturing precision of the silver armor the knights wore is quite outrageous. Both the mana and the metal to manufacture such things largely rely on imports from the Empire, making them strategic resources under the jurisdiction of the state.

I pressed the tip of the tube against the side of the large tree in front of me. I took on a stance like firing a machine gun from the hip, and lined it up so that it angled towards the center as best I could. The tapered tip of the rod sank ever so slightly into the tree's bark. I grabbed the horizontal portion of the rod and twisted my arms.

Ever so gradually, the rod ground its way into the tree. Of course, I'd never once actually used an increment borer to collect samples of annual tree rings in the other world. If worst comes to worst, I'll just have to try this over and over.

Due to the precision of the tool in my hands, the work proceeded far more smoothly than what I had prepared myself for. But the muscles in my upper arm were quickly getting stiff. And as I went to wipe the sweat off my brow, a slender white hand covered mine from behind.

“Excuse me. Allow me to help as well.”

Her arms, which still appeared slender despite being covered by her vestments, lined up with my sweaty arms. And now an entirely different type of sweat was running down my back. Thank God for the nun’s habit which went as far as covering the back of her hand. If she was more lightly dressed, I’d be sweating even worse right now.

Her breath tickled my cheek from behind and brought my pulse up steadily. My nice-smelling cooperater seemed completely unaware of any of this and simply twisted her arms innocently. I could feel the tips of my elbows brushing against something soft, but that was surely just my imagination. It had to be.

“...I-I think that should be enough.”

Before I knew it, the white line I marked on the rod as a reference point had vanished into the tree. Even if her assistance didn’t physically do all that much, it must have had quite the effect on my own morale.

“I know it’s a little late to ask, but what are we doing with this?” Alfina asked, as I pulled the increment borer out of the tree.

“Please take a look.” I pulled out a thin iron rod I had prepared beforehand and stuck it through the hole in the center of the borer’s handle, pushing out a sample about the thickness of a finger.

The cylindrical sample had a pretty pattern of stripes running down its length. I rotated it gradually to verify the sample. The striped pattern was very close to perpendicular, meaning I got the angle towards the center correct. The tree rings, by the way, were colored normally; there was no red tint to them.

“It’s a piece of the tree, right? Does this serve some manner of special purpose?” Alfina asked, as she cocked her head to the side ever so slightly.

Now then, I wonder if they even know of the existence of annual tree rings here. It’s entirely possible, since lumber was used all the way back in the stone

age. Even here, both in the east and west, there are smaller mountains that don't host ley lines which are surrounded by regular forests too. But serious research into dendrochronology only started around the 19th century back in the other world.

"Trees grow during the summer and stop growing during the winter. The gap in its growth can be seen in this striped pattern here. In other words, the darker portion shows the winters, and the larger white portions shows the spring and summer seasons."

I pointed at the stripes on the cylinder. It really was a nice gradation. It did get gradually narrower as it ran down the cylinder, but the breadth of each stripe didn't change all that much. This was surely a boon of the stable climate.

"Meaning the space from here to here represents one year. So let's see... one, two, three... We've got a record of about fifty years of this tree's growth etched right here."

"I-I see." Alfina blinked repeatedly as she desperately tried to keep up with my explanation.

"That is to say, there's a possibility that traces of mana exist within these stripes recording how much mana it absorbed each year."

In the other world, annual tree rings were used to measure carbon isotopes in order to retrieve data on climate change over the ages. This is the study of dendrochronology and dendroclimatology. It was entirely possible the same mechanism could be used here in this world to retrieve a record of mana fluctuations. Though obviously it'll be missing this year's data.

"A record of mana... for fifty years..." Alfina was deep in thought during my explanation, and as I finished, her face lit up entirely as she looked up at me. "So we can determine the activity of the ley lines from the past... which means we can predict whether a monster flood will occur this year... Amazing. Nobody has ever thought of this method before, right?"

She looked at me with eyes filled with admiration. She's right. The people who first thought of this really are amazing. All I did was take that knowledge and apply it.

“...I just happened to remember a book which wrote about annual tree rings in the library.” And with a heavy heart, I glossed over it the best I could. It didn’t need to be said that the library she’s thinking of and the one I went to are different.

“But...”

“Actually, the real problem starts here. This is, in fact, a method that nobody has tried before. There are plenty of hurdles that we must still surmount, such as the precision and standardization of the data.”

Thinking about it from the perspective of the mana’s color, as Fulsig talked about, it would be ideal if this mana could properly be measured. However, I’m unsure how comprehensively any records are actually retained. You could say that the data is also condensed for year-long intervals, so there is some hope at least.

“Is that so? You really are reliable, Ricardo. Also...” Alfina turned to look at the scenery over the embankment. “I will surely never forget this day for as long as I live.”

“Fina?!”

“I mean, this scenery. Were there not red trees much closer to where we were?”

It was nothing more than a flower field in a basin, but she spoke as if she had been gifted a priceless gem.

“My world is steadily growing bigger thanks to you, Ricardo.” She looked up at me with moist eyes and grasped both my hands in hers.

My breathing reflexively came to a stop. Come on, man, don’t get shaken by this kind of thing. She’s more like a...

“I wonder if this is what having an elder brother is like?”

“...” Oh, yup. It’s a little different, but that’s a pretty accurate perception of the current situation. It’s also much less weight on my heart. That said, though, the way she continued that thought with, “But that’s strange... are we not the same age?” somewhat bashfully was dangerous in an entirely different sense.

“Anyway, we’ve finished what we had to do in Reylia. The disaster will occur at the beginning of fall. We don’t have time to waste.” I forcefully hardened my expression. All we’ve done so far is collect a sample. Thinking of the difficulties of the next step and the time we have left, now’s not the time to get lost in the picturesque scene of this girl and the landscape together.

“Yes. Of course.” Alfina squeezed my hands tightly one last time, and finally let them go.

That Archduchess Berthold really needs to warn her of these things just a bit more. A sweet flower easily beckons pesky insects, after all.

Interlude: Secret Talk

“Now then, regarding the supply of the emergency stores for the Second Chivalric Order...”

“Yes, we will be switching to your company moving forward.”

The Second Chivalric Order’s headquarters lay near the eastern gate of the capital surrounded by stone walls. And within a manor adjoined to said headquarters, in a dimly candlelit room with the shadow of silver armor projecting against the wall, two men in the prime of their lives faced each other.

One had his back to the wall and was seated in a tall-back chair. He had a large build, and rested both his arms on the chair’s armrests. Across the table from him was a plump man sitting in a simple chair, his hands placed together, humbling himself before the other man.

“At the very least, we can handle some amount of burden this year and next, considered there are no campaigns to be had.”

“Thank you very much for your patronage,” the fat man replied, resisting the urge to rub his hands together greedily.

To a nobleman, he was a commoner. And to a commoner, he bore the honorary title of baron. He had become an expert at such negotiations.

“Although, this does mean changing a habit of many years. Someone like Adel may raise a fuss.” The vice commander of the chivalric order brought up the name of his stubborn subordinate, and smiled suggestively.

“With all due respect, My Lord, we naturally intend to compensate for the burden this will put on you...” The fat man placed a heavy box on the table. The man across from him opened the lid, and the candlelight reflected off its contents with a golden gleam.

“Good, there’s something that we must do given this spare time, now that we don’t have to deal with those damnable beasts.”

“So the crown prince is really...” The fat merchant let his eyes wander left and right as the noble before him began speaking of things that were only known to the innermost parts of the royal palace.

“As saddening as it is, the condition of his health continues to deteriorate. So placing any further burden on him is not ideal... Meaning, the next in line is...”

“It’ll fall to Prince Delnicius, then. I thought the knights would nominate Prince Craig, though...” The fat man squinted his eyes ever so slightly.

The second prince Delnicius belonged to the prime minister’s faction, while the third prince Craig was affiliated to a chivalric order, small as it was.

“Setting aside the deterioration of relations with the Empire, we must follow the trend. In the end, it’s the prime minister who has hold of the nation’s budget. Moreover, that prince is difficult to handle in all sorts of ways.”

The earl angrily tapped his finger on his desk. He had no affinity for his fellow soldier. He looked just like a merchant, breaking into another’s business.

“Certainly, it’s quite unprecedented for one who serves as a prince to lead a chivalric order.” The fat merchant put on a plainly sycophantic attitude.

This was vital information to him, as someone looking to maintain the status quo. The reckless negotiations he was carrying out here gradually continued to solidify his status as a guild representative. It also served as revenge against the Kendalls.

“Oh, yes... please accept this as well.” The guild representative placed another gift on the table, as if to change the subject. The candlelight went through the bottle, revealing a golden liquid seated in a decorative wooden box.

“Hmm. She’ll be grateful.” The earl’s thoughts moved from his principal residence over to the other residence he frequented lately. However, his grin quickly broke back into a cynical smile. “Speaking of honey, I’ve heard a copper has broken into your business. Are the guild regulations really alright?”

He brought up the topic as mere banter, but the merchant’s shoulders shuddered slightly. However...

“There is no need for concern. It certainly does appear that they possess

some manner of secret regarding the collection of nectar, but I've already played my hand. Soon enough, everything including that secret will fall under my jurisdiction."

The man's attitude in constantly humbling himself before his trade partner didn't crumble, but the expression of the strong suppressing the weak showed on his face just a little.

Chapter 12: From Prophecy to Forecast

The day after returning from Reylia village, I finished up my work in the courtyard while enduring the scornful gazes of my fellow students piercing my back.

During my business trip, I apparently earned the title of “pathetic commoner who has to resort to buttering up a retired old man.” It kind of drives me to want to go and make a profit.

I took my sample in hand and headed towards the director’s office. I properly had the “official” request I got from the director in my hand as well. Alfina’s maid stood by the door to the room, and shot an icy glare me.

Her wariness level had increased. I didn’t do anything for her to complain about, and I never really met her in the first place, so this is probably the archduchess’s doing. It’s not nice to make others do something for you just because you can’t do it yourself, you know?

At any rate, first it’s Claudia, and now this maid... why is it that the people whose interests are supposed to be aligned with mine are always so hostile towards me? This even happened back in the other world.

I entered the director’s office and found Alfina and Mia already inside. Incidentally, it seemed that nothing had happened while I was away. The carriage I saw on the way to Reylia is just becoming more and more suspicious.

On that note, Mia’s mood has been quite frigid ever since I informed her that I traveled from Berthold to Reylia in the same carriage as Alfina.

“So you’re finally here.” I was urged on by the owner of the room I was apparently buttering up and moved over to his personal lab.

Apparently, when he was transferred from his position as Court Wizard of the Royal Bureau of Wizardry, he managed to acquire this room and split off from them completely. Just how much does he hate the company of others?

The window was blocked by a thick curtain, and the walls were blackened.

The black material is apparently used to block mana from escaping or entering the room. A bulky desk, the same color as the walls, sat in the middle of the room. There were racks on the table with strange vials on them. And a slate board, similar to the one in the director's office, was set up against the wall.

This room clearly cost more money than his plain office. It made it clear as day where the owner's heart lay between his hobby and his work.

"As you can see, everything is ready to go." Fulsig was wearing a hefty apron and thick gloves, the magical device before him completely set up.

A small and a large sphere were both supported in the air by rods, hanging over a small rectangle no bigger than a little flower. It kind of felt like some sort of electrical experiment. Beside the device was what looked like a crystal ruby, wrapped in a rope the same color as the curtains.

The ruby emitted an ever so faint red light independent of the candles in the dimly illuminated room. So this is magicite. It's the first time I've seen it for myself. All I could see was a faint light, but apparently those with a disposition towards mana see it as a sparkling one.

A long and narrow object wrapped in black cloth, the sample I just took from the courtyard, and some black paper were also placed on the desk.

"Then let us begin," Fulsig said, holding both his hands in the air like a surgeon before a procedure.

He was like an old teacher starting a science experiment with his students. Not that we're actively participating. Wizardry uses mana to invoke certain phenomena, but unlike the image of magic we had in the other world, it has pretty big limitations.

The first restriction is the complete reliance on mana from magicite, meaning it isn't produced by the caster. Another is that the result produced by the mana is fully determined by the magical device being used. Also, there is a need for mana to flow from the magicite to the device for it to be used, as well as a need to manipulate the flow. Finally, it requires the so-called disposition towards mana.

My disposition is absolutely zero. When I enrolled in the Academy they had

me grasp a small hoop to confirm this. Mia also has about the same disposition as any old commoner. Those with disposition towards mana are largely restricted to those of noble blood. You could say that they're literal blue bloods.

Not only that, there's even a problem of compatibility with magical devices. Quell's Crystal is a prime example. Nobody is capable of using it except for Alfina. The only devices which are somewhat general use are the armaments used by the chivalric orders.

They are technically magical devices, but all they allow is for mana to flow through a metal called brightsilver. How much mana is allowed to flow through it seems to be important, though.

Weapons and armor with mana flowing through them are far sturdier, and become as light as cloth. That's why the only ones capable of opposing monsters are the knights of the chivalric orders.

"Let's start with this 'tree.'" Fulsig picked up the bored-out rod I got from the tree in the courtyard with the tips of his fingers.

This one is the negative control. It's meant to confirm that normal trees do not naturally emit any sort of mana. By all rights, we should be using a tree of the same species that hasn't absorbed any mana, but that's difficult to acquire in practice.

He stood a piece of black paper vertically against the device, and placed the sample in contact with it. Next, he removed his right glove and pinched the magicite with his thumb and index finger. In the next instant, his withered fingers, which were trembling quite unreliably, became completely still.

Just as they did, the red light from the magicite grew stronger and he slowly passed the sample through the device. He then peeled the black paper from the device. A white shape, as if the sample had cast an inverted shadow, was now imprinted on the paper.

In short, this is the exposure of the paper to mana which passed through the wood. Seeing that the imprint was completely uniform, as if it was drawn with white ink, this meant that the wood itself didn't contain any mana.

"Looks like it went right through unaffected. Well, that much is only natural,"

Fulsig said.

He told us once before that mana only reacted to specific materials. I'm the one who requested that a negative control be measured, since by the standards of the other world, it's important to know the basis upon which a measurement is being taken. I guess it was just the meddling of an amateur, though.

"Now for the sample we got from the east." Fulsig put on airs as he unwrapped the black cloth and pulled out the bored-out rod from a red tree. It had apparently been collected in the eastern region, near one of the observatories.

This one's the positive control. In other words, it's the sample used based on a result that is already known. Nobody has ever measured the mana from annual tree rings before, though, so strictly speaking, this is also a brand new experiment. Actually, this would normally be the starting point. We just didn't have much time, so we're running all the experiments at once.

Fulsig passed the sample from the east through the measurement device. I reflexively held my breath. If no result could be made apparent, then the entire idea of using annual tree rings to measure mana fluctuations goes out the window.

Fulsig slowly peeled off the black paper. Unable to see the other side of it, we couldn't tell what the results were. And looking at the paper in his hands, the corners of Fulsig's lips curved upwards.

"I see, so it ends up like this... How interesting."

He finally turned the black paper towards us and revealed a wave like pattern atop it. I let out a huge sigh.

The brightness of the pattern is inversely proportional to the amount of miasma; in other words, the amount of mana emitted by the ley lines. I guess the principle theory is somewhat similar to the Roentgen values of an X-ray. It still wasn't determined that the red trees possessed an accurate record of mana fluctuations, but it was at least clear that the shade changed throughout the years.

However, the boundaries between patterns were vague in the portion

representing the center of the tree, the oldest records.

“It looks like the older portions are impossible to read. We can get about ten years or so...” I commented.

“Wait, hang on a sec, don’t jump to conclusions. Let’s adjust the sensitivity a bit more.” Fulsig was filled with motivation, and began fiddling with the measurement device.

Apparently, the distance between the two spheres adjusted the sensitivity of measurements. And after repeating the experiment, a new image was taken with a slightly higher contrast than the previous reading.

“See? It’s even better now. But still, we might just have to concede that data from over thirty years ago can’t be used...”

He really could back up his claims. So this is one degree of precision higher than the observatories. It really would’ve been out of the question to measure this sample without him.

“Now to quantify it,” Fulsig said as he took out a square board with a tiled pattern on it. He slid the paper atop it, and used the tiles on the board as a standard for measuring the density of mana in each band, like one would do with pH paper. “Mia, please table the recordings.”

He then took a magnifying glass in hand and began quantifying the density of mana in each year and Mia recorded the numbers. She was in perfect sync with him as a helper... she *is* my secretary, after all.

And as a result, 29 years of data was now recorded on paper. He then took a scroll from his breast pocket. The red seal of an official document could be seen on its back as he unfolded it.

He was making sure we couldn’t see it. Meaning this was something important enough that anyone other than him couldn’t see it.

Alfina and I waited with stiff expressions. And suddenly, Fulsig tossed the scroll onto the table.

“Um, there’s a seal on that scroll indicating it’s classified information...” Alfina said in a reserved tone.

The opened scroll displayed a row of numbers. It was likely the record of ley line fluctuations recorded directly by the observatories. This was of course a state secret, and a military one at that.

If, say, the Empire knew of this information, they could identify the timing with which the main body of the Kingdom's army would march east at least one year in advance. The fact that he laid it open in front of students basically means...

"There's no meaning to the confidentiality any more. You've got the same thing in front of you already."

I compared the numbers Mia recorded and the numbers on the scroll. The peak recorded by the observatory 29 years ago before a small-scale flood was 30, and the recording during the flood itself was 12. The respective values from the annual tree rings were 12 and 5. For the flood 20 years ago, the observatory recorded 32 and 13, while the rings showed 13 and 6. They completely supported each other. Disregarding the sensitivity, the numbers from the annual tree rings are just below half the observatory readings.

However, looking at the readings from three years ago, the observatory recorded 32 and 16, while the tree rings showed 17 and 9; a little more than half. That was likely due to decay over time. This is all within permissible limits. Mia began working out the math to normalize them for decay without saying anything.

"...In the last thirty years, there have been two mid-scale monster floods in the east and four small-scale ones. Just as you can see from the observatory readings, the measurements of the ley lines begin rising five years before the flood, peak three years before it, and then decay for the next two years. That's when the monster flood occurs. As for these annual tree rings, we have the exact same data," Fulsig stated.

The black paper had three gradations to it, and there were visible bands where it got darker and darker.

"It turned out just as you said, Ricardo." Alfina's pretty eyes opened wide as she looked up at me. Whenever this princess laid bare her emotions, her reactions really became quite innocent.

“A way of measuring ley line activity for several decades in the past... We really did it? Who exactly are you?” Fulsig looked like a child playing with a new toy up until now, but he pointed a sharp gaze towards me in the next instant.

“We were just lucky. Frankly, I didn’t think we would get such clean data. And above all else, this is actually your achievement for being able to identify a clear pattern to predict monster floods to begin with,” I replied with a cramp in my cheek. I couldn’t possibly say I had knowledge from another world. That’s far shadier than a prophecy, isn’t it?

That was also my genuine opinion on the matter. This measurement would likely be impossible if the data on the mana wasn’t so cleanly taken. It would probably have taken years of research at minimum to be able to produce such a result.

Also, no matter the theory, it’s just pie in the sky without precise data to back it up. Whether or not it would actually work took constant and steady polishing of techniques and technology to bring it into a tangible state; just like the twenty long years of hard work this man had put in already. And in contrast, the knowledge I have is just borrowed from others.

My consciousness drifted over to the room adjacent to his office. I thought back to the libraries of the other world, which contained several hundreds, thousands, and when you include the computers, millions upon billions times more knowledge than that room possibly could. What I have in my mind is just a tiny portion of that, and my understanding of said knowledge is shallow compared to any specialist.

Nevertheless, this experiment proved the fact that knowledge in itself is extremely powerful.

“Hmm... Now then, these are the numbers from the east for the last five years, according to the annual tree rings. There’s no major fluctuation. Just from today’s experiment, we can predict that a monster flood will not occur in the east. This, of course, just backs up the data from the observatories when it comes to the eastern region. However...”

Fulsig’s gaze pierced through the bundle in my hand. Yes, in my hands was information yet unknown. It wasn’t just a record of the pattern of mana

fluctuations in the west; it had far more serious connotations behind it.

I nodded to Alfina, and she nodded back. I then handed the sample over to Fulsig.

And now it's finally time for the brass ring. The air in the room felt like it had dropped several degrees. Mia's expression hadn't changed at all until now, but a small gulp could be heard from her too.

Fulsig began taking the measurement from the opposite side of the bark, the oldest portion. After finishing, he slowly peeled the manometer paper off the device.

A white pattern appeared on the paper. All of our eyes converged on the paper in a panic. However, even in the portions where we were supposed to start seeing a pattern, the paper was completely white.

And after some point, the pure white band turned completely black. I stared at the paper, but I couldn't even see the slightest shadow within the band.

My mind went completely blank, as white as the measurement results, in complete contrast to how well things were going until now.

Were there no fluctuations in ley line activity then...? Or does this mean the disaster in the prophecy wasn't a monster flood? We'll have to move on to the next hypothesis. Or actually, was the prophecy even...

My mind fell into a vortex of doubts.

"How strange. It's unnatural for there to be no fluctuations at all. Did you really..." Fulsig said as he looked over the measurement device. "Crap! I didn't reset the sensitivity."

"Dammit, you old fa— ...Please continue, Director."

Fulsig scratched his head and readjusted the position of the two spheres, then once more began measuring the annual tree rings we got from Reylia village. He set aside the sample, then peeled off the measurement results. And again, pure white... or wait, it had some faint shadows.

The long white band representing the last thirty years was pretty much uniform, but right at the tip, for a small region, it had something which looked

like black stains.

“Looking good, let’s adjust it a bit more.”

Third time’s the charm. Fulsig exhaled and set aside the sample. And what was shown this time was the result we’d hoped for, and yet didn’t want. The measurements from the core of the trunk were completely white. Upon very close inspection, the middle section was just slightly shaded. And just a small distance from the bark... was a single black band. Fulsig lined up the results from the east and west with trembling hands.

In direct comparison, it was clear that the west was far more stable than the east. That is, until five years ago. Four years ago, it showed a slight peak. For the next two years, it decayed. And one year ago, it was completely white again. Of course, the data for this year was incomplete. But from what we could see, there was no shadow at all.

The four of us all gulped at once.

“We have to readjust the standard for this level of sensitivity... but there’s no need to even quantify this, is there? The omen is right there. It’s likely that this year...” Fulsig said in a heavy tone.

It felt like the candlelight swayed, despite there being no wind.

“...A great disaster will befall the west, the outbreak of a monster flood.” I voiced our conclusion.

Our exaltation over the success of the experiment lasted for only an instant. The two girls remained silent. One of them now knew of the disaster that threatened her home, and the other was shown proof that the terrifying scene she saw would become reality.

From the decades of records accumulated in that tree, to the plain grayscale pattern projected from that thin bored rod, and from that vague and mystical image to clear numbers. That was the moment the prophecy became a forecast.

Chapter 13: From Forecast to Politics

A heavy silence fell over the laboratory. Everyone held their tongue and didn't utter a single word; there was just silence. Even though the experiment had succeeded, or perhaps precisely because it did. The one to receive the biggest shock may have actually been me, seeing as the sense of reality of a prophecy was weakest in me.

The image of that tranquil village I just visited several days ago returned to me. I had a strong desire to go there immediately and make preparations for an evacuation...

"R-Right, we need to announce this quickly and e-evacuate everyone in the —" Alfina stood up and broke the silence. Her desperate expression brought me back to my senses. I took a deep breath to compose myself.

"Please calm down, Princess Alfina."

"Ricardo... But..." Alfina's face was telling me, "but you're the one who predicted a monster flood would occur." It's certainly true that our hypothesis of an outbreak of a monster flood in the west has been substantiated.

We turned the prophecy of a disaster that only Alfina could see into a forecast that anybody could see objectively. Honestly speaking, I didn't think the outcome would be so clear. It just went that well. Until now, that is. The part that isn't all that straightforward begins now.

Nature is honest. Monsters will surely react honestly to the pattern in mana fluctuations, even if a monster flood has never occurred before. However, could the same thing be said about humans? Data that anybody could look at objectively? Ridiculous.

"If the omens are confirmed, the chivalric order will dispatch right away to crush it before the flood can break out, right? At least... in the east," I asked, and Fulsig tapped his finger against his forehead twice.

"Right. For a pack to form and move to the open plains, there needs to be an

individual specimen of higher rank to serve as its core. Once that one is taken care of, the monsters will cannibalize each other. That's how it's possible to stop a flood before it happens."

So there's something like an alpha male which guides the pack into new territory. And when that one is taken out, the extreme situation of starvation will drive them to rampage and kill each other to take the crown as the new alpha male.

Well, let's set aside investigations of zoology, which is way outside my field of expertise, for now. The current problem isn't the enormous wolf, but the clever monkey. In other words, the pack of humans. The image of our own alpha male and the organization which surrounded him came to mind.

"When it comes to dispatching the Second Chivalric Order, the core of the national army, it requires a royal command, right?" I asked, and Fulsig nodded.

After downscaling the army, the Second Chivalric Order became the group possessing the most war potential in the country. A dispatch required them to go to the very east of the Kingdom. The tremendous cost of doing so also threw off the balance of the distribution of military forces within the Kingdom completely. This meant only the highest authority could make it happen. It'd be problematic if that wasn't the case.

However, having only the highest authority make a decision also means that it takes a tremendous amount of time and effort to make them move.

"If the observatories were to report such omens, the dispatch of the chivalric order would go smoothly. However, even though it's obvious now, the first time this was discovered and reported, no action was taken until the second occurrence."

The old man spoke with no emotion at all, in a completely level tone. His wrinkled eyes then wandered over to the granddaughter-like girl before him.

"So a prediction in an unprecedented territory, using an unprecedented means, won't be assessed the same as the east, right?" I asked.

"That can't be... Even though it's so clear...?" Alfina muttered in despair. At the current rate, she would have to taste the same feelings she felt watching

the prophecy, and she looked up at the old man, imploring him for help.

“I promise to report the results of these measurements as definitive. No matter who it is. However, I’m nothing but a retired old man to the royal palace. That means that I have to go through the proper channels, I have to report things from the very bottom of the ladder. At best, it would take half a year. And that’s only if it isn’t dismissed even once in the meantime.”

Fulsig’s official endorsement about the monster flood is critical. Without it, this really would be nothing more than a student research project. But that’s all it would be: an endorsement. By itself, it would be decisively insufficient to make the pillar of the nation move in time to make it for the disaster.

Let’s say that, in the other world, filled with trust in science and technology, a groundbreaking method in predicting earthquakes was discovered. The one who discovered it would surely be praised. It would definitely become the talk of the town in scientific society. But just how long would it take for national administration to legislate its use? Even half a year is an overly optimistic estimate. And in half a year, the lotus flowers will have long been scattered.

There’s actually an entirely different worry I have as well, but let’s set that aside for now. First, we need to find a way to make the country take action. And for that, we need a shortcut all the way to the highest level decision-making party in the nation, and a really fast one at that. The current date is the 12th of May. Judging the time that the lotus flowers blooming lines up with the wheat harvest, the soonest the disaster could occur is August. If a campaign is not decided on next month, and if the subjugation does not take place the month after that, we’ll be in a bad situation.

I took a look at the people gathered here. We had the ideal team when it came to the analysis and verification of the prophecy. But regardless, we were the worst members to accomplish the vital point of actualizing a countermeasure. I mean, only one of us wasn’t a student.

“I shall petition His Majesty the King. It is my responsibility to have him listen, no matter—”

“That’ll have the opposite effect.”

Alfina spoke up full of determination, but her vigor was smashed to pieces by

me in an instant. The royal palace would only harden their stance if she were to petition them due to her speech regarding the prophecy in the first place. We can't afford a repeat of the Spring Festival.

"Princess Alfina, this is no longer a prophecy. It's a forecast. A prediction that everyone here worked together to create."

"Precisely, we got this far because of everybody's help. That's exactly why I have a responsibility to inform His Majesty about it," Alfina desperately pleaded, but I shook my head.

She's already fulfilled her role more than enough. Thinking of the things to come, I don't want her taking on any more risks. My sensibilities might be a little naïve, but she's still just a student. And unlike me, she's a genuine student. This naturally also applies to Mia. In this situation, it would be troublesome if even just her name were to be mentioned to the higher-ups.

"Putting on the airs of a schemer like that will cause people to misunderstand, sir."

"She's right. The youngster here is trying to say that it's not a prophecy, so there's no need for you to carry the burden on your own anymore, Princess."

"Ricardo..." Alfina's eyes shot wide open.

Crap, she's starting to make an expression that someone who's meant to be protected shouldn't be making.

"Come on, that's the misunderstanding here. You've got the wrong idea."

Being a knight to protect a princess is not on the list of services provided by a merchant. Taking on unreasonable ventures will only lead to mutual destruction with my customer. Fulsig's interpretation was way off the mark. If I was capable of saying such a cool line, then back in the other world, I would've been more...

"Listen, alright? What I'm trying to say is that a forecast can be treated differently from a prophecy. Depending on how we deliver the news, it's possible to widen the scope of the sense that there's an impending crisis. That's what I mean. Well, that's if we're able to properly convey it to someone who will very thoroughly scrutinize it." I moved both my hands in the air in a fluster while trying to veer things away from the direction they were going in.

If the situation is left as it is, Weinder's business, as well as all manner of other things, will be dealt a fatal blow. We don't have any time to grieve over what we don't have enough of. To begin with, the next phase is to execute countermeasures. Even if there were many options that each of us could take action on, a single person could only take one action at a time.

Even if just one such action is sufficient to solve the problem, then that's enough. No matter how enormous the problem, there's always a crux. In this case, it's the key person that we need to convince.

"Looking at it from the point of view of those who share our interests, the influential nobles of the western territories would be our best candidates. Among them, we want those that would listen carefully to you, Director, or you, Princess Alfina. The condition is that we can get through to them with logic. It's also a necessity that they do not fear overturning precedence."

My face hardened as I listed all the conditions. They seemed far too severe to be able to find even just one viable target. There was too much in this country's establishment that was deficient.

And sure enough, Fulsig cocked his head dubiously. Mia also remained quiet. And my personal connections numbered far fewer than these two. Silence swept over the room, as if stagnating in the air. And just as myself, Mia, and Fulsig all hung our heads down and looked at the table...

"Um, I was thinking of handing this over after we finished for the day." Alfina suddenly pulled out a white envelope.

The wax seal was proof that it was an official letter. The crest was the same as the one I saw on the gates of the large city I stayed in overnight in the center of the western region. And the addressee... was me?!

"My aunt said she had things she wanted to ask you about last time."

"By 'last time,' do you perhaps mean when you forced your way into Ricardo's vacation, Princess Alfina?" Mia said with a sharpened gaze.

"It wasn't a vacation, it was work. Jacob was with us along the way too, and when we got to the village, we didn't do anything other than collecting this sample. Anyway, moving on here. We need to check the contents of the letter."

I opened the letter in a fluster and scanned over the unexpectedly plain writing. Of course, only the writing was plain. The contents were a summons under the guise of an invitation.

“Uh, it’s written here that I’m to see her tomorrow? I thought it was normal for grand nobles to have the leisure of time... Like, if they summon someone in a hurry, it makes them look like they’re panicking and affects their standing, or something?”

“My aunt doesn’t really worry about such things.”

I looked to Alfina for help, and the niece of the sender smiled back at me in a slightly troubled manner. *I’m* the one who wanted her to worry about these things a little, though.

“No, but, I mean, what about my plans? We don’t have much time to deal with the monster flood...” I couldn’t say that I really didn’t want to go, and clung to my just cause.

“Isn’t Archduchess Berthold the most suitable candidate for those conditions you just listed?” Fulsig’s words struck me like a punch to the head.

Alfina’s guardian sat one step below the king during the Spring Festival. I must have unconsciously ignored her as a choice because she’s in far too high a position. I glanced down at the letter on the table with a twitch in my eye.

Okay, so this invitation is actually quite convenient. Or maybe you could say, here comes a mark begging to be swindled. But what if the archduchess is actually the swindler and I’m the mark? I’m just some puny commoner. I’ve got nothing for an archduchess to steal, or anything...

“It’s alright. When I spoke of you to her before going to Reylia village, she showed great interest in you, Ricardo.”

That’s not alright at all, though... Those two carriages weren’t just to protect the princess from an outside menace, they were a threat towards me, weren’t they?

“She’s quite the hard nut to crack, after all. I’ll have to choose my words carefully for the letter of recommendation...” Fulsig said. Though he appeared cooperative, he was actually just pushing it all on me, wasn’t he?

“I can’t possibly make a presentation in front of some big shot I just met. Should you not take this role as a man of experience and wisdom, Director?”

“Oh, but you were the one invited in the letter... Mhm, it’s written right here that it must be you. How about I write, ‘He’s the most outstanding among the pupils I’ve had here for the last ten years.’ Well, the wording is a little diplomatic, so if it doesn’t get through to her, it won’t help you any.”

I’m the one who wants to know how many students this old fart bothered to teach in the last ten years here.

“Sir? Please instruct me as to what format you would like the necessary data and graphs in.” Mia began organizing the data, as if it was the obvious thing to do.

“I will take responsibility and introduce you to her. It’ll be alright as long as she understands how amazing you are, Ricardo.” And Alfina put her hand on my shoulder, trying to comfort me.

*

“In summary, the most important point is that this information demonstrates... no, that won’t do. Using the word information will work against me and lighten its value. Uhhh, I’ll be presenting to the archduchess, a noble, a woman, Alfina’s aunt... which do I use as a premise? Oh, and then there’s the problem after the presentation finishes too... Crap, no, this is no good at all. This isn’t the time to be mixing multiple problems together.”

After returning home, my outline of the presentation grew more and more chaotic. And before I knew it, it was pitch black outside.

By all rights, I should be starting by studying proper etiquette, but there’s no time for that. I’ll have to rely entirely on the little princess’s support. Not in terms of etiquette, mind you, but for when I have to beg for my life after I fail.

I’ll simply win with the contents of what I’m speaking of... famous last words. Everyone who immediately blunders a presentation says that.

“I think the day’s just about to change over now... It’s awfully inconvenient not knowing the exact time...” And just as I sighed and gauged the remaining length of the candle...

Knock, knock.

“Hm? What does she need this late at night?”

I turned around as Mia opened the door and entered my room. I couldn't make out her complexion from the dim candlelight, but her expression lacked its usual composure.

“Sir? Jacob has a report for you.”

“Jacob? Isn't he in Reylia with my father?”

My foster father was in the middle of a business trip. We'd only just determined that a disaster was a sure thing today, but I had him take action beforehand. I was up to my neck with work, putting together a presentation to get someone capable of moving the nation to take action themselves, but also, of course, preparing for the possible scenario where I was unable to do so.

My foster father should be on his way back home after preparing the goods needed for an evacuation.

“It can't be... Did something happen to my father?” I turned to ask Jacob in a panic, who followed Mia into my room. The carriage that I saw following us partway during my trip came to mind.

“No, the president's alright. Actually, we weren't the target,” Jacob answered.

“What do you mean?”

Mia and Jacob exchanged glances.

“One of the children from the village was abducted by an unidentified man. Luckily for us, we just happened to be there and managed to get him back. Seems that man's been sniffing about for intel on us in Berthold. The amount of goods we were carrying this time around were a little too big in scale for a farming village, so he likely got his info from that.”

It really was a bit backwards for a farming village to be importing food. It seems they got cold feet when I had my escort plain in the open while traveling with the incognito princess, but they ended up just taking the next chance they had.

As for the people who could be so fixated on the insignificant dealings of a

company from a village far away from the capital that they would spend such funds... narrowed down to the ones that even knew I was taking a week off school, and the ones who could easily collect information on the flow of foodstuffs leads us to none other than...!!

“Dreyfan? Yeah, who else but Dreyfan.” And the moment I arrived at the answer, I started to lose my cool. My quill pen went flying off my desk and fell to the floor as I slammed my fist into the desk.

“Please calm down, sir.” Mia picked up my pen, wiped off the ink, and held it out to me.

“Like hell I can calm down. We just happened to get by without any harm done by pure chance!”

“Sir.” She placed the pen on the desk in front of me.

The pen is the symbol of stability for my mind. Even when I lose my composure and am unable to give form to my thoughts, I can constructively maintain myself as long as I have a pen and paper. Even if I’m unable to control my thoughts running amok, I can still control the movements of my hand. But there are still limits. For example, just like now, my trembling hand is unable to write anything.

“I get it. I need to calm down.” I forced my heart to slow down. Since this concerns the children of the village, Mia is surely far more worried than I am. “Okay, I get it. Strangely enough, nothing happened.”

Even though they’ve calmed down recently due to their important negotiations, the Dreyfans are still an enemy. Only an idiot blows their lid at an enemy taking antagonistic action. It’s fine to get angry, but being shocked is unforgivable. You can’t protect anything like that.

“...How much do you know of what’s behind the guy? What did my father say?”

First is to confirm the information. It’s impossible that the Dreyfans directly took action themselves.

“They traced us back from the goods the president stocked up on in Berthold. Judging from the equipment and skills of the guy, he’s the same as us, a former

soldier. Berthold's our old haunt, so we've got a few connections there. Remy'll likely be able to get something after some prodding. You can leave the capital to me. I may not look it, but I know a lotta people here."

Jacob and Remy possess an unbelievable amount of skill for guards hired by a copper company. My only choice now is to believe in them.

"Well, it won't really fly here to say the cost doesn't matter, but you can use the rest of this year's budget. Don't just grab their tail; we need to confirm the main body behind all this."

"That's what I thought you'd say. I'll get some nice wine for my connections."

"Mia, help Jacob out. But limit yourself only to organizing the information he gathers, and under no condition are you to go out alone."

"Understood. Jacob, please investigate the Kendalls too. Their relationship with the Dreyfans is pretty poor. I've got a few prospects we can go to as well."

"Roger that."

The two of them left as they talked. After confirming they were gone, I once more gripped the pen in my hand. The scuffle between children was long over. That stupid rich boy didn't matter anymore. My target was now the father.

It doesn't matter that no real harm was done. I'm making my decision based on the fact that he crossed the line and laid a hand on my family.

I'll never forgive him. Not "I can't forgive him," or "I shouldn't forgive him." I don't, and won't forgive him.

I won't confuse "ideals" with "reality." I won't pray for a world where the heavens punish the foul. The weak have no leisure to wait for the time it takes for such a wish to be fulfilled. In the time that the weak pray, the strong take action. All that does is increase the gap between them.

"But you know, Dreyfan..." I looked out the window past the palace walls, towards a large shop on the other side of the main street. "You're the one who has confused 'reality' with 'ideals.'"

I managed to slow down my heart, and the trembling of my hand ceased. Now then, I'll have to think of what's to come after the presentation. There's

one more thing I need to include now, after all.

Chapter 14: Presentation

A fireplace made of red bricks protruded from the wall, and above it was a decorative plate. A painting of a knight running through the winter plains was placed on the smooth stone wall. A bronze chandelier hung from the ceiling, and the rectangular table placed near the fireplace was made of bulky wood.

There were two mansions, with the royal palace located between them. And now, I found myself in the mansion on the west, Archduchess Berthold's official residence.

I was led to a small room on the second floor. Alfina and I sat on the same side of the table and waited for the mansion's owner to arrive.

The two of us were wearing our uniforms. We came here directly from the Academy. Fancy clothing suitable for a visit to an archduchess's residence isn't something which can be prepared in just one or two days. All the more so for me, since I have no plans of ever coming here again.

My underclassman was wearing a maid's outfit and poured us some tea. It's like I was a guest or something, though she glared at me coldly in a way that Alfina couldn't see before leaving the room. It had enough punch to it that it made me hesitate to drink the tea she put before me, just for an instant. I didn't really feel like a guest anymore. Well, not that I intended to be one, either.

I took a look at Alfina sitting beside me. Unlike me, she appeared to be more relaxed than usual. To her, this house is literally home. Apparently, the room across from the one four rooms down is her private room. How many rooms do they have in this mansion, anyway?

It made me want to know just how high-class the leaves in this tea, and all the ornaments in the room, are. I couldn't tell whether they were welcoming me, at least for decorum's sake, or telling me "this sort of shabby room is more than enough for the likes of you."

It looked high-class enough from my perspective, but this sort of luxurious space is quite foreign to a commoner from a farming village. Even if you doubled the value of everything in the room, I wouldn't be able to tell the difference. I couldn't sense any sort of idiosyncrasies from the furniture and such, either. The unaffected and sincere atmosphere didn't show any of the ruling lady's tastes. In any case, I didn't know what her motive is.

"Does it not suit your tastes? Shia prides herself on the tea she brews, so she insisted on doing so today." My classmate placed the cup at her lips back down on the table and cocked her head.

Her elegance was on a different level from mine. Each and every one of her gestures felt natural within this room. Right, I get it now, this room is high-class. Actually, that girl really did volunteer to make this tea? Isn't having a student of the Academy do so in spite of all the maids they must have at this mansion kind of poor taste?

"I don't know how to behave myself in front of a grand noble. I'm nervous that I'll end up doing something impolite." Even though I thought that saying this to a princess was weird, I forced myself to stretch my hand towards the teacup.

However, I came to a stop before touching it upon realizing that it wasn't sugar next to my saucer, but honey. That light tint is something that I'm greatly familiar with. I really am being welcomed here...

There's no doubting this archduchess is a troublesome opponent. She was far beyond prepared, and summoned me without giving me the time to prepare myself. It's far too immature an act against some harmless commoner, isn't it?

"There's no need to be so nervous, Ricardo. You're a guest here, and my aunt is quite kind."

It must indeed be true if you claim it to be so, to you, at the very least, Your Highness. Crap, even the speech in my head is getting all stiff.

"Well, considering what we'll be talking about..." I put the documents I had prepared for the presentation on the table.

"That's certainly true. I may not be all that reliable, but I will assist you the

best I can.” Alfina placed her hand atop mine as if to comfort me.

Resorting to physical contact is cheating. She seemed even more open-minded than usual here in her home, and I felt my stiffened mind calming down... The feeling of warmth returning to my chilled fingertips is nice. And just at that moment...

“I regret that I kept you waiting.”

The door suddenly opened, and Alfina let go of my hand in a fluster. A lady entered the room, accompanied by an elderly maid and butler. Her blonde hair was tied up in a spiral and hung down over her shoulder. She held out her hand to stop us from standing up, and with rapid strides, she sat down in front of us, with the fireplace to her back.

The lady in a dress received a fan from her maid and then faced us, or more specifically, me. We just barely averted the atmosphere in the room turning to that of an impending sentence of an execution during the French Revolution.

This is the Archduchess of Berthold, Euphylia; Alfina’s guardian and aunt. I’ve heard she’s in her late thirties, but she doesn’t look to be any older than her mid-twenties.

“I thank you for coming here. First, I must offer my gratitude for taking care of my niece the other day.”

“Nothing of the sort, Your Grace. Being appointed to serve as Her Highness’s guide was far too great an honor for me.”

You’re the one who forced it on me. I managed to return her home by curfew too, so I have nothing to feel guilty about. Her eyes didn’t seem to imply that she was smiling at all, and I barked back at her in my mind. I think I’m doing pretty good for not voicing my sour grapes yet.

“Mm, my niece is a little too sheltered, you see, and I’ve been quite worried about that. I thought it would do her well to experience a little flirting.” The archduchess half-opened her fan and hid her mouth.

“Wha—?!” I was stretching my hand out towards my teacup and nearly ended up knocking it over.

“A-Auntie?!” Alfina also covered her mouth in a panic and put down her cup.

“Hm? Was that not the case? For that quiet Alfina to have a tryst while leaving me uninformed... My, how you’ve grown.”

“Your Grace. There are limits to such jests, are there not? I already have my hands full with my work and the organization of these documents I’ve brought for what I’ll be explaining today. I’ve been receiving help from Her Highness with these all this time.”

“So how was the trip both ways in the carriage? You two were alone in there all that time, weren’t you?” Meaning the other two carriages really were both escorts and surveillance. This much I already expected.

“I am fully aware that I am privileged just to be a classmate to Her Highness the Princess.”

Seems she’s thinking of me as an older brother anyway. Well, regardless of Alfina’s intent, the problem the archduchess is facing is probably what my intent is.

“Hmmm. In that eccentric’s letter of recommendation, he wrote that you’re a brazen youngster who places not an ounce of worth in social status, you know?”

That old fart. Is this supposed to be a perfect letter of recommendation? I don’t appreciate you putting my life on the line because you think it’s funny, dammit.

“Besides, Alfina herself is surely delighted to not be treated as a princess, aren’t you now?”

“Th-That’s because... I’m thankful to Ricardo for properly listening to my story without worrying about my status...” Alfina’s cheeks turned red. This was bad. The people around me were all joining forces to testify against my true nature.

“I was approached by Her Highness for my knowledge regarding the disaster in her attempt to fulfill her duty as the Oracle Princess. Director Fulsig and I just happened to possess the relevant knowledge. That’s all.”

“Hmm, and the reason you divulged this knowledge for no compensation?”

“The disaster that I’m about to explain to you, Your Grace, is to befall a region of great importance to our company. For a small company like ours which could be blown away by the wind, losing a single business partner could affect our very existence.”

I opened the lid on the jar of honey, scooped up a full spoon, and mixed it into my cup. I never planned to pretend it was out of any sort of loyalty to the princess, nor out of friendship for a classmate. Thinking of the difference of what we were responsible for between myself and this woman, there’s no way she would trust me if I did. I would never trust someone like that, at least.

“So you say it is purely for your own interests?”

“Yes. And just this once, I do believe that my interests are in line with yours, Your Grace. As well as quite a few others.” I emphasized my own interests, as well as the interests of the lady of Berthold. This is the one point I’m capable of boldly advocating. Not because it’s just, but simply because it’s true.

“You’ve grown bold.”

“I am naught but a simple student. I can’t run counter to what my teacher said in the letter of recommendation.” I shifted the responsibility over to my referrer.

“Very well, let’s move on to the main topic. This is about the danger that encroaches upon my territory, correct? Alfina’s prophecy. A disaster will actually break out from the west. I understand that this is your claim, but a monster flood is truly difficult to consider.”

Euphylia corrected her posture. The mask of an aunt teasing her niece had vanished. Well, I guess that’s how it goes. The possibility of me being a danger to her niece is perhaps the greatest scale to measure whether or not the upcoming topic can be trusted.

“Then I will begin by explaining the details of how we arrived at such a conclusion. I leave the decision of what is to be done after that to you, Your Grace.”

“Naturally, I intend to do just that. A crisis to my land, and ultimately the Kingdom, cannot possibly be left to the words of a single youngster.”

The archduchess squinted her eyes and her gaze grew sharper. I suppose this was the intimidating air of a sovereign. The atmosphere of those who carry the burden of the lives of thousands upon thousands in their everyday routine. And this fact was felt by me, who had never once, even in the other world, sat face to face with such a person before.

It's finally time for the main stage. But a negotiation is exactly what I want. That's because I hold the important information that she requires, and she possesses what I need. Regardless of the gap in our social status, our current relationship can be simplified to the fate of the nation, and the lives of the people. In other words, what's about to begin here is a business negotiation. That's just perfect for a merchant. And as I forcefully deceived myself into believing that, I opened the map I'd brought along with me.

"First, we began with constraining the potential regions where the disaster that Princess Alfina was shown by the crystal could occur, by analyzing the geography and customs of the land based on the image she saw. As a conclusion, we assessed that it will occur on the western border of the Kingdom, in Reylia village. This fact has been confirmed by Princess Alfina herself upon her visit to the village."

I emphasized Alfina's role in this and its point as our primary piece of information. The archduchess looked at her niece, and Alfina nodded back firmly. After confirming that the archduchess's gaze was once more on me, I continued my explanation.

I went on with how we narrowed down the list of potential disasters, our hypothesis of a monster flood, our discussion with the specialist Fulsig, and the experiment we ran to verify it. I brought attention to each logical step as a single point, and interposed the basis for what we did and our conclusion between each one.

A sandwich of information. It makes it easy to digest in a short time. The more capable the person, the more they will harbor distrust when there is too much of a gap between the basis and the conclusion.

I stopped at each spare moment to observe her reaction. The archduchess had her fan covering her mouth, making her expression unreadable. About the

only visible reaction was her brow raising ever so slightly at the graphs of precipitation and crop yields that Mia put together.

“And finally, these are the records of mana fluctuations taken using annual tree rings during the monster floods in the east. And these...” I pulled out the most important document. “...are the records of mana fluctuations in the west over the past few years taken using the same method.”

I lined up the two graphs Mia made and paused right there. I’ll leave the conclusion to her. If this was a competition between merchandise—in other words, if the person before me were the guest and judge—I couldn’t be the one to make the conclusion. That wasn’t where we were going with this, though. This wasn’t a matter of selecting one of multiple goods. This was an exclusive item that only we could provide. Meaning there was only two choices: to buy it, or not to buy it.

Euphylia put down her fan and looked at the documents I laid before her. Silence filled the room.

“Auntie, Ricardo can be trus—”

“What’s your opinion of prophecies?” The archduchess once more picked up her fan and held back her niece. An unexpected question. “Putting it bluntly, do you believe in that which we call prophecies?”

“Auntie, I really did see...”

“No, I don’t believe in them.”

“...Ricardo?!”

I dared to say it. This wasn’t a lie. Even after confirming this much, I still can’t imagine the mechanism to make it possible to predict the future. That’s exactly why I put all my strength into changing the prophecy into a forecast.

“I see. Honestly speaking, at least the last three Oracle Princesses were unable to see anything from the crystal. The prophecies, you see, were simply created similarly to what you did here, by observing the rainfall. We have records of the volume of water in the rivers of every region, after all. There are two regions where we receive such reports in my territory as well. Of course, our methods were not as strict as your analysis, though.”

Euphylia looked at the line graph displaying the precipitation and crop yields, then to the scatter plot which showed its normal distribution.

“Incidentally, our original plan for the prophecy was to announce the same yield as last year across the nation, including the west.”

“But Auntie, in the years where a monster flood was to occur in the east, wouldn’t the prophecy be wrong?”

“There are some differences from the calculations you’ve just shown me, but they aren’t all that big. Who are you saying will complain if the harvest is just a little more bountiful?”

It was clear as day that she was treating the prophecies as a farce, even in front of Alfina. The fact that there was a trick behind it is actually quite admirable, to me at least.

“This is not that manner of farce, by the way. Just as I explained, this is a pure forecast. In other words, this isn’t about whether or not the disaster in the prophecy will occur. This is a forecast of whether a monster flood will occur in the west. This is what I’d like you to make a decision on, Your Grace.”

After coming this far, I did in fact have no choice but to believe that the image of the future that Alfina was shown by the crystal did in fact exist. That was the source of an entirely different problem, but that could be set to the side for now. As the guardian of this adopted girl of the royal family who has been placed in such a precarious position, it was surely something this woman before me has given much more thought.

“‘Omens of a monster flood from the western mountain range have been shown. Decide on how you will deal with this, as the representative of the feudal lords of the west.’ That’s what you want to say, right? I see, you truly are a brazen youngster,” the Archduchess said, as she tapped the grip of her fan with her finger. “What are the expected casualties?”

“We made our calculations based on the monster floods in the east that were not suppressed before they began. In the case of a small-scale monster flood in the east, there are examples of grausams encroaching from the Loewer Wald over here... to about here. Over ten villages fell prey to these attacks. Even if we assume that a flood of the same scale will occur, villages that exist within this

same range to the west surpass 25 in count. There's never been precedence for a monster flood there, after all. Also, in the case of a larger flood, I cannot deny the possibility of it reaching all the way to Berthold. Setting aside Berthold itself, protected by its walls as it is, the surrounding villages surely won't get by unscathed."

The important point in negotiations with a large organization is to emphasize the interests of the negotiator. That's because their interests are not necessarily the same as those of the organization as a whole. A negotiator is simply but a representative of a single part of the organization, even if they're at the very top. This also works in the extreme case of dealing with a completely impartial eccentric. Such negotiators would surely extrapolate the interests of everyone all on their own.

"It would be no exaggeration to claim that it will affect the entire region. Without the food in the surrounding area, Berthold won't survive either."

In this world, the transport of goods took a lot of time and labor. It was different from Japan, where food can be imported from across the ocean. With just a little too much distance, even if there was an abundant harvest elsewhere, a city could easily starve out before anything could be done.

The reason the Kingdom didn't have many records of starvation isn't just because there are many fields, but because of the stability. As for the reason why agricultural trade with the Empire is managed by the state, it's because it has to be handled on a national scale, taking every region into consideration. My belief on this, though, is that merchants exist precisely for the point in time where such stability is lost.

But still, how did I end up getting directly involved in all this...?

"Then, my next question..." The archduchess placed her fan on the table, and began asking about the necessary scale of the knights to dispatch, the types of monsters that would appear, and other such questions. I answered each one using what I'd heard from Fulsig beforehand as a basis. There were, of course, multiple points that I wasn't certain of.

"And that's all the information I possess." I delivered the general framework of all the information I brought with me, and the presentation came to an end.

“...Hmm.” The archduchess once more picked up the fan she put down on the table. Two gulps could be heard resounding in the air. “Very well. I shall take charge of this conclusion. Of course, I’ll have the Kingdom cooperate and take action as well.”

“Thank you so much, Auntie!”

“Thank you very much, Your Grace.”

Alfina raised her voice in joy, and I honestly bowed my head. It truly was a relief. Now I just need to go home...

“My nerves ran cold when you went wild during the Spring Festival, but you’ve really hung in there, Alfina. Not lending you my ear was truly ignorant of me.” The aunt spread open her fan and praised her niece. Mhm, she really did hang in there.

“That’s not really... This is all due to Ricardo’s guidance.” My self-preservation alarm started clanging over my classmate’s overestimation of me.

“Nothing of the sort. You were the one to disregard your position and attempt to fulfill your duty, Princess Alfina. And the theory to predict a monster flood is the result of the long years of research that the dire—”

“Oh yes, that’s our remaining problem.” The sound of a closing fan cut me off. “I understand full well what you’ve said to me. However, just how did a fifteen or sixteen-year-old commoner come up with this? That’s what I’m completely unable to understand.” The grand noble put the tip of her fan against her temple and shook her head.

Well... I guess that’s about right. That’s an inevitable problem. I mean, it’s the kind of problem that comes with being able to make a presentation that can move an archduchess.

Chapter 15: The Big Basket and the Small Basket

The grand noble before me, who had not forgotten to keep up an elegant front until now, was no longer smiling at all. Her theatrical approach just now was to put an emphasis on how serious a matter this is. In other words, a tremendously influential noble who carries the power of my life is now tremendously wary of me.

“Oh, there’s no need to misunderstand. I’m not saying that you’re serving as somebody’s parrot. From what Alfina has told me, it’s clear that’s not the case. I’m asking why it’s possible for you to be able to do this.”

A question about as obvious as, “What is your reason for applying here?” in an interview. I’ve prepared several answers already. Though, the reason my voice won’t come out is because the archduchess’s silent gaze is implying that no manner of deception will work.

If left to the knowledge in my head, there are countless ways of answering. However, in my current condition, they’re all useless. Actually, I don’t even know why I came here.

“With regards to the method using the annual tree rings... I can’t say much else other than it being knowledge I found in a book.”

“And you’re saying that, with a single piece of knowledge, you surpassed the decades of experience of the Court Wizards? That you exposed the problem of the nobles falsifying their taxes that has gone on for over two centuries? You were also said to possess no disposition to mana, correct?”

And of course, I was faced with derisive laughter. I likely wasn’t the only one feeling a chill down my spine; I’m sure she was also feeling the same emotion as me—true fear. Thanks to that, my tongue completely froze up and wouldn’t move.

“Let’s change the question. What manner of reward do you desire for this accomplishment? If you claim to be unable to properly value this, I do believe

this level of accomplishment would leave me with no other choice but to grant you death.”

A cold sweat started pouring down my back. The fan she pointed at me was terrifyingly aimed at my neck. And before I knew it, the butler who was standing stock still behind her like an ornament until now was suddenly right behind me.

“Auntie, you’re carrying your joke too far. We’re speaking of a reward, right?”

“Protecting your business. What is it that you wish for aside from that?”

Alfina gripped her hands together in front of her chest and defied her guardian. However, the archduchess didn’t pay her any mind. There was no need for talk about rewards to begin with anyway.

This is simply a continuation of our interview upon meeting. Not about whether such a person should be near Alfina’s side, but about whether such a person should exist in the Kingdom at all.

This noble fully understands the power of knowledge in a different way from Fulsig’s scientific literacy. That’s why she accepted our explanation. That’s also why she obviously senses danger from someone like me, whose knowledge doesn’t match their stature.

I wanted to just say, “I wouldn’t have it so hard if I could so easily apply modern knowledge,” but that wouldn’t do anything for me in this situation.

That’s why Alfina is sorely mistaken. There was absolutely no generosity in her offer for a reward. Depending on my answer, my very fate could be decided upon the resolution of the disaster.

An old Japanese folktale called “The Sparrow with the Split Tongue” came to mind. What happened to the kind old man who picked a large wicker basket again? No matter how many good deeds he did, a single wrong choice ruined his life. It’s a somewhat extreme story.

In this case, unlike the folktale, choosing the small wicker basket won’t solve anything. If I ask for something small, it will only magnify her suspicion. And if I were to choose something big, her wariness towards me will only multiply. Isn’t this a checkmate?

“What’s wrong? You won’t answer?”

What was reflected in her eyes was a completely unknown entity. And the less one knew of such things, the warier they were towards it. Claiming to be harmless would just have the opposite effect. The real problem at hand here is that I am in fact harmless as I am right now, but I’m the only one who knows it.

Objectively speaking, I wouldn’t want someone who isn’t wary of me in this situation to be running the country. Although the archduchess’s wariness towards me is unreasonable and unjust, it isn’t unfounded.

“A normal person, you see, thinks about their own livelihood in the current moment above all else. Because of that, their outlook naturally narrows down. The only two choices they make with regards to an unknown disaster, which they don’t know will necessarily occur, are to believe in it, or not believe in it. You said that the reason you cooperated with Alfina was to protect your own small company, correct?” The archduchess’s eyes grew even sharper. “Such a person is unable to paint this picture.”

Dammit... she’s saying nothing but really accurate things all she wants. But that’s nothing more than her one-sided judgment. It isn’t unfounded, but there’s no reason for me to accept it.

So let’s choose the perfect sized basket in front of this woman ready to cut off my tongue, or I suppose my head in this case, shall we?

“As a matter of fact, there are three things that I wish for. Will that do?”

I already had a plan prepared to be put in motion. There were originally only two things I wanted, but due to a certain event, it was now three.

“Let’s hear them.”

“First is the handling of Reylia village after the disaster is resolved. I’d like for you to safeguard it in a certain manner.”

That village will, at the least, attract attention due to the monster flood. In the worst case, they could catch the eyes of the government from the knights coming and going during that period. And then there was the matter of the kidnapping the other day. Our secret couldn’t be protected the way we were doing it until now. And it *had* to be protected.

The archduchess pointed at the jar of honey next to my cup.

“‘Safeguard the production area for this,’ is what you mean to say, then? How so?”

“If we’re able to fend off the disaster, Princess Alfina’s reputation will surely swell. And when that happens, will it not become apparent that it’s unnatural for royalty to not be given a land to govern?”

If it became the land of a royal princess, then nobody could lay their hands on it half-heartedly. My original plan excluded having it come to this, but I’ve lost the leisure for that. My only choice is to make the best of a bad situation.

“Very well. There’s a problem in that it’s former Felbach territory, but it’s just a small village. If I say that I will manage things, the king will surely agree.” The archduchess nodded.

This would mean that the archduchess would get involved with the village, but because of Alfina’s complete lack of know-how in managing land, this fact couldn’t be avoided. She’s bluntly calling it the production area for our honey, too.

“Second. I’d like for you to recommend the Third Chivalric Order to be the ones dispatched to the west.”

“The Third Chivalric Order is small. Even from a financial standpoint, it’s not a terrible idea from the perspective of avoiding unduly provoking the Empire, but...” The archduchess looked puzzled.

The Third Chivalric Order is, in a sense, a reserve force. They’ve provided support to the Second Order during campaigns, so it wasn’t like they possessed no experience at all. However, the suppression of monster floods is the principal job of the Second Chivalric order.

In a situation like this one where many lives are at stake, it would normally be prudent to prioritize a flawless force no matter the cost. However, the Second Chivalric Order isn’t in a state where they can be dispatched right away.

“There is a possibility that the Second Chivalric Order will be hindered in deploying.”

In this world, where there was no room for the surplus production of goods, gathering military supplies together takes a lot of time. The last foreign war was long ago, and in the current day, the Kingdom is capable of predicting monster floods. Thus, they maintain less emergency stores than one ordinarily would.

And under the assumption that no monster flood will occur this year, the Dreyfans and Kendalls are in the middle of a conflict over shares. The emergency stores won't last for a campaign. This is a reality Mia and Jacob grasped through their investigations.

If hurried into an emergency dispatch, the Dreyfans and Kendalls will cause them to drag their feet. The dispatch of troops, which already involves all manner of disputes, would just get tangled up in unnecessary lobbying. In the worst-case scenario, the dispatch itself would be completely obstructed.

The suppression of a monster flood is, in short, the subjugation of a single large specimen. It isn't a war against a horde of monsters. Amassing a large number of troops shouldn't be top priority. This is something I confirmed beforehand with Fulsig.

The showy parade the Second Chivalric Order puts on when they depart is a demonstration towards the state as an appeal to increase military budget. As a matter of fact, there have been zero casualties on their last few campaigns.

"Hmm. Do you have some connection to the Third Chivalric Order...? No... to Prince Craig?" The archduchess narrowed her eyes.

Who the hell is Craig...? Oh, is that the third prince's name? It's fine for her to guess wrong, I suppose. I don't really care about the prince's personal circumstances at all. Although, the fact that the chivalric order is formally led by a prince is part of the plan.

"I was there watching during the Spring Festival. 'Even if a disaster is to befall us, the *King*-dom shall overcome it, and protect our peace and prosperity. Just as we always have.' Was it?"

"...The leader of the Third Chivalric Order is the third prince, which means the key figure in preventing the disaster would be the prince himself. It would compensate for the royal family's failure in rejecting the Oracle Princess's prophecy... no, it would paint a picture of the royal family joining forces to

prevent a disaster, right? This would also suppress the criticism towards Alfina.”

Euphylia’s expression slackened for just a moment, and she looked at both myself and Alfina. I didn’t know what kind of misunderstanding she’s coming to, but Alfina’s self-preservation was basically linked to the village’s, Weinder’s, and my own at this point.

“And lastly?”

I wavered just a bit. These two conditions were enough to harden our defenses to the minimum requisite level. However, I couldn’t possibly stop here. This was no longer a scuffle between children, after all.

“I would like information of the knights being dispatched to the west kept secret, and that divulging it to anyone be postponed for ten days. It will likely take that much time for all concerned parties just to make the necessary arrangements anyway.”

“There’s no way it’ll even be done in ten days. Well, I can arrange to postpone it. Your reason?” The archduchess watched me steadily.

“I can only say that the monopolization of information is the greatest benefit to a merchant.” And I dared to put on a theatrical front and play dumb. In truth, just this one request was through and through, in every way possible, completely at my own convenience.

The two of us continued to stare at each other for a while longer.

“...Very well. All those shall be your rewards. Alfina, you are not to speak a word of this either. Even if Adel’s daughter is to return.”

“Even to Clau? Y-Yes, understood...”

“Thank you very much, Your Grace.” I bowed my head, for all sorts of reasons. If Claudia were informed of this, my plan would go out the window.

“Um, is that all? Everything just benefits me. There’s nothing for Ricardo... R-Right. This is something I begged of you to begin with. If there is anything that I can do, then I shall do whatever you want...”

“Wh-Whatever?”

Alfina nodded firmly with an earnest expression. Her platinum hair ran down

her modest, yet well-shaped breasts, and I unintentionally gulped down.

“Hmm, so you really do have some sort of promise with Alfina?”

“I-I don’t.”

Alfina surely saw my requests as nothing more than the small basket. However, to me, they were a tremendously large basket. And not in the relative sense. Trading small baskets and receiving an enormous one in return is what business is all about.

“Hmm, then let’s see... One of my distant relatives, a viscount, has a sole daughter of suitable age. They’re searching for an appropriate husband to inherit their name. If it would please you, I could introduce the two of you.”

“Auntie?!” Alfina stood up in shock, and thanks to that, I missed my chance to be shocked myself.

“What’s the matter, Alfina? We’re speaking of the promotion of a precious friend of yours. If he becomes a relative, then you’ll be able to associate with him far more than now, correct?”

“Th-That may be true, but, that’s not really what I... Um, you have to consider the will of the person in question, so...”

“Hmm. Certainly. Louisa may be dissatisfied with taking a commoner as a potential husband.”

“That’s, um, not that. We’re supposed to be talking about rewarding Ricardo, so without even asking for Ricardo’s will is... um, you can’t!” Alfina’s childish tone turned up in full force. It was actually quite charming since she looked like a little sister who didn’t like the idea of her big brother being taken away.

“Are you not the one ignoring Ricardo’s will here? I simply said that I could introduce them, I was asking for his will to do so.”

“Huh? Oh, um...” Alfina turned to look at me with a troubled expression. Isn’t the answer obvious? Also, in these types of situations, I can’t refuse after we’ve actually been introduced, right? I at least know that much.

“I’ve spent a lot of time carrying the honey business of our house all the way here. Earlier, you called us a small company, Your Grace. It’s certainly true that

the Weinders are small, but..." I puffed out my chest with pride. "We're not so cheap that we can be traded for a mere viscount."

My goals aren't so petty that I have the spare time to be hooked onto some manner of side job. In any case, social status doesn't have even the least bit of worth to me. But let's make sure that never reaches the ears of said viscount's daughter.

"Pffft... Ahahahaha!" The lady before me opened her mouth wide in laughter. She even started slapping the desk with her fan. The overwhelming pressure she was giving off until now had completely vanished. "I see, so you can't be traded for a *mere* viscount, huh? Oh my, I thought to seat you as the purveyor to Berthold, but it seems that's also unwanted."

"Just think of being allowed to maintain a certain degree of freedom as being a part of my reward."

It's not like I'm selfless or anything. Indirectly hoping for nothing more than my own self-preservation could be said to directly interfere with the Weinder Company's interests. Being under the patronage of a noble with strings attached would be mismatched to my objective. Freedom isn't some god-given right; it's an extremely valuable resource, especially in this society.

Of course, to do something about our situation, such power is a necessity. Even going through Reylia village would tie me down too much. That's precisely why I didn't need some antiquated position like a purveyor. I need a more transparent relation where our interests can be regulated. I do at least have a plan, but that's for after things have calmed down.

"Well, let's see how things go for a while longer. It does seem that as long as you're here, Ricardo, I'll be able to enjoy teasing my niece just that much more," Euphylia said.

Now that I think of it, she just suddenly started referring to me as Ricardo. Well, whatever. Please just do your job. I'm going to be quite busy handling the matter at hand here.

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Ten days later, I was headed towards the library as always.

“Sir.”

“How are the preparations coming along?”

“The rumors are slowly being spread throughout the city. Jacob is the one doing that, so it’ll surely reach the military soon.”

“And their reaction?”

“Just as we expected. There’s nothing we need to deal with ourselves. The only thing worth mentioning is that those with animosity towards the Dreyfans are serving as a distraction and spreading out their attention.”

“All according to plan, then.” I suppressed my emotions as best I could.

We spotted a plump student walking about in the courtyard, accompanied by a group of other commoner students. One, two... twelve of them. There’s even more than last time. Things are looking good, aren’t they?

“Yes, but...”

“What’s wrong?”

“What will Her Highness think when she finds out about this?”

“...Is that important right now?”

Considering the little princess’s personality, she definitely won’t smile at what I’m trying to accomplish. However, my current focus needs to remain on what I need to protect.

The attempted kidnapping of a child from the village ended up being connected to the Dreyfans. According to Jacob and Remy’s investigation, they were able to identify one of the key companies under the Dreyfan umbrella as the client.

“That was unnecessary, I suppose. Also...” Mia looked at the schoolgirl waving towards us from the courtyard, who was grimacing at me though. “I leaked information to the Kendalls to be careful of the Third Chivalric Order’s movements.”

“Sorry that I have no connections.”

Looking back on it, wishing for a scuffle between children to remain on the

level of child's play was just my ego doing the talking.

"No worries. This also happens to be for Lilka's sake as well."

They're likely done verifying that the Third Chivalric Order's garrison is full of hustle and bustle. As for the royal palace, that scary lady is probably in the middle of a presentation with a grip on the scruff of Fulsig's neck.

"Okay, everything is in place, then."

A large company has many tails. With the power we currently have, even one of those tails seems gigantic to us. In that case, we don't take aim at just one tail, but rather...

Chapter 16: I Want to Do Away with the Party's Punch Bowl

About a month and a half has passed since the presentation. A group of mounted knights in orderly formation were now passing through the western gates of the royal capital, as if cutting through the brisk July wind. They numbered far fewer than the Second Chivalric Order, and their armor had practically no ornaments, yet they were full of fortitude and vigor.

This was the triumphant return of the Third Chivalric Order upon completing their campaign to the west. Unlike the time they left one month ago on an “investigation,” the people of the capital were here to welcome them en masse.

Their cheers were centered on the commander leading the group at the fore. He wore plain armor just like the rest of his unit, emphasizing the stress he put on practicality. Even the helmet he carried on his waist was a simple bell-shaped helmet, although the juxtaposition of his silver armor with the flag of a blue rose behind him made him stand out more than enough.

Furthermore, the commander, the third prince, with his wild and short chestnut hair, was quite the good-looking man. I've heard he's just 25 years old, but the confidence he exudes has a personality to it. That's why the shrill voices of the crowd stood out in the midst of all the cheering.

There were two trolleys being pulled in the middle of the knights. The first trolley had two dead grausams atop it, each about the size of a rhinoceros. Their physique was somewhat stubby for a Canidae, especially at the neck. The ruffled fur around their necks was like a mane. And most conspicuously, a large red crystal was affixed to the center of their foreheads.

The second trolley had the severed heads of smaller specimens on it. Even then, they were about the size of lions. I see now. An entire pack of these things could easily obliterate a village. Actually, I'm surprised the knights won.

The prince himself stood on the frontlines and suppressed an entire pack of

monsters. I doubt he actually stood at the vanguard, but the image of him that these people saw in their minds was undoubtedly something like that.

The birth of a new hero is a form of entertainment to the masses. Now then, do your best to stand out as much as you can. The more you and your subordinates stand out, the more eyes are averted from us.

And they knew this much as well. I was, in fact, the one to throw them into a situation full of uncertainties in the completely unknown territory of the monsters' domain to the west. I'm honestly quite grateful for that.

The fact that there were two bosses is actually different from what I heard from Fulsig as well. Though the grausams on the second trolley had more wounds from fangs and claws than they did from swords and spears, so the cannibalization of the pack after defeating the bosses looked like it went according to plan at least...

There's still far too much I don't know yet about ley lines and monsters.

I bid farewell to the knights responding to the cheers of the people, and headed towards my original goal: an upper-class residential district on the capital's central street. And there, I found a huge shop about ten times the size of our own.

The grand front display was in terrible shape. Just the other day, the crest of an honorary baron that they proudly hung out front was torn off. It must have been done quite violently, as there were still scrapes left behind. The walls were drawn on, and there were traces of stones being thrown too.

Ideals are everlasting, but that's exactly why they don't exist in reality. In contrast, reality is an authoritative existence. For this reason, the strong take reality as absolute. But if handled poorly, then changes in the reality before them start to get confused with their ideals.

"Sometimes reality changes in an instant. To the next reality, that is..." I muttered, looking at the gold company that was but a shadow of its old self, which once boasted of its glory.

The weak must not confuse ideals with reality. And the strong must not confuse reality with ideals. As someone who came from a world where changes

in reality happened far faster than they did here, it was something that I knew full well.

Now then, if I don't start heading back now, Mia will get angry at me. At any rate, I've got an event waiting for me after this that I don't want to go to. I'll just go dressed as a student, and erase my presence entirely while standing against a wall.

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Lights filled the royal residence's ground in the middle of dusk. The entrance hall, saloon, and vast garden were all transformed into a party site. The space was decorated like a hotel ceremonial hall, and had many noble guests elegantly sharing in lighthearted chatter.

This was a celebration hosted by Archduchess Berthold. Apparently, it was being held out of gratitude to all those who took action to dispatch a chivalric order to the west, despite there being no precedence for it.

I saw several students from the Academy, as well as some teachers, among the dressed-up men and women. I panicked and hid myself in the shadow of the curtains along the wall. They were giving me a "what the hell are *you* doing here" look. Come on, I'm the one who wants to know that.

There were two guests of honor for this party. One was obviously my classmate. She was currently in the center of the entrance hall, standing next to the archduchess and surrounded by a large number of guests. Her dress was simple and white, with a large ribbon adorning her chest.

Even from far away, she was still dazzling. That young knight wasn't at her side, but in her stead was another young noble lady that I didn't know. Standing behind her was her usual maid, who looked truly proud of her lady.

The guests who praised her as the Saint of Prophecy came up to greet her without pause. There was also a large number of students among them, even though only three months had passed since that scene in the courtyard.

The ones desperately bowing and apologizing to her were likely the young nobles she used to have tea with, who'd kept their distance at that time.

I, of course, didn't try to get any closer to her. Or, rather...

“Can I go home yet? I finally got to get back to my primary job...”

The commercial world of the royal capital was currently going through the greatest crisis it had ever known, and our work had been piling up because of that. The number of documents we have to deal with right now even exceed the number of students crowding around Alfina. I want to get back and hurry up with securing our new customers for the honey trade.

“You can’t possibly leave on your own after being personally invited by the hostess, sir. By the way, the director said pretty much the same thing as you. And just as you can see, he’s hanging in there.” Mia abruptly averted her gaze.

Now that I think of it, she parted with one of her friends on the way here and looked troubled when she asked where the girl was going. Apparently, the revelry in the capital’s central street celebrating the knights’ return was still going strong.

“That geezer does seem like he’d be bad with this stuff...”

The other guest of honor, Fulsig, was a little further away from Alfina, talking to some bald man. I think that’s the Academy’s chairman. Fulsig was given an honorary position on the school’s board while keeping his position as director of the library, and was bestowed the title of Great Sage, along with a pension for his entire life befitting of said title. There were also talks of giving him a court rank, but apparently he told them to just hand over research funds in proportion to that.

In a sense, they were quite lavish towards him, perhaps to dilute Alfina’s own accomplishments. All those lavish rewards, including his so-called lifetime pension, are all going to vanish into his hobby anyway.

“Oh, right. So why isn’t *that* girl by her lady’s side?” I looked at Claudia, who was loitering around to the side on her own. I’m pretty sure I saw her back at the Academy about a week ago.

The girl with a red ponytail had completely turned into a flower on the wall, and showed none of her usual ambition. What happened to her vigor when she drew a blade on me without hesitation? I wouldn’t mind at all if she charged over here and yelled, “What in the world would the likes of *you* be doing here?” I may even be able to use it as an excuse to go home.

“I believe she was dismissed as Princess Alfina’s aide.” Mia lowered her tone. Now that I think of it, setting aside Alfina herself, this girl lost the trust of the archduchess.

“That’s a shame. It’s not like she’s personally responsible for any of it.”

The family she held pride in opposed her precious lady, and even if you don’t interpret it like that, they openly kept their distance from her. And during that period, her lady went on to achieve a great accomplishment. Meaning her loyal retainer’s pride was now in shambles.

“I guess this is a result of her inconsistent behavior.”

“You’re the one acting inconsistently, sir. Even as you complained ‘I won’t get closer. I won’t get closer,’ you went on to close the distance between you and Princess Alfina anyway. Your speech and conduct are at complete odds.”

“Don’t say such rash things. If I start to stand out in a place like this, my self-preservation will...”

“I do believe you should re-examine the definition of the word self-preservation. Especially with regards to human relations.”

Perhaps having noticed my gaze, Claudia looked over to me. Oh, and there’s the haggard heir of Earl Rowan. Rowan began complaining in some manner to Claudia.

“It’s not going smoothly despite their parents being from the same chivalric order, huh?”

“That’s because Earl Rowan’s reputation has taken quite the dive. They probably think she was hiding information about Princess Alfina due to being her aide.”

“Oh, there are rumors going about that they plotted with the Dreyfans to obstruct the campaign to suppress the monster flood, right?”

“They were nothing but absurd rumors that nobody would listen to just a little while ago, but the monster flood in the west that should never have occurred did happen, and then the Second Chivalric Order had their turn stolen by the Third Order because of their lack of provisions. And due to that

unfortunate coincidence, the rumors suddenly gained a lot of credibility. Just like your little ‘prophecy’ stated.”

Mia looked at me with a cynical gaze. The time bomb of the rumors went off splendidly, just as planned.

“They even filed a complaint as to how the Kendalls were able to provide the provisions for the campaign to the Third Chivalric Order in no time at all. President Dreyfan was even dismissed from his position as representative of the guild. His rank of honorary baron was stripped as well.”

“Coincidences sure can be terrifying, huh? We can’t afford to be careless.”

“You are what is terrifying here, sir.”

“I’ll take on business rivals with business, and political enemies with politics. It’s not like I took his life. And I didn’t abduct his son or anything, either,” I replied, remembering the sight from this afternoon. The sight of the ruined Dreyfan Company.

As a matter of fact, the truly horrible part for them is still to come. His leverage as guild representative that he had been using up until now had completely vanished in an instant. He was exiled from the market after making an enormous investment; he’ll surely get crushed by the interest on his debts. Up until now, he had been using his money and authority as much as he wanted in order to get his way. And now both of those were gone. There’s a lesson to be learned here about using power beyond one’s means. Not that I’m in much position to criticize others, considering my current situation at this party.

“That son of his also left the Academy.”

“...Yeah, he did.”

Just this afternoon, I saw Dreyfan’s son leaving through the back gate of the Academy. Among the twelve students I saw surrounding him before, only two of them saw him off. However, the fact that they remained was quite considerate of them.

“It’d be nice if he notices just how much value those two have beyond the other ten combined...”

My enemy was ultimately just President Dreyfan. His son was merely an annoyance. And although I can sympathize with him, I have no regrets.

If Dreyfan were to target us, those around me would inevitably come to harm. And he should have known full well that the reverse was also true. In fact, this is nothing compared to the large number of Dreyfan employees and their families who were now left out cold in the streets.

And even though that parent and child were ruined, Weinder's position within the guild didn't really change. About all we gained was a larger margin to move around in. Also...

"The greatest profit for us from this is two very valuable connections." I looked at the old man and the hostess of the party. The latter is difficult to handle, but the fact that talking logically to her gets across is something to be grateful for. There were all sorts of unexpected factors along the way, but ultimately, we managed to yield a profit.

"Aren't you forgetting one more?" Mia looked at the girl in the white dress. Her future prospects are indeed promising, and her character could be trusted. So, honestly speaking...

However, due to this case, her volatility has gone up exponentially. She isn't someone we could approach freely. In fact, this case put her in a considerable amount of danger as well...

"We'll have to remember to keep an appropriate distance from her, more so than we have before." And we're still unable to decide on what exactly the appropriate distance was...

"You are Mr. Ricardo Weinder, correct?" A girl wearing a graceful yellow dress approached me. It was a noble lady with a small face and tied-up chestnut hair, like that of a ballerina. I think I saw her standing next to Alfina earlier. "It's a pleasure to meet you. I am Viscount Morland's daughter. My name is Louisa."

"...I'm Ricardo Weinder. What do you need of one such as I, Madam?"

Thinking back on it, this is the viscount's only daughter, whom the archduchess spoke of. Hang on... Had the fact that I harshly claimed that she was worth less than a copper company leaked out?

“I have been appointed as an advisor in managing Princess Alfina’s social relationships on this occasion. There are even those calling her a saint now, so I’m sure there will be many things happening along those lines from here on out.”

Louisa looked at the crowd surrounding Alfina and the archduchess. Well, that makes sense; there really is a need for such an advisor. Meaning her very first job is... Alright, I may get to go home now.

“And so, I came to greet the one whom Her Highness trusts so deeply.”

“How courteous of you, Madam. It’s an honor. However, I was just thinking that it was about time for me to take my leave from such a place...” I understand, I really do understand what you want to say. So I guessed at the young lady’s attention.

“Oh my, then allow me to lead you there. I’m sure Princess Alfina is waiting for you, Mr. Weinder. Come now, please, this way.” And she began taking action in the complete opposite direction from my expectations. Is this new advisor really all right? Thanks to her, a certain wallflower is now coming this way.

“What’s the meaning of this?”

“My, now. You are Claudia from the Adel family, correct? You *formerly* served as Princess Alfina’s aide, if I’m not mistaken.” Louisa put strong emphasis on the ‘formerly.’

I thought Claudia would get angry, but she came to a dead stop instead.

“Ugh. I-I’m... Wait, never mind that. What do you mean by this commoner having Princess Alfina’s trust? You mustn’t make such irresponsible statements in such a place.”

“Oh, it isn’t all that strange now, is it? Everybody seems to be treating it as if it hadn’t happened at all, but ever since Princess Alfina announced the prophecy, many people left her side under the pretense of problems from her mother’s side of the family. Including yourself, and your family.”

“W-Well...”

“And when Princess Alfina found herself completely disheartened, the one to lend her his ear and subsequently save her was none other than Mr. Weinder.”

“Wha...?! Impossible. You must be mistaken. No, it must have been nothing more than this scoundrel scheming for a chance to draw closer to Princess Alfina. For a while now, he’s been—” Claudia shook her head as if to deny the reality before her.

“Clau. What a thing to say...”

“Y-Your Highness...”

And with the worst possible timing, both for me and Claudia, Alfina arrived before us. The knight was practically made out to be a storybook villainess like this.

“We were able to avert the disaster entirely thanks to Ricardo.”

“Yup. There’s no doubting his achievements. Mia’s contributions were quite large as well.” The other guest of honor, Sage Fulsig, followed behind Alfina and nodded.

And now I was panicking. Why are the two guests of honor forgetting the setting we had? Claudia turned pale. Even I turned pale. The two attractions of the party began talking to the unusual commoner. All gazes fell upon us.

“There is no greater honor than such an unmerited assessment. However, I just happened to know about the region of the prophecy *by chance*. The resolution of the disaster is entirely due to Princess Alfina’s courage in speaking the truth, and the Great Sage’s profound knowledge.”

I desperately tried to correct the course of events with a cold sweat dribbling down my brow. The princess looked at me with saddened eyes. Please stop. You don’t need to look at me in such a heartbreaking way. I’ve already secured my profits from this. What’s more, I even crushed the house of a fellow classmate.

“My, he is just as modest as you said, Your Highness. Even Her Grace the Archduchess was praising you as the one who painted this entire picture, you know?” Louisa posed with her hand to her cheek. Her behavior was truly admirable, but this woman also seems like she’ll be quite difficult to deal with.

“N-No way, even the archduchess...?” Claudia’s face was basically pure white now. It even looked like her red ponytail had darkened.

The gazes of bewilderment around us only intensified. All this despite the fact that the kind princess was even being considerate towards her mean classmates earlier.

“Ricardo. My aunt is calling for you. Mia, you too.” And Alfina dealt the final blow as she held out her hand towards us.

Behind her, I could see Euphylia beckoning us over with her fan. What happened to the setting? I’ll sue you for breach of contract, dammit. Not that I can win.

And with no other choice, feeling like a cow being sent to pasture, I went along with Alfina.

“So you’ve finally come. For the key figure behind this entire incident to hide in such a corner... Just what manner of scheming were you up to?” And that’s how Euphylia greeted me, seated in her chair as I came up to her. A wave of unrest spread out among the distinguished nobles around her.

“First off, Alfina continued to reject all their invitations for your sake, and you’ve just been loitering about.”

And the answer as to why I was being treated like some good-for-nothing was answered by the particularly sharp gazes around me. All from young men. I get it now. She’s talking about invitations for a dance.

“Much attention will gather around Alfina from now on. And if a commoner were to approach her at such times, the repercussions will surely be large.” The archduchess tilted her fan and spoke in a way that only I could hear her. That’s why I kept my distance, you know?

“As such, it’ll be better if it’s considered normal for you to be by her side from the start,” Lousia whispered in my ear from the side. So you’re the one who gave her this ridiculous idea.

“Even I cannot take my eyes off this. At any rate, the repercussions this time were far larger than I thought they’d be...”

And just as Euphylia was about to say something even more turbulent, a large commotion broke out at the entrance to the venue. The hostess of the party stood from her seat. Was there an intruder in the residence of one of the biggest nobles of the Kingdom?

The crowd parted to the sides, and an armored group came into sight. There were five of them, and at their center was a young virile man. I feel like I saw him just a short while ago...

"My, my, Prince Craig. To have the star of the campaign honor us so." Euphylia walked up to him at a quick pace.

"Ooh, Auntie Euphylia, you're just as beautiful as always. Haha, it's nothing, I simply came to give my greetings before returning to the garrison. There's no need to make a fuss," the prince said with an impish smile.

"Hmph. As the savior of the west, we should normally be opening the entire mansion to celebrate your victory."

"Oh, come now. I simply fulfilled my duty as a member of the chivalric order. As the one to see through the possibility of a monster flood in the west, which has never happened before, you should be the one being showered with praise, Aunt Euphylia. Oh, together with the Great Sage and Oracle Princess, of course." Craig looked to Euphylia, Fulsig, Alfina, then stopped on me. "Oh? I see an unfamiliar face next to Alfina there. Are you perhaps my little sister's friend from the Academy who lent her a hand?"

He smiled at me in good humor, and a chill ran down my spine.

"He is," Alfina replied immediately.

"Saying that I lent my hand is much of an overstatement. All I did was follow the instructions of the Great Sage." I hijacked the conversation from Alfina in a fluster.

I've already got more than enough connections that I'm unable to manage right now. My business card case, which didn't have much space in it to begin with, is bursting at the seams now. I can't fit even one more card in there.

"I see. Do take care of Alfina from here on out as well, Ricardo."

“I do not deserve the honor.” I somehow managed to get my mouth moving. Why do you know my name? Can’t you just claim all the glory for the suppression of the flood?

I was desperately trying to keep my eyes forward, and the prince looked back at me with an air of composure. Our gazes remained locked, and shortly after, he looked away.

“Now then, I can’t stay for too long. I’ll be excusing myself here.” Craig suddenly released me from the pressure.

“Hmm, you only just returned from a campaign, Your Highness, so it would surely be best for you to take it easy and get some rest while you can. If you don’t, I’ll have much to say to you...” Euphylia put an emphasis on some sort of unexpressed point as Craig said his farewells. The image of the empty seat during the Spring Festival came back to mind.

The prince turned on his heels and left. And as his gallant figure vanished, I finally let out the breath that I had been holding this entire time.

Frankly speaking, there’s something I want from that prince: information regarding the irregularities of the ley lines during this incident. Thinking of what’s to come, it’s essential information for me. Though the oh-so-Great Sage is the one with the role of asking that, of course. I glanced over at the old man, who refused to give his pupil even a single lifeline.

“...That was an unexpected surprise, but we cannot allow the party to cool down.” The archduchess shook her head lightly, then raised her fan, and the music in the venue changed to one with an emphasis on rhythm. And then, a graceful white hand extended towards me.

“Will you dance with me, Ricardo?”

Crap, I lost my timing to run away thanks to our surprise guest.

“Th-Though it pains me to say, Princess Alfina, I do not possess the knowledge to serve as your dance partner. I cannot possibly ruin the prime show of the party in such a manner...”

We did, in fact, have lessons aimed at commoners, so I knew the basics. But taking center stage is far too unreasonable.

“So there are things even you are incapable of? It’s alright, I’m the one inviting you, so I’ll do my best to take the lead, Ricardo. This is my first time dancing with a boy, though, so I don’t know whether I’ll be able to do so properly.”

Alfina’s statement kicked off the murmuring around us once more. Didn’t the first dance of a noble lady in high society have some sort of special meaning?

“In the case that she has a fiancé, it would be him. If she doesn’t have one, it would be the man she trusts the most. Normally, that would be her guardian.” Mia explained it to me with a reproachful glare. So that answers my question. Alfina’s guardian is the archduchess. Now that I think of it, I’m like a big brother to her, apparently...

The most likely perpetrator behind instigating Alfina into doing this, Louisa, was watching on in an amused manner. Behind her, Alfina’s maid was making an expression akin to biting down on her handkerchief in vexation. Actually, she was clearly wrenching at the curtain behind her. That’s at least the normal reaction.

The waltz-like rhythm began, and all eyes remained on me. If I were to refuse her now, I would become the insolent knave who embarrassed the savior of the country, the guest of honor of the party, the saint.

The choice of just accepting such infamy to escape this situation entirely did come to mind. But I could see the tips of her fingers trembling ever so slightly. Good grief, I can’t possibly neglect her like that, now can I?

And so, I reached out to her. I timidly took her slender and beautiful fingers into my hand. And though my hand felt horribly sweaty, Alfina firmly grasped back.

A path to the center of the garden opened up on its own. And then there were eyes, eyes, and more eyes piercing into the man monopolizing the beautiful girl at the center of the party. Not only that, quite a few of them were gazes filled with envy.

Even if she were not a princess, even if she were not the guest of honor, no matter how you looked at it, she’s an enviable beauty. That’s to say nothing of her pure figure clad in a white dress being blindingly dazzling. My personal

tolerance could just barely handle the brilliant figure of this angel when she was sitting under the unreliable illumination of the archive's skylight.

The dance began. And surely matching my skill level, Alfina chose the most basic of steps. I somehow managed to keep up with that, and looked at the girl smiling in my arms.

Those who feared her power and fame, and those who looked to use her. Such people were sure to come out in droves from now on. Also, there's no guarantee that there won't be another prophecy.

So let's look over this dangerous girl just a little more until she's an adult, then. I at least have that much of an obligation towards her. At any rate, she's the one who saved my business, and is also that village's new feudal lord.

And... I guess it isn't all that amusing to leave this role of leading her by the hand to someone else. That feeling as a sort of guardian of hers surely just can't be helped and must be within the permissible limits.

And just like that, with my precious self-preservation falling victim alongside it, the first disaster came to an end.



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The Economics of Prophecy: Volume 1

by Norafukurou

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