



아카데미에서 살아남기

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THE EXTRA'S ACADEMY SURVIVAL GUIDE

– 아카데미에서 살아남기 –

- VOLUME 1 -

-AUTHOR-
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[MattReading]

– STORY –

I ended up transmigrating as a third-rate extra in a game I like, but worst of all this character has already fallen and been disowned.

I have no ambitions. I just want to graduate, but the world won't let me.

– GENRE –

Action Adventure Drama Fantasy Harem Romance School
Life Supernatural

CHAPTER 1

- 'We no longer acknowledge you as the Rosetail heir. The disgraceful slurs you hurled in the esteemed presence of Princess Penia, your unsanctioned meddling in the entrance exam for the venerable Sylvanian Academy, your blatant disregard for dignity and jealousy-induced blind rage that besmirched our family name; these aren't offenses we can just ignore.'

I didn't need to read the rest.

It was a personal missive from the patriarch of the Rosetail family, Krepin Rosetail. Packed with formal niceties, its underlying message was simple and harsh:

You're being cut loose from the family tree.

The high life I used to live, ruling like a king with the backing of a powerful family, was at an end.

I could practically feel the god of fate sneering at me.

Enjoyed the ride so far? Time for a one-way trip to hell.

These words seemed to echo in my ears.

I wanted to rail against this cruel mockery, and why shouldn't I?

Because I wasn't the one who lived the high life shielded by the powerful Rosetail family. That was Ed Rosetail, not me.

"All your belongings are packed up here. We appreciate your time."

The maid managing the top-tier Ophelis Hall at Sylvanian Academy bid me farewell with impeccable politeness.

I took the two large wooden crates she handed over with a vacant look. My room, once filled to the brim, was now reduced to a pair of bags.

In other words, those spacious quarters were never mine to begin with.

Now that the family had cut me off financially, this was my new reality.

"Best of luck with the rest of your life."

Even though I felt like my life was in the gutter, they maintained the courtesy due to a former noble. A touch of class, but for me, it was just salt in the wound.

-Thud

The heavy doors of Ophelis Hall shut behind me, leaving me alone in the picturesque garden.

I sighed. I guess it's time to face reality.

"Could I really be... inside the game...?"

My all-time favorite game, 'The Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman'.

At the worst possible moment, I'd reincarnated into the worst possible character.

I put down my bags and rubbed my face with both hands.

I'm screwed.

This is hopeless.

* * *

Even the name 'Ed Rosetail' had a kind of old-world charm to it.

In 'The Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', which had a total of 43 episodes, even I, who had played through it more than five times, didn't remember this name all that well. The reason was pretty clear.

He was a third-rate bad guy, booted out almost as soon as the game started.

- 'Hey, isn't that Ed Rosetail?'

- 'Quiet! Stop gawking! He'll catch on!'

- 'What's left to notice? Rumor is, he's taken a serious fall from grace.'

- 'A buddy at Ophelis Hall told me just yesterday - they even yanked his dorm room. Bet we won't catch a glimpse of him next semester.'

- 'There he was, grinning ear to ear, oblivious to the harsh realities of life.'

- 'Why the heck did he cheat on the entrance exam for the freshmen?'

- 'I've always said that guy was cruising for a bruising! All talk, no show, that's him!'

Lunch hour rolled around, and the student union was buzzing with activity. There I was, wedged between two body-length wooden crates, overhearing the oh-so-pleasant chatter swirling around me.

People love to gossip, especially when someone's luck has taken a turn for the worst. I got that, but it still felt like a raw deal.

I had always been a humble guy, living a simple life without any grand ambitions.

And now, to make a stand-up guy like me take the fall - well, it just didn't seem fair.

"-Sigh..."

I was craving a cigarette.

When I exhaled and took a look around, the chattering students who had been making a spectacle of me had cleared out.

Two hours or so had passed since I'd been booted from the dorm.

The sudden change had stunned me into silence, and the surreal reality had my head spinning. But, I'd managed to get a handle on myself.

The situation was downright absurd, but somehow, I'd accepted the drastic change. Perhaps it was just part of being Ed Rosetail - the ability to keep my cool no matter what.

Anyway, it was high time to figure out my next move.

Sneakily, I unlatched my wooden crate and pulled out a personal mirror, glitz and glamour to the nines. Gone was my old reflection, replaced by a golden-haired boy with distinct features - not too shabby-looking, if I do say so myself.

A mirror image of my current predicament.

[Name: Ed Rosetail]

Gender: Male

Age: 17

School Year: 2nd

Race: Human

Achievements: None

Vitality: 3

Intelligence: 4

Dexterity: 7

Willpower: 7

Luck: 6

Detailed Combat Abilities >>

Detailed Magic Abilities >>

Detailed Life Abilities >>

Detailed Alchemy Abilities >>

To someone who'd gone five rounds with 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', this info screen was all too familiar.

The game's interface would pop up whenever you inspected your reflection, be it in a mirror, pond, or a pane of glass.

The fact that this trick worked in reality too made everything feel like a dream.

And, judging by the dismal stats staring back at me, I found myself wishing it was one.

Here I was, a student of magic at Sylvanian Academy, and my intelligence was scraping the barrel. And my vitality? Well, let's just say it wouldn't do a noble's son any justice - it was practically subterranean.

For comparison, a regular Joe farmer would clock in at a 5 or 6 on the vitality scale. And a combat-trained main character, by game's end, might just tip the scale past 20.

My own stats? Downright laughable.

Although his talent and determination were far from poor, they certainly didn't stand out in any way. His modest abilities fell short when faced with the protagonist - a fact that became painfully obvious.

He was just a low-tier villain, a disposable character introduced for a bit of early story intrigue.

His role was so trivial, that his fate after his small part in the story remained unknown.

Wait. I recall now.

He had a brief appearance after all the storylines had concluded. There he was in the end credits, seen draped in rags, begging on a city street.

I wished I hadn't remembered that.

"-Ah..."

Another heavy sigh escaped me as I leaned back.

In truth, his end was to be expected. He was a naive young noble, who had grown up sheltered and adored, suddenly cast out onto the streets with nothing to his name.

The immediate goal was to avoid a life of begging on the streets.

And then what?

I was at a loss for an answer to that question.

After pondering for a long time, the answer I came up with was simple.

By whatever means, I would survive.

CHAPTER 2

The Sylvanian Academy seemed more like a city than an educational institution.

The academy, having been established by buying up the entirety of Aken Island in the southwest of the kingdom, was so vast that even the graduates hadn't fully explored it.

So, what did that mean?

For starters, it suggested that if one were to wander, they'd inevitably stumble upon something interesting.

Feeling the weight of the students' eyes, I found myself meandering into the untouched forest nestled in the island's northwest.

The majority of the academic facilities were located on the southeastern side of the island. Conversely, the students' amenities, welfare buildings, and commercial spaces were predominantly in the southwest.

Originally, due to the sole bridges connecting the school and mainland positioned in the southeast and southwest, development had naturally gravitated to these areas.

After half a day's journey reaching the northeastern edge, I surrendered to my throbbing legs and collapsed onto a conveniently placed tree stump.

"I think I'll stay on this island for now."

Having roamed for half a day and having had the opportunity to gather my thoughts, I could draw a few definitive conclusions.

Regardless of my circumstances, this was the state I'd been thrust into. It was essential to adapt and devise a strategy for survival.

Sylvanian Academy was the epitome of prestige - a place where nobles were eager to enroll their offspring. Either overwhelming talent or wealth was a prerequisite for admission.

Holding a Sylvanian diploma meant you could make a living regardless of your circumstances. I resolved to buckle down and earn that diploma. In this unforgiving world of which I knew nothing, there could be no greater asset.

More importantly, voluntarily leaving the school at this point would be akin to taking a leap into an abyss of uncertainty.

I've played through 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' several times.

If we're at the point where Ed Rosetail has just found himself embroiled in a scandal, then we're at the very start of the story.

I had a fair idea of the events that were to unfold at this school. As long as I stayed within the academy's bounds, I could use my game-based knowledge to my advantage.

There was absolutely no reason to leave the comfortable confines of the academy, stepping into an unknown world that had nothing to do with the game's backdrop.

Once I had mulled over all these thoughts, I realized the sun had already begun to set.

There I was, alone, perched on a tree stump in the middle of a deserted forest.

I heaved a sigh and rubbed my face.

"Let's see..."

I placed my two wooden crates on the grass and began to rummage through them.

There were various items like clothing, textbooks, and magic tools, all meant for learning and not particularly useful.

Living in such opulence yet having this be the sum of my personal possessions made me realize just how hollow my existence had been.

That's right... even if I'd been ousted from my family, I hadn't yet been expelled from the academy.

Without my family's support, affording the exorbitant tuition was out of the

question, rendering my situation virtually indistinguishable from expulsion. However, tuition for the next semester must have been paid in advance.

Whether I earned a scholarship or found a new source of income, I could potentially continue my studies. The catch was a ticking clock – the time limit was the next semester.

"The view is really something..."

Just a bit further along, I came across a creek. The stream cascaded from a wild hill in the northwest part of Aken Island, gurgling its way right down here.

The moonlight reflecting off the water surface and the serene forest, filled only with the gentle sounds of insects, left me in awe.

But this was no time to get lost in such romantic notions. If I didn't snap out of it, I'd starve.

I picked up a twig and started scratching words into the ground.

I needed to sort out the essentials if I wanted to make it.

The objective was graduation.

Prominently at the top, I wrote: Goal = Graduation.

Ed Rosetail was in his second year. Six semesters remained until graduation.

One semester's tuition cost a typical 20 gold coins. That amount could buy an entire carriage, lavishly adorned with golden trims.

And that was after a generous discount.

The typical student at Sylvanian Academy lived in top-tier dorms, dined in restaurants offering the finest meals, utilized the highest quality magical tools for studying, and often even had a couple of servants.

The cost of one semester, after slashing all these perks, equaled the price of one carriage.

There was no straightforward solution for the tuition. Unless I could secure a scholarship for the next semester, it'd be a struggle to even avoid flunking with my current weak abilities.

I wondered how such an incompetent person could have such audacity and arrogance.

Really, there was no need for such thoughts. After all, who would bother overthinking a villain character, one that's designed to just be beaten by the protagonist early on and then discarded?

Either way, tuition aside, the most pressing needs were the immediate essentials for survival.

In other words, the basics.

I had clothes. Whether there would be a way to wash them was uncertain, but I could probably avoid looking like a beggar for a week or so.

Food and shelter, though, were problems. I didn't have a place to sleep or anything to eat for the night.

"-Ah..."

A deep sigh slipped out once more.

But quickly, I shook my head, giving my cheek a firm slap.

"Just sighing isn't going to change anything!"

I gritted my teeth, stood up abruptly, and started to stretch. I loosened up my waist, then my legs, went through a full set of national gymnastics from start to finish, followed by a set of jumps and a set of push-ups.

With each heavy breath, I refreshed both body and mind.

I'd heard there was an entrance exam for freshmen, which meant the next semester couldn't be far off. Thinking about the date, I probably had around ten days left.

First, I needed to create a basic environment where I could attend school. If I had ten

days, I could do something.

The first thing to arrange was somewhere to sleep. The spring breeze was pleasantly cool, and if I needed to, I could sleep outside... but I couldn't just lay on the bare ground.

Might it be possible to construct a kind of makeshift tent?

Even without going so far as to build a full-blown tent, a simple shelter shouldn't prove overly complicated.

Just standing up some thick tree trunks to use as supports and covering them with a tarp-like material would make for a basic shelter with something of a roof.

The northeastern forest on Aken Island remained admirably preserved. Given the occasional sightings of sprites, it was clear that human influence was nearly non-existent.

There should be plenty of tree trunks to serve as tent supports if I searched thoroughly enough.

"There's no time to ponder, I need to get moving."

There wasn't a moment to lose in contemplation. Regardless of the situation, action needed to take precedence.

I focused on my reflection in the stream, honing in on my eyes once again.

[Name : Ed Rosetail]

Gender: Male

Age: 17

School Year: 2nd

Race: Human

Achievements: None

Vitality: 3

Intelligence: 4

Dexterity: 7

Willpower: 7

Luck: 6

Detailed Combat Ability >>

Detailed Magic Ability >>

Detailed Life Ability >>

Detailed Alchemy Ability >>

Shoving the pathetic abilities to the back of my mind, I honed my concentration on the details of my magic abilities.

[Detailed Magic Ability]

Rank: Novice Magic Student

Specialization: Elemental

Common Magic: Quick Casting Lv 1; Mana Sensing Lv 1

Fire Elemental Magic: Ignition Lv 2

Wind Elemental Magic: Wind Blade Lv 1

It seemed odd that as an Elemental specialist, I only knew two basic elemental spells.

According to Sylvanian Academy's curriculum, students of elemental magic choose two specialties in their first year. I appeared to have chosen fire and wind, but even the most basic of spells were hardly practiced, a testament to my lazy student days.

Whatever. The only important thing was that I had some spells up my sleeve.

I made my way deeper into the forest, sensing the mana within my body.

My mana may have been pitiful compared to that of typical main characters, but it was enough to chop down moderately sized tree trunks.

My mana, in concert with a Wind Blade spell, brought down tree trunks of just the right size.

It was essential to select the correct size. If they were too heavy to handle, they'd be useless.

Having chosen and felled about six tree trunks, I found myself panting heavily.

Clearly, my body was not yet used to freely wielding mana. The need for further training felt urgent.

"Really, what kind of ordeal is this?"

I spat, caught my breath, then hauled the trunks to a spot with a good amount of sunlight.

Attempting to erect a structure on bare ground would simply lead to it slipping due to an imbalance in force.

It made sense to dig out some soil where the supports would stand.

I used a branch roughly the size of my forearm to scrape out the earth.

After digging out four spots and propping up four supports, I angled them to meet in the center.

Juggling four supports with just two hands was no simple task, but by leveraging my shoulder or head to brace the supports, I somehow managed it.

I secured the middle of the frame, where the supports intersected, with a leather belt. The belt had been taken from a high-quality tunic stashed inside my bag. I used the last of my wooden poles to buttress the center and dug a hole in the ground to ensure the structure wouldn't collapse.

What resulted was a shaky, yet somewhat credible frame for a shelter. It wasn't a

looker—far from it. The supports didn't converge neatly in the center, and because I'd put it together without precise measurements, it ended up lower than anticipated.

Still, if I could cover it with a makeshift tarp, it would suffice as an overnight shelter.

There was a thought to use the garments from my wooden crates as some form of insulation, but I quickly dismissed the idea.

The clothes were scant, to begin with, and I'd have to use several pieces to provide any real coverage. Sacrificing my attire for tomorrow didn't seem like a worthwhile tradeoff.

What's more, these high-quality items might fetch a good price. It seemed wasteful to use them as a tent covering and soil them.

I opted for a compromise—laying down just one or two pieces on the ground. I wasn't about to sleep on bare earth.

But then, what would I use as a tarp...?

I racked my brain but came up empty-handed. So, I ventured back into the forest and gathered a pile of branches from a tree with broad leaves.

The endeavor took nearly an hour.

Another hour went by as I used these branches to cover my makeshift shelter.

By the time I managed to slap together a passable shelter, the full moon, which had just begun its ascent in the western sky, was now high overhead.

"Whew... Damn... this is hard."

Stretching my aching back and wiping off the sweat, I took a moment to appreciate the completed shelter. It was grueling work, but at least it was done.

A rudimentary but serviceable shelter stood before me, ready to house my weary body. A sense of accomplishment washed over me as I took it all in, lifting my spirits.

[Production completed. Your production proficiency has increased.]

[The list of completed items has been updated.]

These messages sounded off in the moments following.

"Hmm?"

Tilting my head in confusion, I turned my attention back to the stream, focusing my gaze.

Not the extensive information window, but another window floated before my eyes.

[Detailed Life Ability]

Rank: Novice Craftsman

Specialization: None

Dexterity Lv 4

Design Lv 1

Gathering Ability Lv 1

"Ho?"

It seemed Ed had more of a knack for crafting than magic. True enough, my stats favored dexterity over intelligence or vitality.

[New Completed Item]

Wooden Temporary Shelter: A rest spot that offers temporary respite. It's crude and ramshackle. If not regularly maintained, its life expectancy will be short.

Production Difficulty: ●○○○○

A rather welcome window. I hadn't expected the crafting system to pop up as it did.

If I could manage my crafting proficiency, it suggested the same might be possible in other areas. It was a silver lining, at least.

There might be a way to weather the current crisis, I thought. However, right now, both physically and mentally, I was spent.

Rest was required.

I quickly collapsed onto the shelter I had just constructed.

The rustling of leaves and the drone of night creatures filled my ears.

It was pitch-black, nothing visible. I closed my eyes, aiming to drift off slowly into sleep.

It's really hard, and there's so much to do.

But let's rest first. Rest and see.

Rest comes first.

When the rest is over and it's light out, let's find a way to survive in this academy for the long term.

CHAPTER 3

Three days slipped away as I adapted to my new surroundings.

I didn't squander that time. Each passing moment was too filled with minutiae to recount individually, yet somehow summarizing everything in one sweeping statement felt woefully inadequate.

To begin with, the rudimentary shelter I first constructed had notably grown.

On the second night, it collapsed unexpectedly. In response, I harvested more timber from the surrounding forest, reinforcing the support structure.

In an ideal world, I would've had rope to bind everything together, but in its absence, I resorted to excavating mounds of dirt to anchor the supports.

Concerned about the possibility of rain, I draped a few spare pieces of clothing over the leafy canopy, layering additional broad leaves atop them for extra protection.

Still, the supports seemed to buckle under the weight, compelling me to install horizontal cross-braces for added stability.

Finding myself at a loss for what to use to tie the supports, I ultimately repurposed an old garment. I ripped it into strips, twisted them, and fashioned makeshift ropes.

Sacrificing my clothes in this way felt regrettable. I briefly considered if I could bundle everything up and pawn it for a handful of silver coins.

However, I soon dismissed the idea. Unless it was luxury merchandise adorned with an array of jewels, no pawn shop would give it a second glance.

Fortunately, I still had some genuinely valuable items set aside, so all was not lost. The real issue was that the nearest pawn shop was in the neighboring city.

The prospect of departing Aken Island and trekking to the pawn shop in the adjacent city only to fall short on return fare was a calamity I wished to avoid.

Taking a carriage would expedite the journey, but if I were to walk, it would require at least two full days of travel. It wasn't a trip one could undertake lightly.

Given my lack of funds for a carriage, caution was the order of the day.

"Hmm..."

I found myself seated by a stream, carefully whittling the end of a branch into a sharp point with my dagger.

Having resolved to avoid venturing from the school prematurely, my immediate priority was securing the basic necessities.

Food, clothing, shelter.

I had a modest supply of clothes for the next few days, and while my shelter was rudimentary, it served its purpose. The most pressing concern, however, was securing food.

On the second day, I ventured into the forest in search of sustenance. I grew up in a rural village, so my familiarity with environments such as forests and mountains was more pronounced than one might expect.

Yet, seeking edible flora was an entirely different ballgame. Grasses were abundant, but distinguishing between the edible and the inedible was a skill I lacked. Even with my eyes trained, my novice survival skills could only discern so much.

So, I turned to the pine trees that populated the forest, stripping off their bark to reveal a whitish pulp within.

A story my grandfather once shared surfaced in my memory. As a child during times of famine, they would boil and eat tree bark from the hills behind their house.

I used the ceremonial dagger in my possession to extract this inner bark. After conjuring a fire using Ignition magic, I boiled some stream water and stewed the bark. Lacking a proper pot, I improvised with a decorative iron cup.

I bit into the peeled pine bark and chewed. The taste was truly dreadful, but it was somewhat edible.

That night, I suffered from violent diarrhea. Evidently, tree bark isn't fit for human consumption.

On the afternoon of the third day, having been famished for nearly two days and suffered from diarrhea, my physical condition was horrendous.

Using my ceremonial dagger, I carved the end of a branch and tightly bound the dagger with a handkerchief to create a crude harpoon. Despite tying it as tight as possible with the handkerchief, it felt a bit loose. So, I added a few layers of thin vines I had found while exploring the forest.

[New Item]

Simple Harpoon: Tied a ceremonial dagger to a well-carved tree branch. It seems usable for fishing or hunting. However, because the sharpness of the dagger is lacking, it's hard to expect significant lethality.

Crafting Difficulty: ●○○○○

[Crafting completed. Your crafting proficiency has increased.]

It was time to use the skills I learned as a child catching freshwater fish by the river. However, this time there was a desperate intensity because I was starving to death.

Unlike the fishing harpoon produced as common goods, it was lacking in sharpness, but it could be overcome with experience.

Firewood was burning with a crackle. I was grateful for having the Ignition magic, which saved me the trouble of starting a fire.

I thanked my past self, Ed, who had chosen fire as one of his two elements.

...

Should I really be thankful?

In any case, since gathering was not possible, the decision to switch to hunting was the right one. My skill in catching fish at the river in my childhood had not disappeared, I was able to catch some freshwater fish.

I tried to skewer the fish on a branch and roast it like I had seen in cartoons, but as the fish was roasted, the flesh became soft and started to fall off the branch, causing me to lose a lot of precious meat.

If I could make something like a grill... but there was no suitable material at hand, so it was impossible. I had no choice but to scorch my tongue while stuffing the hot fish meat into my mouth.

"Khah..."

It felt like nutrients were being absorbed into my body for the first time in a while. It didn't taste good, per se. But I was grateful for the fact that I could fill my stomach.

I spread the fillets of a few fish to eat, buried my face in the stream, and drank the water in gulps.

"Hoo..."

Although I wasn't full, the hunger that had been torturing me for two days was somewhat relieved.

I collapsed on the pebbled floor of the riverbank and looked up at the sky. The sun was setting slowly, even though I hadn't done much.

There was only one week left until the start of the school year.

If even solving the food situation was taking most of my day, would it be possible to follow the Academy curriculum and even receive a scholarship?

Before discussing what's possible and impossible, I have to achieve it. In a world where I know nothing, holding a Sylvanian diploma would make all the difference.

Typically, Sylvanian graduates become core talents in various countries. Even if a student's grades are at the bottom, just being a Sylvanian alumnus allows them to sit in the ace seat of a conquest team or have a place in a local non-mainstream magic society.

Being a graduate was undeniably better than just being a nobody.

"Anyone there?"

As I was stretched out by the riverside while looking upon the heavens, I was startled by a voice breaking the silence.

The northern expanse of the Aken Island was known to be rarely frequented by both students and faculty. It was used for specialized practicals or exams, and hearing a voice - particularly a youthful one - was rather unexpected.

And I had an inkling about who that voice belonged to.

"Are you... Ed Rosetail?"

She was the third Princess of the Kroel Empire, Penia Elias Kroel, commonly known as Princess Penia.

She was among the four primary heroines of 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', an influential force throughout the narrative, continually shaping the political landscape of the school.

Yet, that was a tale for the future. For now, she was just a freshman at Sylvanian Academy.

Our protagonist, 'Taylee', encountered her during the entrance examination.

Princess Penia, who participated in the entrance examination under a guise, identified Ed Rosetail - yes, she called me out as the perpetrator.

She was the one who revealed my jealousy towards the protagonist Taylee and my manipulation of the examination's content. She was also the catalyst for my banishment from the family.

"I heard you were expelled... What are you doing here...?"

What was I doing here?

That was a question I'd been asking myself.

This was hardly an appropriate location for the Third Princess, who was normally escorted by no less than seven bodyguards.

Lifting my gaze, I looked at Princess Penia.

Her neatly tied platinum hair and frilly dress seemed to clash with the surrounding wilderness.

However, she wasn't adorned in her typically extravagant attire.

That's when it hit me. Ah, the 'Class Assignment Exam Episode' was in progress.

Certainly... It was an episode that took place in the northern forest of Aken Island.

An exam designed to ascertain the aptitude of students aspiring to join the Academy's Magic Department. It was conducted a week before the start of the term.

It was the infamous and notably brutal freshman class assignment exam conducted by Professor Glast of the Magic Department.

In the vast northern forest of Aken Island, they would randomly scatter beads endowed with magical properties, tasking the students with locating them.

The test aimed to assess their ability to sense the mana seeping from the beads. After all, the foundation of all magic was the ability to detect mana.

"It's an honor to meet you again, Princess Penia."

Princess Penia's eyes were sharply focused on me, her contempt evident. From where I stood, it was absurd. But then again, just because I prattled on didn't mean she'd take my words at face value.

I swiftly sat upright, offering Princess Penia a respectful greeting.

"I thought you'd been ousted from the school."

"I was expelled from the dormitory."

"I asked what you're doing here."

After a quick survey of the makeshift shelter I had built, the campfire, and the remnants of a fish meal, Princess Penia wore an expression of disbelief.

"Are you still not out of this school?"

"Regrettably, I'm still technically a student."

"You mean Sylvanian Academy hasn't initiated your expulsion process?"

"I don't see why they would. After enduring such humiliation, unable to receive the support of the family, how could I possibly continue here?"

Princess Penia's lips twisted in scorn. Understandably, the idea of a noble who had suffered this level of disgrace and was subject to scandal continuing to study at Sylvanian was hard to fathom.

"If the Academy learns of your current state, they will initiate the expulsion process immediately."

"..."

"I'll have to inform the Academy about this tomorrow. Do you think they'll permit you to stay here?"

My plans of graduating from Sylvanian Academy were already beginning to derail.

I couldn't let that happen. I heaved a deep sigh, quickly beginning to rack my brain.

"If that's what you believe, Your Highness, there's nothing I can do. Indeed, not just Princess Penia, but a majority of the students despise me. The Academy staff probably feels the same."

"If you are aware of that, why don't you leave voluntarily? Wouldn't it be better for you to leave with some dignity rather than endure the humiliation of being expelled?"

"I want to continue attending Sylvanian."

"I wouldn't recommend it."

Princess Penia crossed her arms, looking at me disdainfully.

"Leave. Everyone despises you, and you despise everyone."

"I think you've misunderstood. I don't despise anyone."

"You seem to have forgotten just how arrogant and contemptuous you are. But then again, it's not easy to look at oneself objectively."

"That's not true."

Regardless of what had transpired, I had no choice but to sweet-talk my way out of the situation.

"I'm actually thankful to you, Your Highness."

Princess Penia stared at me with disbelief in her eyes.

CHAPTER 4

The Rosetail Family that I was once part of was nothing short of a collection of villains.

The clan, intoxicated by the prestige of their name, had been infusing their offspring with vanity and a superiority complex for generations.

The integrity of their noble ancestors, who once knew and shared the essence of honor, was lost.

Only a warped sense of entitlement lingered, ghost-like, among those family members occupying key roles within the empire, all puffing themselves up in their positions.

Indeed, there was a hefty secret within the Rosetail lineage.

The patriarch, Krepin Rosetail, was a practitioner of Eternal Life Magic, having brokered a pact with the malevolent deity Mebula from the epoch of myths. This endeavor led to the execution of countless inhumane experiments, sacrificing innumerable lives in the name of research.

His grand scheme would be brought to light about two years later by none other than Taylee, the protagonist of 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', leading to a final showdown and the inevitable downfall of Krepin Rosetail.

Krepin Rosetail, the leader of the Rosetail family, was indeed the end boss in the fourth act of 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman'.

What transpired for the Rosetail family afterwards didn't warrant a question. Weren't all the members of the Rosetail family painted with the same broad strokes of arrogance and pride?

For the gratification of the player, they experienced a downfall so extreme it bordered on tragic.

Those who were party to Krepin Rosetail's plot were executed without exception,

and anyone with even a hint of involvement faced at least imprisonment or some form of punishment.

Considering all this, it was high time to reevaluate my current predicament.

Yes, I might have been hungry, cold, and at a loss about my immediate survival, but hadn't I presciently severed my ties with the Rosetail family?

Summing it up in a single line:

This might actually be for the best.

"You're grateful to me? I find that hard to swallow."

I abruptly stood up. Truth be told, having survived three days in the wilderness, I was far from presentable. That must be why the princess looked so shocked.

Seeing the miscreant who had been parading around as a noble, acting high and mighty until just a few days ago, now in such a sorry state, stirred a mix of feelings - both of satisfaction and pity.

I was tempted to dig deeper into that point, but the Princess Penia I knew would not let trivial emotions sway her judgment. Playing on emotions would likely backfire.

What was the ideal outcome?

The best scenario would be for Princess Penia to be indifferent to whether I continue my studies at the academy.

It wasn't just Princess Penia - all the students of the Sylvanian Academy should turn a blind eye to me. Any unnecessary uproar surrounding the fact that Ed Rosetail hadn't yet been expelled could lead to my downfall.

The academy had every right to expel me at any time. I was on thin ice. Staying under the radar was the best strategy until I was in a position that made the academy think twice before expelling me.

So, being disliked by Princess Penia had no perks whatsoever.

"My future is in your hands, Your Highness. I will simply follow your decision."

I spoke with a calm and composed demeanor.

Making a scene, clinging and pleading for mercy, would only backfire. The more desperate and cornered one appears, the more contemptible and pitiful they seem.

Princess Penia, known as the 'Princess of Mercy', is a character in 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' with a particularly special 'eye' among all the characters.

It's an eye that discerns the capacity and depth of humans.

Since childhood, she has ruled as a princess, growing up while piercing through the flattery and adulation of many, their sugar-coated words, and cunning arguments.

Behind her infinitely merciful demeanor hides the eye of a ruler who can weigh a person's nature in a glance.

I turned my head and looked at the campfire flickering and blazing. The firewood was burning, giving up its life.

I could reignite it using the Ignition spell, but I didn't want to unnecessarily use magic as my body was not yet properly trained in it.

I passed Princess Penia and sat by the fire. I poked at the fire with a stick, gathering the scattered burning logs back to the center.

"Have you been here for three days?"

"I'm doing my best as I'm trying to live."

I had made my decision clear.

The most certain way to avoid attention is to not give any.

Whatever you do to me, I don't care. If I maintain this attitude, she'll probably ignore me as well.

Even though the person in question is the third princess ruling the empire, which is a significant cause for concern, compared to kneeling and crying, this strategy has a higher chance of success.

Don't mind me.

However, this alone is two percent short.

Since she's planning to report me to the academy and get me expelled. I have to compromise on this point.

"Every step taken by royalty is noble. Even a brief walk requires dozens of servants, and a half-day outing needs heavily armed guards, so I've heard."

Bribes and flattery are necessary.

But there's a problem.

I have nothing to give as a bribe, and if I flatter her, I'd appear cheap, and she would quickly look down on me. So, I have no choice but to compromise.

"At this time, when the sun is setting, you, the noble Princess Penia, are walking alone in the dangerous northern forest of Aken Island. There must be an unavoidable reason for this."

When moving around the school, Princess Penia is accompanied by servants.

Of course, in the current situation, she wouldn't be without guards. They would be watching, their hands on their weapons, out of sight. If I make any false move, I would be punished immediately.

"So? If you think you can take advantage of my lack of guards to harbor ill will against me, you will regret it deeply."

That's why I can say this boldly.

I grinned.

"Professor Glast of the magic department has a reputation among us second-year students for his ruthless class assignments. He makes students suffer in innovative ways every year. I suppose you're also undergoing that class assignment, Your Highness."

Unbothered by the princess's presence, I poked at the dying bonfire with a stick,

continuing my explanation in a calm, measured voice.

"You'll find a lake southeast of the forest. In its center, there's a small island made of rocks. A lone pine tree grows there. It's known as the 'Guardian Tree of Merilda'. If you were to check the hollow of that tree, you might stumble upon something worthwhile."

"Come again?"

"Given you'll need to scour the entirety of the forest anyway, a detour to the spot wouldn't hurt."

I felt the burning gaze of Princess Penia on my back. Her eyes were wide and glaring. Her attention was prickling, but I did my best to shrug it off.

"And what's your angle here? Still nursing a grudge, are we?"

"As I've said, I simply wish to continue attending Sylvanian Academy."

The crackling noise of the fire shot up alongside the sparks. I had managed to revive the fire, at last.

"So, in essence... This could be seen as a bribe I'm offering to you, Your Highness."

Finally, I tossed the last stick I'd been holding into the heart of the fire.

"If you refuse... I'll be left with no other options."

And with that, Princess Penia held her piercing gaze on me for a moment longer before she stood up, scoffing at my words as if they were laughable at best.

Well, whatever happens next was up to the princess.

* * *

- 'Unhand me! Do you have any idea who I am?! I'm Ed Rosetail, the second son of the Rosetail family! Get your filthy hands off me, swine! How dare you touch me!'

- 'Taylee? Huh... A dropout like you, of such lowly status, sure knows how to talk.'

- 'Wha? Pri, princess? The Princess of Mercy, Princess Penia? I, I didn't recognize you, I apologize!'

- 'Your Highness! Defending a lowly creature like Taylee will only tarnish your noble and exalted name. Please, I beg you, punish him!'

- 'This... Something's off! It's a trap! It's a trap, I say! That lowlife Taylee plotted against me out of jealousy! Filthy brat! Filthy lowlife!'

'Are they the same person?'

While traversing the forest, Princess Penia brought back the memory of the spectacle she had witnessed during the entrance exam.

She remembered the pathetic sight of the vainglorious noble who had attempted to sabotage Taylee's exam in a bid to expel him, a dropout.

There was no need to utilize her distinct 'insight' to recognize how pitiful and revolting he was. Anyone could tell he was an arrogant and worthless man at first glance.

The sort who groveled before power but turned savage in the face of the weak. He had been disrespectful to Princess Penia herself when she first hid her status.

Such a person shouldn't be allowed to stay in Sylvanian. That was why Princess Penia intervened herself.

Despite being a student, her opinions couldn't be disregarded in the academy. Such was the influence of the royal family.

Three days had passed since she had exposed his misconduct, creating a ripple effect in his family.

'His tone has mellowed considerably'

In all honesty, three days could potentially offer enough time for personal introspection and transformation. Yet, there simply hadn't been enough time to dwell on such matters.

The immediate issue requiring attention was a class assignment exam.

It was an exam orchestrated by Professor Glast, a figure notorious for his brutal methods within the Magic Department. The task was simple: find and retrieve mana orbs.

These orbs were scattered across the expanse of the northern forest. The test demanded students find these orbs and bring them back to the academic building.

Initiated after lunch, the exam continued, even as the sun was on the brink of setting.

Of the fresh-faced 310 students in the Magic Department, an overwhelming majority - nearly 290 - had already returned to the academic building, each having located their mana orbs.

Initially, over half the students had discovered their orbs and had returned within the first hour of the test.

When the sun started to sink low in the sky, only a handful of students were left in the northern forest.

Truth be told, Princess Penia could have effortlessly located a mana orb hours ago. Anyone with even a rudimentary ability to sense mana could have found them without difficulty.

Mana orbs were abundant, hiding between tree leaves, nestled near mounds of dirt, hidden beneath small wooden benches - the list went on.

However, something felt off.

The quantity of mana orbs significantly exceeded the number of students. It seemed as if there were manifold orbs compared to students.

Although this was the first test since enrollment, it was unnervingly straightforward. More so considering it was an exam set by Professor Glast, a man renowned for his grueling grading, it felt suspiciously easy-going.

Surely, there was some concealed intent. That nagging thought remained lodged in her mind.

Many students had assumed it was a 'first come, first served' scenario, leading them to hastily return to the academic building.

Even students who initially scoffed at the idea of it being a 'first come, first served' test eventually gave up as the sun began to dip below the horizon.

Opting for quantity over quality, they returned to the academic building laden with as many orbs as they could gather.

Already, the moon had risen in the evening sky.

Yet Princess Penia had not returned to the academic building.

She was consumed by the belief that this exam held a concealed purpose.

After what seemed like an endless walk, she found herself standing by a lake.

There, she saw the rocky island Ed Rosetail had once spoken of.

A lone pine tree stood in the heart of the lake, basking in the moonlight's mystical aura, the 'Guardian Tree of Merilda', as Ed Rosetail had called it.

"Hmm..."

Princess Penia, deep in thought, rested her chin on her hand. She then focused her mana at her feet and performed 'Water Walking'.

This magic enabled her to walk on the water's surface at the expense of a large amount of mana. It was impractical for combat due to its high mana consumption and short duration.

However, it offered the advantage of crossing water without getting wet.

Walking slowly towards the rocky island, Princess Penia noticed something lodged near the base of the tree.

Could it be a trap set by Ed Rosetail, who was potentially harboring a grudge?

Engaging in such mischief with the 'Princess of Mercy' would lead to dire consequences. Ed Rosetail should have been fully aware of this.

Still, there was no harm in proceeding with caution. Princess Penia meticulously made her way toward the large tree.

"A mana orb? But the color's off..."

An orb, gleaming with a golden hue, was snugly lodged, casting a soft glow.

With a tilt of her head, Princess Penia contemplated,

"Strange design... It emanates a subtle, golden light, but... beyond that, there's nothing..."

She attempted to detect any presence of mana. However, the amount of mana within was so miniscule it was barely perceptible.

"Might it be of value?"

The thought of it fetching a good price if sold crossed her mind, but to Princess Penia, the value of an object wasn't of much significance.

"Regardless... It does appear to be an item of some importance..."

Brushing her platinum tresses aside, she lowered herself, keen on keeping her immaculately maintained hair from grazing the dirt-covered ground.

Crouched down, she studied the orb nestled within the tree, contemplating whether to simply take it.

"That's not an option."

The orb was discovered due to Ed Rosetail sharing its location.

It hadn't been discovered by Princess Penia's own efforts. Thus, her sense of pride would not permit her to take the orb.

Resolute, Princess Penia decided to depart from the lake.

Circumventing a trial through dishonest means was nothing short of shameful. She was well aware of this truth.

CHAPTER 5

[New Creation]

With a makeshift fishing knife, I stripped branches from a wooden stem, fastened silk thread pulled from old fabric, and improvised a hook from a small nail.

Its durability left something to be desired, and the absence of a float made it challenging to detect a nibble quickly.

Crafting Difficulty: ●○○○○

[Crafting completed. Your crafting proficiency has increased.]

I had come to recognize the main drawback of spearfishing - it was incredibly energy-draining.

So, I decided to try my hand at rod fishing and managed to put together a rod. Selecting a suitable wooden stem was straightforward, they were scattered all over the place.

I found a silk-threaded garment among my old clothes, plucked out the thread, twisted it a couple of times, and repurposed it as a fishing line.

To use a tiny nail that was fixing the hinge of my wooden crate, I had to break one crate. Lacking tools like pliers, I was left with no other choice.

As a result, I assembled a rather rough fishing rod. For bait, I decided on earthworms abundant under the stones in the nearby creek's wetlands.

All set, I cast my line into the creek.

There I sat by the creek, idly waiting for a bite.

"Hmm..."

Chin in hand, waiting for a bite, I found it surprisingly enjoyable. A refreshing change

from splashing about the water's edge.

"It would be nice if this works."

Thinking back to my childhood days, running wild in the mountains and fields was pure joy without a worry about going hungry. These thoughts stirred a nostalgic yearning within me.

"Hmm... I hope this isn't a waste of time."

Just sitting there, rod in hand, let my mind wander.

I pondered whether it was wise to have informed Princess Penia about the golden orb's location.

"I'll need to tread more carefully from now on."

Knowing all that will transpire at Sylvanian Academy is my greatest advantage.

But if I act recklessly and become a variable, disrupting the future from unfolding as I know it... then I risk abandoning the advantage I possess.

In the narrative I know, Princess Penia doesn't discover the golden orb.

Following the original tale, 'Lazy Lucy' is the one to uncover the orb's location.

She's the prodigy who never once relinquished her top spot in Magic Class 1, from the class placement exams right up to graduation.

"Well, I didn't have any other immediate solutions."

Regardless, my priority is to prevent Princess Penia from expelling me. Whining, pleading, and emotional appeals were the worst strategies.

The ideal course would be to present an air of mystery and intrigue, making it seem as if expulsion may not be the best course of action.

Adopting an odd stance that seems uncomfortable but not dangerous...

If you were to ask what exactly that means, I wouldn't have a clear answer. It's

simpler than it seems.

* * *

Professor Glast held a notorious reputation amongst his pupils. He was often referred to as 'the skull-faced bastard', a nickname befitting his abrasive personality and skeletal features.

In truth, nicknames for professors weren't uncommon in student circles, yet Glast's stood out. He wasn't just known for his tactlessness, but also his uncanny skeletal resemblance.

"Today, I'm announcing the results from yesterday's class placement exam."

His platform was in Pileus Hall Auditorium, nestled within the bustling, immaculate district reserved for the faculty on the island's southeast. Gathered around him were the new entrants of the magic department.

Glast's face was pallid, his frame gaunt. His grayish-green hair was neatly slicked back, which only accentuated his skull-like features.

"All students who arrived within an hour can safely assume their placement in F class."

This statement set off a murmur throughout the room.

"However, those who showed some forethought by bringing several spheres have potential for improvement. They'll start in E class. Depending on the type of spheres brought, some might even find themselves in D class."

Glast's nonchalant use of 'brats' when referring to his students was undeniably brazen. Regardless of their background – be it nobility, wealth, or even royalty – he treated them all the same.

This was a somewhat unspoken rule at Sylvanian Academy. In the pursuit of knowledge, social standing was often overlooked.

Even though disparities in living conditions and relationships couldn't be eliminated, academic pursuits demanded a fair playing field.

"Only three have made it to A class, guaranteeing them the best treatment and education: Lortel, Lucy, and Ziggs. Of them, Lucy stands at the top. The rest can find their positions on the distributed list. I will not entertain any objections. That concludes it."

The auditorium sprang back into action at his words. Glast, indifferent to the stir, dusted off his robe, ready to step down from the podium.

- 'This is outrageous! Unacceptable!'

- 'The grading criteria are unclear. Was this just assigned randomly?!'

- 'Explain so we can accept this! What was the purpose of this test? What abilities were you assessing?'

A few students voiced their grievances amid the uproar. Glast, seemingly unfazed, stepped back on the podium and cast a voice-amplifying spell.

"Why should I explain the purpose of the test?"

His response left everyone speechless, including Princess Penia.

She perused the list in disbelief. It sorted students into six levels, from F class to A class.

Only three made it to A class, and there were none in B or C classes. The remaining 300 students were squeezed into D, E, and F classes. She, at least, was listed in D class, putting her in the top 10 percent, a fact she struggled to believe.

"If you're keen on taking the advanced classes, prove your worth and rise. That's what you should be focusing on."

This was turning out to be far more ridiculous than she had anticipated.

Feeling a flush of embarrassment, Princess Penia quickly shook off the feeling.

She recalled how the principal had tirelessly warned her even before the entrance ceremony. Once inside the walls of Sylvanian Academy, her royal privileges would be diminished and oftentimes overlooked.

Despite the pomp and prestige associated with being a princess, she had left the emptiness of her royal study to learn magic as an equal at Sylvanian Academy. She was prepared for this level of humiliation.

But acceptance was another matter.

"Still, you could at least make an attempt at justification, Professor Glast."

Her tone wasn't particularly forceful, yet it hushed the simmering whispers among the crowd. Everyone was well-aware of her presence: she was royalty.

Although her royal stature had been momentarily relegated to that of a mere student, her inherent nobility couldn't be easily dismissed.

"Princess Penia. I regret to say, but this is my pedagogical policy."

A frosty stare, a familiar one. It was reminiscent of the confident figures seated beside the emperor—those certain of their own capabilities. This distinct chill was reflected in Professor Glast's gaze.

It was unmistakable to the princess's discerning eyes. It was a feeling she was far too familiar with, so much so that it had become tiresome.

"But... if even Princess Penia insists, let's make this a one-time exception."

His sudden acquiescence was alarmingly familiar.

"However, if I were to provide the explanation, it might be misconstrued as a hastily assembled justification. To avoid that, let's have Lucy Meiril, who I've selected as the top student, explain instead. Lucy?"

Professor Glast called for Lucy, but received no response.

"Lucy? You should be here, Lucy?"

Whispers once again rippled through the crowd as students began searching for the elusive Lucy.

"-Ugh."

At last, a girl seated two seats ahead of Princess Penia stirred.

She looked rather immature. Her witch's hat, obscuring her face, was excessively large, nearly engulfing her up to her shoulders.

Her petite figure was dwarfed by the crategy sleeves of her student robe.

"Were you asleep?"

"Ah,... Yes... I was sleeping..."

Her voice dripped with lethargy, and her droopy eyelids added to her overall weary demeanor.

Her bold admission of dozing off solidified her oddball image.

"Would you like to come up to the podium and discuss the purpose of this exam and its solution?"

Lucy's eyelashes twitched noticeably at this.

She was clearly disinterested.

"Do I... have to do it now?"

A ripple of tension swept through the hall at her words. In front of the notoriously curt Professor Glast, she had just implied 'it's bothersome'.

Yet, those students familiar with the rumors surrounding Professor Glast remained unperturbed.

"That seems to be the case."

"Ugh..."

He was a man of contrasts – a harsh taskmaster for those lacking talent, but a benevolent mentor to the gifted.

That was Professor Glast in a nutshell.

-Groan... Ahhh... Urgh!

She flung her wide-brimmed witch's hat onto an empty chair next to her, stretching her arms and legs in a manner reminiscent of a kitten shaking off sleep.

Her attempt to rise from her seat was as lethargic as a sloth, making even the slow-moving creature seem industrious in comparison.

"If you'd rather not come up to the lectern, just answer from there. You just have to explain how you ended up discovering the golden orb in the 'Guardian Tree of Merilda'."

"Ah, really? Well, that... won't take much time."

Lucy, slumped in her chair as if clinging to it for dear life, began her story nonchalantly.

"The Archmage Gloct posited... the three virtues of an outstanding magician in the pursuit of truth. Mana Sensing, Quick and Precise Judgment, and a Will to Explore. You likely wanted to see if those held true."

Gloct, the archmage whose name graced the pages of every magic history textbook, was renowned for defining these virtues of an exceptional magician.

"Hmm... I just happened to be napping nearby, and when I woke up at dusk... I hastily gathered the mana orbs that were detected in the vicinity."

Her slow, drawling speech was enough to sap the energy from the listeners. Still, Professor Glast waited patiently for Lucy to finish.

"Of course, it seems likely I was the only one who could pinpoint the orb's location."

Her statement, seemingly arrogant at first, was delivered devoid of any pompousness.

It was as if she was stating an unquestionable 'fact'. Like the sun rising in the east or a glass cup shattering when it hits the ground, she elaborated as if it was nothing remarkable.

The spectators were already feeling a sense of amazement at Lucy's nonchalant

explanation while battling sleepiness.

She was undeniably a genius.

It couldn't be reasoned or explained logically. But those blessed with some inherent gift always radiated a unique aura that was hard to miss.

CHAPTER 6

The Sylvanian Academy's royal dormitory occupied a prime location on Aken Island's western shores, hugging the line of cliffs closest to the coast.

It was a good distance from the living quarters in the southwest, where a variety of amenities and modest commercial facilities were nestled.

While students of the academy enjoyed equal academic privileges, it was understood that the royal family, in their everyday life and accommodations, would experience a different standard.

Consequently, the royal dormitory had been constructed exclusively for Princess Penia.

The sprawling mansion was set on a sizeable piece of land. The garden, a private sanctuary, was off-limits to regular students - a clear indicator of the preferential treatment accorded to the princess. It went without saying.

"Life here certainly diverges from my experiences at the faculty dormitory."

As the sun was setting, an expansive view of the ocean unfurled outside the window.

The gentle murmur of the waves washed over the window sill, briefly filling Princess Penia's sizable private room before fading into silence.

Seated at her desk, Princess Penia gazed at the reddening sky beyond the window bars. The personal study desk, adorned with exquisite patterns on premium wood, was even larger than Principal Obel's office desk.

Such was the royal way of life, nothing short of opulent.

It was a stark contrast to being just another student at the faculty dormitory.

Princess Penia, her platinum hair neatly brushed over her left shoulder, was about to delve into textbooks on magical history and elemental studies, but soon found herself setting her pen down.

"..."

She became lost in deep contemplation.

The golden orb Lucy Mayril had alluded to during the class assignment announcement — it was unquestionably the same golden orb Princess Penia had discovered in the Guardian Tree of Merilda.

At that moment, the realization hit Princess Penia.

The golden orb, unusual in appearance but otherwise unremarkable, contained an almost negligible amount of mana.

In the end, Princess Penia's judgment had been correct.

The orb was merely an odd-looking sphere, containing only a minor amount of mana.

However, the mere fact that it contained 'a minor amount of mana' was the crux of the matter.

- 'You've done well, Miss Lucy.'

As defined by Archmage Gloct, an archmage in pursuit of truth required three vital qualities.

Mana Sensing,

Swift and precise judgment,

The will to explore.

Students who hastily wrote the exam off as a first-come-first-serve scenario were penalized under 'swift and precise judgment'.

Those who didn't bother to decipher the test's intent and turned back prematurely suffered deductions under 'the will to explore'.

And the deciding factor for top students, the 'mana sensing' category, was judged based on the inherent mana in the orb itself.

The lesser the inherent mana in the orb, the more challenging it was to detect.

Looking back, each mana orb scattered across the field contained different amounts of mana. The discrepancies were so slight, it would've been difficult to discern unless fully concentrated.

The ability to identify orbs with lesser inherent mana would fetch additional points in the 'mana sensing' category.

And the golden orb that Lucy Mayril casually found after waking from her nap...

- 'The Guardian Tree of Merilda is the oldest tree even in the northern forest. It is a tree under the protection of the high wind spirit Merilda, always surrounded by abundant mana.'

Professor Glast, with his unique skull-like face, leaned forward on the podium as he spoke.

- 'Amidst the overflowing presence of mana, a mana orb filled with only the minutest amount of mana was placed. The location was even the middle of the lake on a rocky island, a place that could only be found by a student who sensed that mana.'

There is no end to the subtlety of mana response.

Just as the scent of a person becomes indistinguishable when mixed with a crowd, the unique mana also becomes hard to notice when mixed and buried.

Lucy Mayril is a human who is innately gifted in sensing such subtle mana responses.

Not only that, she seemed to have dozed off in sleep as if she didn't know such a thing... but in fact, she was reading Professor Glast's intentions.

The fact that she returned to the faculty building with only that golden orb, neither more nor less, is proof of that.

Lucy Mayril was already at the top of this test.

'Yes, I can understand that... '

Princess Penia had heard the name Lucy Mayril for the first time. But among her

classmates, she was already somewhat famous.

'Lazy Lucy'.

It was often seen that she was taking a nap while curled up on various benches, tree stumps, or in a grassy field as she wandered around the campus.

Though the background of her growth was unknown, there was a rumor that she was a genius among geniuses, born with an extreme sense of mana.

It was indeed an enviable talent, but innate abilities are inherently unfair, so it was understandable.

But there was one thing that she couldn't accept.

There was one more person who knew the whereabouts of that orb.

-That tree is the Guardian Tree of Merilda. It would be good to examine the hollow of that tree, you will have a good harvest.

Ed Rosetail.

Princess Penia fell into deep thought.

Initially, Ed Rosetail knew the location of the golden orb. It couldn't be explained by saying he found it by chance.

In contrast with the powerful mana spewing from the Guardian Tree of Merilda, the orb that was hidden in its crevice contained really a minor level of mana.

The location was in the very center of the rocky island in the lake. It was definitely not a place that could be found by walking around casually.

The conclusion drawn is only one. He was born with a sensitivity similar to Lucy Mayril.

-Let me go! Don't you know who I am?! I'm Ed Rosetail, the second son of the Rosetail family! Get your dirty hands off me, you pigs! Where are you touching?!

-Do you think I would stoop so low as to bully a dirty failed student like that Taylee

or whatever? Let me go! What do you dirty and ignorant commoners know to blabber about?!

-Huh? Y-you're, the Princess? Princess Penia, the Princess of Mercy? I-I didn't realize, my apologies!

-I'm sorry, Princess! I prostrate myself in penance! Please! Show mercy just this once!

-Princess! Defending a bastard like Taylee could tarnish your esteemed and noble reputation. Please, I urge you to mete out just punishment!

"...That's impossible."

Princess Penia had dismissed the thought with a shake of her head.

Ever since her toddling years, she had a knack for evaluating people.

The revolting spectacle Ed Rosetail put on during the entrance exam was a desperate tantrum, anyone could tell he was a cornered animal.

From what she'd heard, Ed Rosetail's magical prowess was entirely unremarkable. It was baffling how he managed to develop such arrogance despite his middling academic performance.

Likely, the toxic indoctrination of elitism endemic to the Rosetail Family was to blame.

More importantly, if his talent was that remarkable, Professor Glast wouldn't have overlooked it.

Professor Glast was notorious for his knack for uncovering hidden talents and meticulously cultivating them. His manic obsession with talent was his defining characteristic.

It was unlikely that he would've overlooked such potential.

Still, an unsettling feeling lingered in a corner of Princess Penia's heart.

'Is he really the same person...?'

Something felt unresolved, not quite right. Above all, the apathetic demeanor of the Ed Rosetail she encountered in the forest.

Just making eye contact with Princess Penia had him trembling, his reverence for authority wasn't concealed, revealing his petty nature in the face of strength.

None of that was present now. Initially, she thought he was posturing, but she observed actions that quickly dispelled that notion.

Ed Rosetail seemed more concerned about the dying embers of the bonfire he had carefully nurtured than earning the Princess's ire.

Throughout their conversation by the bonfire, he didn't spare a single glance in her direction.

An inexplicable unease.

The nagging suspicion that he might not be the same person at all.

Yet, his demeanor and appearance were unmistakably those of the haughty noble Ed Rosetail she'd observed at the entrance exam.

'Was there some kind of turning point?'

The most likely catalyst would've been his expulsion.

However, it was undeniably strange to consider by common reasoning.

Princess Penia was primarily responsible for Ed Rosetail's expulsion.

He should've responded with resentment or pleas for forgiveness. If he had reacted in such a way, Princess Penia wouldn't have felt this strange sense of unease.

However, the transformed Ed Rosetail's gaze was devoid of such negative emotions.

The look in his eyes when he saw Princess Penia.

Indifference. Apathy. Resignation.

It even conveyed a sort of nonchalance.

The fact that such sentiments were etched into the eyes of a disgraced noble... Reflecting upon it, it seemed utterly surreal.

"Could it be... was the shock of the scandal not as impactful as we thought...?"

Having spoken these words, Princess Penia shook her head again. This was a man who had lived all his life within the fold of the Rosetail Family.

No matter how calm and composed one might be, being expelled from the cradle you've occupied all your life would not be anything but shocking.

"Hmm..."

Brushing her hand across the cover of the Elementology book before her, Princess Penia lost herself in thought.

The nature of the Rosetail Family.

The head of the Rosetail Family, Krepin Rosetail, whom she had met at a royal banquet, sprang to mind.

He was an impressive nobleman, with a neat, dashing appearance and a benevolent smile.

However, the then younger Princess Penia saw through him.

She was gifted with an unusual 'insight'—an instinct, if you will, a divine gift for sizing up people and gauging their depths. That instinct was ringing loud and clear.

There was a fat, nasty serpent living inside the beneficent Krepin Rosetail, the ruler of one of the most distinguished noble houses on the continent. It was something she couldn't quite put into words, but it was definitely there.

There was something hidden in the darkness behind Krepin Rosetail, who portrayed himself as an exemplar of benevolent leadership...

She had definitely captured glimpses of Krepin Rosetail's darker side in the royal council chamber from time to time.

He was a villain disguised as a virtuous ruler. She was convinced of that a long time

ago.

According to the private forces she had secretly dispatched to investigate, there seemed to be a darkness in the Rosetail Family that no one knew about.

Rumors of items occasionally missing from the annual royal report, then being filled in late.

Rumors of servants disappearing after entering the family mansion from time to time.

Rumors that head of the family, Krepin Rosetail, was studying books about ancient demons.

There was a suspicious feeling that something was amiss.

However, the problem was the lack of substantial evidence.

"..."

Princess Penia's hand, which had been stroking the spine of the book, stopped.

When it came to her intuitive ability to assess people, she had never been wrong in her life.

No matter how exceptional the being in question might be, if she acted according to her instincts, she was almost always right.

So, let's say, hypothetically, the darkness of the Rosetail Family that her instinct had signaled had yet to fully reveal itself.

What if Ed Rosetail had been trying to escape from this dark Rosetail Family?

If so, that would explain why he could maintain such a nonchalant face despite being embroiled in scandal.

He was simply trying to naturally shake off the darkness of the Rosetail Family.

However, it's not so easy to shed noble blood. If he was naturally pushed away, he would have to leave a corresponding 'black mark'.

"..."

Princess Penia's face was growing stiffer by the minute.

Above all, if this were true...

"Back off! Don't you recognize me?! I am Ed Rosetail, the second son of the Rosetail Family! Remove your filthy hands, you pigs! Who gave you permission to touch me!"

"Do you truly think I'd go out of my way to disparage a worthless failure like Taylee or whoever? Back off! What could these uneducated, dirty commoners possibly know, running their mouths like they're privy to anything!"

The stark ugliness that revealed the dregs of human nature... it all turned out to be nothing but a farce.

Even the divine gift of intuition failed to perceive it, implying there was a deeper motive at play.

It hinted at a strategist who wouldn't shy away from using even a princess as a pawn for his cunning plans.

"All of that... was an act...?"

The princess shook her head almost instantly. That couldn't possibly be.

Yet, the chasm between the image of Ed Rosetail she had witnessed in the forest and her prior knowledge was a relentless torment for Princess Penia's heart.

What if everything was nothing more than a performance.

What if he held some knowledge about the darkness enveloping the Rosetail Family.

What if he used the princess as a means to extricate himself from that impending darkness.

What if all of this was masterminded by him.

What if...

-Thud.

"It seems I'm exhausted."

Accompanied by the scraping sound of a chair, the princess rose.

She moved to the window, welcoming the cool sea breeze. Her platinum hair whirled beautifully in the wind.

It was a sensation that cooled her heated mind.

"Between chasing admission deadlines and academics, I barely have the time to concern myself with state affairs."

Savor the joy of learning to your heart's content. These words of encouragement from the king resonated with Princess Penia as she embarked on her journey.

Having already strayed somewhat from the royal etiquette and ventured into the world of academics, it was time to leave such weighty thoughts behind, wasn't it?

After all, her life had been consumed by political discussions, power dynamics, the well-being of her people, and international politics. It was about time she took a breather.

Perhaps she was already fatigued.

Maybe she was just overestimating Ed Rosetail.

Not everyone wears a multitude of deceptive masks to conceal their true intentions.

Perhaps due to a life spent navigating the narrow paths amidst nobles and the wealthy, she had developed a habit of scrutinizing others' intentions.

Though her body was still that of a naive girl yet to undergo the coming-of-age ceremony, her heart felt like it had aged prematurely.

Princess Penia was too young for such burdens. Wasn't it the time to engage in lighter and freer discussions, to focus more on self-growth rather than delving into others' psyche?

Sighing deeply as she braced against the wind, the princess mused.

"It feels like I've grown old..."

She then shifted her gaze to the mirror hanging by the window. The mirror reflected the princess, her beautifully maintained platinum hair shimmering, clad in light sleepwear.

With both hands, she tried various hairstyles - lifting and twisting her hair, parting it on both sides and tying it up, and even braiding it to one side.

Then... she sighed heavily, her fingers drifting through her loose hair.

"It's not that I'm disinterested in primping, but I can't understand why it makes me feel so self-conscious."

Authority, she realized, was as much a shackle as it was a boon. Standing as the epitome of such power, she was often overwhelmed by the resultant fatigue.

Still, she had to endure. To some, her position as a princess may have appeared a blessing.

"I suppose I've developed a bad habit of thinking too deeply... of making everything more complicated than it needs to be."

Princess Penia pondered, the wind caressing her face. She was thinking about Ed Rosetail.

Assuming he was aware of the darkness that loomed over the Rosetail Family, and had deliberately incited a scandal to sever ties with it...

That assumption seemed too far-fetched.

Although she could concoct a plausible narrative by stitching together various premises, it still felt like a stretch.

His demeanor had inexplicably shifted a full 180 degrees...

"Maybe the scandal shook him to the point where he lost his senses."

He had located the golden orb before Lucy Mayril and reported its position to Princess Penia...

"That... I don't know... He might've just stumbled upon it."

On the other hand, she felt she was being too opportunist. Even though Princess Penia was aware of this, it somehow lifted her spirits.

"Even during our initial conversation, I didn't sense any ill intent..."

As she mulled over this, Princess Penia's movements stilled once again.

The dialogue they had shared in the northern forest.

She had forgotten it, so smoothly had it woven into the fabric of their interaction.

As soon as she saw his face, Princess Penia launched into her tirade. She urged him to leave the school immediately.

She pointed out that everyone at the school despised him. She asked if he didn't despise the school as well.

She wondered aloud if he bore any resentment towards her, the instigator of the scandal.

And how had Ed Rosetail responded?

With an expression of utter conviction, he had looked Princess Penia straight in the eyes and uttered those unfathomable words - 'In fact, I find myself grateful to you, Your Highness'.

She hadn't been able to question the underlying meaning of his words, given the absurdity of the situation.

What on earth was he grateful for?

To Ed Rosetail, Princess Penia was akin to a foe, a contributor to his downfall.

What could he possibly be thankful for in facing such an adversary?

Was he implying that being banished from his family was a cause for gratitude?

"....."

Slowly, Princess Penia's movements grew scarce.

-Crack, crack.

The intermittent crackling of the campfire echoed in her ears. It was a hallucination.

The princess hadn't seen much.

Only the wide back of a boy, busily gathering firewood with a stick and carelessly kindling a fire.

* * *

-Swish!

"Got another one!!!"

It was his seventh catch.

The hastily constructed fishing rod had proved surprisingly effective. He had already caught seven bluegill-like freshwater fish.

With this amount, he was past the point of merely staving off hunger - he could actually feast.

Having been perpetually famished, for the first time since his arrival in this wretched world, he might finally experience the sensation of 'satiety'.

Overwhelmed with satisfaction, his thumb shot up almost instinctively.

"They're really biting today!!!!"

CHAPTER 7

The symphony of insects in the grass created a soothing soundtrack to the night.

Nestled in the northern part of the forest, a stream bathed in moonlight emanated a unique aura, pacifying anyone in its vicinity.

There I was, huddled in front of a flickering campfire, skillfully preparing fish for my meal.

The past three days had been a whirlwind of survival activities, a makeshift lifestyle I had been thrust into.

The haphazardly erected shelter I had initially constructed now appeared reasonably secure and comfortable.

The makeshift refuge, hastily cobbled together from wood, fabric, and leaves, had significantly improved after reinforcing it with clay sourced from the riverbank.

The sturdier seams between the supports and a well-sealed roof no longer raised concerns about potential leakage in case of rainfall.

However, the supports, straining under the weight of the clay, were due for further reinforcement. Consequently, the shelter had expanded quite a bit.

What about my provisions, you ask?

In the river's lower reaches leading to the coastline, I chanced upon rock salt. Crushing the scattered fragments, I was able to repurpose it as table salt.

Moreover, I found a large flat stone from the riverbank, a perfect makeshift griddle for my cooking.

"I guess I'm getting the hang of this."

Despite my hastily crafted fishing rod, catching sizable fish was an unattainable feat. Most of the time, I managed to hook only minnows, but occasionally I got lucky with

a decent bluegill.

I had managed to hone my fish preparation skills quite a bit.

I found myself reaching for the dagger, now an integral part of my life and meals, slicing open the belly of the fish and removing its entrails.

Next, I scraped off the prominent scales from the fish's surface with the blade, made deliberate incisions for the salt to permeate better, sprinkled salt, and proceeded to grill it over the stone slab.

[A new dish has been perfected]

Grilled Bluegill with Salt: Skillfully prepared bluegill from the riverbank, grilled to perfection with a sprinkle of salt. Simple, yet brilliantly encapsulating the flavor of the ingredients.

Cooking Level: ●○○○○ [Your cooking expertise has leveled up.]

This marked a new milestone.

This message never appeared when I simply caught fish and grilled them without a care.

But once I took the time to properly prepare the ingredients, season them, and cook them correctly, I noticed a remarkable improvement in my cooking expertise.

All my life skills were collectively contributing to my progress, marking frequent level-ups.

I decided to reassess my status, pulling out the ceremonial mirror, glancing at my reflection, and checking the information window again.

[Name: Ed Rosetail]

Gender: Male

Age: 17

School Year: 2nd

Race: Human

Achievements: None

Vitality: 3

Intelligence: 4

Dexterity: 8

Willpower: 7

Luck: 6

Detailed Combat Ability>>

Detailed Magic Ability>>

Detailed Life Ability>>

Detailed Alchemy Ability>>

To my surprise, my Dexterity had increased from 7 to 8.

In the game of 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', attaining proficiency in an array of life skills is of paramount importance.

Skills like cooking, construction, carpentry, brewing, and many other production skills allow you not only to create an array of useful items but also significantly impact your actual combat abilities.

Particularly, the Dexterity attribute is closely tied to intricate sensory abilities, governing your ability to discern minute flows of power or movement.

Although it has little to do with magic, it can bring meaningful differences in swordsmanship, archery, or alchemy.

I wasn't quite certain when my abilities had increased, but the benefit of having the Dexterity level increase by one was monumental.

Increasing a stat became progressively harder the higher it was. Even though boosting a level from 3-4 to 7-8 might not have taken much time, once the specs surpassed 20, it wasn't unusual to complete epic quests for a single point increase.

'Most skills related to life were closely linked to the Dexterity stat'

Combat Abilities were driven by Vitality, Dexterity, and Willpower. Magic Abilities depended on Intelligence, Willpower, and Luck. Life Abilities hinged on Dexterity and Willpower. Alchemy Abilities were ruled by Intelligence and Luck.

It might've seemed excessively intricate, but the core idea was that different stats influenced each type of ability.

I grabbed a piece of fish and tossed it into my mouth. The seasoning had soaked in perfectly, making it quite flavorful.

I downed the water I had fetched from the creek, then slumped onto a large rock that served as my chair.

"There's still so much left to do..."

The shelter, built initially from logs, was uncomfortable at first, but it gradually felt more like home.

My clothes were plentiful for now. As for food, I was subsisting on fish I had caught and fruits I gathered from the forest. My living conditions weren't ideal, but they were manageable and subject to improvement.

"I need a drying rack to wash clothes, but I suppose I could just make one... I also need to identify edible plants to diversify my meals... The Ophelis Hall library should have relevant books, right? I would like to try hunting, not just relying on fishing and gathering."

Yesterday, while wandering through the forest, I had spotted a wild boar. I also saw a fair number of other critters, such as rabbits and squirrels.

Since Sylvanian Academy was located on Aken Island, there had been a massive monster-eradication effort. Dangerous beasts threatening human life were seldom seen, but the island was home to many animals naturally belonging to the wilderness.

Hunting was not just an option, it was a necessity. Not only for meat but if I managed to collect animal fat, the quality of my dishes would undoubtedly improve.

"Now that I think about it, I could use some cooking tools..."

The ceremonial utensils used for Academy events were all I had at the moment. The ceremonial dagger, the ceremonial iron bowl, the ceremonial mirror. All were supposed to be kept pristine, but at this point, I didn't have the leisure to fuss over such decorum.

The ceremonial dagger had seen its share of abuse, and the bowl and mirror were far from clean. It was an unavoidable situation.

"A proper pot, a good kitchen knife, a ladle, a dish to serve the food in... these would be a real convenience..."

I began to list various necessities on the ground with a stick. I couldn't leave Aken Island right now, and I didn't have any money, but these were the things I really wanted to acquire if I somehow came across some money.

"There's still a pile of things to do... Only three days left until the start of the school year... Sigh..."

I drew a deep breath and stretched my limbs.

Despite the odds, I'd managed to cobble together something resembling a livable environment.

The makeshift shelter I'd hustled to build over the past week had begun to take on the appearance of a 'camp'.

My greatest investment of time and effort was the wooden shelter.

I had circled small stones around a campfire to regulate its burn effectively.

A large, flat stone replaced a traditional griddle over the fire.

Beside it, my personal effects from Ophelis Hall were neatly arranged, with the array of handmade tools I'd crafted each sorted separately.

"So, today... I think I'll try my hand at creating a bow using the silk thread."

Among the items I'd lugged here, a sturdy fabric had been a considerable asset. It felt almost too luxurious to dismantle, and as I unraveled the threads, I felt a pang of regret.

Yet, the silk threads served multiple purposes. I used them to craft fishing lines and to secure the fabric forming the shelter's roof.

The thread was high-quality and durable. If I twisted it tightly, it would make an adequate bowstring. I had already spotted a tree in the forest of a suitable size to form the bow's backbone.

Mastering the bow would provide a significant advantage.

Moreover, archery harmonized well with both magical abilities and lifestyle manufacturing skills.

If I could customize the arrows or enchant them with magic, their power would increase dramatically.

If I could accumulate proficiency with these auxiliary weapons now, it would have a direct impact on my future performance enhancement.

Experience taught me that attempting to master something in a rush, when the time was critical, would result in a lower proficiency level compared to other specialized skills. It would throw the balance off-kilter.

No matter how busy, it's best to have everything in order. Always prepared, as they say.

"It seems like tonight is going to be another long one."

Flexing my shoulders, I braced myself to plunge back into the quagmire of crafting. Bedtime would be delayed again tonight.

* * *

Dean McDowell stroked his mustache, sporting a satisfied grin. It had been quite some time since he'd smiled this way.

The deanship of the Sylvanian Academy's magic department was an excessively arduous and exhausting role for a man of his mild temperament.

The students of the magic department were an eccentric lot, and the professors too had rather strong egos. After years of mediating among them, his once lustrous black hair had given way to pure white.

In comparison to the deans of the combat and alchemy departments, his job seemed unnecessarily strenuous.

However, there were times when he felt a sense of reward.

He couldn't suppress a grin as he glanced over the class assignments of the first-year students at Sylvanian.

This year's roster of first-year magic department students was like striking gold.

The raw talent from an array of newbies made even the seasoned McDowell's heart flutter.

To start with, Professor Glast had allocated three students to Class A, an auspicious sign.

Even the highest-ranking professors were in awe of Professor Glast, who had taken under his wing not one, but three students. This was an unprecedented event.

'Ziggs of the Northern Plains' - a talent awakened even in the harsh environment of the northern grasslands.

The only daughter of Elte Keherun, the 'Golden King' who leads the Elte Trade Association, the continent's top magnate - 'Lortel, the Golden Daughter'.

And finally, there was 'Lazy Lucy'. A girl of mysterious origins, her profound talent had earned her the rare admiration of Professor Glast.

Dean McDowell was particularly taken aback by Professor Glast's high praise of Lucy Mayril.

'-She possesses the innate qualities of a legendary sorceress who could redefine the course of magical history. I am humbled to be her instructor.'

For a man like Professor Glast, known for his icy indifference toward even the most prodigious magic prodigies, this was high praise indeed. Nobody could predict the extent of Lucy's potential.

In comparison to the previous year, this year's freshman class was exceptional.

Among last year's crop, few made such an impact. Only Yenika, who managed to forge a bond with a high-ranking spirit, had stood out.

The average scores were dwindling, and a scandal involving a freshman cheating on their entrance exam had sent shockwaves through the academy. It was a year that might be labeled as the worst in history.

"Perhaps last year was merely a prelude to the brilliance of this year."

He mused, preparing to sign off on his report.

Suddenly, his secretary interrupted him with a knock. He had warned her not to let anyone into his office outside of scheduled appointments during office hours, yet there she was.

McDowell was about to chide her when the door opened. Standing there was Cler, the captain of Princess Penia's royal guard, with Princess Penia herself in tow, resplendent in a soft purple dress.

Caught off guard, McDowell began to bow his head in deference, before catching himself. This was the professor's building of Sylvanian. Here, the virtue of learning superseded nobility.

Outside of these walls, he would be just another commoner, but here he stood as Princess Penia's teacher.

He couldn't afford to treat her lightly, but he also needed to maintain his role as an educator. This was the principle of the founder of Sylvanian.

With this in mind, he offered her a measured nod.

"To what do I owe the pleasure of this unexpected visit, Princess?"

"My apologies for my abrupt arrival, Dean McDowell."

Princess Penia responded gracefully, taking a seat on the office's visitor's sofa.

"I have something important to discuss. Would that be alright?"

Princess Penia was known for her humility, often putting others before her royal status. McDowell was well aware of this fact.

But what could be so urgent that she would impose on him in his own office?

Regardless, he had little choice but to hear her out.

CHAPTER 8

"Well... what to do with this..."

In the southeast quadrant of the North Woods lay a petite lake. In the midst of it, upon an island of rock, was the 'Guardian Tree of Merilda'.

Lost in thought, I found Yenika, a spirit medium, sitting propped against that tree, focusing her mind.

* * *

The first day of school was on the horizon.

There was a whole heap of stuff to prepare for returning to school. For starters, I had to deal with my raggedy appearance.

Living wildly for ten days had made me look every bit as a caveman. Sure, I bathed daily in a brook, but my rapidly grown beard still needed a good shave.

Shaving was a nerve-wracking affair, with a razor blade I fashioned from a hinge yanked from the wooden crate. The blade was rusty, and I had fears about tetanus or other nasty infections.

But maintaining dignity was fundamental if I was to continue my studies at Sylvanian Academy without drawing attention. My objective was to graduate as unobtrusively as possible.

Being spotted by the academy staff because of my scruffy look would be an unnecessary complication.

I had to figure out a way to procure a clean razor blade.

Once I tidied myself up and got done with the rest of my back-to-school preparations, I picked up my bow.

----- [Detailed Combat Ability]

Grade: Combat Novice

Specialization: Bow Proficiency Lv1

Without a second thought, I selected the bow as my specialization in combat ability.

The 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' game offered four ability categories: Combat, Magic, Life, and Alchemy.

These categories were combined in pairs to determine your professional job within the game.

Choose combat and magic, and you're a Magic Swordsman, or Battlemage.

Combine magic and alchemy, and you become an Alchemist, or Spirit Medium.

Sure, if you were just a player who could pick and choose at will, there'd be room for consideration. But in my case, the two ability categories I had to fuse were set in stone.

Survival hinged on honing my Life Skills, and given my incarnation as a magic student, I couldn't avoid Magic training.

So, doubling down on Magic and Life Skills wasn't a choice, but a requirement.

While their compatibility wasn't particularly strong, the path to Magic Engineering or Enchanting remained open.

As I mentioned before, there's no weapon that matches this combo better than the bow.

With stamina, strength, and reflexes on the lower side, close combat was a tough nut to crack. The most desirable battle configuration would be to assault the enemy unilaterally from a distance...

And, if my Life Skill proficiency leveled up enough to craft high-quality arrows, I could potentially imbue those arrows with spirit formulas or magic formulas.

That being the case, it would be ideal to specialize in Archery for combat ability and Spirit Magic for alchemy ability.

"Spirit Magic..."

Yet, there was an inherent ability required for Spirit Magic – the aptitude to respond to spirits.

The ability to connect with spirits, to commune and resonate with them, had a certain limit that no amount of training could surpass.

This was why, historically, all of the great spirit mediums had been born with an innate gift for communing with the spirits.

"If it's not in the cards, there's not much I can do... but it's hard not to feel disappointed..."

Alchemy skills, from the get-go, weren't designed for specialization. Herbalism was about as specialized as it got...

That said, I couldn't simply force myself to develop Spirit Sense, so I decided I would have to explore other options if the disappointment became too much to bear.

"Regardless, I need to test the bow I spent all night making."

Creating a bow with a two-step difficulty level had been a thrilling accomplishment, but whether it would prove practical in use was another question altogether.

My so-called arrows were merely sharpened hinges tied to branches. I had exhausted my entire supply of sharp hinges to create four arrows, and to be honest, I was skeptical about their killing power.

They would be of little use against large beasts like wild boars, but they might just prove effective against smaller creatures such as squirrels or rabbits.

So, with my new bow slung over my shoulder, I set off to hunt.

And two hours later, with the bodies of two squirrels as my trophies, I stumbled upon Yenika at the 'Guardian Tree of Merilda.'

Yenika, the current valedictorian of the sophomore class at Sylvanian Academy, was a prodigiously talented spirit medium who, at an extraordinarily young age, had made a contract with a high-ranking fire spirit named Tarkan.

Yet later, she would fall under the dominion of Velosper, a high-ranking dark spirit. She seized the entire student council building and summoned Glaskan, the right hand of the highest-ranking dark spirit.

She was infamous in 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', for she was the final boss of Act 1.

* * *

I held no lofty ambitions. My policy was simple—I just wanted to graduate.

That's not to say I was devoid of romanticism.

It wasn't that I never felt the urge to be the protagonist of this world, to receive everyone's praise, to stride down the path of a glorious hero.

However, the path tread by a hero is often strewn with thorns.

Heroes earn their applause for a reason. It's because they have the grit to traverse a bloody, thorny path as if it were a bed of roses.

The same was true for this world's protagonist, 'Taylee', whose whereabouts were still unknown.

Having played as Taylee countless times, I knew all too well.

The grand saga of five acts, 43 chapters, the trials that protagonist Taylee had to endure, were insurmountable to an ordinary mind.

Beyond the lively and romantic life at the academy awaited endless suffering, death, and overwhelming adversaries.

In particular, the scale of the trials dramatically escalates during the final semester, ceaselessly threatening and pressuring Taylee.

While the euphoria and sense of victory that came with overcoming these trials would undoubtedly be sweet, I had no desire to endure such countless trials.

More importantly, the rewards that awaited after bearing such severe trials were not all that great.

Honor and glory. These were worthy rewards, but they weren't handed out freely. In fact, the sacrifices required along the way were numerous and substantial.

Despite knowing that the road ahead was a path of thorns, I wouldn't be foolish enough to walk straight into it.

So, I reached a decision.

No matter what unfolded, I'd stick to the 'script'.

I decided to stick to the 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' scenario that I knew inside and out. Taylee, hardened by countless trials and tests, would handle all the crises himself.

My role was simple. Applaud him, keep my interests at heart, and focus on graduation.

After all, I was one year ahead of Taylee.

The 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' scenario started to heat up around Taylee's final year, just before graduation. That marked the climax of the scenario.

Various outside factions stirred, threatening the students. The atmosphere turned grave, and an onslaught of trials battered the students.

All I needed to do was graduate before that turbulent season hit.

The strategy was perfect—savor the honey, leave the hard parts to the protagonist, and embark on a journey for my own life.

Sounds pretty good, doesn't it?

So, there was this situation.

One of the most pivotal characters in the scenario, destined to be one of Taylee's first trials: Yenika Faelover.

I had no reason to get involved, I would just stick to my path.

That was the sensible course of action.

Just as I settled on that decision and was about to stand up.

"Oh my, you must be the 'fun friend' Merilda mentioned."

Yenika, with her eyes snapping open, spoke to me.

Life, as it turns out, seldom runs smoothly.

* * *

"This forest is entirely under Merilda's control. She's a high-ranking spirit, but boy, does she love to chatter."

The girl, casually naming the ancient high-ranking wind spirit who had guarded this forest before the Sylvanian Academy was even established.

She had voluminous pink hair that she brushed away neatly, her hair on both sides braided, giving off a warm impression.

Clad in a standard Sylvanian Academy uniform—a red cloak and a teal skirt—she nonetheless had a fluffy shawl wrapped around her shoulders, as if she were cold.

Several magic books were spread around the tree where she was seated, a clear sign she had been reading amidst the forest.

"Just returned to the dorm after the break, and she's full of stories... Seems high-ranking spirits get lonely without a conversation partner. I can't imagine how she survived the holidays with the boredom."

She chuckled and casually tossed out chatter, but all I felt was a sense of dread.

I was hoping to avoid involvement, if at all possible.

While it made sense for me to act regarding Princess Penia's matter—since it directly tied to my circumstances—this situation was an entirely different beast.

"It looks like loneliness is universal when you don't have someone to talk to."

Her radiant smile and her gentle, kind aura made her the culprit destined to shock the players early in the game.

She'd been a dependable and comforting senior in her second year.

Yet, there she was, bearing the Curse Seal of Glaskan, having commandeered the student council building.

She was an entity ruthlessly battering the players who were only just acclimating to the laws of this realm.

Essentially, she became the catalyst for diving into the narrative. I found myself swearing under my breath.

So, why was she conversing with me?

She offered an explanation herself.

"Do you make your home in this forest? Since that disturbance?"

"Did the forest's guardian tell you?"

"Merilda can be quite nosy. She's fond of this forest."

Her smile was as radiant as blooming flowers. She appeared like someone who'd brush off the world's troubles.

From my perspective, her behavior was a stark contrast to her audacious takeover of the student council building.

"You claim to she loves this forest, yet, she's ignoring an unwelcome visitor who's taken up residence here?"

"Hmm..."

I found myself overly concerned about the two squirrel carcasses hanging behind me. A good number of trees had been felled.

"Don't dwell on such trivialities~. It's natural for forest creatures to prey on each other. Do you think Merilda would be upset over such trifles?"

"So the massive, seemingly clumsy wolf has a tender heart after all."

"Surprising, isn't it? Ahaha."

Merilda, the forest's protector, was a high-ranking wind spirit shaped like a huge wolf. Her appearances before humans were rare, but I remember she was more lenient than expected.

It wasn't peculiar that she allowed me to set up camp, to hunt, and to gather so far.

"You seem different. Hmm... Last semester, Ed, you... We didn't converse much, but you were... You seemed more energetic! You've turned rather serious. A change of image, perhaps?"

"More or less."

"Ahaha. I'm in the same boat. The maid in Ophelis Hall braided my hair on both sides. How do I look? More girlish?"

Her query fell on deaf ears as I couldn't muster any compliments.

I wanted to laud her sociability, for maintaining pleasant discourse even with the notoriously ill-fated Ed Rosetail. But knowing her future, I couldn't humor her with laughter.

Regardless, if I wished to maintain some distance, that was an easy task.

No matter how sociable a person, I knew a magic-like phrase that would make them swallow their saliva and cast a suspicious gaze.

"Yenika. Since we met on the eve of the school opening, it seems like fate. Might I ask a favor?"

"A favor?"

"Money has been a bit tight lately, so I'm looking for someone from whom I could borrow."

I effortlessly spat out that magical phrase.

"Would you be my guarantor?"

Cut.

CHAPTER 9

Raised with love by my parents since childhood, their conscientious early education led to a peculiar reaction in me. Whenever I heard the word 'guarantee', my back would shiver and my blood flow would accelerate.

Yet, that was merely my personal experience.

Regardless, the ugliness of humanity when cornered often proved more burdensome than one might expect.

"I hit hard times after the scandal within the family. So, I desperately need a significant amount of cash."

I confessed to a classmate I wasn't particularly close with.

I was well aware that my situation might be a burden for them. Yet, I felt compelled to express my dire predicament.

"Or could you lend me some money?"

Thus, I boldly requested money from the spirit girl, Yenika.

"I see...!"

But Yenika's affability was far more impressive than I had anticipated.

"You must've struggled...!"

I was struck speechless by the empathy that followed her realization of my circumstances.

"You must have faced countless difficulties unknown to me... I'm not sure how I should encourage you... but I hope you find the strength to persevere!"

Her genuine and vibrant demeanor made me doubt her sincerity. Did she truly know who Ed Rosetail was?

Even with empty words, I struggled to win anyone's favor. However, Yenika's approach was on another level.

"But... I'm not financially stable myself... I wish I could help, but my family's circumstances aren't great either."

Yenika hailed from a small ranch in the eastern Sparde region of the kingdom, a far cry from a wealthy upbringing. In fact, she grew up in a modest environment, frolicking across the plains.

Therefore, her enrollment at this aristocratic academy was most likely due to her superior Spirit Sense ability. She was gifted, earned good grades, and received scholarships.

"But still, keep your chin up! I'll be cheering for you!"

Her bright smile was her trademark, capable of warming one's heart when you watched her.

However, as someone who knew the truth behind her words, I found little joy in her encouragement.

* * *

Where Ed Rosetail once stood.

A girl sat there, extending her hand into the void.

"You're right, Merilda. He's truly an enigma."

Only three individuals at Sylvanian Academy possessed a Spirit Sense ability high enough to perceive Merilda, the Wind High-Spirit.

The valedictorian of the second school year, Yenika Faelover.

'Lazy Lucy', who displayed an innate talent in all magical fields.

And Melina, the senior professor of spirit studies.

"It wasn't like this last year."

As she extended her hand into the void, the wind encircled it. Suddenly, a massive wolf, wrapped in gusts of wind, stood before her.

Opening its imposing maw, it gave a low growl and nuzzled its face against the girl's hand.

While stroking the underjaw of the enormous wolf, Yenika's face broke into a radiant smile.

"I wish I could have the chance to form a contract with you someday, Merilda."

They were as close as family, yet Yenika's magical prowess was still too feeble to form a contract with Merilda, the high-ranking spirit.

Recently, she had managed to succeed in a contract with Tarkan, a high-ranking fire spirit.

However, that victory was hard-earned, resulting in her languishing in bed, tormented by fever for ten days and nights.

"Still, a wolf... now you somewhat resemble the lord of the forest."

Merilda's form as a high-ranking wind spirit changed every time they met. Sometimes she would appear as a giant eagle, at other times, a spine-chilling crocodile, and sometimes, a rugged boar.

Among all these animal forms Merilda took, the form of a wolf was a first.

Burying her face in the soft fur of Merilda for a while, Yenika purred and rubbed her face.

"No matter how much I think about it, he can't see you."

Yenika thought this as she laid her face against Merilda's body.

Her thoughts wandered to a classmate who had been disgraced due to some dishonorable event. He was not someone with considerable skills or magic power.

Still, there were occasional remarks that bothered her.

- 'Even such a rough, giant wolf seems to have a tender heart.'

That's precisely what he had said.

Upon returning to the forest after the end of her vacation, Yenika had confirmed Merilda's wolf form for the first time and he had spoken of it as if it were a matter of fact.

"What is he up to?"

The intention behind the ensuing remarks was also clear.

He spoke about needing money, expressing his curiosity, but his tone and manner of speaking was calm. There was no hint of the desperation typical of those cornered.

Despite appearing carefree and constantly smiling, Yenika had enough common sense.

He had indirectly rebuffed Yenika's approach, essentially warning her to keep her distance.

"Well, there are such people... but I'm also human."

She vented her frustration by lightly tapping on Merilda's fur. Of course, Yenika's playful taps would not leave even a bruise on Merilda's steel-like skin.

"I was so kind and friendly, and yet he rejected me so blatantly. It hurts, you know. Sigh."

She felt unjustly rejected even though she hadn't harbored any feelings or made any confession.

"Well, we'll continue to see each other, so our relationship will probably improve."

She gave a broad smile as she tightly hugged Merilda, who was rubbing her face.

People are always a mystery. Last year, she had become friendly with many of her classmates, thinking they had become close. This year, she found new, interesting, and fun people.

Among them, Ed Rosetail was particularly unique. Merilda even described him as 'an interesting human'.

Despite knowing about Merilda's wolf form and Yenika's bright smile, Ed Rosetail had pushed her away.

To Yenika, the world was always kind, much like a flower garden with a constant fragrance of flowers.

Because whenever she greeted anyone with a bright smile, their hearts would soften and they would reciprocate with a smile.

Even the kindest person has a small corner of darkness in their heart. Yenika was not oblivious to this fact. She just did not understand it.

In spite of everything, she never questioned the power of a heartfelt smile to unlock hearts.

"School's back in session tomorrow. Time to bury my nose in the books again."

She'd stumbled upon a classmate who intrigued her. That simple fact brought her an unexpected happiness.

* * *

"She's bound to lose interest in me at this point, right?"

I settled down by the campfire, giving myself a once-over for the last time. I was aiming for an understated neatness, something that wouldn't stand out too much.

I slicked back my golden hair as tidily as I could and stripped away any superfluous accessories on my attire. I even trimmed my beard to significantly alter my appearance.

The question of tuition was a ticking time bomb set to explode at the end of this semester. Without securing a scholarship, I'd be forced to vacate the school post-haste.

The reality was clear as day—I needed to perfect myself to the best of my abilities during this single semester of reprieve.

The magic department curriculum would likely be less strenuous than I expected, but it would undoubtedly monopolize my time.

Both my Mana Sensing and my adeptness at elemental magic had progressed quite a bit. Since I used these skills continuously for survival—felling trees in the forest, starting fires—attaining a certain level of proficiency through repetition.

[Magic Ability Details]

Grade: Novice Magic Student

Special Field: Elemental

Common Magic: Quick Casting Lv 2; Mana Sensing Lv 5

Fire Elemental Magic: Ignition Lv 5

Wind Elemental Magic: Wind Blade Lv 4

The mastery of my primary spells had increased rather impressively. Although it's typically not too challenging to raise proficiency to level 10, the speed of my progress was noteworthy.

The field of magic itself poses certain restrictions for self-study. Once the curriculum gets underway, the array of magic I employ will broaden.

My life skill proficiency will naturally escalate and will consequently make a meaningful impact on my talent stats.

The crux of the issue was my combat capability. My stamina and strength were woefully lacking.

Even with several days of varied physical exertion, my stats remained stagnant. It appeared that this cursed body of mine lacked any semblance of a talent for physical prowess.

But doing nothing and just lying about isn't my style.

"There's nothing quite like cardio for stamina training."

At this juncture, where each day is a barrage of aerobic workouts, setting aside time for additional exercise might sound ludicrous.

But, considering my circumstances, it made sense. My current residence, the Northern Forest, is a considerable distance from the dormitories located in the southeast of Aken Island.

The day I was expelled, I aimlessly meandered into this forest, a journey that took around half a day. I walked deep in thought, pausing for breaks, and drifting without any sense of direction.

The distance to the dorms was not insignificant. What's more, I needed to commute to school every day. That meant a daily dawn run to the distant dormitories.

'I have to see it as part of my stamina training.'

Stamina forms the backbone of all actions. No matter how exceptional my skills or how honed my magical powers, they would amount to naught without the backing of endurance.

Every morning, the students in the Combat Department would engage in this level of rigorous training as standard practice. I was no exception.

I belonged to the Magic Department, not Combat, but those were minor distinctions that held no importance during training.

Each morning, my commute to school was filled with strenuous exercise, amplifying my combat skills through activities like hunting and carpentry, amongst other survival techniques.

It was equally vital not to neglect the continual repetition of mana sensitivity training and mastering foundational elemental magic, forging my magical abilities into something more potent.

Simultaneously, I strived to create various environments conducive to survival, ensuring the training of Life Skills didn't fall by the wayside.

The Dexterity stat and numerous crafting skills were persistently amassing, which would undoubtedly prove beneficial in the future.

As for Alchemy Skills... I remained uncertain. At present, I was devoid of any useful magical tools or alchemical supplies.

"Regardless, I have to concentrate entirely on my training for this semester."

I just hoped that I wouldn't draw unnecessary attention or become a magnet for aggro. There were far too many tasks I had to manage already.

Hopefully...

CHAPTER 10

In truth, there came a point where a question naturally sprang to mind.

At first, I was so occupied with trying to survive that I couldn't spare the brainpower to consider it. But as the new school year slowly approached, the question reared its head once more.

So, what on earth was our protagonist, Taylee, doing right now?

* * *

The start of a new semester tends to breed an atmosphere of anticipation and excitement.

The vacation was drawing to a close, and the majority of the students had already returned to their dorms.

The initial rush of reuniting with friends had likely faded. Yet, attending the opening ceremony stirred up a new wave of excitement—that's just how human nature works.

The Student Union building was located at the very center of the faculty buildings. It was collectively referred to as the Union, but it was actually split into three separate buildings.

This particular building, Kate Hall, situated on the western side, was frequently used for the school's large events.

The grand auditorium was filled with dozens of large tables, each comfortably seating about ten people.

A lavish banquet covered every surface, a sight that seemed like paradise to me, having survived on nothing but fish and weeds for the past few days.

I had even woken up at six in the morning, searched the northern forest of Aken Island, and then trekked to the faculty building.

Given this feast in front of me, holding back was a test that pushed the limits of human endurance.

I could manage for a while just by salvaging the leftovers. I wondered if I could find a bag or a bowl or something to carry them away.

But, I dropped the idea.

The blasted aristocratic culture of this school, Sylvanian Academy, emphasized maintaining one's dignity to an excessive degree.

If I were seen scooping up leftovers... I'd consider myself lucky if I were only scorned. It might even directly affect my conduct grade.

["It's heartening to see you all grown and improved as we begin this new semester, and regarding the progress we've made in our Sylvanian Student Council..."]

The dean's address was destined to be a bore, regardless of the era or world.

What stood out, though, was the fact that every student, due to the school's heavy emphasis on dignity, was sitting upright and attentively listening to the dean's speech.

This spectacle of thousands of students silently absorbing the dean's words was a sight to behold. It was a moment when the prestige of Sylvanian truly hit home.

- "Look over there... Isn't that... Ed Rosetail?"

- "What? The second-year who embarrassed himself during the freshman entrance exams?"

- "Hold on, he does look a bit different... But, yeah, that's him."

- "How did he have the gall to show his face at the entrance ceremony? Is he really planning on continuing his studies here? Didn't he get involved in a scandal?"

Of course, not all whispering disappeared. Caught among the students, I clearly heard their derisive whispers directed at me.

- "Look at him, after all that arrogance. He's hit rock bottom, absolutely ruined."

- "Shh, he might hear!"

- "And what if he does? He's not a noble anymore, you know."

What are they on about?

I savored every morsel of roasted turkey and potato salad, eating slowly and with great care. My morning workout had taken its toll, and I wasn't about to miss this opportunity to recharge.

"Hello there!"

My attention, honed on refueling, was interrupted by a sprightly greeting.

"Long time no see!"

Ed Rosetail, who had suffered a scandalous expulsion from the Rosetail Family, had few who would greet him with such cheer.

Looking up, it was none other than Yenika Faelover, waving with an infectious grin.

"I caught up with all our friends from Ophelis Hall, but I hadn't seen you, Ed. You were missing from your room."

I forced down the urge to furrow my brows. Alarms were already sounding in my head.

Approach with caution!

Maintain a safe distance!

"There's no benefit in talking to me," I warned.

"Huh? Why?"

Rather than voicing my reason, I rolled my eyes to indicate her to survey the surroundings.

Already, murmurs had begun to swell around us.

In the eyes of the second-year students, Yenika Faelover was something of a celebrity. Not only was she academically at the top of our year, but her naturally bubbly and approachable demeanor also made her popular among classmates.

Moreover, she had established a contract with the high-ranking fire spirit, Tarkan, during the entrance ceremony. She was, in essence, the beacon of hope for the second-year magic students at Sylvanian Academy.

Naturally, the sight of such an innocent and adored classmate being drawn towards a notorious mischief-maker was alarming to some.

Ultimately, a few brave souls decided to stage a rescue.

A short-haired girl speckled with freckles and another with long, fiery red hair emerged from the crowd.

"Oh my! Yenika! It's been ages!"

"Yenika! How was your time back home?!"

Wearing the most forced smiles, they waved enthusiastically at Yenika and proceeded to take her by the arms.

"Um, huh?! Clara, Anise! It's good to see you...! But why are you greeting me like we've just met? We definitely bumped into each other at Ophelis Hall just yesterday..."

"Speaking of, did you know? That table over there has desserts whipped up by Ophelis Hall's student cafeteria chef...! I've been dying for his food all through the holidays."

"Yes, let's go and grab a bite! Yenika! It'll help cool your head...!"

And with that, the two girls, having successfully liberated Yenika from the looming danger, disappeared back into the crowd. Yenika was dragged away, her befuddled expression making for a rather amusing spectacle.

...Nice!

Well done! Unnamed classmates...!

"Hold on...!"

However, Yenika, having miraculously escaped the clutches of the two, waded back through the crowd and stood before me once more.

"But I just have to show you this!"

"What?"

In response to my incredulous stare, Yenika proudly extended her hand towards me.

"What do you think?"

"...?"

As I simply stared, Yenika began to twirl and twist her hand, flaunting it as if she had something extraordinary to show. Her display of her small, pale hand left me somewhat perplexed.

"After you took off yesterday, something peculiar happened. This utterly charming and cute creature emerged from the lake. I signed a contract with it on the spot. It's my latest companion. Here, would you like a touch?"

I was puzzled at first by what she was blabbering about. However, when she uttered the word 'contract', I quickly picked up on her meaning.

To put it succinctly, it was a spirit. I had no clue what form it took to have her raving about its cuteness.

It appeared as though it was curling around her arm, judging by how she was bending her wrist... But, in any case, it was invisible to my eyes.

Still, unseen or not, I could approximate its appearance. Given the commotion she was making, it likely wore an adorable guise.

Playing along with Yenika and her excitement here would be easy, all I needed to do was say something like, "It's so darn cute and utterly charming. I'm super envious you can bond with such a spirit!". Doing so might work to my favor.

She was the most socially adept individual in our grade. These sorts of people always

simplified social interaction.

There was no need for me to concoct various conversation starters or struggle to find shared interests.

She was the kind of person who, given an attentive listener, could lead a lively conversation. No wonder she was beloved by all the sophomores.

For that reason, maintaining my distance required even more careful thought. With her ability to befriend anyone, keeping her at arm's length demanded a more deliberate approach.

The actual solution wasn't all that complex.

"I'm not quite following you."

Shutting down the conversation was the simplest strategy.

"I... I can't perceive spirits. My Spirit Sense is nonexistent, so I can't see them."

With one swift cut, I annihilated our common ground. Following such a blunt dismissal, she wouldn't have anything more to say. Trying to fish for a new topic at this point would likely lead to an awkward pause.

Yenika wasn't a fool. Chances were she was already getting the hint that I was trying to keep my distance.

Given her life surrounded by kind souls, she likely had little resistance to unprovoked coldness.

"...Really?"

Yenika responded slowly, tilting her head as she leaned into me.

"You can't see spirits?"

It wasn't unheard of. Being a magic department student didn't guarantee the ability to perceive spirits.

Nonetheless, Yenika tilted her head a few more times, deep in thought.

"Yenika! We have to hurry!"

"All the desserts will be gone!"

At last, the cavalry arrived. The group tightly embraced Yenika, intending to bring her back into the crowd.

"Alright! See you around!"

Even in the midst of this, she was waving at me with a radiant smile. Quite a scene.

Well, her friends will likely caution her while enjoying their desserts. Warn her not to approach Ed Rosetail without consideration.

That way, her interest in me should wane gradually.

From my perspective, that's not such a bad development.

"Finally, each grade's top student will bestow the 'Sage's Document' upon the representative of the freshman class. Students being called, please approach the podium."

"The sophomore class valedictorian, Yenika Faelover, the junior class valedictorian, Daike Elfelan, the senior class valedictorian, Amy Innis... And the freshman representative, the esteemed Princess Penia Elias Kroel."

Even her royal status didn't exempt her from the respect due. They always prefixed her name with 'esteemed' in formal settings.

It wasn't surprising that Princess Penia was chosen as the freshman representative. 'Lazy Lucy', who was in her own league regarding grades and talent, had no interest in such a role, and there simply was no figure as representative as Princess Penia to begin with.

This year's freshman class at Sylvanian Academy was brimming with talent. The gap between them and my current sophomore class was staggering.

It was inevitable. The stars of this world were, after all, the freshman class.

As I navigated through 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', I couldn't help but think. 'Are

all the successful students really just freshmen?'

Princess Penia, who during her sophomore year took control of the student council, acting as a de facto president, and aiming to eradicate corruption as the power behind the throne.

On the flip side, there was Lortel, 'The Golden Daughter', who sought to expose the darker underbelly of Sylvanian Academy, controlled the flow of money, and managed student relations, making a fortune along the way.

Lazy Lucy was another standout, a personification of talent, born under the blessing of the stars from the great wizard Gloct.

And that was just the tip of the iceberg. There were more significant characters in the freshman class than I could even begin to explain.

The full curriculum hadn't even started yet. But with such a talented group of freshmen, I had no doubt the faculty was already buzzing with anticipation.

"The 'Sage's Document' is a relic, a fragment of the teachings left behind by the great sage Sylvanian Robester, the founder of this Sylvanian Academy. We bestow this document upon our newest students as a symbol of our commitment to continuing Sylvanian's dedication to learning."

Sure, there were layers of symbolism, but in the end, it was all ceremony.

As the opening ceremony neared its conclusion, I continued to scan the crowd.

In this moment, students of all grades had gathered in the Kate Hall auditorium. Rarely did students of various disciplines and majors gather in one place like this. The hall was packed with freshmen of substantial talents and backgrounds. I knew those guys were all just 'characters'.

The real key was finding the protagonist of this world, 'Taylee'.

He was the one who, without my intervention, would resolve the countless challenges that would undoubtedly arise at Sylvanian Academy in the future.

There wasn't anyone I could be more thankful to, for willing to go through the hardships on my behalf, saving me the trouble.

The surest way to verify if this world was unfolding as I remembered was to locate 'Taylee'. His actions were the compass guiding the world's narrative.

Time to roam around, see if I could figure out where Taylee was.

Ed Rosetail, utterly defeated and dismissed, wouldn't be missed at this grandiose matriculation ceremony. My presence or absence would hardly be a blip on anyone's radar.

In fact, it would probably raise more eyebrows if I stuck around.

As my belly was plenty full now, it was about time I stirred from my seat.

[A brief announcement. 'Ed Rosetail', you are requested to visit the office of Dean McDowell. Thank you.]

My name unexpectedly echoed from the podium.

McDowell. A name I recognized.

The magic department's supreme dean at Sylvanian Academy. He held the strings to all academic matters, controlling the appointment of professors in his clenched fist.

He was seeking me?

"Could it be... am I facing expulsion...?"

Did the school's highest authority personally deliver the expulsion notice now? Were they going to such lengths to show me the door?

"...Have I screwed this up?"

I dragged my hand down my face.

No, just stay calm.

...

What the...

What the hell was going on?

CHAPTER 11

Sylvanian Academy, with its grandeur and sprawling scale, was laden with complexity.

However, like many organizations, the further up one climbed the hierarchical ladder, the simpler it became. The intricate spider-web structure, when inspected closely, was deceptively straightforward.

Dean McDowell stood at the pinnacle of this simple hierarchy. He was not only the dean of Sylvanian's Magic Department but also held the highest position among the three deans.

One look at the hierarchy from top to bottom would lead to his name, right after the Vice-Principal.

"The faculty didn't see the need to initiate your expulsion"

He started, a casual facade hiding his true intent. His shaggy beard and aging glasses hanging on his face belied his less-than-friendly attitude.

I refrained from touching the tea brought in by the principal's secretary. The room was devoid of any cordiality.

"Do we need to expel you following a thorough inspection of school regulations, or run the course of a disciplinary committee?"

Dean McDowell, seated across from me, wore a stern countenance.

Surprisingly, his assertive manner was just an exterior veneer, disguising a frail and generous nature within.

This was knowledge unbeknownst to many, only disclosed in a sub-quest. Having endured many twists and turns, I wasn't surprised.

A position of authority in a place teeming with eccentric personalities, like the Magic Department, required a domineering presence—it was an occupational necessity.

With a political playground where opportunists thrived, his consistent demeanor was rather commendable.

"If that doesn't suffice, we'll move forward with your expulsion directly through the academic office."

I was, quite naturally, left bewildered. Two reasons instigated my confusion.

Firstly, Dean McDowell, known for avoiding student confrontation, now opted for this uncharacteristic threat.

Secondly, his stature.

Being the dean of the Sylvanian Magic Department and the highest among the three deans left little reason for him to involve himself in every student's expulsion and its proceedings.

His role was to review and greenlight the execution plan.

Every role was endowed with fitting responsibilities.

Pulling a student into his office to debate over expulsion seemed as preposterous as going to the district office for a family register copy only to find the district chief handling the task personally.

"Do you have any justification for this?"

A typical student wouldn't ponder this far. They'd be struck by sheer panic, being summoned and notified of their expulsion.

With this realization, I understood his motive.

The objective was to disconcert me.

"You're entirely correct."

Thus, I responded as such for the time being, intending to contemplate more later.

In the grand and imposing reception room, I found myself suddenly summoned during the school's opening ceremony—a formal event.

Across from me sat a highly ranked figure, dressed to impress and radiating an aura both aggressive and threatening. The situation had taken a grim turn, with a threat of expulsion looming large.

The more elevated the status, the better they were at engineering such oppressive atmospheres.

They were attempting to gauge my reaction in this scenario.

Naturally, questions followed.

What was the reason behind this extraordinary procedure?

Ed Rosetail was just a regular student, the only exception being his illustrious lineage. He possessed no standout magical abilities nor was he particularly distinguished academically.

Here in Sylvanian, his so-called noble lineage served as little more than an intriguing talking point. The academy was a melting pot of nobility and the affluent, and even had a princess among its ranks.

Then why would they squander valuable time on a private meeting with Ed Rosetail, a mere student?

The possibilities were scarce. I sighed deeply, the sound silent but heavy within me.

"I would like to express my gratitude to Princess Penia."

I blurted, deviating from the topic of my expulsion.

"For her attentiveness to her subjects, even within the academy, and her unfailing regard for the minutiae."

This out-of-the-blue statement must have taken him by surprise.

A sudden mention of the princess in the middle of a discourse on my impending expulsion—it had to be bewildering.

What was the reason for this abrupt shift? Why bring her up now?

Those were the anticipated reactions.

"What?"

But for a fleeting moment, his brows knitted together. It was only for an instant, but I managed to catch that subtle reaction.

"What are you talking about?"

However, my counterpart had served as the Principal for more than five years. It took him less than a second to regain his poker face.

But that fleeting moment of confusion was sufficient for me to discern the situation.

Just as I'd suspected.

Only a handful of individuals could have wielded enough influence to have me summoned by the Dean: Principal Obel, Vice Principal Reyna, and Princess Penia.

Neither Principal Obel nor Vice Principal Reyna had any compelling reason to take an interest in me, which made Princess Penia the most probable candidate.

Despite this institution championing the virtues of learning over social status, they couldn't possibly ignore the words of the princess.

This seemed quite in character for Princess Penia.

She could've easily summoned soldiers, had me shackled, and demanded I confess my secrets to avoid expulsion.

Did she believe she couldn't coerce the truth from me, even if she resorted to such measures?

Or did she consider such barbaric and forceful methods to be distasteful and pointless?

It was likely a combination of both.

In retrospect, her approach was judicious.

No amount of threats or coercion would have compelled me to confess that I was a reincarnated individual, a being distinct from Ed Rosetail.

Why would I willingly set myself up to be treated as a lunatic?

She must have devised an alternative strategy.

"No, I got my words tangled up. My apologies. Ha... ridiculous, right... just a case of nerves... ha..."

Feigning embarrassment, I scratched the back of my head, my speech tripping over itself. I mustered up a stupid grin, but it only sharpened Dean McDowell's scrutinizing gaze on me.

He was a man set in his ways, through and through.

He had seen through my attempts to gauge him.

Damn... the balance of power has tipped too far.

"I was merely... pondering about what the 'right answer' might be."

Given the circumstances, I chose to tackle it head-on.

"Why go to the lengths of summoning a single student like me, to measure my worth... What must I say to provide the 'right answer'?"

I was aware that expulsion was nothing more than a front.

I positioned that fact as a natural assumption. It was a statement saying, 'To some degree, I know what you're up to'.

Had he been an intimidating, pressure-cooker of a man, it might have backfired. It could've come off as if I was challenging him, potentially sparking an unpleasant reaction.

But I knew Dean McDowell wasn't the type to pull rank, surprisingly so.

"To cut to the chase, while I do think my actions were a mistake... I don't believe it merits expulsion."

"If we dig through the school regulations, it seems there's enough grounds for expulsion."

"But isn't it true that rules and regulations are often vague and ambiguous? They are open to interpretation. That's why we have a disciplinary committee, and why students are given the chance to voice their side."

I decided to respond on a point of principle.

"In that case, I have no choice but to use every opportunity given to me. I have to do my best to persuade the disciplinary committee, post notices around the school, and try to sway my peers. I should also air out some grievances about the unjust treatment I've received."

This would undoubtedly be a headache from the school's perspective.

"So, are you trying to intimidate me now?"

"Not at all. I'm genuinely sincere."

I declared with a confident expression.

Initially, the thought of intimidation was absurd. How could a student on the brink of expulsion threaten the Dean?

If they were determined to expel me, they could simply disregard all the minor chaos I could cause.

It might stir up some noise and be a nuisance for a while, but it would ultimately end there.

There wasn't a student who would side with Ed Rosetail in the first place.

"All I'm going to do is everything within my capacity. If I end up getting expelled... well, it can't be helped. But to do nothing and just accept expulsion, I fear I might regret it in the future."

After articulating my thoughts, I took a sip from the tea the secretary had served.

"Does this qualify as... the 'right answer'?"

It felt like having a conversation behind masks. He was probably experiencing the same.

A moment of silence passed.

Dean McDowell, who had been studying me for some time, his chin resting on his hand, finally began to speak again.

"Princess Penia made some perplexing comments about you. Now, I'm starting to see some truth in her words."

Princess Penia had an innate ability to assess others, a blessing of discernment, and we often had confidential talks.

She made no secret of the fact that I was under her observation. Even without discussing it, we both knew it to be true.

"You're crafty like a fox, but I don't sense any malice in you."

"Your words suggest I'm a sly trickster."

"You're calmer than most students who've been sat in the dean's office. They usually tremble."

Had I been too composed? That thought crossed my mind. Even if it was a mistake, there was no going back.

"Anyway, you may leave. I will consider whether your response was right or wrong."

"What about the expulsion... What's going to happen?"

At that, Dean McDowell chuckled. It was the first time I had seen the dean's true colors.

"You're quite the clever one, aren't you?"

I never intended to expel you from the beginning. You must've realized this too, right?

The way he avoided a direct answer, that was the Dean McDowell I knew.

That was a close call!

I let out a sigh of relief as I tossed a log onto the campfire.

I wasn't sure what had happened, but I had the feeling that it was a critical turning point for my future actions. Even though I felt that way, if I had answered incorrectly, I might have been in serious trouble.

As I closed the door and left, I took a quick glance at McDowell. He had stopped smiling, his face was serious again, and he was lost in thought.

He had been seriously assessing me.

He was a man I couldn't afford to take lightly.

Anyway, the die was cast, and all I could do was continue with my own tasks.

[Newly Made Item]

I had just crafted a simple wooden drying rack for drying laundry and food. It wasn't particularly sturdy and couldn't bear much weight.

Crafting Difficulty: ●○○○○

[Completed. Your crafting proficiency has increased.]

I wiped off my sweat and admired the finished drying rack. This was good news. I realized I needed to start checking my lifestyle skills. I had been too busy and didn't have time to check my proficiency in detail.

[Lifestyle Ability Detail]

Rank: Novice Craftsman

Special Field: Carpentry

Dexterity Lv 10

Design Lv 2

Gathering Lv 3

Carpentry Lv 7

Fishing Lv 3

Cooking Lv 4.

Dexterity was at level 10...

Dexterity was the foundation of all lifestyle skills, and it was the skill most related to the dexterity stat.

As the proficiency of dexterity increased, the increase rate of other skills was also significantly noticeable.

Moreover, reaching level 10 in a skill was significant. Reaching level 10 meant that I had mastered the basics of that skill.

Once the proficiency level exceeded 10, the experience required to advance to the next level noticeably increased. From here on, 'investment' was needed.

I fell onto a flat rock, letting the warmth of the bonfire envelop me.

The rock was a far cry from the plush comfort of the Dean's office sofa. But since my arrival in this world, I'd come to rely on it. It had become a familiar part of my day-to-day existence.

I sat by the fire, looking at my hand open and close in the firelight. I pondered to myself.

"Could it have been a mistake to be born into nobility?"

Living skills had flourished here at a pace unmatched by combat or magic.

Without the right environment, inherent talent cannot bloom. Having been brought up with the privileges of nobility, these abilities had lain dormant.

Tasks like cooking or crafting, mending things—these would have seemed too pedestrian in his previous life. A side effect of his status, I suppose.

"Despite the hardships, I've managed to create a somewhat livable environment."

Compared to Ophelis Hall, the best-equipped facility in Sylvanian, my camp may seem homeless. But I had grown fond of this camp that I'd built with my own two hands.

The day's ceremony had filled my belly, so hunger was not an issue. I could simply go to sleep.

"But sleep can wait."

The day had only consisted of the opening ceremony, and my return walk had been leisurely. So, I had plenty of energy left.

I picked up a few books scattered around the camp. I couldn't simply go to sleep, not with so much time on my hands.

So, before it got dark, I decided to read. The books, borrowed from the school library, detailed various edible plants and wild herbs.

Knowledge equals survival. Being able to identify edible plants would broaden my dietary range.

"A workbench or reading desk wouldn't be a bad idea. Maybe I'll try making one this weekend."

With that thought, I laid down in my makeshift shelter and opened a book.

Ten seconds later, I was asleep. It was almost instantaneous.

Perhaps, I was a bit tired...

* * *

Meanwhile, in the Dean's office at the corner of the faculty building, Dean McDowell sat on the reception sofa, lost in thought. Some time had passed since Ed Rosetail had left.

He had a pile of work to get through, but he just sat there, deep in thought.

His secretary, busy with paperwork, quietly sighed, careful not to disturb McDowell.

McDowell had these spells from time to time. He would get lost in thought, letting the work pile up. Naturally, this affected when his secretary could leave.

Going home on time seemed unlikely today. Resigned, the secretary decided to take on the task of cleaning the office—a task that had been put off.

'He seems more contemplative this time... I wonder what's on his mind?'

The secretary gazed out the window at the stars, looking at McDowell who had gone rigid with thought.

The clear night sky offered a stunning view of the stars. She opened the window to let in the night air.

"Secretary Anes, do you think I wear my emotions on my sleeve?"

"Pardon?"

Dean McDowell's demeanor is so impeccable that one sometimes wonders if he has a double personality. At least the Dean's secretary, who is always by his side, knows that.

So when asked about it, she stammered and mumbled something to the effect that it wasn't true.

And so it went into the night in the faculty wing.

CHAPTER 12

As everyone knows, games are typically seen from the perspective of the protagonist.

Being a fallen character already out of the picture, my available actions were rather limited.

The one silver lining was that I had already experienced this world multiple times from the perspective of the protagonist.

By thinking about the timing and the Academy's schedule, I could somewhat guess the current events.

There was no need for frustration about not knowing the current status of the Academy, or how things were unfolding. That was one comforting fact.

Rather, I was surprised by the many things that I hadn't noticed when the story was always being seen from Taylee's perspective.

For example, how the curriculum of the Magic Department proceeded.

The protagonist, Taylee, being a 'Failed Swordsman', was part of the Combat Department.

Therefore, he didn't have a clue about the lives of the students of the Magic Department.

Besides, there were things happening beyond Taylee's active radius.

The construction of new buildings and statues under the sponsorship of 'Golden Daughter Lortel', and the sight of a small royal guard stationed at the entrance of the faculty building for the escort of 'Princess of Mercy Penia'.

Even though they were off the main stage, these elements of the world were still ongoing and felt fresh.

In fact, there were many future stories that I was curious about but were not directly

revealed when playing as 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman'.

The list would be endless if I tried to enumerate them all, but if I had to choose just one... Yes, it would be Yenika Faelover.

She was the final boss of Act 1, falling under the control of the High Dark Spirit Robesper. Her story was not given much importance.

To put it nicely, she was the final boss of Act 1, but the actual boss was the right arm of Glaskan, the Highest Dark Spirit that she summoned.

However, high-level dark spirits usually descend based on the darkness or pessimistic thoughts in a spirit master's heart.

While it's not surprising given that everyone has some darkness in their heart, Yenika Faelover seemed completely detached from such darkness.

I knew it. Her brightness was innate, and her vivacity was natural.

What on earth made Yenika Faelover fall under the control of a high dark spirit?

Of course, I didn't need to worry about that.

After all, Taylee would take care of Glaskan's right arm, which had taken over the student council building.

* * *

"Is it too tough...?"

About ten days had passed since the start of the term.

"I might really die at this rate..."

While taking a break on a wooden bench at the faculty building at dusk, I suddenly had a moment of enlightenment.

Since the start of the term, my daily routine went as follows:

I woke up before sunrise and washed my body in the stream water.

I was cautious about any possible odor, so I cleaned every nook and cranny.

Dressed in the clothes I washed every day, I walked from the northern forest to the faculty building.

By the time I arrived, I was soaked in sweat. I would sneak in another wash at the faculty bathroom in Gloct Building.

Then, I would change into the uniform I brought along.

I would hide my everyday clothes between the bushes in the rose garden of the faculty building to pick them up after school.

I made my way towards the academic building where our lessons were conducted.

Starting here, it was important to carry myself with the utmost decorum, as I was about to encounter the offspring of noble families and the academy's top students.

Of course, given my less than stellar reputation within the Academy, I had to endure a barrage of whispers and gossip every time I made a public appearance.

Strangely, the days felt incomplete without these whispers echoing around me. I had grown quite accustomed to being treated as if I were invisible during the various classes.

In this manner, absorbed in my studies, time would slip away until it was lunchtime.

Eating at the extravagantly priced and opulent Ophelis Hall cafeteria or the student council's dining area was out of the question.

I ate food from a lunchbox that was filled with wild foods I had gathered from the camp.

Jerky, salted and dried in high heat, had become a staple of mine. A meat salted and left to dry for about three days on a simple rack I made for laundry resulted in a decent piece of jerky.

Portable, filling, and unmatched by any other improvised food, my jerky not only staved off hunger, it also allowed my cooking skills to grow in the process.

With my hunger satiated, I would sit through the afternoon lectures, an invisible man once again, before it was finally time to leave.

I collected the civilian clothes that I had hidden among the rose bushes in the garden and once again set out for the northern forest.

Leaving at sunset, I would arrive just as the darkness started to fall.

I had resolved to jog as much as possible on my return trips for the purpose of training my vitality.

But with the commencement of practical lessons involving direct usage of mana, I felt drained of too much energy and decided to slow my pace and walk.

Upon arriving back at camp, my first task was to wash my sweat-soaked everyday clothes. They had to be dried in advance for me to wear them the following day.

Then, I thoroughly inspected my uniform, which always needed to be maintained in a pristine and dignified state. I checked for any stains or tears, and in case I found any, I mended them using thread borrowed from other clothes.

Having swiftly finished checking my clothes, it was time to tackle the day's remaining tasks, which varied day by day.

Sometimes, if I was running low on the herbs or medicinal plants I had gathered, I would set out to gather more, or I might check the condition of the trimmed wood I had prepared and stored.

If I had run out of the meat I had stored in a burrow, I would grab my bow and go hunting.

True, it was more convenient to hunt using a harpoon or a hastily assembled spear, but for the sake of the future, I forced myself to fill my proficiency with a bow, thus hunting with it.

But on days when the hunting wasn't fruitful, I would resort to other methods of procuring food. After all, survival came first.

When the sun had fully set, I would light a bonfire to provide light. It was homework time.

On the makeshift workbench I had assembled from a large, flat stone, I would review the practical assignments of the day.

My strengths lay in the fields where note-taking was crucial, like Magic History or Elementology. Thankfully, my mind still seemed to be functioning rather well.

It'd been a fair bit since I'd last held a pen, but even so, I had once walked the hallowed halls of academia.

Blood still coursed through my veins from the trials of my student days, surviving the academic storm of university entrance exams.

Long live the educational fervor of Korea...!

My notations were a process of scribbling on a humble slate using chalk that was nearly spent. The books were borrowed from the university library. I couldn't afford the luxury of quills, ink, or personal books.

And when the moon sat high in the sky, I practiced magic alone.

My primary goal was to reach a proficiency of 10 in basic elemental magic. The second-year curriculum at the magic school had already started delving into intermediate magic. It was futile if I was still struggling with the basics.

But if I were to train in magic, it would be best to do it practically. I used Wind Blade to trim the trees, and played around with controlling the sparks from a campfire using fire magic.

As I did this, exhaustion crept over me. But it was not yet time to sleep. There was still plenty to do before hitting the sack.

I checked the makeshift shelter made of wood for any damage, replenished the firewood to ensure the fire would last through the night, and counted the number of jerkies for tomorrow's lunch.

If the water jug was empty, I'd have to fill it up.

After ensuring everything was in order, I made a mental note of tomorrow's schedule, filled the shelter with smoke from the campfire to deter bugs, and then aired it out before turning in.

With all that done, I could still sleep for a solid four hours, give or take.

Thankfully, despite my exhaustion, I had the blessing of never oversleeping. This trait served me well during my military service as well, enabling quick adaptation.

I had lived like this for around ten days.

My body screamed in muscular pain.

Sitting on a wooden bench, staring at the crimson-stained sky, was a small deviation from my routine. Back at the camp, a mountain of tasks awaited me.

"Maybe I should move the camp a little closer..."

The thought crossed my mind, but I quickly dismissed it. There was no good in placing my camp within the living area of other students.

Moreover, the long travel distance was helpful in physical training... I needed to remain resolute.

"Ugh, my poor body..."

I heaved my aching body upright and resumed my journey. After all, what could I do about being reincarnated into such a body?

This degree of hardship, I could endure.

Bright days were sure to come.

* * *

There was, thankfully, a silver lining.

As I cut across the northern forest, such a thought crossed my mind.

At least, having somehow survived this lifestyle for about ten days... I had gained a certain level of confidence about its sustainability.

While it was indeed hellishly tough and grueling, it was somehow maintainable. The life of a second-year magic school student was more peaceful and quiet than I had

anticipated.

Being looked down upon with disdain wherever I went, people whispering behind my back, was now something I'd grown accustomed to.

Well, what could I do? It wasn't something I had done, but Ed Rosetail had stacked up an overwhelming amount of dislike.

Nevertheless, the situation for the first years would have been much worse. A stage had been set for an adventure drama, prone to accidents and chaos, sparked at the slightest provocation.

At the start of the semester, scenarios like 'Ziggs of the Northern Plains' blowing up the experimental dorm or 'Lazy Lucy' electrocuting the dean's cat with a lightning spell were commonplace.

An array of such incidents had already begun to unfold.

Students from the departments of Combat, Magic, and Alchemy had joined forces for their first practical lessons against demonic beings.

By this point, our protagonist Taylee and the other key characters would have been well-acquainted.

Yet, the world a step behind the stage unfolded in a surprisingly peaceful and orderly manner. Looking at it from this perspective, things didn't seem too shabby.

Even the demanding routine of life back then, with its endless repetition, gradually began to feel familiar.

Just like that, keeping a safe distance from the main characters, I only needed to carry on with my own life. Then, upon graduation, I would bid farewell as the school's crisis loomed.

It wasn't as though the school would crumble, and since every trial was bound to be resolved on its own, there was no need for me to suffer and intervene.

Reflecting on it, the first step appeared to have been fastened securely. There was no cause for despair.

Still, the one variable was undeniably Yenika Faelover.

- 'Hello!'

- 'What are you eating?! Dried meat?'

- 'Good morning!'

- 'What's your next class? Elemental Studies?'

- 'Want to join me for lunch in the student cafeteria?'

Over the last ten days, whenever we crossed paths around the professor's building, Yenika would greet me with her unchanging bubbly energy.

Similarly, the sight of her two best friends appearing out of nowhere, dragging her away by her arms, became a recurring spectacle.

"Hmm..."

This wasn't part of the plan. There was no reason for her to show such interest in me. It seemed there had been a mistake, or perhaps some aspect I had overlooked.

"...Well, it should be fine."

As dusk fell over the forest, beyond the intertwined branches, the sight of my camp, now as comfortable as home, came into view. It had been a long journey home.

As I've said time and again, I was an anomaly in this world that flowed normally.

Should I have become a variable that overturned the natural course of the world, I risked squandering the advantage of knowing the future.

So, it seemed right to maintain a reasonable distance from this world's key players. Sure... attempting to forge a friendship might involve an awkward, strenuous process, but maintaining a distance was simple.

I could do it!

For some inexplicable reason, the sage time, which bubbled up in a corner of my

heart, had receded considerably. In its place, a renewed sense of hope - that I could once again do well - took root.

It will somehow work out!

Maintaining a decent amount of distance was a skill honed through tiresome societal interactions. It's okay, I can do this!

With that hopeful thought, I stepped into the camp, ready to tackle yet another day with fervor.

"Zzz-Zzz."

It was then that I found a girl, nestled and slumbering within my makeshift sanctuary.

Her witch's hat, draped loosely over her shoulders, boasted a brim so broad that it nearly obscured her entire face. Her breathing was an audible sigh, a sound of world-weariness that immediately betrayed her identity.

I sank into the cool embrace of my stone chair, sweeping a hand across my weary face.

"Whew..."

The sigh that escaped me seemed to well up from my very soul.

"Why on earth... is she sleeping here?"

Despite our first encounter, she was unmistakable.

This girl, pivotal from the beginning to the very end of the 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' narrative... in terms of significance, her presence was as imposing as the main heroines themselves.

Appearances could be deceiving. Despite her seemingly endless laziness, this girl was an extraordinarily crucial character among the cast.

But why was she here, fast asleep in this state?

I paused, lifting my gaze to survey my campsite.

The northern forest of Aken Island. A remote, unvisited depth. But for this prodigious girl, who could effortlessly maneuver with swift mana, it wasn't isolated at all.

Initially, her territory mirrored that of feral cats.

Her small stature allowed her to dart around using mana with ease, making her capable of reaching any sun-kissed locale, whether the pinnacle of a clock tower or the rooftop of Gloct Hall.

So where was this, exactly?

A place devoid of human activity, situated far from the school structures.

However, it was a pleasant location, where a gentle breeze stirred the air and the soothing sound of a babbling stream could be heard. Fortuitously, a roofed shelter had been erected here.

There truly was no better place to steal away for a post-class siesta.

"...I brought this on myself!"

Alas...!

My outcry was in vain, nothing more than a pointless monologue.

Listening to the whisper-like sleep-talking of 'Lazy Lucy', her breath gentle, I could do nothing but sit quietly, shielding my eyes with a hand for a time.

CHAPTER 13

Comparing people to animals might have seemed a bit blunt, but every now and then, I couldn't help but think of Yenika Faelover as a well-loved puppy.

She was as vivacious and inviting as a tail-wagging pup, and just like when you see such a creature, there's an urge to embrace her or pat her on the head.

Her classmates appeared to harbor similar feelings, always keeping her nestled in their arms or striding arm-in-arm through hallways and classrooms.

Adding to this scenario, I was often rewarded with suspicious glares when I dared to approach within ten feet, as if they feared I might pose a threat to their precious Yenika.

While Yenika's demeanor resembled a cute puppy, Lucy Mayril was more akin to a street cat.

Her raspy breathing and curled-up sleeping posture were unmistakably feline, but it wasn't just her physical appearance that drew the comparison.

Wild cats were never truly domesticated.

They rarely displayed affection or friendliness toward pedestrians. That was the case, at least, with all the stray cats I'd come across.

Street cats, having adapted to the rhythm of urban life, had a set of rules unique to them.

Even though they roamed in dreary back alleys, they always maintained an air of self-importance, walking with the dignified gait of a princess, no matter how dirty their fur.

Such behavior wasn't a result of vanity or superiority complex. They were... just inherently that way.

Lucy Mayril, too, was this kind of person right from the start.

"Ugh-hah-kyaah."

She yawned and stretched her body, sitting up.

It had been about half an hour since I returned to the camp and found Lucy Mayril.

Lost in thought, I sat there, chin in hand, wondering what to do with this individual.

The setting sun was nearing its final retreat, and the vast spring sky was already under assault from the encroaching eastern darkness.

"....."

Lucy Mayril sat there with drowsy eyes. A few strands of her stubborn hair clung to her cheek.

And her first words upon waking up in someone else's camp were.

".....I'm hungry..."

She was the kind of girl who could make you want to bang your head against a wall.

Only then did Lucy's gaze meet mine. I had been sitting by the crackling campfire on a rock, my chin resting on my hand for quite some time.

A typical girl might have shown signs of discomfort at such a gaze.

But Lucy Mayril was anything but typical.

"Out of 100... about 90 points...?"

I remained silent, offering no response.

"The sunlight filtering through the leaves is quite pleasant. The draft is refreshing too. As soon as I lay down, I fell right asleep."

Lucy Mayril had rated my camp as one of the top three nap spots in all of Sylvanian Academy.

"The floor was a mess of clothes thrown about haphazardly, so I found myself laying

flat on the ground... It would've been better if it were comfortable, yet the sunshine was nice... And the soothing babble of the stream was delightful."

Lucy's face remained impassive as she made her remarks with an air of cheeky confidence.

"It was absolutely lovely."

There wasn't a flicker of change in her expression, but there was a strange, sparkling energy around her that made me realize, she was genuinely content.

...What was I trying to convince myself of?

Lucy Mayril rose from the ground and stretched again, arms wide.

My wooden shelter, fortified multiple times, was larger than expected. The space was broad horizontally, but the ceiling was merely shoulder-high. I couldn't even stand up inside.

In such a cramped space, watching Lucy Mayril stretch made the difference in our sizes strikingly obvious. She was genuinely a small girl. Even her uniform, the smallest available size, seemed baggy on her.

Soon, the rumble of Lucy's stomach broke the silence.

And in the next moment, Lucy was darting out of the shelter.

"Darting out" was an incredibly apt description.

Lucy Mayril's movements resembled the martial artistry one might see in a wuxia film.

She concentrated her magic at the tips of her toes, leapt forward, using a combination of wind magic, gravity magic, and advanced shock absorption spells to land precisely where she wanted.

Her movements were fluid and graceful, like a celestial being, effortlessly layering high-level magic.

Even professors at the Magic Department, who were used to focusing to use a single

spell at a time, would marvel at her ability to multi-cast multiple spells instinctively.

"Is this dried meat? Can I eat it?"

Lucy had landed on the makeshift drying rack I'd put together. Displayed there were the neatly arranged strips of jerkies I had carefully seasoned and laid out.

"..."

Surprisingly, I hadn't uttered a single word until now. I didn't want to have any interaction with this girl, if at all possible.

'Lazy Lucy'.

A prodigy acknowledged by all at the Sylvanian Academy, from the entire student body to Professor Glast to Principal Obel. She left everyone in awe.

A significant supporting character in 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', she felt like an insurmountable wall that existed until the very end of the scenario.

If you embarked on a specific journey, you could spar with Lazy Lucy. However, despite maximizing the 'Inspect' skill that allowed a peek into the opponent's stats, her abilities remained hidden.

This led me to speculate the intentions of the game's developer.

She wasn't a character designed to be defeated.

"You can eat it."

Hearing that, Lucy picked up a piece of the jerky and took a bite. After chewing thoughtfully, she grimaced,

"Ew-! It's too salty!"

She stuck out her small tongue in displeasure.

".....But, there might be an oddly intriguing taste too?"

And then, she put the jerky back in her mouth.

While gnawing on a piece of jerky, Lucy unexpectedly gulped it down, having seemingly become fond of its distinctive salty flavor. She then signaled for another piece.

"Can I have another?"

"...Sure."

Then she planted herself on the drying rack, kicking her feet back and forth as she relished the jerky's flavor. The salty taste had initially caused her to scrunch her face, but she was soon eating with a satisfied smile.

What was this feeling? A sensation that was filling my heart.

The unique fulfillment one feels when feeding a small mammal...

Is this how it felt... becoming a pet lover?

It seemed quite addictive...

"..."

I shook my head briskly. Snap out of it... This was Lucy Mayril.

A pivotal character in the 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' scenario, holding immense narrative importance. Nothing good could come from getting overly involved with her.

Right, for now, I had to shake her off. I needed to focus on ushering her away with minimal conflict.

"It was so salty at first, but now it's so salty that I like it. It's stimulating."

"..."

"This salty sensation... I really love it..."

At that point, I understood.

Lucy Mayril, a prodigious genius in her first school year at Sylvanian Academy, must

be living in Ophelis Hall, a privilege extended to only the top students.

Among the three dormitories at Sylvanian, Ophelis Hall was considered the finest. A place that wouldn't give room without formidable status or impressive grades.

The student dining hall at Ophelis boasted the finest food, prepared daily by the kingdom's top chefs. As such, her palate must have been sophisticated, on par with high-ranking nobility.

However, there are flavors that one cannot savor from such gourmet food.

These were the tastes of salty, sweet, and spicy.

An area outside the meticulously balanced high-end diet, where the freshness of ingredients, harmony of flavors, nutritional balance mattered significantly.

The real taste of excitement came from these tastes that didn't concern health and were laden with spices.

This sort of rebellious stimulation was akin to a devil's whisper to someone who had spent their life strictly on wholesome, gourmet diets.

"Can I take all of this?"

"No."

That was definitely crossing a line. That was my lunch, after all.

"Ugh..."

Her deflated look was quite pitiful, but what might be a snack for her was a matter of survival for me.

She could simply enjoy a wealth of luxurious food at Ophelis Hall.

"That reminds me..."

A good idea suddenly struck me.

Lucy Mayril feared no one in this academy. Even Princess Penia, the Princess of

Mercy, Lortel, the Golden Daughter, and the notorious tough Professor Glast, all stood equal in front of Lucy.

However, there was someone who could rein in this seemingly uncontrollable Lucy.

"Um... the maids from Ophelis Hall were looking for you."

At those words, Lucy's face went deathly pale. The foot swinging that had been bustling in mid-air quickly fizzled out.

Out of nowhere, she flew into the shelter and picked up a wide-brimmed witch's hat.

"You know, I think I need to go."

"Alright... take care."

"I'll visit again soon."

I quietly wished she wouldn't.

"But before I go, I have a message for you. She asked me to tell you something."

I had already wasted an obscene amount of time catering to Lucy's whims. I was in the middle of preparing my workout clothes for the following day, sorting through the laundry tools.

Lucy gestured towards the forest.

"What?"

I followed the direction of her finger, but all that met my eyes was a sprawling expanse of verdant forest.

"..."

"That wolf, the size of a house. It was watching us the entire time."

A shudder of unease trickled down my spine.

My training in Spirit Sense had been rudimentary at best. There was still an unseen

world beyond my grasp.

"One day, she wants you to rescue Yenika."

With that casual prophecy, Lucy vanished towards Ophelis Hall.

I slowly pivoted my head back to the forest Lucy had indicated.

The chorus of rustling insects amidst the dense trees was the only sound that filled the air.

Nothing else stood out.

* * *

-----[Announcement]-----

Joint combat training for the first and second years is scheduled.

Students taking part in the Basic Cooperative Combat Overview/Advanced classes at the Iron Hall Combat Training Facility are advised to confirm their assigned groups via the distributed roster.

※ Attendance is alarmingly low among Alchemy Department students! While alchemy experiments are a worthy pursuit, please make sure to attend the general classes as well!

-Assistant Combat Practice Professor, Cler Elphin.

The following day.

During the second-year student assembly held at the Student Union, the announcement was disseminated. Time for the joint combat training for the first and second years was already upon us.

The curriculum was progressing swiftly. The joint combat training was undoubtedly... the event that marked Yenika Faelover's first appearance in the game.

That implied that 'Lortel, the Golden Daughter' and 'Princess Penia, the Princess of Mercy' were already drawing lines of opposition based on ideological differences.

With the commencement of the second year, both the combat and political student dramas took center stage. The groundwork for it was already being laid.

Whether it was the combat sequences or the political threads, both were crucial elements in this world, warranting my vigilant attention.

From my vantage point, a step removed from the main stage, I could only rely on occasional whispers and the passage of time for any indication of unfolding events.

Yet, it's always more accurate to see things with my own eyes.

I needed to keep a close eye on which faction the protagonist Taylee would align with, what choices he would make at key junctions, and ultimately, in which direction the world was leaning.

During the previous matriculation ceremony, I couldn't properly observe Taylee since I was summoned for a meeting with the Dean.

This joint combat training would certainly give me a comprehensive glimpse of the first-year students, who were key to the main scenario.

At any rate, this was the moment to ensure the story was unfurling just as it should, with no surprising twists or turns - straight from the 'authentic narrative'.

I strode out of the Student Union Building, my shoulders hunched and fatigued from a long night spent honing arrows.

Life was a relentless series of harsh realities, but as they say, humans have a knack for adaptation.

I was beginning to sense my body catching up, adjusting to this reality. If only there was some meaningful improvement in my Vitality stat...

But hey, things have a way of working out.

Now, I could entertain such hopeful thoughts more often.

CHAPTER 14

The joint combat class for the first and second school years was a passing event, but it played a pivotal role in the larger narrative.

This was because it marked the moment when Taylee, our protagonist, first took up the sword.

Taylee, who until now had been training in hand-to-hand combat as part of the curriculum, picked up a sword unexpectedly, effectively parrying Lazy Lucy's electric shock.

Taylee was born with a talent for swordsmanship. Unaware of his ability, this marked a turning point in his life, transitioning from unarmed combat to wielding a sword.

Of course, his still-dormant talents couldn't match up against Lucy Mayril.

He managed to deflect Lucy's lightning once, but was overwhelmed and knocked off his feet by a sudden intermediate-level electric shock spell that Lucy threw out in her surprise.

As a result, Lucy, who had violated the rule of only using basic elemental magic, was disqualified.

That incident confirmed Taylee's talent as a swordsman, and his name began to circulate among the first-year students.

After all, he had withstood the terrifying attack of Lucy Mayril, and while it was due to disqualification, it was true that he had defeated Lucy Mayril.

"Since there were no significant variables yet, things would continue to flow as they were, right?"

It was a rare weekend. A chance to deal with things left undone during the weekdays when classes were in progress.

There was surprisingly more leeway with food. Although my hunting skills had

improved considerably, the most critical factor was learning to set hunting traps.

[Newly Created Item]

Snare Trap - A trap set by tying a rope obtained from the Ollenkwang construction site to an elastic tree stem. It's effective for catching small animals.

Production Difficulty: ●●○○○

[Your production proficiency has increased.]

It was hastily made following the instructions in the survival book borrowed from the student library, but it turned out better than expected.

My woodworking skills were approaching level 10 due to increased production proficiency.

Moreover, it was efficient considering the time. Even when I was attending classes, the set traps wouldn't disappear, allowing for more efficient use of time.

After returning from class, all I had to do was collect the wild animals hanging from the trees where I'd set the traps.

Starting from small creatures like squirrels and rabbits, if I was particularly lucky, I'd even find a raccoon caught.

Of course, there were more times when the line was broken, or the jerky used as bait had disappeared, leaving him empty-handed.

However, considering that setting the traps required minimal labor, the benefits outweighed the drawbacks.

With the dual food procurement system of direct hunting and trap hunting established, there was more than enough meat for him to eat alone.

The actual act of hunting was less of a problem compared to the labor of handling the game - not a bad problem to have.

Apart from hunting, after the start of school, I managed to significantly improve my standard of living.

Even with materials only gathered from the forest, there were limitations to the quality of items I could create.

However, by picking up discarded items from Sylvanian Academy's construction site and various classrooms, I was able to collect various materials that I couldn't find in the forest.

In this particular time, many buildings in the Sylvanian Academy were being expanded under the patronage of the 'Golden Daughter Lortel'. As a result, numerous construction sites had sprung up around the academy's outskirts, which served as a treasure trove of discarded materials.

Thanks to this, I'd managed to amass a collection of leftover timber, rusted nails, and odds-and-ends of rope. Still, my most precious find had to be the discarded hand axe.

-Thwack! Thwack!

The rhythmic sound of chopping wood punctuated the forest's silence.

I'd been busy splitting firewood, using a tree stump I'd cut down as a makeshift worktable.

The hand axe, gifted by construction workers who no longer found use for it due to its worn-out state, was hands-down my top find for the month.

Much obliged, hardworking folk! I was so grateful tears welled up in my eyes!

"Phew... this is one tough job..."

After roughly cutting the logs with Wind Blade, I meticulously split them lengthwise using the hand axe.

The elemental Wind Blade, basic though it was, didn't have enough power to fell a whole tree in a single swipe.

Previously, when I needed to kindle a fire, I'd use random thin branches I'd haphazardly hacked off from the trees. They were of various sizes, many damp, and as such, they were rather inefficient as fuel.

However, now that I had proper 'firewood' at my disposal, the efficiency of managing

my fires skyrocketed.

Maintaining the fire had been a real struggle. Its warmth was necessary while I slept, and it also served to deter any nearby wildlife, meaning I had to keep it burning constantly.

Unfortunately, with the shoddy kindling I'd been using, the fire wouldn't last, often going out and filling my shelter with choking smoke.

It was challenging enough to secure a few hours of sleep each day, without the added issue of being jolted awake by a smoke-filled shelter.

"But seeing it all stacked up like this, it feels good."

I had roughly fifty pieces of firewood drying by my camp. It was a tough job swinging the axe, but once done, a sense of accomplishment filled me.

It would've been easier to split them all with Wind Blade instead of manually chopping with the axe, but alas, my mana would have been depleted before the task was half completed.

Still... once the moisture evaporated from the firewood, it would provide a stable and effective fuel source.

"Phew, just look at all this sweat..."

I was drenched, my casual clothes sticking to my skin.

On the weekends, I ended up washing my clothes twice a day.

Collecting herbs, edible grass, hunting, refining necessities as I was doing now, or simply checking the camp...

Every moment of my life was a constant cardio workout, so it was a rare day when I wasn't drenched in sweat.

For now, I decided to head to the nearby stream to wash off my sweat.

It wasn't far, just a few dozen meters away, but seeing my camp as I walked back gave me a sense of comfort.

Each day, it was becoming more livable, and I couldn't help but swell with pride at my humble abode.

"..."

However, lately, I found my solitude frequently interrupted.

My gaze fell on Lazy Lucy, sprawled carelessly on a flat rock near the stream, fast asleep. I heaved a sigh at the sight of her.

Since my unexpected run-in with Lucy Mayril at the camp, she had developed a habit of popping into my camp unannounced for her daytime naps.

She visited without a discernible pattern, roaming the Academy at will, dropping by whenever it struck her fancy.

-'Hello.'

We weren't particularly close, yet whenever we crossed paths, we'd casually exchange greetings. She'd nap at my place, and by the time I realized, she'd be gone.

Initially, I was reluctant to befriend such an unpredictable character like Lucy Mayril, but after enduring her constant intrusions for a few days, I had let it be.

Lucy Mayril's visits had come to resemble natural occurrences - unpredictable and unavoidable.

I was already overwhelmed, dealing with the pile of tasks that had accumulated over the weekend. I couldn't afford to waste energy on chasing away a free-loader.

She wasn't causing much trouble. She lazed about, occasionally snacking on pieces of dried meat I'd left out, and left when she pleased.

Eventually, I saw her as part of my camp's scenery, an animated decoration, if you will.

She had expanded her sphere of activity within my camp, often napping on trees or rocks by the stream, bathing in the sunlight. She seemed to be quite fond of the stream's surroundings.

Recently, I had started to dry the skins of raccoons and squirrels that I'd trapped. I placed them in my shelter, and Lucy seemed to thoroughly enjoy their soft and fluffy texture, making quite a fuss about it.

...It indeed felt like I was taking care of a stray cat.

"Zzz..... Zzz....."

I walked past Lucy, sprawled comfortably on a flat rock, sleeping, and headed to the stream to wash my face.

My tired reflection stared back at me from the water's surface. I was exhausted from chopping firewood. As I was about to splash some cool water on my face...

I realized I hadn't checked my stats in a while.

□ □ □ □ □ □

[illegible]

"Huh?!"

At my sudden scream, Lucy woke up with a start and rolled off the rock.

[Name : Ed Rosetail]

Gender : Male

Age : 17

School Year : 2nd

Race : Human

Achievements : None

Vitality 5

Intelligence 5

Dexterity 9

Willpower 7

Luck 6

Detailed Combat Ability>>

Detailed Magic Ability>>

Detailed Life Ability>>

Detailed Alchemy Ability>>

"Hi there, Ed! You're looking bright today! Anything good happen?"

Yes, something had.

I had been diligently improving my carpentry skills and practicing magic, leading to a boost in my Dexterity and Intelligence stats. But that wasn't the exciting part.

My Vitality stat had jumped up by a whole two points!

Can you fathom the significance of this?

Finally, a path had opened to train this darned body of mine, which was devoid of any inherent physical prowess.

Honestly, from a broader point of view, it was odd that my Vitality stat hadn't budged despite the grueling physical labor I had been performing all month.

Yet, this body was lacking in every aspect - strength, agility, endurance... There wasn't a single attribute it excelled at. My spirit was on the verge of breaking with no change in stats, despite rigorous training. Amidst this turmoil, it had jumped up two stages.

The impenetrable wall of training that had persistently thwarted me was crumbling, indicating that I had broken into the next stage. Now, there was a ray of hope for substantial growth.

The excitement was undeniable!

"What? Oh... Nothing much."

Naturally, I kept my poker face intact.

* * *

After Professor Hella's Introduction to Elemental Studies lecture, students started trickling out of the auditorium.

Despite my best efforts to respond as distantly as possible to Yenika, who usually initiated conversations with me, she continued to chat with an unwavering, beaming smile.

"Hey, Ed. We've got that combat practice class tomorrow. It's with the first-years. Our teams are already set. Isn't it thrilling to think about meeting our juniors? I still can't wrap my head around being a senior. Ehehe."

Has the time already come for the practical class? Being a required course, I had no other choice but to participate.

The joint combat practice was essentially mock combat training designed for one-on-one battles. Of course, we didn't use any real lethal weapons or spells.

Most combat students resorted to imitation weapons, while magic students were permitted only basic elemental magic. Alchemy students were also barred from using potent potions or spirit formulas.

Being in the same team didn't necessarily mean we were working together. It was closer to a bracket-style tournament.

The key idea was that the school years were mixed, and one-on-one practice duels were conducted based on a randomly prepared bracket. This spectacle, of course, unfolded before an audience.

The random bracket placements resulted in an array of intriguing matchups.

First year vs first year offered the less experienced first-years a chance to exhibit their skills and receive advice from seniors.

First year vs second year provided an excellent opportunity to get firsthand experience of the seniors' honed combat abilities and magic.

Second year vs second year allowed the spectating first-years to assess the level of combat they should be striving for.

In a nutshell, the crux was the collective viewing of the battles.

From what I knew, all the prominent characters who played significant roles in the narrative took part in this spectator class.

The size of the class was so large that there was no division - combat, magic, or alchemy, everyone participated.

'Princess of Mercy' - Penia, 'Golden Daughter' - Lortel, Ziggs of the Northern Plains, Spirit Mage Yenika, Hard-working Emilie, Lazy Lucy, the Sombre Clevius, Romanticist Adel... The list goes on and on.

But the most crucial person was, without a doubt, Taylee - the 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman'.

I had a rough idea about the tournament bracket. Surprisingly, I even knew all the outcomes. It was a disheartening fact that almost all the battles were won by the first-years.

Despite the lesson's initial intent to learn directly from the second-year students, it quickly descended into chaos.

The first-year class, teeming with formidable individuals, overpowered the second-years in a rather brutal display.

The sight of Professor Glast applauding gleefully, his face a mask of satisfaction, was quite a spectacle.

What could we do? We would have taken the spotlight if things were normal...

Yet, amidst the melee, a lone second-year managed to claw victory from a first-year powerhouse.

Yenika Faelover, a vision of dominance as she completely overpowered her

opponent, the renowned 'Golden Daughter' Lortel.

As I had alluded to earlier, she was the ultimate adversary in the first act, and her introduction into the narrative was precisely during this practical lesson.

"Ed, want to take a look?"

Yenika offered, a grin spreading across her face as she extended the tournament bracket.

I was inclined to decline, to check it out later, but curiosity over who my opponent might be began to bubble within me.

After all, I was an anomaly, a character that shouldn't exist in this narrative. I was plagued by a creeping concern about what would occur if my participation instigated a significant shift in the tournament bracket.

The majority of the first-year students attending this class were pivotal characters in the grander scenario.

Although my primary approach was to maintain a respectful distance from such influential figures, I guessed that I wouldn't have much of a choice if one of them happened to be my direct competitor in this class.

It was just the structure of the class. Therefore, I decided to remain composed, irrespective of who my opponent might be.

"Let's see..."

"Here, look! It's right here!"

Yenika's cheer was infectious as she handed over the tournament bracket, delighted by my genuine interest in her words.

As it turned out, there weren't many surprises. The matchups were largely as I had anticipated. Except for one.

'Group 13 - Ed Rosetail vs Penia Elias Kroel'

The name rang a bell.

"..."

I was at a loss for words.

Oh... my God...

"..."

But isn't this a bit too much?

* * *

Whispers filled the royal family's lodgings as the servants stirred with speculation. Evidently, the new formal attire from the southwestern clothing store of the island had become quite the trend.

Every single item distributed by the Elte Trading Company was selling like wildfire. Princess Penia found this development far from pleasing.

"That crafty merchant's schemes... are all too evident..."

Born with an innate ability to discern the true nature of people, Princess Penia was deeply irked by the sly maneuvers of Lortel, the so-called Golden Daughter.

Lortel was one of the three students of Group A recognized by Professor Glast during the class assignment test. The sole daughter of Elte Keherun, a continental magnate, she possessed a cunning mind, much like her father.

Despite her consistently polite demeanor and impeccable conduct, beneath that facade, she concealed a core that calculated every facet of life in terms of potential profit.

In the privacy of her chamber at the royal quarters, the princess sighed heavily, sinking onto her large, luxurious bed.

For Lortel, even this esteemed institution of learning was no more than another avenue for profit-making.

She squandered her magical talent and extraordinary intellect, capable of memorizing an entire book in a single read, not utilizing them for her studies.

Princess Penia had an uneasy feeling. She couldn't help but think that the actions of Elte Trading Company, gradually gaining control of Sylvanian logistics, were somehow connected to her.

"I may not like her, but... I can't deal with her based solely on personal sentiment..."

She slumped onto her bed, a disarray of magical texts, paperwork, and scattered bags.

"Once again, I'm tangled up in politics and social issues... even though I've finally made it to this haven of learning..."

Even if this was technically royal accommodations, it was a far cry from the actual royal palace.

At the very least, in the palace, she wouldn't indulge in the undignified act of sprawling out on her bed, or scatter reference materials and papers across it.

She found herself somewhat amused at her uncharacteristic behavior, yet there was also an inexplicable sense of satisfaction. After all, that was just human nature.

Smiling wryly, the princess stretched herself out once more.

"Ugh... Well... the key thing is to refine myself through learning."

With this thought, she started checking the notice that was distributed to the first-year students. It was important to thoroughly review any announcements concerning classes.

After reviewing the team formation for the combined combat practice, she let herself sink back into her bed.

"This... is yet another peculiar turn of fate..."

She had spent three restless days and nights pondering whether to approve his expulsion, eventually deciding to put it on hold. Instead, she asked Commander Cler and Dean McDowell to keep a close watch on him. He was a unique individual, enigmatic even under her sharp insight.

Though his case had been sidelined due to the beginning of the semester and a host

of other incidents, he still remained an entity that she couldn't ignore.

"There's no need to overthink..."

Deciding to get some sleep, she left herself as she was, nestled into the soft bed. She hadn't fully removed her school uniform, and her books lay strewn about, but her first priority was to alleviate her body's exhaustion – a behavior unthinkable in the royal palace.

Although he was a man shrouded in mysteries, his magical abilities didn't appear to be exceptional. She felt confident that she could easily best him without any significant upheaval.

At this moment, there were just too many concerns on Princess Penia's mind.

All the Emperor of Kroel probably wanted for her was to set everything aside and fully immerse herself in the joy of learning. To discard the intricate political and social issues and relish in her student life.

However, for this young ruler, that simple desire was exceedingly difficult.

Perhaps, it was just the fate of a monarch.

CHAPTER 15

The concept of the "butterfly effect" is a remarkable one.

The theory that a minuscule gust of wind, birthed from a butterfly's wings, could escalate into a hurricane devastating buildings on a faraway continent... That was the crux of it, at least.

This idea often came up in discussions on chaos theory, highlighting the intricate complexities of life and the Herculean task of predicting the future, given the myriad of variables at play.

This seemingly convoluted theory can be distilled down to a simple notion: even the most trivial of events can snowball, leading to unexpectedly monumental consequences.

The wisdom here is profound: Don't attempt to control the universe according to your whims.

I never anticipated that I'd come to fully grasp the weight of these words during our joint combat drill.

As it turns out, there's no such thing as an old saying that doesn't hold true.

* * *

The student union comprised three buildings, one of which, the Iron Hall, had a long-standing tradition of serving as the venue for joint combat classes.

Its coliseum-style arena and audience seating were immaculately clean, every seat and the entire floor sparkled.

True to the prestigious reputation of the school, even the venue for physical combat training was crafted with elegance.

I was perched on one of those seats, observing the mock combat practice that was unfolding in the center of the arena.

This year's freshman class was in the midst of their own star wars. The rare elemental talents, typically just one or two per grade level, were in abundance, drawing the focused attention of the sophomores.

The trio that had gained the endorsement of the notoriously meticulous Professor Glast were the talk of the academy. Ziggs of the Northern Plains, 'Golden Girl' Lortel, and Lazy Lucy.

Public attention was undeniably riveted on these three magic department novices.

-Boom!

"Thank you. That was a valuable experience. Your control of mana was impressive. I learned a great deal."

In the heart of the arena, Ziggs, a descendent of the Northern nomadic tribe, had used his wind magic to force a senior student out of the fighting zone.

His lengthy curly locks, trailing down to his neck, fluttered in the aftermath.

"I hope to learn more from you in the future."

And with that, he bowed politely. Something was definitely off about that guy.

His sophomore opponent... what was his name... Michael, I think... Regardless, he was mentally disoriented, being escorted out of the arena by his attendants.

In student combat practices between freshmen and sophomores, magic beyond the basics was strictly prohibited. Yet, it was evident that Ziggs' magical prowess extended beyond the elementary level.

It was certain he would have displayed a far more formidable front had he utilized higher-level magic.

Rumors circulated among the sophomores.

-Another freshman has won.'

-At this rate, won't the sophomores face a complete defeat?'

-'Something's off about this year's freshmen. How'd such monsters gather in one place?'

The annual joint combat practice was a ritual event, but this year's result was disastrous. Despite their seniority, the sophomores were mercilessly defeated by the freshmen. After a while, it felt like the sophomores were merely punching bags, showcasing the freshmen's skills.

A sorrowful sight, indeed.

"Students Lucy Mayril and Taylee McLore, please finish your practice preparations and proceed to the waiting room."

Then, the announcement everyone had been waiting for - the duel pairings. The crowd immediately erupted into murmurs. The moment had arrived.

I also adjusted my posture, focusing my attention on the stage.

The world's eyes were undoubtedly on Lucy Mayril, the genius rewriting the history of Sylvanian Academy.

However, that was merely a plot device to direct the audience's attention to the true protagonist through a twist in the narrative.

The real focus should be on Taylee McLore, the protagonist born with the fate of a swordsman. Even though he'd never held a sword in his life, he cut through Lucy's swift magic with his debut swordsmanship.

The magic she thought would hit him without a doubt was blocked, and Taylee seized the moment of her surprise to quickly close the distance. Caught off guard, Lucy unleashed a mid-level magic attack, the Lightning Strike.

In response to the impromptly cast magic, Taylee was overwhelmed. However, because Lucy had used a mid-level spell, she was disqualified. Thus, Taylee was honored with his first victory against Lucy Mayril.

"Lucy Mayril, please complete your preparations and come up to the dueling arena."

Ah... that was a memorable moment.

Taylee McLore had lived a life hearing he was talentless. Even after coming to Sylvanian, he was treated as a failing student.

Constantly harassed by the likes of Ed Rosetail, and consistently failing in combat classes, it was a life of hardship.

Despite these struggles, Taylee never ceased his efforts. It was a moment of reward for all his struggles.

The drama was so intense, with the close-up of his childhood friend Ayla shedding tears at his victory, it genuinely tugged at my heartstrings.

"Lucy Mayril, please. Come up to the dueling arena."

...What?

"Lucy Mayril. Please, Lucy Mayril. Proceed to the dueling arena."

Wait, where did she go?

* * *

The odd excitement I felt at Taylee McLore's entrance was difficult to put into words.

Despite it being a world beyond the screen, I had lived several lifetimes as him, from miserable and hollow bad endings to the lingering true endings. I had seen it all many times over.

At the same time, it was inevitable to remember the numerous trials that lay before Taylee McLore.

Despite being born with the destiny of a swordsman, his life was far from triumphant. There wasn't a single path among the many he could take that was not strenuous or challenging.

I had resolved to cheer on Taylee. After all, he was the one who'd chosen to dive headfirst into all of the trials and tribulations that Sylvanian had in store, while I was merely attempting to get by.

It seemed only right to support him.

"I will do my best!"

Taylee declared from the stage.

A wave of enthusiastic applause washed over him. A true show of encouragement. The spectators already had a clear vision of what lay ahead — the inevitable clash between Taylee and Lucy Mayril.

He was unaware of what he didn't know. Among all the students gathered here, he was the one blessed with the most outstanding talent.

As an insider privy to this knowledge, I found myself curiously anticipating the inevitable shift in public sentiment.

But that's another story. At that moment, my attention was elsewhere...

"Oof, ugh."

I was engaged in the task of pinching Lucy Mayril's cheeks.

We were stationed at the reserve podium behind the central stage of Iron Hall, a spot I had stumbled upon while seeking a place to nap in the middle of a joint practical class.

Given the inconvenience of leaving Iron Hall, it was a no-brainer to find a suitable spot for a nap indoors.

It was only a moment ago when I discovered Lucy, huddled and dozing under the reserve podium.

"Ugh, oof."

"Hey, wake up. It's your turn."

After a considerable effort to rouse her, Lucy Mayril managed to lift her torso from beneath the podium.

Her expression mirrored the dazed look she wore when waking up from a nap in my tree hut. Her hair was a mess, half undone from where it had been neatly tied.

Her cheek was marked by the imprint of her hair, and her response to my prodding was as expected.

"...I'm hungry."

She shook her head and stretched, greeting me in a manner that suggested she recognized me.

"Hi."

And then she asked, nonchalantly.

"Do you have any beef jerky?"

I had to laugh at the absurdity.

"I do."

"Give me a little."

"Finish your duel first."

[Student Lucy Mayril, please come up quickly.]

It was a strange sight indeed: Lucy, the duel participant, emerging from beneath the reserve podium.

Everyone, from the spectators in the stands to the assistant professor leading the class, watched with expressions of utter disbelief.

Nonetheless, as long as she didn't run off entirely, the duel would proceed. I was a tad worried, though. If the duel fell through entirely, it might turn the tides in Taylee's favor.

"Ugh!"

A single hair tie dropped next to Lucy as she struggled to lift her languid body. One side of her carefully tied hair had come undone.

" ... "

With her hair unraveled on one side, she picked up the hair tie and handed it to me. Her request left me dumbfounded.

"Can you tie my hair..."

"No, just let it loose and get going."

"No... If I look disheveled, the maids at Ophelis Hall will scold me. They're really intimidating..."

Lucy, on par with Principal Obel in Sylvanian Academy, was petrified of only one thing—the maids of Ophelis Hall.

The eccentric Lucy, notorious for sleeping in random corners of the street or scattered across building rooftops, was only ever seen clean and decent due to the diligent work of these maids.

They were an elite force serving high-ranking officials, but their patience was often tested by the task of reining in this wayward soul.

Exhaling heavily, I took Lucy's hand and led her to the nearest spectator seat. I fetched a hair tie, swept her hair to one side, and neatly bound it in sync with the other side.

The irony of my situation didn't escape me—I was supposed to duel with Princess Penia, but instead, I found myself fussing over another person's appearance.

To make matters worse, our every move was under the watchful eyes of everyone present in the Iron Hall. It was quite a spectacle.

- 'That's Ed Rosetail, right?'

- 'Is he still attending school? That's persistence.'

- 'And who's that freshman he's with?'

- 'They look close, don't they?'

- 'Really? Or is he just her guardian?'

The second-year student infamous for his notoriety was seen fixing the hair of the first-year student who was celebrated for her academic prowess—it was a scene so ridiculous it invited laughter.

I could feel my own cheeks flush with embarrassment, prompting me to finish fixing her hair post-haste.

I helped the dazed Lucy up, straightened her sloppily worn coat, tucked in her shirt that peeked out over her skirt, adjusted her disheveled collar, and straightened her sagging knee socks.

I fixed her loose tie, and she finally looked somewhat respectable. Her oversized sleeves, a result of her indifference towards her uniform size, were left as they were.

"All set?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Better get going, then."

I ushered Lucy toward the dueling stage. Lucy, who yawned expansively and appeared utterly bored, took her position opposite Taylee.

[Let the duel begin...]

-Boom!!!!

Without wasting a second, she slammed a lower-tier lightning spell right into Taylee's face.

The whole sequence probably lasted about 0.3 seconds.

* * *

Taylee McLore's life was an unending chain of trials.

He was a country boy with a track record of failure from the onset, never achieving noteworthy grades since his admission—an underachiever, a reject no one recognized.

Except for Ayla, his childhood friend, nobody held any optimism for Taylee's future.

Slowly, even his family started losing hope in Taylee, who consistently demonstrated below-average capabilities. There were numerous instances when he contemplated giving up everything.

For Taylee, gaining admission to Sylvanian Academy was a golden opportunity to vindicate himself. It felt as if he was finally bestowed a divine favor.

He had pulled an all-nighter and scraped by, passing the written exam by the skin of his teeth. Then he barely made it through the practical exam, dodging failure because of a vindictive second-year senior.

The princess's mercy was his saving grace.

The trials didn't cease when the semester kicked off. Yet, against the odds, he faced and overcame each one.

During the placement test, he had nearly perished at the hands of a Kobold monster, accidentally conjured. At the opening ceremony, the ridicule of his peers for his dropout status had barred him from entering the banquet hall.

Despite these hurdles, he found the strength to push through, thanks to his childhood friend Ayla and Aiden, another student on the brink of dropping out.

And now, he was at a critical juncture - a moment of truth.

Enter Lucy Mayril, a prodigious talent who had garnered the awe of freshmen, upperclassmen, and even professors.

Everyone around him had already accepted his defeat, showing him a kind of misplaced pity. The situation seemed bleak, but Taylee never allowed despair to quench his hope.

The odds seemed insurmountable. His peers scoffed at his efforts. Undeterred, Taylee honed his body and martial arts skills, swinging his fists and spending his nights in rigorous training.

Even when all around him expected him to fail, Taylee did not relinquish his efforts to win.

And here he was.

Caught off guard, he had found himself pinned to the dueling arena wall with one swift strike.

"Cough... Huff... Ugh..."

Yet, Taylee managed to rise. The arena around him was strewn with an assortment of weaponry - swords, bows, whips, you name it.

These mock weapons, blunted and clumsily modified, were meant for the combat students.

Taylee glanced at the knuckles fitted onto his hand. This was a weapon he had shared many battles with. But now, he took it off.

An electrifying sensation surged through his mind.

Among the scattered weapons, a shabby wooden sword caught his eye. Drawn to it as if by a spell, he reached for it. Taylee picked up the wooden sword and slowly assumed a stance with his battered body.

This was his first time wielding a sword.

His adversary was none other than a revered genius wizard.

Still, Taylee rose to his feet once more. He was standing because of those who had believed in him. He owed it to them to stand tall and fight back.

Driven by this sole purpose, Taylee gritted his teeth.

"He's picked up a sword.....!"

I had gasped when I saw Taylee pinned to the wall, but as he raised his sword, I felt a renewed surge of hope and clenched my fist.

That's it... you've got this...!

"Lucy Mayril!"

Taylee's voice, fiery and resolute, rang out as he called Lucy's name.

I felt a pull, a compulsion, watching from the stands. This was it, the defining moment.

In the throes of the world's challenges, abandoned by his destiny, Taylee stood his ground. This was the pivotal moment he lit the beacon of resurgence.

His relentless cry as a swordsman unwilling to surrender his life was etched deep within the hearts of the student body. It was precisely at this instant.

"Ughaaa!"

His agility was beyond belief for someone who had just grasped a sword.

The sensation of mana was imbued within the crude wooden sword Taylee brandished. I was familiar with this.

It was the Sword Aura, a privilege exclusively granted to those destined to become swordsmen. Before it, a heavily layered mana wall, regardless of its thickness, could be effortlessly sliced as if it were mere paper.

The spectators felt the crushing weight of his momentum.

The students found themselves holding their breath as Taylee's aura shifted discernibly. The atmosphere was tinged with a hopeful anticipation of some unforeseen event about to unfold.

Then, an unexplainable gust of wind swept through.

Suddenly, without a logical cause, the abrupt gust momentarily lifted Taylee into the air.

-Kwang!!!

With the subsequent lightning spell, Taylee was struck squarely again and embedded into the wall.

This time around, it took roughly half a second.

"...Huh?"

* * *

It was a flawless knockdown this time. Thick smoke billowed up, revealing Taylee, who appeared utterly battered and bruised.

"Huaaaam..."

Lucy Mayril awoke, stretching lazily with a yawn.

"You did well..."

Having wrapped up an ostensibly tedious task, Lucy descended from the stage, a look of gratification on her face. The audience was absolutely silent until this moment.

Despite all eyes trained on her, Lucy, seemingly indifferent, approached me with her distinctive springy stride. Then, with a vacant expression, she tugged at my shirt collar, whining once more.

"Can't you give me jerky now?"

In the midst of it all, I had an epiphany.

The wind magic Lucy utilized during the duel appeared like a basic wind magic variant but was not an original application by her.

I was familiar with the spell that momentarily restricts an adversary's movements, throws off balance, and creates a tactical opening.

It was the 'Protection of the Storm', a perpetually active skill acquired through a pact with Merilda, a Wind High-Spirit.

There hasn't been a significant amount of time passed. Merely a few days.

She, who was perpetually in a state of languid slumber, had casually entered a pact with a Wind High-Spirit

Traditionally, Merilda and Lucy existed as separate entities in the narrative. It could

be assumed they were not meant to intersect. Lucy hardly ever lingered in the northern forest to begin with.

However, she recently started to hang out in my camp, and as a result, crossed paths with Merilda. Consequently, she managed to employ Merilda's protection and grew unnecessarily stronger.

But even so... One could never imagine that she would establish a pact with a Wind High-Spirit in just a matter of days.

"..."

I subtly raised my head, directing my gaze toward Taylee.

Taylee, having relinquished his sword, sat down in hesitation, his head bowed low. The usually fiery vitality in his eyes was conspicuously absent.

The vast chasm of overwhelming talent was as brutal as violence. Once you come face-to-face with that insurmountable wall, your spirit shatters in an instant.

Crap... this looks like a serious problem...

I swiftly rose from my seat. This couldn't be ignored. I shrugged off Lucy who was clinging to me and moved towards Taylee, who was exiting the stage, his face painted with utter despair.

"[Next up for combat training, student Ed Rosetail and the esteemed Princess Penia Elias Kroel...]"

Amidst the commotion, I heard my name called out. Princess Penia, having adjusted her attire in the stands, now rose to her feet.

At the crossroads leading to the combat ring, I crossed paths with Princess Penia. Her eyes flashed with their usual hostility at my sight. I was hardly taken aback by her antagonistic demeanor.

From the princess's standpoint, she seemed to have resolved something internally, but at this juncture, Princess Penia was not on my priority list.

"Ed Rosetail... About last time..."

As the princess attempted to speak, I walked past her without a word. If I lingered, Taylee would have completely disappeared.

While ignoring a princess is an offense that would invite public outrage, in this academy where learning takes precedence over status, it wouldn't lead to severe consequences.

However, at the moment, there was something far more pressing.

Unperturbed by the surprised look of the princess, I focused on Taylee, who was gradually fading into the crowd. In a clear and loud voice, I called out to him.

"Hey! Taylee!"

Whether or not this was the right thing to do, it certainly felt better than standing idly by.

"Your efforts won't go unrewarded! Keep your chin up! Hey! Stand tall! There's nothing to be ashamed of!"

If Taylee's spirit was completely shattered, it could potentially lead to my own downfall. I couldn't let him just walk away.

"Walk with your head high! You did a good job! Your opponent was just too tough, that's all! Don't let this setback break you!"

Yeah, don't give up just yet!

It's your turn to bear the brunt, not me! This academy still has countless challenges to face!

I kept shouting words of encouragement until Taylee, who was slowly retreating into the crowd, was out of sight. My words echoed with genuine desperation.

CHAPTER 16

- 'Penia, you were born blessed by the gods.'

The first person to realize the intuitive nature of Princess Penia was her father, the Emperor of the Kroel Empire.

Life as royalty is a ceaseless procession of plots and stratagems. Viewed only from the outside, the dazzling and lofty life of the royalty might not reveal its underlying sticky darkness.

Thus, it's incorrect for the Kroel Emperor to dub Princess Penia's ability to gauge people as a 'blessing from the gods'.

Her ability was not a gift from the gods. It was an acquired sense, honed to protect herself in the gloomy abyss of royal intrigue.

This understanding gave Princess Penia the confidence in her abilities.

She had seen the light of greed in the eyes of the regent who plotted to poison her mother-in-law, the covetous gestures of the duchess who wanted her son to become a royal, the trembling pupils of the servant who stole the gold watch chain from her bedroom.

She heard the anxious footsteps of the commander who embezzled the maintenance fees of the knight's order, and the jealous gaze of the blood relatives who envied her power.

She even noted the trembling voice of the spy from the dukedom who disguised as a maid to gather information.

She knew that beneath the gaze of all those who reverently looked upon the noble 'Princess of Mercy', lurked a grim abyss.

Despite piercing through all these vile motives, she still managed to lead a dignified life of a princess, feigning ignorance.

"I look forward to our duel."

She had no choice but to stare straight at the man who had finished preparing for the duel and was politely greeting her.

Princess Penia's intuition was extraordinary. To possess an intuition superior to hers, one would practically have to employ a mind-reading technique.

- 'Hahaha, is that Ed Rosetail?! He used to dress in clothes dripping with jewels, but he looks pitiful now!'

- 'He looks quite becoming in his humble attire!'

- 'He was always haughty with absolutely no magical talent to back it up, now his true colors will be exposed!'

Whispers floated up to the duel arena. They wanted to jeer loudly but restrained themselves because the princess of their nation was present.

"Yes, I look forward to it too."

Lifting her hand lightly, Princess Penia sensed the flow of magic. She was in peak condition. Maintaining good health was also an important trait of an excellent mage.

She narrowed her eyes and stared at the man.

- 'Your efforts will surely be rewarded! Don't lose heart! Hey, straighten your back! You have nothing to be embarrassed about!'

- 'Walk proudly! You did well! It was just bad luck that your opponent was stronger! Don't be discouraged by this minor setback!'

The urgent words shouted to a boy on the verge of failing, ignoring even the princess of the nation.

Initially, it was Ed Rosetail's desperation that surprised her more than being ignored.

- 'Did you hear him shouting at Taylee? He's really severe.'

- 'Ugh. He torments him, then makes a fuss. I wonder if he wanted to tease someone

who couldn't use magic that badly.'

- 'Or maybe he's decided to play nice, finally. Why... would he root for the kid he used to harass? Something along those lines.'

- 'Wow, his intentions really do seem devious.'

- 'Isn't that just who he is?'

The audience's whispers had evolved into audible murmurs. These murmurs had traveled from the viewing stands, reaching the ears of Princess Penia. There was no way Ed Rosetail could have missed them.

However, the look in Ed Rosetail's eyes was calm, like a clear pond undisturbed by even a single drop of water. There was no trace of unease in his gaze.

For Princess Penia, discerning emotions from such a gaze was a simple task.

Apathy, disinterest, that everything was fine.

It was a familiar feeling. Ed Rosetail was currently exuding this demeanor. The snide whispers from the crowd couldn't make a dent in his composure.

The feeling was no different from her first encounter with Ed Rosetail at the camp. In life, one tends to come across plenty of such individuals.

People who are apathetic, who don't care one way or another, who remain indifferent regardless of what others might say.

At the end of the day, they are the center of their own lives. Once a staunch belief is firmly embedded in their hearts, they project an unshakeable resolve, unaffected by the opinions of others.

Such individuals, surprisingly enough, were abundant even among the first-year students.

Lucy Mayril was like that, the 'Golden Daughter' Lortel was as well, and so was Ziggs of the Northern Plains.

Upon realizing this, she felt an unexpected sense of relief. Finally, she felt like she

was beginning to understand the enigma that was Ed Rosetail.

Though it took some time, she now saw Ed Rosetail as an equal under her insightful gaze. Armed with this certainty, she finally managed to rise from her seat.

However, his audacity to blatantly ignore the princess and stride past her, his earnest encouragement of a first-year student he himself was about to flunk, threw Princess Penia's mind into chaos once again.

Just when she thought she had understood his inner psyche and was about to grasp his true identity, his actions slipped away, like a slippery fish, leaving the princess flustered.

Was it a shout intended to mock the rattled Taylee?

Was it a hypocritical attempt to sanitize his own past by publicly supporting Taylee?

Without knowing the full context, anyone would likely fall for the crowd's speculations.

However, Princess Penia saw through him. She saw his desperate plea, one he hadn't shown even once since the entrance examination. She clearly saw his distress.

If only he had implored her like that when they had met at the camp, she wouldn't be so conflicted now.

'Please don't expel me, I sincerely regret my actions. Please, grant me another chance.'

Had he fallen to his knees, wringing his hands, pleading with all his might, she wouldn't be harboring such uneasy feelings now.

Before the imposing figure of the princess, a multitude of people had bowed their heads, pleading desperately.

Yet there he stood, Ed Rosetail, dismissive about his impending expulsion, consistently indifferent amid countless students hurling mockery and jeers.

What was even more bewildering was his peculiar display of frustration when the freshman, whom he had tried to expel himself, became disheartened.

"Ed Rosetail. You have a knack for throwing me off balance."

The princess released a heavy sigh. Was all this truly worth her energy?

She was growing weary of being buffeted by the ebbs and flows of his unfathomable inner world.

After all, he was just a student swept up in the maelstrom of a scandal.

He wasn't some scheming warlord plotting to usurp the throne, a corrupt regent pilfering from the treasury, or a thieving servant coveting the royal family's wealth.

Even if he harbored an innermost self that eluded even the princess's perceptive gaze, what of it?

Yes, now was the perfect chance to clear the air. She could resolve it all with a single duel. Thus, the princess fortified her resolve.

Regardless of the circumstances, she now had the opportunity to engage in a definitive clash with this enigmatic man, Ed Rosetail.

"With this duel, I wish to make a definitive end."

The world was filled with mysteries. Yet, if there was a chance to emphatically clear the air, to laugh freely or to weep openly, that was enough.

The backstory, whatever it may be, held little significance. The cosmos wouldn't implode because she couldn't fully grasp Ed Rosetail.

By now, Ed Rosetail's mana capacity had been gauged adequately. It wasn't spectacular, but observing him control the flow of magic effortlessly over his hand, it was clear he was no easy opponent.

The upcoming duel was originally a showdown between a freshman and a sophomore. Given the disparity in power levels, they were both restricted to using only basic magic as a handicap.

Observing Ed Rosetail, who while relaxing his body was controlling the flow of magic, she could deduce that he had perfected his command of basic elemental magic through relentless repetition.

The extent of his abilities in intermediate elemental magic remained uncertain, but at the very least, his proficiency in basic elemental magic was beyond doubt.

While Princess Penia's magical prowess couldn't be described as an exceptional gift like Lucy or Lortel's, her inherently diligent disposition ensured she never overlooked her magical training.

"[The duel shall commence now.]"

Upon the assistant professor's signal, Princess Penia assumed her stance.

The first strike would allow her to assess her opponent's measure. Princess Penia's expertise, water elemental magic, was ideally suited for unpredictable attacks.

Responding to every shift in the trajectory of her sudden offensive was no easy feat.

"I'm starting."

As Princess Penia raised her hand, she brought forth the basic elemental magic 'Water Ball'.

The fluid mass of water, morphing freely through the harnessing of magic, was a crafty attack. It launched a substantial assault on the enemy's guard within the blink of an eye.

Princess Penia could conjure up to five such water orbs simultaneously, providing a multidirectional assault. But for the moment, she produced only one, opting to measure the defensive abilities of her adversary.

Ed Rosetail's choice of elemental magic was a blend of wind and fire. She wondered, how would he counter?

Depending on his response, she'd adjust her plan of attack, gradually ramping up her power while battling with every ounce of her strength.

She was engaged in a dramatic fight to wipe the thought of that mysterious man from her mind. There were, after all, far too many other matters in the world that demanded her attention.

With this resolve, she launched her water orb. Its trajectory shifted as it hurtled

towards Ed Rosetail.

She saw it. Ed Rosetail's eyes were following the water orb's path with focused intensity. Would he utilize wind or fire? How would he defend, and how should she counter once his defenses were up?

-Boom!

However, the water orb that Penia launched struck Ed Rosetail squarely in the abdomen.

Ed Rosetail's body briefly hovered in mid-air before he tumbled to the ground. Dust swirled up around him, and there lay Ed Rosetail, completely sapped of energy, sprawled awkwardly on the ground.

-'...Lost.'

-'Excuse me?'

Princess Penia's pupils widened with surprise.

-'Hahaha!'

-'Wow, look at that! He's even more pathetic than Taylee!'

-'He played it cool, but one hit and he's down!'

-'Princess Penia! You were incredible! Really showed him who's boss!'

The spectators, previously holding back, burst into applause and whoops of approval. They reveled in the satisfying sight of Ed Rosetail, their common adversary, knocked down in such a gratifying fashion.

But Princess Penia, standing on the opposite side of the duel platform, saw everything clearly.

Until the very moment her water orb was launched, Ed Rosetail's eyes had been fixed on its trajectory.

It wasn't that he couldn't defend himself.

He had simply chosen not to.

"What the hell are you..."

"Thanks for the match. I've learned a lot."

Brushing dust off his clothes, Ed Rosetail rose and saluted the princess. Only then did he look straight at her.

It was at this moment that Princess Penia came to a realization.

Throughout the duel, he hadn't met her gaze even once.

He had been entirely disinterested in the duel from the start.

A feeling welled up within Princess Penia, as if a burning lump was stuck in her throat. The discomfort she hoped to easily brush off after a refreshing and invigorating battle was, instead, eating her up from inside.

* * *

Is this the time to be dueling?!

I quickly exited the duel platform, taking rapid strides. Today, once again, I was greeted by the familiar scornful jeers. They seemed to take immense satisfaction in seeing me knocked down pathetically by a single magic spell.

"Where on earth had Taylee vanished to?"

Every situation had its pecking order, each facet carrying varying degrees of significance.

When interacting with Princess Penia, the paramount concern was to ensure her narrative remained unaffected. She was, after all, a vital character in this scenario.

However, of even greater consequence than the princess was Taylee, the protagonist of our tale.

Should Taylee succumb entirely to this challenge, allowing his spirit to break, my grand scheme of reaping all available benefits and breezing through graduation

would suffer a crippling blow.

So, action was mandatory. Regardless of how vital Princess Penia might be, her importance could never eclipse Taylee's actions.

"Regardless, the first order of business is to find that boy, Taylee."

I dismissed the mocking catcalls trailing me, striding purposefully towards the exit of Iron Hall down the corridor.

The practical class was still in session, but all I needed to do was to blend into the collected crowd and make my escape.

If only I could discover a means to reorient Taylee's spirits, any adverse impact on our grades could be offset by sheer determination.

With that in mind, I continued my brisk pace, but there was a tail trailing me.

"Ed Rosetail!"

Surprisingly, it was Princess Penia who'd bolted from the dueling platform. She was panting and leaning against the wall, hardly the epitome of physical fitness, yet she'd hurried after me.

"Huh? Princess Penia, it's quite unusual for you to venture out here without an escort..."

I turned to face Princess Penia, an expression of utter bafflement plastered across my face.

"Would you please drop that 'I'm clueless' facade!"

She shouted, her voice echoing with undisguised ire. Her reaction was, frankly, a little startling. Wasn't this entirely out of character for her?

What could possibly have stirred her emotions to such an extent?

"Always so... vague, so ambiguous... Do you have any idea how exasperating it is for someone trying to understand you?"

"I... I'm not quite sure what you're trying to say. Regarding the duel, I learned a..."

"What lesson...!"

Her clenched fist was noticeably shaking. She seemed genuinely furious.

"Princess Penia. Please... compose yourself."

"When you clearly didn't even intend to win, only focusing on leaving the dueling stage as soon as possible...!"

"Princess Penia. Your voice is rather loud..."

While I wasn't typically someone who'd outwardly show discomfort, the princess's unanticipated response had caught me off guard.

Princess Penia was a dignified monarch who detested the misuse of authority, always maintaining her composure and decorum in any circumstance.

Scolding an inferior in such an undignified manner, shaking her hand in agitation, and elevating her voice was unbecoming.

It not only went against her principles but could potentially stir unfavorable rumors if anyone were to witness or overhear.

It seemed that the princess was at her wit's end.

"Keeping up with class progression is already a struggle, and that conniving merchant is scheming to consume the school behind a market front...! Professor Glast's stubbornness knows no bounds...! All the while, the servants wave around royal laws as if they're some sort of excuse...! As if I don't already have enough on my plate! This is hard!"

Why was she so irate...?

But why was she giving me an earful? Was my half-hearted duel such a great crime? I understand she may be carrying a lot of bottled-up emotions, but exploding on me seemed uncalled for.

"Princess, please calm down."

Bracing myself for a scolding, I made contact with the princess. It was merely placing a hand on each shoulder and looking her directly in the eyes.

"Take deep breaths."

Upon feeling the large hand envelop her shoulder, she finally took a breath. It wasn't common for anyone to dare touch the princess, so she must have been startled by the sudden intimacy in our private setting.

In unfamiliar situations, people often experience a surge of discomfort, leading them to regain their composure.

"There's no need for such agitation. Breathe in, and breathe out."

Upon my instruction, Princess Penia began to take deep breaths...

"Ah... uh...!"

She abruptly recognized her unbecoming behavior and hid her face in her hands.

This was her moment of clarity. Shame typically sets in after a bit of time has passed.

"Ah... Please forget about... what just happened..."

"Ah... yes..."

Did I have any other choice?

For some time, she remained with her face buried in her palms. Her ears had reddened, indicating profound embarrassment.

...Was it over?

Could I leave now?

"I have this bad habit. I should be straightforward with my questions and inquiries, but I always find myself trying to speculate on ulterior motives. Perhaps living in the royal family for so long has caused this."

She then began sharing unasked-for facts.

No, I understand! I'll listen attentively later with sincere responses!

Just let me go for now! I need to find Taylee!!!!

"I was aware of this... bad habit..."

Yet I couldn't just blurt out in front of the princess that I didn't care, to please let me go because I was in a rush. So, I simply nodded in agreement.

"I see. Princess, in that case..."

"So, I'm going to ask you directly."

What was it this time?

"This is my theory. You either possess some knowledge about the Rosetail family's darkness, or perhaps you have suffered at their hands and have sought to sever ties? Needing a plausible excuse for the backlash, you tormented a student named Taylee to create a ripple effect?"

Only then did the princess squarely meet my gaze and continue her story. It was quite a sharp deduction. Often off the mark, but the notion that there existed a dark side to the Rosetail Family held true.

I think I mentioned it once before, but the head of the Rosetail Family, Krepin Rosetail, was indeed researching immortal magic with the aid of Mebula, the evil god from the mythic era.

During the process, countless lives were sacrificed under the guise of experimentation.

Yet, this was a narrative for the latter part of the scenario where the princess would investigate using her academic authority. It was a storyline yet a long way off.

"By chance, if you know anything about the dark side of the Rosetail family..."

Why would I divulge that?

"I really don't know about such things."

"...That's impossible."

The princess swiftly intercepted my reply.

"Logically, it doesn't add up. Then, what about what you just shouted at Taylee? Why would you encourage and cheer on the person you tried to expel? Isn't it true that you don't really hate Taylee in the first place?"

"Um... that..."

This kid, her questioning is sharp, isn't it?

"That was... just a joke. Otherwise... um... why... why does everyone hate me? So, if I cheered on Taylee, wouldn't it seem like... something had changed...? Something like that..."

"Anyone can see that's a lie!"

"No, it's not a lie..."

"I take great pride in my ability to judge people."

The princess leaned in once again and spoke with conviction. It was a fair point. Princess Penia, the Princess of Mercy, was quite skilled at sizing up people, even refusing to follow others in that regard.

"Even if the whole world thought differently, at that moment, I saw through you. The moment you were encouraging Taylee, you were genuinely desperate and earnest, weren't you?"

Well, I had no choice but to be desperate and earnest... if he got discouraged, I'd be ruined...?

But I couldn't explain that, so I resorted to the 'ultimate defense strategy' widely used by everyone from grade schoolers to adults.

"I'm serious..."

Do you have any proof?

You don't have any proof, do you?

It's all circumstantial, isn't it?

"No, that..."

"I'm serious... It's really true..."

There was no room for any further argument. No matter how insightful she was, if I say it's not, it's not. If she insists, she'll have to bring tangible evidence.

"It's really... really true..."

"Oh... really...!"

Having come to this point, the princess again tore at her hair in a fit of frustration.

With a desperate look of exasperation, she stomped her feet and repeated the same words.

With nowhere to vent her frustration and the irritation not subsiding, the poor ground took the brunt of the princess's stomps.

"Ah---! Really--!!!!"

Pursuing a truth that feels just out of grasp... being repeatedly slipped away from like a slippery fish, would undoubtedly make steam rise from anyone's head. Especially when this had been going on for several weeks.

On top of that, her insight allowed her to see through anyone crisply, an experience Princess Penia was not used to, so the frustration and suffocation would be twice, no thrice as much.

But I had no choice. A stable flow of future events was my only lifeline.

Would you have told her if you were me...?

CHAPTER 17

Suddenly, Princess Penia bolted from the dueling grounds, rushing towards the exit. Knight Commander Cler dutifully followed, struggling to keep pace.

The Princess, once agitated and anguished by the intense atmosphere, finally calmed upon seeing her trusted bodyguard, Cler.

No matter how angry she might have been, she couldn't lose her decorum in front of her.

After all, she was still a princess.

"I can't give up just yet."

However, it was apparent she wasn't completely calm, her face still painted with pouty defiance.

"You're hiding something, aren't you? It's like you're carrying a burden or... keeping a secret... I'm not sure why you're being so obstinate about not telling me, but I know something is off. Not that I sense malice or anything sinister..."

"I think you're overestimating me, Princess..."

"...Listen closely. I can't make any claims without evidence right now, but..."

Her radiant golden eyes were fixed on me.

Sure enough, the more I thought about it, the more I realized that Princess Penia was just as intriguing a figure as Lucy Mayril.

Her piercing insight, unique to the princess, made it challenging to deal with her.

Just as she had caught a glimpse of my desperation when I was shouting at Taylee, her sharp intuition did not allow even a moment's lapse.

In 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', Princess Penia's intuition was simply depicted as

an ability to predict an opponent's next move during combat or to catch a glimpse of some of their stats.

Outside of that, it was treated as nothing more than a plot device.

But now, facing that power in reality, it was both annoying and mentally draining. Even in daily life, it was difficult to deal with her sharp insight.

It was best to keep my distance from Princess Penia.

Even though she was a main character in the scenario and it was unlikely, I decided I should never become close friends with her. That conclusion became increasingly firm.

"...As soon as I get a clearer picture, I will get an answer."

Of course, whether I could maintain that distance easily, I wasn't sure. It would depend on my efforts.

Princess Penia heaved a deep sigh after saying this. She seemed to have realized how absurd and laughable the current situation was.

Placing her hands on her waist and sighing, she finally regained her usual composure.

"Anyway... I apologize for losing my temper earlier."

Running a hand over her face, she seemed to reflect on her earlier outburst, clearly regretting her behavior.

Despite her anger, she managed to offer an apology in the end, which was quite like Princess Penia.

After all, it was rare for her to show annoyance or anger when dealing with others. Especially in the exceptional circumstance of dealing with Ed Rosetail.

The princess herself rarely got irritated or angry with anyone else. The reason for this was quite complex.

The gap in status between a princess of a nation and a mere student was enormous.

A minor annoyance or irritability from the princess could be a catastrophe from the other party's perspective.

I was privy to tales of the Princess's youth. To unravel each intricacy would be a lengthy endeavor.

However, understanding her excessively altruistic nature and deeply ingrained consideration for others came quite naturally, despite its apparent oddity.

There was an instance when a maid, who was once a close acquaintance, endured public whipping in the royal garden simply because the princess pointed out a remnant stain on a teacup.

In a royal family always on guard against the risk of poisoning, the mere presence of a blemish on their dishware, which made its way to the refreshment table, was blatant proof of negligence in a duty of paramount importance.

And there was more.

Should she get injured, perhaps by falling while frolicking in the garden, the name of the knight assigned to her protection would change immediately.

When she showed signs of fatigue or minor ailments, the complexion of the royal family's primary physician would turn ghostly pale.

On the occasion of her shoe heel breaking during a royal gala, the royal tailor was expected to make a tearful apology, offering full prostration in her room.

The gentle-souled Penia found these societal bindings burdensome and restrictive.

In the noble journey of a monarch, not even the tiniest of missteps was allowed. One had to accept that their personal errors could spell irreversible disaster for another.

Imagine the consequences then, of openly expressing her anger or frustration towards someone. Even Princess Penia herself couldn't foresee the potential catastrophe.

The moniker, 'Princess of Mercy', lauded her compassionate nature. But I knew better. That title was nothing but a shackle limiting the princess.

However, I was powerless to act. Nor did I have any compelling reason to do so. If anything was troubling me, it was the unpredictable element I introduced.

"You're free to leave. You've been glancing at the door for a while now so there must be something pressing, right?"

The princess waved me off, a resigned look on her face. For me, it was a relief.

All things considered, my existence, a variable that technically shouldn't have been there, seemed to have added undue stress to the princess.

-As if trying to keep up with classes wasn't challenging enough, that sneaky merchant is attempting to devour the school from within while concealing his true intentions...! Professor Glast's pettiness shows no signs of letting up...! Meanwhile, the servants strut around wielding palace rules...! As if I don't already have my plate full! This is too much...!'

In a fleeting moment of lost self-control, her venting exhibited a side very unlike the Princess Penia I knew.

She was probably gradually being worn thin by the series of events and mishaps intrinsic to the narrative. The added weight of a variable like me must've made her feel as though her head was on the verge of exploding.

I was naturally concerned that showing instability right from the start might negatively impact the flow of future scenarios. But then, what could I do...? There wasn't much.

"No matter the burden I bear, could it ever weigh heavier than what you, Princess, must endure?"

About to leave, I held my hand on the door, adding just a few words. It may have been out of line, but she wouldn't fuss over this small intrusion.

"Dealing with complicated political and social situations is undoubtedly necessary, but why don't you try to relax a bit? This isn't the royal palace where everything is authoritative. It's Sylvanian Academy."

At my words, it seemed like Princess Penia's pupils widened for a moment. I hadn't said anything particularly surprising, though.

"I don't know if you realize it, but you look exhausted."

I had spent my life scrutinizing others, but I wondered how often others had the chance to scrutinize my inner self.

Seeing the princess's expression as if I'd pricked her in a tender spot, I quickly shut the door and left, regretting my audacity.

Thankfully, she didn't try to stop me. That was a relief.

In any case, Princess Penia was the main character.

I might be the focus of her attention now, but she'd probably forget me soon enough once she got wrapped up in various incidents and accidents...!

Let's hope we never see each other again!

Please!

* * *

I found Taylee McLore sitting on a bench on the outskirts of the student union building, still clutching the wooden sword he'd used in the duel.

I spotted Taylee from a distance, but that didn't mean I had a plan on what to do next.

"Hmm....."

Wasn't it a somewhat amusing situation? No, I hadn't even thought that far.

Ed Rosetail was a third-rate villain who had relentlessly abused Taylee McLore and tried to chase him away. It was somewhat funny for me to now try to offer encouragement.

Earlier, my body and words reacted impulsively to the sudden situation, but when I thought about it calmly, I realized I had absolutely no reason to encourage Taylee.

Whatever I said, there was no way he'd sense sincerity in it.

In such a difficult situation, I pondered what to do. Even so, my feet were steadily moving toward Taylee when someone suddenly blocked my path.

"Stay away."

I wondered what this was about. But the moment I saw her face, a strange sense of familiarity welled up.

Short, wavy brown hair and a fragile appearance that belied her strong resolve visible on her face.

"You are..."

"Stay... away..."

She spread her arms, trembling, but she was speaking to me directly... Her appearance was exactly like the character I had seen in the game.

If you'd ever played 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' at least once, there was no way you wouldn't feel a sense of familiarity with her.

Who would have thought that I would meet Ayla Tris, the actual face of 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', Taylee's childhood friend who always staunchly supported and encouraged him in times of difficulties and trials, in person.

"Ed Rosetail... don't... don't mess with Taylee anymore...!"

She looked pathetic, trembling so much it was pitiful. But on her face, contempt bloomed resolutely. Now that was a fresh sight.

Sure enough... From the perspective of Ed Rosetail, it was easier to comprehend why Ayla, normally so reserved, would sport such a look of contempt.

"Even if it hadn't been you... Taylee... he's suffered more than enough... It's time to stop! There's no need to torment him anymore! You saw it yourself! He's... He's been through so much...!"

Her voice quivered, faint and on the verge of shattering, yet she forced the words out. Her determination to protect Taylee was unyielding. That fact stirred unexpected emotions within me.

Yes, that was Ayla...!

...It was somewhat humorous, my being moved by her determination in the face of her glaring adversary.

-Clink!

The iron cup Ayla had been holding rolled across the stone floor. She must have been off to fetch water.

At the noise of the cup clattering and the water spilling out, Taylee finally responded.

Slowly rising from the wooden bench, Taylee moved in the direction of Ayla and me.

Something felt wrong from the outset. The characteristic frailty of Taylee's stride was largely missing.

"Ed... Rosetail..."

Drawing closer, he tightly gripped his sword, maneuvered Ayla behind him, and fixed a steely gaze on me.

"You're still... attending school..."

His voice was low, imbued with a seriousness that startled me with its newfound vigor. After his loss in the duel, Taylee's face had been completely devoid of vitality.

But Taylee now, what was he?

That distinctive energy of his, the unyielding spirit, even in the face of overwhelming opposition. The resolve that shone clearly in his eyes.

Had he rebounded?

So it seemed.

Having come this far, I could piece together the story.

I had been unable to immediately follow Taylee due to overseeing his duel with the princess.

However, his childhood friend and most staunch supporter, Ayla Tris, who had been anxiously watching Taylee from the spectator's seat, had rushed out instantly without looking back.

The unfolding situation was apparent, even without direct observation.

Whenever an insurmountable wall loomed ahead or icy trials threatened to halt Taylee's progress, Ayla was always there to console him, to motivate him, and to validate him.

It's okay. You can overcome this too. You've always done well. I believe in you. You can do it. Don't give up, Taylee.

She continued offering these warming words, shared his tears, and laughter, becoming a pillar of support for Taylee.

With Ayla beside him, Taylee could stand up again, no matter how many times he fell.

That, I was aware of.

"Do you... have any business... with me...?"

And thus, Taylee stood up again.

Worried that Ayla might somehow get hurt, he shielded her small frame behind his own, staring straight at me while his determination flared anew.

A familiar sensation roiled within me, filling my chest.

Yes, it was true. As Taylee, I had gone through countless experiences, allowing me to deeply empathize with him to the very end, and that was due to his unyielding willpower.

"You handle a sword pretty well."

"Please be clear about your intentions."

"There's nothing in particular."

A comment like this from someone who had looked down on you during an entrance

exam could catch you off guard, but it was a reality I was dealing with.

Still, this time, I wanted to express my thoughts clearly.

Before discussing the current situation or future outcomes, I had to acknowledge the sense of affection that developed over a long time while I played as the 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman'.

I had witnessed your unwavering spirit repeatedly as I journeyed alongside you, and it had inspired me, filling me with courage. No matter how tough the trial, your willpower never wavered.

The notion that one beating from Lucy was enough to drain all of your willpower was a hasty judgment. My excessive worrying was a bit ridiculous.

Despite the countless times I'd taken advantage of you, it was different when I faced the situation directly. My feelings of guilt started to dissipate.

Well, it's a fact that you had to endure all the hardships on my behalf... but let's put that aside for a moment... Otherwise, I would appear too cold-hearted.

"Hmm..."

Suddenly, my eyes met Ayla's. She returned my gaze with a look of contempt, but I shrugged it off, nodding a few times before turning away.

The anxious feeling I had, worrying that Taylee might break down, seemed to vanish.

Even so, no matter how proud or exceptional my friends were, getting too involved could have had a negative impact on the predestined future flow.

Even as I walked away, the lingering gaze on my back was slightly unsettling. I didn't need to look to know that they were probably thinking, "What the hell is his problem?".

Well, it was a situation I couldn't avoid.

* * *

Shortly thereafter, flames engulfed the area around the Iron Hall, where the joint

combat practice was in progress.

The students, who were wandering around the student hall, all stared at the Iron Hall in shock. No one could have predicted such a large fire would suddenly break out.

But in reality, it wasn't a fire at all.

The flames of Tarkan, the Fire High-Spirit, were a curse that burned only the opponent targeted by the summoner.

That's not to say it wasn't hot. The spreading heat was palpable. Given the intensity at this distance, the spectators in the stands might have felt as though they were in the middle of a desert.

"Is it that time already?"

With my hand in my pocket, I turned back towards the Iron Hall.

It was the climax of the joint combat training event for the first and second school years.

Ideally, this would have been a moment we all witnessed together, sitting on the observation stones of the Iron Hall.

The situation had taken a slightly different turn than I expected, largely due to Lucy's one-sided beatdown on Taylee. Nevertheless, the scale of the event ensured it was impossible to miss.

The confrontation between 'Lortel, the Golden Daughter' and 'Elementalist Yenika Faelover'.

In order to gauge the skills of the infamous second school year's top student, Yenika Faelover and 'Golden Daughter' Lortel, risked disqualification by casting an intermediate freezing spell.

This impromptu action blew off the ceiling of the Iron Hall.

After all, the cost of repairing the ceiling wouldn't bother her much.

This move forced Yenika Faelover to showcase her full power, leading her to summon Tarkan, the strongest among the spirits with whom she had made a pact.

Even if you weren't sitting in the spectator seats of the Iron Hall, it was easy to imagine the scenario.

The flaming lizard, which seemed to embrace the large the Iron Hall, boasted the most formidable presence among Yenika's 'best friends'.

The faint figure of Yenika, standing straight on its flaming head, was visible.

Her clenched fists grasping the scales to prevent losing balance and falling, her other hand brandishing her staff, and her lively smile even in such a dire situation was truly remarkable.

She truly never lost her smile... She was like a protagonist from a fairy tale.

I sat on a nearby bench, leaning back against the backrest. I was rather tired, and I didn't particularly want to enter the Iron Hall, where that massive heat source was located.

The sight of the huge flaming lizard roaring against the setting sun was indeed an intensely surreal landscape.

Though the situation had taken a different form than I had anticipated, Taylee and Ayla were undoubtedly witnessing this scene.

I genuinely hoped they would pay close attention.

The first final boss that Taylee would face in a multitude of trials that lay ahead.

Yenika Faelover, the top student of the second school year at Sylvanian Academy's Magic Department.

This was the last chance to get a preliminary look at what to expect.

CHAPTER 18

"Hey there!"

I stifled the instinctual grimace that threatened to take over my face with sheer willpower. As I returned to the camp with an armful of edible herbs, I found an unexpected guest had claimed my makeshift seat.

There she was, Yenika, the valedictorian of the sophomore year, known for her genius in spirit manipulation, sitting on the log I had stripped to use as both a seat and firewood.

She was cheerfully kicking her legs back and forth, a buoyant greeting on her lips.

We had bumped into each other near the Guardian Tree of Merilda once before, and due to overlapping classes, we'd exchanged greetings from time to time.

However, I couldn't recall a moment when I had returned her salutations sincerely.

Truth be told, I made an effort to avoid Yenika, as her close circle of friends seemed to have an uncanny knack for crowding in at the wrong time.

While my own agenda to limit contact with Yenika was served by this, it apparently annoyed Yenika, who was eager to expand her circle of friends.

I could bet that her friends had warned her about me, the notorious Ed Rosetail, asserting that she had nothing to gain from my friendship.

Unfortunately, Yenika exhibited a streak of independence that was almost childish.

Although she always projected a cheerful persona, she was quite headstrong about the things she believed in and had a habit of pushing her own ideas relentlessly.

A classic case in point was the scenario at hand.

"Wow, it's fantastic! It feels like a secret hideout here!"

Her childish enthusiasm was akin to a kid seeing the first snowfall of the season.

"Do you mind if I pop by often?"

I was afraid of hurting her feelings if I denied her request outright. There was something about her vivacious personality that provoked a protective instinct in people.

That must be the reason why her classmates were so fond of her.

"Why here, of all places?"

"It feels like an adventure. Don't you feel that way, Ed?"

My everyday life was a constant thrill, all right. Just two days ago, I had botched up tending the fire, and nearly got attacked by a wild boar when the flames died out at dawn...

But our definitions of thrill seemed to be on completely different spectrums...

"I was hoping we could chat a bit more... I have a few questions, and well... I think I need some advice?"

Why me, of all people...? I felt it would be too harsh to question her outright.

Despite the apparent need to keep some distance, treating her with such blatant disregard would be a demonstration of inhumanity...

Conversely, being overly friendly wouldn't help either.

"How did you find out about this place?"

This camp was in a remote corner of the vast northern forest, far removed from the student dormitories.

There were only a handful of people who knew about my makeshift home here.

"Did the wolf clue you in, perhaps?"

If I had to guess, the most probable tip-off would be Merilda.

Merilda, the Wind High-Spirit, was like family to Yenika.

Given her status as the caretaker of the forest, it wouldn't have been strange if she'd spilled the beans to Yenika about my pitiful attempts at survival hidden in the forest's depths.

"No, Merilda often talks about you, but... She never divulges stuff like your camp location or personal secrets. She respects your privacy."

Who knew this kid had such a strong sense of confidentiality? I'd figured that her gossipy nature would lead her to reveal everything about me to Yenika.

Then the million-dollar question was—who spilled the beans about my camp's location to Yenika?

"The answer is ~ drumroll, please~."

She mimicked a drumroll and flaunted a smug expression, but I had already deduced the answer.

"It's Bell... darn..."

"Wow! You're quick on your feet!"

Bell Meiya was a name unfamiliar to me, referring to the head maid at Ophelis Hall, famed as the most luxurious of the three dorms at Sylvanian Academy.

To delve into how she informed Yenika about my camp, we need to turn back the clock by about a week.

* * *

[Name: Ed Rosetail]

Gender: Male

Age: 17

School Year: 2nd

Race: Human

Achievement: None

Vitality: 6

Intelligence: 5

Dexterity: 9

Willpower: 8

Luck: 6

Combat Ability Details >>

Magic Ability Details >>

Life Ability Details >>

Alchemy Ability Details >>

It was an excellent weekend to tackle some overdue chores.

After a morning spent hunting, I washed my sweat-soaked clothes and hung them to dry by the creek.

The vexing joint combat practice concluded successfully, and two weeks had swiftly passed since.

Getting tangled with the main characters of the scenario was draining—I felt as if I had aged a decade.

The fear of negatively influencing the main plot had me on tenterhooks, meticulously walking a tightrope, and all while juggling the demands of everyday life—it was exhausting.

However, there wasn't much interaction with the key characters post the combat drill, offering a brief respite.

Being able to solely focus on my academics and survival led to a marginal increase in my somewhat lackluster vitality stat.

The relatively high dexterity stat, on the other hand, was starting to stabilize. Raising each level beyond 10 wouldn't be a walk in the park.

A vitality stat of 6 was not too shabby. Although it might seem negligible compared to the impressive combat specs of the combat department students, it was adequate for an average person.

After all, 10 was the yardstick for high-performance stats. Whether proficiency or basic stats, once they surpassed 10, the fluctuation dramatically reduced, demanding a painstaking effort for each subsequent level.

Considering the end specs hover around level 20, I still had a mountain to climb.

Yet, this was a criterion for a distinctive playable character, not an average person. Even at this point, it was a capability that could hold its own.

Due to strenuous effort, my body had started to form some degree of lean muscle.

Standing shirtless by the riverbank, I surveyed my physique.

"Indeed, the Vitality stat does seem to have some significance."

The grueling schedule testing human limits I had been subjected to for the past two months forced my body to adapt and evolve.

I was far from turning into a macho man flaunting bulging muscles, but subtle, functional muscles had started to develop around my stomach, shoulders, and the edges of my arms.

When one considers the significant progress from the stick-thin figure I used to be, it was quite an accomplishment.

Starting from a body with negligible physical aptitude to this point indicated significant progress.

However, my skill and level in archery were still incredibly low, and I hadn't managed to gain proficiency in daggers, the most effective secondary weapon. I had come a

long way, but there was still a long road ahead.

"I should train now to have an easier time later... I should avoid falling into complacency."

The progress was significant, but I couldn't be satisfied with just this. I stretched my arms side to side, loosened my waist, and got to work on the tasks that had piled up during the week.

I had run out of firewood, so I needed to chop more logs, and in the afternoon, I planned to mend the fishing net.

The remaining silk threads would be used to create an intricate mesh by layering two diagonal lines and knotting them at each intersection.

Why make a net? Partly for fishing, but more importantly, it was for preserving fish.

Meat was stored in a dugout for preservation, but it didn't last very long and would spoil quickly. It wasn't feasible to cure everything with salt, as the amount of salt obtainable from sea water was limited.

So, I came up with the idea of smoking. By lightly cooking and drying the surface with wood smoke, it could extend the preservation period of meat by several days, freeing up time to invest in academics or other survival activities.

However, fish preservation didn't benefit as much from smoking. Also, the flavor change was significant, making it challenging to prepare the hard-earned fish properly.

Hence, I intended to make a net, tie it to branches, and establish my own fish farm in the river. If successful, I could preserve live fish, maintaining both freshness and taste.

It was a worthy endeavor. During the week, attending classes drained energy for immediate survival needs, so the more relaxed weekend was the perfect time for such a project.

I was eager to finish chopping firewood, check if the uniform I had washed earlier had dried properly, and begin work on the fishing net.

"Zzz... Zzz....."

While loosening my body by swinging my arms in my shirtless state, I headed to the stump prepared for chopping wood. Naturally, there was Lazy Lucy, huddled up and sleeping there.

I hoisted Lucy Mayril as naturally as breathing, and just as effortlessly, tossed her over my shoulder. With that same ease, I dropped her into the wooden shelter.

"Ugh, ack!"

Once inside, Lucy squirmed a bit, her body lodged awkwardly. But the floor was a plush bed covered in badger and squirrel hides, so she quickly fell asleep again, sighing softly.

From the looks of it, Lucy Mayril's siesta was upon us. She had a habit of appearing and treating my camp as her personal bedroom. By now, I wasn't even surprised to stumble upon her.

"I'll chop about fifty logs, then go check on my uniform. I should finish all of it within the hour."

With that, I spat on my hands, gripping the axe tightly. The moment I swung down on the first log, a loud noise broke the silence.

-Thump!

"Ugh... ack..."

I heard a loud collision and turned to see Lucy rubbing her forehead. Apparently, she had bumped her head on a wooden post when she sprang up.

Lucy, the type who wouldn't wake unless both her cheeks were pinched tightly, was suddenly wide awake.

"...What's up?"

"...This smell!"

Before I could probe any further, she swiftly grabbed her witch's hat and dashed out

of the camp like a gust of wind.

Her swift movements left me in awe. In the blink of an eye, her petite figure vanished. All that was left was the gust of wind from her magic, which blew away my sweat.

"...What just happened?"

It wasn't long before I pieced it all together.

"...Who goes there?"

Emerging from the bushes was the head maid of Ophelis Hall, the most prestigious dormitory in Sylvanian Academy, Bell Meiya.

* * *

I was familiar with the tales about the maids of Ophelis Hall.

These were the caretakers of Ophelis Hall, where an array of noble and gifted students resided. Each one worked with a pride and skill set that rivalled those of the royal household staff.

These maids were specialists, trained since childhood in their field.

But that was just the premise. If you asked me whether they had any significant influence on the 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' storyline, nothing came to mind...

They were depicted to underscore the uniqueness of Ophelis Hall, but none of them played a significant role in the main plot.

Which meant Bell Meiya, who I had just run into, was a character about whom I could only recall, "Ah, there was such a character, wasn't there?".

In terms of her role in the storyline, she was as minor as Ed Rosetail, a villain mentioned once and then forgotten.

"I didn't expect to bump into Lord Ed while venturing deep into the forest."

"Ah, yes... it's been a while."

"No need for the formality."

Despite Bell Meiya's minimal impact on the storyline, she had a knack for appearing just when you were about to forget her, delivering profound dialogue akin to the comfort of a favorite home remedy in a medicine cabinet.

She would observe the protagonist or the heroine confronting a challenge and remark, 'Despite everything, I can see determination in your eyes. You're bound to overcome this.' or 'If it's her... she'll certainly prevail... '.

She had the flair of a character providing an undercurrent of foreshadowing.

She didn't actively assist in solving problems, but she offered an inexplicable assurance that issues would eventually be resolved.

She was a character who seemed redundant, yet oddly indispensable to the narrative. And beyond that... well, she was the only person that the lone-wolf wizard, Lucy Mayril, genuinely feared.

However you dressed it up, her essential nature remained constant.

She was a member of the 'bit part character' club, just like Ed Rosetail.

"I prefer formalities."

"But I'm more comfortable with you not being so formal."

"I'm no longer a noble."

"But you're still enrolled at Sylvanian Academy."

Her immaculately trimmed raven-black hair and modest comportment were the reasons she was recognized as a 'senior' maid in Ophelis Hall, an establishment renowned for its professional maids.

Even though she lacked the capability to cast even basic spells and had ventured deep into this forest, her immaculate maid uniform remained untouched by the wilderness.

"Honestly, I was quite taken aback."

Her stoic demeanor didn't convey the surprise her words expressed.

"Your speech has changed considerably, and you've developed a more robust physique."

Only then did I register that I was standing before her without a shirt. I didn't feel particularly embarrassed... however, her unflinching, calm demeanor made the situation somewhat disconcerting.

"I'm glad to see such a positive transformation."

"Ah, yes..."

"There's no need for formal speech."

"But I prefer it."

"..."

Her constant poker-face made her difficult to read, but I suspected I had unintentionally brushed against her peculiar pride.

"You can speak informally to me."

"But I prefer not to."

"You used informal speech when you lived in Ophelis Hall."

"Well, that was... when I was residing in Ophelis Hall..."

All in all, the maids at Ophelis Hall all seemed to harbor a peculiar kind of stubbornness that was tough to grasp.

I noticed Bell was holding a large basket in one hand. Sneaking a peek at its contents, I found it was packed with a variety of mushrooms, herbs, and fruits.

Most meals at Ophelis Hall were prepared with top-tier ingredients delivered by several suppliers, yet there were times when the freshness of ingredients took precedence, and they would locally source their food materials.

Seeing that they handled such tasks, I began to comprehend the Internet meme referring to the maids of Ophelis Hall as 'human livestock machines'.

These folks had a knack for everything, and in my position, all I had to do was sit tight and keep my mouth open.

"I knew you were still attending school. I assist Miss Yenika with her preparations each morning. She often speaks of you, Mr. Ed Rosetail."

"Is that so?"

"I did not expect you to be living like this, though. The look on your face when you left Ophelis Hall suggested you'd lost everything. I thought you'd leave the academy."

Upon hearing this, I suddenly realized.

On the day I was chased out of Ophelis Hall, the short-haired maid who handed me the wooden crates was Bell.

I had just flown into this world and was out of sorts. I hadn't noticed as I lumped all the maids of Ophelis Hall together in my mind.

"Anyway, I'm glad to see you're doing well."

"Ah, thank you for your encouragement."

"When do you plan to address me formally?"

"I don't plan to."

These peculiar folks were born with an inexplicable trait. They felt uncomfortable when shown respect. I wondered what kind of education could lead them to adopt such a mindset.

Anyway, what caught my eye was the basket Senior Maid Belle held.

It was chock-full of all sorts of mushrooms, edible plants, and fruits.

My knowledge of edible plants, self-taught from books borrowed from the student library, was hitting a limit.

The contents of that basket were all edible, and if I could learn to identify each one, it would significantly expand my range of foraging.

In particular, mushrooms and fruits had many toxic varieties, so I hadn't dared to touch them. It was an opportunity to learn how to distinguish them, and my mouth watered at the prospect.

Well, despite her cold exterior, Bell Meiya was quite good-natured. If I asked for help, she would likely oblige cheerfully.

As mentioned earlier, the maids of Ophelis Hall didn't significantly influence the scenario. They weren't major characters, so befriending them wouldn't cause any major events.

On the contrary, I stood to gain more than lose. If we got closer, couldn't I obtain leftover ingredients, cloth, or various tools from Ophelis Hall?

Wouldn't it be foolish to keep a cold distance at this point?

The maids of Ophelis Hall had little screen time throughout the scenario. Yeah, getting a bit closer wouldn't make a significant difference, right?

Coming to this conclusion, I cleared my throat, put on a relaxed smile, and spoke to Bell Meiya in a friendlier tone.

"You've come all the way into these deep woods to gather ingredients. It must be hard work. But about that basket..."

Yes, I could get a bit closer!

And this choice led me to regret for a long time until the scenario ended.

* * *

"Yep, yep. I've talked a lot about you to Bell. So, Bell often goes along with my stories, and at one point, she even mentioned that she had met you here."

The idea of even a high spirit, let alone a human, brazenly revealing such personal matters was unusual, wasn't it?

No, the Bell Meiya I knew was a woman of few words, reserved and guarded. She wasn't one to speak carelessly of others. This reticence was a basic virtue, especially for a seasoned maid.

The Bell Meiya I knew was an elite maid, well-versed in these fundamental principles.

"Since it's a rare weekend, he wanted to meet you. He even helped tie your hair beautifully today, look at that. Isn't the braid pulled to one side lovely?"

She was such a chatterbox, wasn't she?

"Ah, sure..."

"So, about the problem I mentioned earlier..."

Seemingly preparing to get to the point, Yenika pulled her knees into a hug and sat down. Gazing at the crackling campfire, Yenika carefully broached the subject.

At first, I wondered why out of all the people, she had chosen me for her confidante.

"Ed might have left early that day and missed it, but I... I hurt someone during the joint combat training last month."

The event of summoning the Fire High-Spirit, Tarkan, and engulfing the Iron Hall in flames, was one of the grandest of the semester.

It was obvious who she had hurt. The one who had broken the rules and used intermediate magic first might have deserved it, but the kind-hearted Yenika saw that as a mere side issue.

Why on earth did she choose me to confide in?

Fundamentally, the students were all on Yenika's side.

The lovable and vibrant Yenika was like a precious gem to all the second-year students. Therefore, everyone would rally to comfort and support her if she ever felt guilty or blamed herself.

But Yenika knew. All their judgements were made on a tilted scale.

Her adoring fans wouldn't provide her with an objective or fair verdict. Although she was grateful to have unconditional support, it didn't erase her transgressions.

That's why she had come to me. Given my relatively lesser inclination towards Yenika, I wouldn't simply side with her without thinking.

She might have had a pure heart and an upright attitude, but that only made her a bad match with Lortel.

"You know, I keep trying to forget, but I can't help but think that maybe I overreacted. Maybe it was too harsh to hurt him that much, right?"

"I see..."

"Should I go apologize?"

"Perhaps."

"But then my friends will insist that he was the one at fault first, and they will absolutely advise me not to."

"Do as you think is right."

"Hmm~."

I left Yenika as she was, hugging her knees and resting her chin on top of them.

I resolved not to force my judgment on Yenika. I was uncertain about how my views could sway her. Yenika Faelover was too substantial a figure to carelessly declare what's right and wrong, potentially impacting her decisions.

Although it seemed harsh, it was unavoidable.

"You're so predictable, Ed."

But the response that came back was surprisingly offbeat.

"You never... take my side unconditionally, Ed."

"If that makes you unhappy, I'm sorry."

"Eh? No, no. You're misunderstanding."

As she warmed herself by the flickering campfire, her smile was visible, albeit her mood seemed a bit subdued than usual.

"I'm not upset, not at all. Quite the contrary, it's comforting."

But she kept speaking in riddles.

"I wish everyone in the world was more like Ed."

I didn't have the time to mull over the implications of her words. My schedule for the day was chock-full.

* * *

"I'd like to book two hours of your time, if you don't mind, Senior Ed."

It was the following day, right after the Elemental Studies class had concluded and I had stepped out to grab some lunch.

A girl, who on the surface appeared courteous and elegant, approached me. But her shining turquoise eyes were brimming with avarice for riches.

Her neat, shoulder-length chestnut hair, tied elegantly, cascaded over her shoulders.

She bore the evidence of minor injuries, perhaps from our joint combat exercises - small bandages were visible on her neck and arms.

Considering how long the combat training had ended, and she still nursed these minor wounds, it was not hard to imagine the severity of her initial injuries.

It was enough to make anyone feel a twinge of guilt - even the usually gentle Yenika.

She sat calmly on a bench, seemingly waiting for me as I emerged from the professor's building. I recognized her.

She was the one who would later lock horns with Princess Penia, eventually becoming one of the four heroines of the 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', reaching a near-untouchable status.

The sole offspring of the continent's wealthiest tycoon, Elte Keherun, she was an extraordinary businesswoman who ascended the pinnacle of wealth solely through her insatiable desire for it.

In the future, people would affectionately refer to her as 'The Golden Daughter'.

CHAPTER 19

Lortel was a young girl who understood human greed better than anyone.

Although she didn't play a prominent role until Act 2, after Yenika left the stage, Lortel had already made her presence felt in Act 1.

Her reputation in Act 1, however, was notably infamous, earning her quite a few unsavory nicknames: 'Bad Ending Maker', 'Noob Grinder', 'Company's Evil'.

Players who had encountered her in Act 1, without exception, spat out such words in frustration. Those newbie days seemed like a distant past, so much so that even the thought of them felt alien.

Yet, when I recalled how badly I had suffered at the hands of Act 1's Lortel, I could still feel my teeth chattering in dread.

Getting entangled with this character in Act 1 invariably led to a bad ending.

During Taylee's class assignment test event, you had the opportunity to rescue Lortel when she was ambushed by kobolds.

In the process, however, you would witness a 'secret' of Lortel's. She then has Taylee kidnapped and taken out of school, leading to his subsequent disappearance. That's bad ending number 2.

In the Monster Tribe Subjugation Practice episode, there's a chance to team up with Lortel. But if you choose to team up with her, ignoring childhood friend Ayla, Ayla would fall off a cliff and die.

Why? Because there was supposed to be an event where Taylee quickly saves Ayla when she stumbles near the cliff edge. If you're teamed up with Lortel, such an event cannot occur, and Ayla falls to her death. That's bad ending number 7.

During the Joint Combat Practice Event, there's an option to protect her from Tarkan, the Fire High-Spirit summoned by Yenika. But if you chose to do so, you would end up severely burned. Bad ending number 13.

In the Glaskan Subjugation Battle, when retaking the Student Council Building, you could infiltrate the Iron Hall using the route suggested by Lortel.

But doing so would leave you vulnerable to an ambush by lurking spirits, resulting in your death. That's bad ending number 22.

At first, such a character would inevitably draw your ire. However, if you played through 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' to the end, you would come to appreciate the developer's intention and admire it.

The intention wasn't particularly complex.

In 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', the role assigned to Lortel Keherun was that of a 'Hidden Heroine'.

She was a character opposing the righteous and merciful Princess Penia. Lortel, who was only treated as a target of subjugation, slowly revealed her true character as the story progressed to the latter half.

The unexpected change in her evaluation and the unforeseen gap sparked a strong appeal in the players.

Slowly they came to accept Lortel's perspective, a girl who, always discussing empathy and moral lessons, had no choice but to see the world in a calculated manner.

A life where she picked up bread discarded by others in the slums, beliefs founded in deceit and fraud, a thread of loneliness that never disappeared no matter how much money she amassed.

Bit by bit, as players began to raise their evaluation of the fallen Lortel, there came a crucial moment when they understood the loneliness etched into her life. And it was then, they asked.

The choice was between the 'Student Council' led by Penia, the 'Princess of Mercy', or the 'Upper Crust' led by Lortel, the 'Golden Daughter'.

Were you to back the noble conviction and idealism displayed by Princess Penia, or the raw realism of Lortel who had always battled alone in a harsh reality?

Players new to 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' found themselves wrestling with these choices. Some were so ensnared in indecision that they barely breathed for nearly 20 minutes.

"Hey, Senior Ed?"

In retrospect, the game system's relentless push towards bad endings in the first act was all part of the design.

Repeated bad endings gradually made players avoid interactions with Lortel, consciously or not, creating an emotional divide.

The wider this divide grew, the more dramatically future evaluations would be inverted— a truly harmonious marriage between gameplay and narrative.

Really, it was a masterpiece.

"Senior. Senior Ed. Can you hear me?"

Even on reflection, it was a triumph.

Walking along, I found myself nodding, a look of satisfaction on my face.

...But let's put that aside for a moment.

"...How long do you plan on following me?"

"I didn't think you would go to such lengths to ignore me."

Well, of course, I would ignore her.

Isn't that the obvious thing to do?

* * *

Setting the tone before doing anything is essential.

The cryptic line tossed my way as I sat quietly on a bench, fresh from an Elemental Studies lecture... not too shabby.

- 'How about selling me two hours of your time, Senior Ed?'

That was definitely a strong opening.

My adversary was none other than Lortel, the golden girl. Having her unexpectedly approach with such a proposition naturally piqued my interest.

Under normal circumstances, I would start with questions.

What's this about buying two hours? What do you want me to do? When you say buy, you mean pay? How much are you going to pay? Are you paying right now? What's the catch?

As I peppered her with such questions, Lortel, flashing a knowing smile, would respond in her own sweet time. That was more or less the scene she had painted in her head.

Before long, I'd be asking the questions, with her deftly evading my queries and subtly taking control of the situation.

Combine that with Lortel's deft skill in rhetoric and negotiation, and I'd find myself agreeing to her proposal before I even knew it.

But that was when I didn't know what she was up to.

"You can, at least, hear me out, right?"

I crushed her carefully arranged sequence, ignoring Lortel completely and maintaining my brisk pace. She finally had to chase after me.

She quickened her steps to match mine. She was practically jogging to keep up, but that didn't make me slow down.

"I heard life's been hard since the scandal. Don't you want some help?"

"Spare me the empty pleasantries."

"Well, believe it or not, courteous exchange matters. It's a sign of respect."

Her unaffected demeanor in the face of my rudeness was likely her nature.

Lortel, bouncing to me with a sweet, childlike grin, rested her back on the wall, fluttering her eyes.

"Won't you hear me out? It's not a bad proposition."

"I was... moved... when I saw you, Ed Rosetail..."

And then she spewed out her spiel with a cheeky grin.

"Of course, I've heard some rumors that you might be slightly arrogant, somewhat self-centered, but who cares? It's not that big of a deal, ha."

Knowing full well the brutal assessment of Ed Rosetail, she swiftly brushed off those parts in her rapid-fire delivery.

"Seeing you still pursue your education under such tough conditions makes me want to lend a helping hand. After all, I've had my own days of poverty and hunger."

"And?"

"As a down payment, three golden coins."

It was the amount a maid at Dex Hall, the dormitory for regular students, earned after a month of hard work.

With twenty of those glittering gold coins, I wouldn't have to worry about next semester's tuition.

"I... want to become friends with senior Yenika."

Ahaha, she laughed, not going into further detail, but I already knew. The difference in values between Penia and Lortel was the core conflict cutting across the script of Sylvanian Academy.

Ultimately, whose side Taylee would take became a significant matter. It was too uncertain at this point to hastily pick a side.

"Can't you introduce me? We just need to go together, just share a little conversation. It won't even take two hours, you know?"

"Are you trying to buy connections with money because you're the 'Golden Daughter'?"

"Well, I won't play coy."

Lortel pulled out three golden coins from her clothes and stuffed them into my pocket.

"Just keep it for now. You know, the more allies, the better."

Lortel seemed to intuitively understand. Having spent her life constantly on her toes, walking a tightrope, it made sense.

She was set to engage in a political fight within the academy with Princess Penia, and she needed to gather as many allies as possible.

The gap between Princess Penia and Lortel was not something that could be bridged with concessions or consideration.

As I watched her in silence, Lortel flashed another cheeky grin.

"You're looking at me like I'm pitiful. Most people are busy hiding their shock, wondering what in the world is going on."

With a chuckle, I spoke up.

"Sure, let's shake on it."

* * *

If there was anyone who understood the essence of greed, it was Lortel. At least, that's what she believed.

Greed, when fueled by madness, was akin to a dormant disease. Under calm conditions, it was manageable, but when every penny mattered, when one was cornered, it gnawed at the human spirit, threatening to swallow it whole.

The more desperate a person—the less they had to eat tomorrow, the less likely they had a place to sleep tonight—the more their eyes bled for a single penny. Lortel knew this feeling all too well, having grown up in the slums.

Furthermore, the deeper one fell, the stronger and more relentless became the grip of greed.

Those who'd spent their lives in abundance were often left in ruins by a single moment of destitution. Lortel had witnessed too many debtors, unable to bear the drastic shift in their circumstances, take their own lives.

What brought these desperate souls to their knees wasn't a fortune that could bury a mansion. It was merely a penny.

The amount mattered little. They always sold more, even when presented with the same sum.

A gold coin bought their dignity.

Another their family.

Yet another sold them out entirely.

Despite the value of a gold coin remaining unchanged, those backed into a corner always gave up more, much more.

Simply because there were no other options.

Because the only path forward was the one in sight.

And so, the crucial point was the 'first time'.

The first instance they clung to that single gold coin, dismissing it as 'just this once'.

That moment sowed the seeds of disaster, pushing the desperate individual further towards the precipice. It served as the launch pad for all the manipulations and deceit that were to follow.

Feasting on a desperate soul was a remarkably easy and straightforward task. Tragically so.

" ... "

When I came to, Ed Rosetail, who had shaken hands with me, had already left. Did he

perhaps feel a bit flustered?

"...Interesting."

Watching Ed Rosetail's retreating back, Lortel couldn't help but smile.

In her small hand, the three gold coins she'd crammed into his pocket had been returned.

His demeanor didn't leave room for any kind of connection.

It was as though he had been onto Lortel's intentions from the very beginning.

CHAPTER 20

Lortel was a grim realist, a master of compromise.

In essence, it was her fate to be so. Her ambitions were lofty, but her natural abilities fell short.

It might be puzzling when seen from an outsider's perspective.

Lortel was one of the three students who earned the right to be in Class A from Professor Glast as soon as he entered Sylvanian Academy.

She could recite the crux of a book after a single reading, her Mana Sensing was beyond what most students could ever achieve, and she had the backing of the prestigious Elte Corporation.

Yet, none of it made her elite.

In the realm of magic, 'Lazy Lucy' was in a league of her own, untouchable to others.

In terms of judgement, quick thinking, and adaptability in battle, she couldn't match Ziggs of the Northern Plains.

Her noble lineage, high birth, innate character, and leadership skills became trivial in front of her rival, Princess Penia.

The cruel destiny permitted Lortel a life in the second league, nothing more.

Her chosen tool to challenge this harsh fate was 'sheer desire'.

"Oh, Senior Yenika."

A constant weighing of gains and losses, benefits and detriments, always trying to tilt the balance in her favor showed her dogged determination.

Her harsh realism and her propensity to join hands with necessary evils, without hesitation, reflected an infinitely compromising attitude.

While this way of life often labeled Lortel as an opportunist, she didn't feel insulted. In fact, missing an opportunity that came within her reach seemed more shameful to her.

"I planned to visit with a gift, but it's surprising to meet you here."

"Hmm...? You're... Lortel, right? You look quite different with your hair down."

"I hear that a lot."

They were standing in the corridor of Ophelis Hall, the most luxurious of the three dormitories in Sylvanian Academy.

To get in, you had to fulfill one of two criteria - an overwhelming social status, or impressive academic achievement.

Yenika was the latter case, while Lortel, being the heir of the Elte Corporation, fit both criteria. However, that didn't significantly affect their living conditions in the dormitory.

According to Lortel, she was heading to her room after an evening bath and some time with the maids of Ophelis Hall. She was in a simple attire, with her slightly damp hair let loose. To Yenika, it was quite a refreshing sight.

"Because, during the recent joint combat training, I caused quite a ruckus by independently using intermediate magic. I have a rather impulsive side, and although some time has passed, I've wanted to apologize when I had the chance."

"I see..."

The reason for her aggressive use of intermediate Ice Sphere magic, 'Ice Spear' and 'Instant Freeze', against Yenika was to evaluate the worth of her reputation as the Sylvanian Academy's second-year top student.

Regardless of the opinions, the current stars of the Sylvanian Academy's Magic Department were the first-year students.

This year's lineup of first-year students was such that even the senior students couldn't guarantee victory in a duel.

Despite that, the title of the top student in the second school year was no trifling matter.

Lucy Mayril, the undisputed first in her first year of school, made discussing who held the top spot irrelevant. However, Lortel's name was not forgotten when debating who would take the second place.

How much was the gap between her and Yenika? Any attempts to gauge that sadly ended in insignificance.

This was due to Yenika, who could command high spirits as if they were her own limbs, and because even intermediate elemental magic, which third-year students couldn't perfectly handle, couldn't cause meaningful damage to her.

The cost of arrogance was high. Hence, even some time after the joint combat practice had ended, she was still bandaged under her clothes due to minor injuries that hadn't healed completely.

"You still haven't healed your wounds, I see."

Lortel keenly caught the remaining sense of obligation in Yenika's gaze.

Yenika Faelover was too kind a human being. Her nature induced strong protective instincts in those around her, making her an idol among the second-year students.

Furthermore, the second-year students were currently being pushed to the side by the first years.

Among this, the only senior who showed competent and capable attitude, Yenika, had become their savior.

From a certain perspective, Lortel, who had been severely beaten during the joint combat practice, also contributed to this.

Before this, she had been our adorable top Spirit-user who needed protection. Now, she was the only hope and light for the second-year students.

Having gathered such hopeful gazes, becoming an object of admiration happened in a flash.

"I think it will heal soon. Please don't worry about me, senior."

After all, social connections lead to social power. Lortel, who lived experiencing this fact, didn't wipe off her business-like smile when dealing with the adorable top student of the second year.

If the other party feels they owe you something, that too is an asset. Not using the assets you have is foolish.

While thinking so, Lortel planned to use this debt as an opportunity to interact more with Yenika.

"Did you not manage to talk with Ed?"

Every now and then, this Spirit-user would pierce through her pretense with a smile that couldn't possibly be any more refreshing.

In the world of commerce, such a cunning smile is a symbol of an impeccable human figure. They are a race of merchants who consider how to outsmart the other with an infinitely kind and pure smile.

However, oddly enough, not a hint of malice could be felt from the girl's laughter.

This was also her natural sharpness. It was a purely thrown question without any malice or intention.

"I heard everything. Spirits do like to chatter a lot, don't they?"

Ignoring Lortel's words, Ed Rosetail had been striding away, and she had been unilaterally chasing him, conversing. His trajectory was undoubtedly heading straight for the entrance of the northern forest.

Originally, the northern forest was entirely Yenika the Spirit-user's domain. Most of the spirits frolicking in the northern forest sided with Yenika.

Lortel had only managed to glimpse the fringes of the entrance to the distant northern forest. Nevertheless, even that was within Yenika's domain.

From Lortel's perspective, it was utterly baffling. The conversation shared between Ed Rosetail and Lortel Keherun was hardly something to proudly flaunt, even as an

empty boast.

Her intent was clear, trying to buy her way into a relationship with the Spirit-user, Yenika, using money as a tool.

On top of that, she intended to exploit Ed Rosetail's dire circumstances to gauge his true capacity. It wasn't exactly a situation that warmed the heart.

"There might be a method to Lortel's madness."

Yenika acknowledged, even in the midst of the absurdity.

"But Ed too, would have had his way of dealing with things. From my perspective, that's a lot more moving."

"..."

"Of course, I did feel touched by Lortel's willingness to generously invest gold coins to get closer to me... But it's said that you can't buy a person's sincerity. Hmm, does it sound like I'm bragging? It's my first time having a junior, so I guess I'm overly excited. Ah, it's embarrassing..."

Even in the face of such absurdity, she did not reject or curse Lortel's methods. It was at that moment, that Lortel finally understood the common opinion about Yenika.

A girl straight out of a fairy tale.

Her bubbly and lively personality often reminded people of a playful young girl. And in that assumption, there was an undertone of humiliation.

The girl who knows nothing about the world, living in a flower garden – that's what Lortel thought she was. But it seemed he had been mistaken.

This girl understood the heavy backside of the world, yet she had never lost her lively nature. In the face of her radiance, those with dark intentions would slither back into the darkness, ashamed.

In a world where everyone lived in the dirt, they began to consider their muddy state as the natural human condition. This, of course, was a delusion.

There were people who were different, she knew it, but she had to search the corners of the world to find them.

"Ed might be a lot more interesting and complicated than you think."

"Really? Why do you think so?"

She laughed lightly, twirling around to undo her braided hair.

"It's a secret."

Only then did Lortel realize they had arrived at the door of Yenika's room. Once she got inside, she planned to relax, undo her hair, and loosen her dress with its many frills.

"I mean, I'm always surrounded by the chattering spirits, they tell me things. But if I give away too much, I'd seem like a stalker, wouldn't I?"

"Having a good relationship with the spirits is something to be proud of, isn't it?"

"Thank you for saying that, hehe. But there are some facts that are fun because only I know them."

Yenika, standing at her room's door, turned around to flash a brilliant smile. Whatever the spirits had whispered to her about Ed, that was something only Yenika knew.

"I should get going now, Dean McDowell suggested trying to form a contract with a new High-Spirit next month. For that, I've got loads of studying and preparing to do."

"Haven't you already formed a contract with the Fire High-Spirit?"

"Well, lately, expectations have soared."

Yenika replied, her voice filled with a determined cheer.

"Working hard isn't so bad when people expect something of you."

With that, she moved towards the door, pausing just as she was about to exit.

"Oh, right, Lortel."

She said, her childlike smile brimming with sincerity.

"I'm sorry about last time. You got hurt because of me, didn't you? I hope you recover quickly."

Her casual manner of closing the door belied the thought she had put into her words, something Lortel knew well.

After the door closed softly, Lortel remained deep in thought.

"Ed Rosetail is certainly an interesting character."

She contemplated, yet she couldn't quite grasp why Yenika held him in such high regard.

But further speculation was futile at this point. It was best to bury such thoughts in the recesses of his mind.

"Be that as it may..."

Lortel mused, the bizarre sight glimpsed through the closing door of Yenika's room left a strong impression.

It almost seemed as if beneath her vibrant and carefree demeanor, there lurked a peculiar sense of precariousness.

However, she couldn't quite pin down the cause of that impression. The answer, it seemed, wouldn't be readily forthcoming.

* * *

[Name:Ed Rosetail]

Gender: Male

Age: 17

School Year: 2nd

Race: Human

Achievements: None

Vitality: 6

Intelligence: 5

Dexterity: 9

Willpower: 8

Luck: 6

Detailed Combat Abilities>>

Detailed Magic Abilities>>

Detailed Life Abilities>>

Detailed Alchemy Abilities>>

[New Creation]

Having expertly woven a fishing net for aquaculture, Ed secured it to a tree branch and positioned it carefully in the stream so that it wouldn't collapse. It seemed like it would hold captured fish fresh for a few days.

Creation Difficulty: ●●○○○

[Creation complete. Creation proficiency has increased.]

The net, which took half a day to create, proved more useful than he anticipated. He had used up about half of the resources on the fish net, but he felt the rest would come in handy eventually.

Perhaps he could attempt net fishing or even use it to construct a hammock, creating a pleasant resting spot. He was quite satisfied with the idea.

As his residence began taking shape, he became increasingly ambitious. His diet was

becoming diverse and improved. Most importantly, he was not as tired as before.

Before, just the morning run to the faculty building would drain his energy, making him feel like he had exhausted his day's worth of vitality.

Recently, however, he even started running on the way back. Even after sleeping late, he could wake up refreshed the next morning, feeling a growing sense of satisfaction and confidence in his new lifestyle.

Moreover, the enhancement of my magical proficiency had greatly contributed to my survival.

[Detailed Magic Ability]

Rank: Basic Magic Student

Specialty: Elemental

Common Magic: Quick Casting Lv 2; Mana Sensing Lv 5

Fire Elemental Magic: Ignition Lv 10

Wind Elemental Magic: Wind Blade Lv 10

Still unable to proficiently utilize intermediate magic, my knowledge was limited to two basic spells.

However, in my current environment, where actual fire was necessary for survival, I had achieved my initial goal of reaching proficiency level 10 through painstaking repetition.

With focused use, I was now capable of felling a thick tree in one strike and igniting or controlling a flame was as easy as eating cold soup while lying down.

Although my inherent mana was rather low, limiting free use of spells, I was still more proficient than most first-year students in the use of Wind Blade and Ignition.

Once I had built up a degree of proficiency in elemental magic, it was quite convenient for daily life—chopping firewood, controlling the heat while sleeping, and creating various objects.

I received a lot of help while processing materials to make things.

If I were honest, I had begun to enjoy it.

Before leaving for school in the morning, I packed up my things and admired my camp.

It wasn't spectacular or impressive, but it was a place I had carved out with my own hands, and that gave me a sense of pride and fulfillment. This feeling was addictive.

I found myself wanting to do more, to improve.

For instance, the process of smoking meat was quite laborious.

I wondered if I could create a proper smokehouse to keep the smoke from dispersing. However, I still wasn't sure how to design it.

"Well, that can be done at any time."

Sitting by the crackling fire, checking the laundry and jerky on the drying rack after finishing work on my bow.

Today's tasks at the professor's office had been completed rather smoothly, and all that was left was to review the assignment Professor Eskin had given me.

Considering it was still early evening, I seemed to be getting the hang of managing my daily tasks.

Humming to myself, I was almost finished with the last arrow when it happened. These days, everything had been going well, so I was in a good mood.

If only I could continue like this until graduation without any hitches in my plan.

With such leisurely thoughts, I was about to call it a day...

-Wham!

Suddenly, a monster-like object came hurtling out of nowhere, demolishing my drying rack and rolling twice on the ground.

A flock of startled birds burst from the trees and a thick cloud of dust obscured my vision for a moment.

I remained seated in the same position I had been while working on my bow, gazing at the object. Once my vision cleared, I saw something all too familiar—a witch's hat resting gently on the ground.

Lifting my gaze slightly, I noticed Lucy Mayril, sprawled on the ground alongside some wrecked construction equipment. Her disheveled look, covered in dirt and tightly gripping a thick tree trunk, was quite the sight.

"What... what happened?"

I asked, reacting a beat too late. As I got up, Lucy, still tangled up, answered slowly.

"I almost died..."

It was a sentence that should never have been spoken from Lucy Mayril's mouth.

Late in the evening, a girl, who should have been wandering around Ophelis Hall after dinner like a slow ghost, was tangled up here. Why was that?

From my knowledge of this school, the only being that could brawl with Lucy would be Principal Obel.

For someone to push Lucy to the brink of death, it would be a variable I wouldn't be able to handle from my position.

I felt a rising sense of danger and hurriedly asked Lucy, who had just sprung up from her spot.

"Almost died, from who?!"

"Bell Meiya... Bell Meiya..."

She was the head maid of Ophelis Hall.

"You've got to be kidding me!"

I grabbed a random stick and tossed it at Lucy. I expected her to easily deflect it, but

surprisingly, no defensive magic was cast.

Thanks to that, Lucy, who was hit squarely by the stick, sulked and laid down on the ground. The faint black mark left on her forehead was quite impressive.

"You actually got hit by that?"

"I'm out of magic power..."

The incredibly fast speed and tremendous aftermath were undoubtedly the high-level space magic, 'Spatial Leap'.

Even professors concentrated and chanted to use such high-level magic.

"I got caught skipping the monthly dormitory meeting that the head calls after dinner..."

"And then?"

"Bell was angry and came at me, fist clenched."

At that moment, I recalled a few scenes I had occasionally seen involving Lucy. Bell Meiya was the nemesis of this brat who no one could handle.

Whenever she made a mistake, missed a schedule, or behaved improperly, Bell would swing her fist at Lucy. Lucy had no counter to these cheekbone attacks.

Punching the cheekbone to suppress a troublemaker had a long tradition. There's even a famous expert in this field, Bong Mi-sun.

It might be amusing to see Lucy, a genius of her generation, being suppressed by a mere maid.

But no matter how talented Lucy was, she wouldn't dare to mess with the maids of Ophelis Hall. The maids who helped the students without a single mistake, they deserved respect, an unwritten rule of Sylvenia.

In fact, even before mentioning such unwritten rules, the students living in Ophelis Hall all had a subconscious debt of gratitude to the maids.

Despite being students who always received treatment, they were amazed by the competence of the maids. They were a first-rate group.

Besides basic housekeeping tasks like cleaning and cooking, they could assist with academic life or even demonstrate simple magic.

Despite their impressive abilities, they were unswervingly dedicated to their core duty—supporting student life. They didn't interfere unnecessarily, and for the most part, they were quiet.

Bell Meiya was no exception, her outwardly gruff appearance and personality weren't her unique traits.

"I feared it might hurt too much, so I bolted. It was just too abrupt."

In essence, she had utilized 'Quick Casting' on a high-level spatial magic, and even employed 'Invisible Cast', enabling her to fly all the way from Ophelis Hall to here.

Accelerating the casting speed forcefully or blatantly skipping the spell chanting would wreak havoc on magical efficiency.

We're talking about an exponential level of concern, not just double or triple. To add to the audacity, she had been recklessly using high-level spatial magic.

It was akin to firing up a private jet just to make a quick trip to a nearby convenience store. No wonder that even Lucy's abundant magic power drained in an instant. Such a feat would have been impossible even for Principal Obel.

Thinking back on the situation, it was outrageous. Bell Meiya, in her fury, had approached with her fist whirling and, like a stray cat spotting a cucumber on the street, had sprung up and flown here.

Lucy, donned in hastily worn pajamas, was sprawled on the floor, panting.

"I'm exhausted..."

"You've brought it on yourself, haven't you?"

"Lately, everything's been so tough. Especially that senior maid, she's been incredibly on edge..."

"Bell Meiya?"

She was the kind of person who, without any shift in expression, stayed laser-focused on her own responsibilities.

"You might not notice it from the outside, but I can tell... she's really wound up... Seems like she's worried about someone... But why does her agitation have to affect me..."

Wouldn't it be sufficient to behave appropriately? Everyone in the world knew the answer to this obvious question, but it was needless to ask. The fact that such an attempt would be fruitless was also universally acknowledged.

Lucy, who had sprawled out on the ground and was dust-covered, eventually spoke up.

"Hey."

Whenever she called out with a 'hey', it was always the same. What followed was predictable.

"Do you have any beef jerky?"

She was hungry, as expected.

I let out a deep sigh, lazily pointed my finger around Lucy.

The remnants of a drying rack, shattered from Lucy's crash landing, lay there, along with the beef jerky that had been drying on it.

It was evident that the beef jerky, having rolled around on the floor and gathered dust, was in no condition to be eaten.

"Noooo..."

At the sight of this, Lucy's face turned ashen in a blink. Seizing the opportunity, I thumped her on the forehead.

Devoid of any magical power, Lucy could only manage a feeble grunt as she continued to roll around on the floor.

CHAPTER 21

'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' grew more compelling the longer one immersed oneself in it.

Elements that once seemed fleeting gradually revealed unexpected intentions, and buried within were special episodes, scenarios hidden beneath the surface.

The reader would often stumble upon aspects about characters, long since written out of the story, that they had initially overlooked.

The tale was peppered with various students, faculty members, and outsiders, all a part of a carefully crafted world, a universe of intriguing detail.

Subsequently, one would find themselves completely engrossed, unable to tear away even as the main narrative wound down, the enticing allure prompting them to eagerly anticipate the next installment.

It was indeed a bitter pill to swallow, to be a mere extra, briefly appearing and then abruptly exiting at the earliest stage of such a vast and rich narrative. But that's not what I wanted to focus on at the moment.

Given the vast array of characters, it was an evident truth that not all could be bestowed the same weight and importance.

It was a natural progression - if some characters had significance and influence, then others were inevitably destined to fade into the background, becoming minor footnotes in the grand scheme of things.

Still, there were times I felt a twinge of discomfort.

Major characters like Act 2's boss, 'Researcher Glast', Act 3's boss, 'Awakened Lucy', and Act 4's boss, 'Family Head Krepin Rosetail', varied in importance.

Yet each boss was carefully fleshed out, indicating substantial effort spent in their portrayal.

They stood firm in their paths, each bearing their unique motivations, circumstances, and backgrounds, obstructing the protagonist, Taylee.

They had differing values, varied power levels, and a strange force resided within their unique aesthetics that inclined one to acknowledge them.

However, Act 1's boss, Yenika Faelover, felt somewhat out of place.

Amongst the array of bosses, each captivating the player with their unique aesthetics and dazzling abilities, Yenika Faelover was the only one who seemed devoid of 'autonomy'.

She fell for the whispers of the high-level dark spirit, Velosper, occupied the student council building, released all her contracted spirits endowed with Velosper's 'Frenzy', and gazed at the impending darkness from the top of the Iron Hall.

Admittedly, the impact was undeniable.

The stark contrast between her usually positive and energetic demeanor in the academy and her actions was bound to leave a profound impression on the player.

But, that was all there was to it.

The Glaskan subjugation episode that culminated Act 1 marked the moment when Taylee first realized the way of the swordsman. It was an episode where he managed to slay a top-level spirit.

As Taylee began to slowly understand the way of the sword, he severed Glaskan's right arm, signaling the beginning of a grand narrative.

The difficulty level was considerable, and I remember frantically searching for strategy guides when I first played. The guide written by a player using the nickname 'Pepe... something', was particularly helpful.

It's an old memory now, and not particularly relevant.

Since every scenario was focused on Taylee's growth, it was inevitable that Yenika was sidelined. As a result, her narrative was pushed to the background, leaving much about her character shrouded in mystery.

Fallen under the sinister whispers of Velosper, the High-Spirit of Darkness, her soul was wholly consumed by the darkness within. This might sound like a nebulous explanation, but bear with me.

Yet, from my knowledge, the 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' did not carelessly squander significant characters like this.

There had to be an intent or a certain narrative the author wanted to communicate, especially in the case of Yenika Faelover, who was chosen as the final boss of the first act.

Try as I might, with a fan's heart and fervor, I couldn't decipher any trace of such intent. The clues were scarce.

Perhaps, parts of the story were lost during the production or editing process.

Regardless, it left a bitter taste. It was an unfortunate reality I had to accept.

"I really need to build a cabin."

I concluded the following day.

My vitality had improved. I was getting quicker at preparing materials with magic. I had started to gather a fair amount of food, so there was no immediate worry about meals.

I should begin laying the groundwork for long-term survival in this forest.

The wooden rest shelter I used as a resting place couldn't exactly be praised for durability. Although I kept maintaining it, it wasn't offering much in return for the labor.

Without walls and a roof, the heating efficiency was simply terrible. It was spring, and the weather was fine, but I had to survive three winters in this forest.

The deteriorating shelter wouldn't be enough to provide a stable living environment.

Furthermore, the expertise required for long-term projects like building a log cabin increased exponentially.

This was a great opportunity to boost my stagnated life skill levels all at once. The skill level of 'Dexterity' was stuck at 10, and the 'Design' skill, which was hard to improve compared to others, was also stagnant.

After all, if a character like Ed Rosetail had a talent for crafting, he had to utilize it. Developing this ability could positively affect his other skills.

Whether in reality or in a game, it was always advantageous to leverage one's specialized talents.

"Hmm... come to think of it, he defeated the mid-boss of the first act..."

There seemed to be fewer variables than expected regarding the progression of the scenario.

My heart skipped a beat when Lucy beat Taylee during the joint combat exercise, but looking at the news that followed, there didn't seem to be any serious setbacks.

The mid-boss of the first act, 'Interfering Elvira' from the Alchemy Department, was defeated by Taylee, and Princess Penia had been buzzing around the student council.

I also caught wind that she was being discussed as a potential candidate for the next student council president among the faculty.

Additionally, Lortel, the Golden Daughter, seemed to be getting along well with Yenika. Judging by Lortel's recent visit, everything seemed to be going according to the 'script' I knew.

I no longer had to worry about the progression of the episode.

Most importantly, I needed to prioritize my own development. Rather than worrying about others, I needed to focus on my own path and make the best of my life.

"Time to get busy..."

There was still plenty of time left before the end of Act 1. I had to deal with tuition fees, but my grades were improving at a satisfactory pace. I thought I could expect some surprisingly positive results.

With a satisfied smile, I began to clean the fish I had caught at the pond. It was quite

a large fish I had caught today.

This was the first time I was cooking a fish this large, and I had spent quite some time contemplating how to go about it.

Well, if in doubt, grilling it with a dash of salt always worked.

I decided to prepare this for dinner, and since Bell Meiya had shared plenty of herbs with me, I planned to make a fragrant herbal tea before hitting the books in the evening.

Yennekar Faelover had occupied the student union building the day after tomorrow.

The end of semester battle of Act 1, which was supposed to take place at the end of the term, was brought forward by a whole month. In some ways, it was a catastrophe.

This guide is a summary of 'A detailed guide to the final boss of Act 1 for beginners! Written by 'PepeRoPepe'. For detailed strategies, please refer to the original post!

Act 1, Final Stage.

Boss: Yennekar Faelover, The Elemental Summoner

✂ This is a boss fight composed of five phases. As it's quite long, make sure to check your items and equipment durability before entering the boss fight.

■Page 1. Call to Arms.

Objective: Assemble 'Princess of Mercy Penia', 'Ziggs of the Northern Plains', 'Golden Daughter Lortel', 'Companion Ayla', 'Meddler Elvira', 'Gloomy Clevius' at the student plaza!

(Additional objective) Find 'Romanticist Adel'.

(Additional objective) Find 'Lazy Lucy'.

(Additional objective) Find 'Senior Maid Bell'.

✂ Instant death occurs if you approach the outskirts of the faculty building where

the Space Seal Magic is used. Do not unnecessarily go out to the outskirts.

✂ The most efficient order to travel is: Orlin Plaza, Obel Hall, Thanos Magic Supplies Storage, West Archery Range, Nilten Laboratory, Student Square.

✂ You don't need to capture all the spirits who are on the move.

However, if you capture Fire Spirit Goda and Light Spirit Rakie, you can manage your route more efficiently, so let's suppress them in advance.

✂ The additional achievement conditions don't provide much except for a little favor from the faction. The corresponding characters don't even participate in the punitive team. However, 'Romanticist Adel' provides a useful buff for boss strategy, so be sure to meet him.

If your goal is 100% clear, Adel is playing the ukulele in the bushes behind the West Archery Range, Lucy is napping on the rooftop of Obel Hall, and Bell can be found next to the statue in Orlin Plaza.

✂ If you are thinking of investing in the Spirit System of the Alchemy Skills, it will be helpful later on if you raise the proficiency of Spirit Understanding and Spirit Response in this phase.

■ Page 2. Student Council Building Recovery Operation Achievement Conditions :

Find the location of Spirit Master Yenika.

Appearing enemies :

Spirit's Stigma * 30

Elemental Trace * 30

Mid-Rank Wind Spirit Peshi * 1

Mid-Rank Fire Spirit Olgogas *1

Spirit Tree Altar * 1

✂ Spirit Master Yenika is in Iron Hall. However, you should not enter Iron Hall first.

(Be careful, if you choose the option 'Enter Iron Hall first' suggested by 'The Golden Daughter Lortel', you will immediately get a bad ending!)

※ Mid-Rank spirits do not take damage from attacks of the same attribute. If it's tricky, wait until the punitive team members knock down the middle spirit.

※ If you enter Hayes Hall first, Wind Spirit Peshi appears, and if you enter Gloct Hall first, Fire Spirit Olgogas appears. Please choose considering your elemental skills.

※ When attacking the Spirit Tree Altar guarding the entrance to Iron Hall, there is a trick using straight cutting. Please refer to the original text for the detailed method.

■ Page 3. Iron Hall Hallway Battle Achievement Conditions :

Reach the battle practice field where Spirit Master Yenika is.

Appearing enemies :

Fire High-Spirit Tarkan * 1

※ The form of the entry route changes depending on the choice after the Spirit Tree Altar subjugation. The fork passes quickly, so concentrate.

※ The key is to continuously inflict damage on the tail using Elemental Slash, which was acquired in Act 1, Chapter 9. Once the tail is cut off, you can attack the head using Elemental Slash again.

※ Please avoid the periodically flying Ignition magic and tail whip. Bleeding and burn conditions are stacked when damage is repeated.

※ There are three scenes during the battle where the pillars of the hallway collapse. If you get hit by a pillar, you will die instantly, so be sure to avoid it.

■ Page 4. Final Battle Achievement Conditions :

Destroy the summoning ritual of the Highest Dark Spirit 'Glaskan'.

Appearing enemies :

Dark High-Spirit Velosper * 1

Spirit Master Yenika Faelover * 1

※ The 5th phase is just an event cutscene, so it's virtually the final battle. Proceed with the mindset of using all remaining consumables.

※ Attacking Yenika directly while she is setting up a summoning ritual will reflect damage back to you due to the 'Dark Veil'.

Attack Velosper first to stun him, which will temporarily remove the 'Dark Veil', allowing you to deal damage to Yenika. However, be cautious of the counter magic Yenika is casting.

※ If 'Princess of Mercy' Penia, who is setting up a defense ritual, dies, you will immediately receive a bad ending. Keep checking her health status.

※ You become immune to Velosper's 'Curse of Bloodline' during phase 1 if you meet 'Romanticist Adel'. However, not all members of the punishment squad become immune, so be cautious.

■ Page 5. Glaskan Suppression Conditions: Suppress the right arm of the 'Highest Dark Spirit Glaskan'.

Enemy Appearance:

Highest Dark Spirit Glaskan (right arm) * 1

※ This is an event scene. You can just watch.

※ The 'Swordsman's Formula' will be added to your skill tab afterwards. Fill up the proficiency to receive generous bonus stats. Practice whenever you have time.

■ Others

※ If you fail to suppress Yenika Faelover by reaching phase 5 before dawn, the 'Intact Glaskan' will be summoned, leading to a bad ending. Be aggressive.

This is the summarized information.

Many novices are tripping over their own feet, unable to break through Act 1. I've summarized the key points, so it would be good if you check them before the final battle.

Good luck!

* * *

The sound of an owl hooting - uuh- uuh- somewhere in the dark forest.

The sound of insects chirping, creating harmony, or the occasional rustling of leaves in the wind.

If you listen, the midnight forest has its own charm.

As I watched the crackling campfire, looking up at the starry sky brought on a sentimental feeling.

Looking at the numerous stars embedded like salt, I pondered on the insignificance of the issues I'm facing from a universal perspective.

Accordingly, another thought comes to mind.

— There's no guarantee that everything in the world will go 'according to plan'.

This painfully obvious fact seemed suddenly profound, causing me to chuckle.

I've adapted quite well to this lifestyle. That said, I must not lose a sense of urgency.

I shook off my thoughts and threw the stick I was holding into the campfire. It was time to wrap up the day.

I stretched and laid down quietly in my shelter.

Hopefully, tomorrow will be another peaceful day.

CHAPTER 22

The anomaly happened on the evening of the following day.

My day was typically routine, ending my daily duties at the professors' building, then returning to camp like a bullet. I was usually absent from the professors' building by dinner, but that day I stayed fairly late.

I had set a goal to construct a proper wooden hut to create a more stable living environment.

Thus, I was in the student library familiarizing myself with basic design materials, gathering information on what necessary materials were required, and how to refine the wood.

Well, the situation wasn't pressing for food at the moment, and with the weekend approaching, there weren't any urgent tasks or assignments to address. It would be fine to stay at the professors' building a little longer today.

If you decided to get something done, dragging it out didn't help anyone. It took time to gather information in the student library.

From my perspective, one who planned life in hour-long segments, once I committed to burying myself in the library, it was better to get everything done at once, since the northern forest and the student library were so far apart it was burdensome to visit frequently.

The number of books I could borrow was limited, and I had already utilized them to their maximum for my studies. Therefore, I had to obtain all the necessary information right there and then.

Thus, with a flaming resolve for battle, I stacked up a pile of books and devoured them like a madman.

"Closing time. You really are studying hard."

A student librarian with a warm impression approached and informed me.

Engrossed in the sea of books, I hadn't noticed how late it had gotten.

Looking around, every other seat was empty except for mine.

I had rushed over, skipping dinner, and now it was closing time.

I lifted my head to glance at the student who had spoken to me. A quiet girl with her hands gently folded together stood before me.

On her chest, a neatly hung blue badge signifying her status as a freshman. In other words, I could speak casually with her.

"Oh, I didn't realize it was this late."

I said, gazing out the window to see that darkness had already settled.

Leaving this mountain of books until the last minute of closing time made it quite a hassle for the librarian who would have to tidy up after me.

"I would've wrapped up earlier if you had said something."

"No, it's okay. You were so focused, I actually felt bad interrupting you."

With wavy pink hair, the name of Sylvanian Academy's trainee librarian didn't readily come to mind... Moka? Elka? Delka? No, that wasn't quite right... She wasn't a main character in the scenario, that much I knew.

"They say studying is all in the hips, but all I seem to gain from sitting around with snacks is love handles..."

I responded dryly and quickly closed my books.

Today, I had planned to lay the groundwork for my hut construction. However, it seemed like that would be a tough feat to achieve.

"Still, whenever I saw someone like my senior, my enthusiasm for learning flared up. They didn't visit often, but when they did, they were immersed in their books, a sight I found admirable."

The girl finished her speech with a radiant smile.

"My name is Elka Islan."

Her smooth transition into self-introduction implied that she had intended to strike up a conversation for quite some time.

"Ed."

"..."

The reaction to his name was so familiar it had become dull. When had the admission test incident ended? Still, the rumors about that notorious Ed Rosetail were ceaseless.

Despite living as quietly as possible, only attending classes and tending to my own business, his ill fame showed no signs of abating.

Just how arrogant and detestable must he have been to merit this degree of notoriety?

Generally, rumors have a knack for spreading negativity like a wildfire and rarely favor the positive. I wasn't exactly hurt or upset by every rumor, but occasionally such reactions provoked a sigh.

"Well... I hope I'm not being rude."

Despite all this, if one simply goes about their business quietly, focusing diligently on academics and striving for daily survival, there were times when perspectives could shift.

"You're quite different from the rumors."

"Rumors?"

"No, um... I hope you didn't take that in a bad way..."

It felt somewhat gauche to argue about rumors. I decided to let it slide, as it was getting late and I should return to the camp.

While I was considering this, my companion was making some senseless conversation.

"As an apprentice librarian, I spend most of my time here after class. You often borrow books on elemental studies, right?"

"..."

"Seeing you read and return several hundred-page books in a few days, or engrossed in about half a dozen books at a time... It makes me think that the rumors about you acting like a know-it-all when you know nothing might actually be unfounded... Oh, I, I'm sorry if I upset you."

With that, the girl hastily picked up her books.

"Well, anyway, I should tidy up and return to the dormitory... Take care on your way back!"

With a rushed farewell, she quickly disappeared between the bookshelves.

And then, the library's bookshelves fell like dominos.

* * *

Living on the periphery, not part of the main narrative, can be a tedious affair.

From a position of having to constantly adapt to abrupt changes, it was hard not to feel that way.

"Damn, are you okay?"

After dragging the struggling librarian from the toppled bookshelf, I casually lifted them like a sack of potatoes onto a table.

A thunderous noise echoed throughout the faculty building, followed by an immense shaking that engulfed the entire student library building. This was fifteen minutes ago.

The effects were staggering, akin to an earthquake. Bookshelves toppled, books littered the floor, and records along with supplies were in total disarray.

Expensive magic tools were damaged, the crystal orbs responsible for light, even the candles were broken. The room was engulfed in darkness.

"Hey."

"Ugh."

The librarian, either unconscious or dazed, could only utter confused sounds.

I placed the disoriented librarian on the table and took a moment to ponder. I didn't distinctly recall her, but there was a nagging familiarity.

Well, if I, who had extensively played as the 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', couldn't remember, it probably didn't matter.

The time must have been past nine, and there was no light source inside.

Nevertheless, the reading room was faintly suffused with a soft violet light, allowing me to see the room's structure.

Surprisingly, the source of this light was the window.

I walked over and opened it. Since the student library was situated on a solitary hill on the outskirts of the professor's building, I could get a comprehensive view of the professor's quarters.

The pillar of dim light, originating from the student hall, cut straight through the sky above the professor's quarters, triggering a spatial seal that enveloped the entire area.

The abrupt earthquake was undoubtedly the aftereffect of this large-scale spatial sealing magic. It was certain, considering the seal extended from the student hall.

"Hmm... isn't this a bit early...?"

But there was no need to panic.

Even though I was stuck in the miserable body of Ed Rosetail and had my fair share of hardship, the information I possessed gave me an advantage in situations like this.

"Hmm..."

I rubbed my chin and fell into thought.

While it was not a crisis worth panicking over, there were several points I couldn't quite grasp.

Firstly, the spatial sealing magic was initiated by the Dark High-Spirit Velosper, using Yenika as a medium, to isolate the sprawling professor's quarters from the outside.

It was an adaptation of Velosper's high-level dark magic, the 'Shadow Veil'.

It sounded grand as a high-level boundary, but in the scenario, it was nothing more than a stage set-up.

The climax of Act 1 was the subjugation of Glaskan, with important first-year all-star members assembling a subjugation team to attack the student hall.

However, logically speaking, such a scenario couldn't be feasible.

The elemental spirits were notoriously inscrutable, and a dark spirit, especially a high-level one, posed a problem beyond the students' capacity to solve.

If it had occupied the student hall, the staff and professors should have stepped in to suppress it.

But that wouldn't work for the story. For Taylee to manifest his swordsmanship, it was necessary to keep the staff and professors out of it.

The emergence of a concept related to Velosper's space-sealing magic was my first real insight.

That barrier was like a lock fastened from the inside. Easy to verify its existence when you're on the inside, but challenging to confirm from the outside.

Even if one were to notice the anomaly, properly releasing the seal of the elusive dark spirit would consume almost half a day using traditional methods.

Inevitably, to break through quickly, one had no choice but to shatter the barrier using overwhelming destructive force.

As unrefined as this method seemed for a barrier of such magnitude, there existed a few individuals in Sylvenia who could achieve this feat.

One need not look far, just summoning Principal Obel would suffice to crush the barrier without deciphering it.

Yet, Velosper, the high-level dark spirit, was cunning.

Most professors had returned to their personal research rooms or homes when the anomaly occurred. It was late in the evening, past nine, and very few professors remained in the faculty building.

The faculty's personal research rooms were attached to the living quarters for their convenience.

The ultimate battle of Act 1, the subjugation of Glaskan, was a race against time.

Before dawn, before Yenika summoned Glaskan, the highest-level dark spirit, it was crucial to suppress her.

Despite the barrier being fragile and quickly destroyed if left alone, all it needed was to buy enough time before Glaskan's summoning spell was triggered.

-'click'

I swiftly opened the window and peeked out. Looking around, it seemed that the spirits Yenika had summoned hadn't taken control of the roads yet.

"We're not even in Phase 1 yet."

The flow of boss fights - mobilizing the punitive force, retaking the student council hall, the battle in Iron Hall, subduing Yenika, and Glaskan - would begin now and conclude before daybreak.

In short, it was going to be an immense struggle. I could only send a prayer for Taylee.

Phase 1 required frantic activity. Running around suppressing spirits blocking the roads and rallying the scattered first-year aces around the faculty building would make one feel utterly exhausted.

"By now, he must have met Ayla."

The situation must be under control.

The aura of spirit magic emanating from the student council hall. Ayla, his childhood friend with expertise in spirit magic, would undoubtedly brief Taylee about the situation.

From now on, the students had to join forces to subdue that monstrous high-level dark spirit.

If Glaskan, the highest-level dark spirit, were to descend upon the faculty building, the consequences would be unthinkable.

The ominous red light changing the serene blue hue outside the window indicated the commencement of the summoning ritual for Glaskan. I knew clearly who was initiating the ritual.

The object of all second-year students' admiration and love, the adorable top spirit user.

"Even from here it's an extraordinary sight."

From Taylee's perspective, he would have been near the student union building when the barrier ritual emerged.

Explosive waves of mana from the barrier ritual swept outwards, sending him flying, soon covering the ominous, starless sky with a fiery curtain. The spread was so enormous it could engulf the entire professor's building.

A cursory glance was enough to deduce the beginning of a large-scale event.

However, as someone who had played multiple times, this moment felt refreshing to me.

From this far-off vantage point, the pillar of light was still imposing.

The view of the barrier ritual's emergence from the outskirts of the professor's building at the student library was certainly captivating. I couldn't take my eyes off of it.

From outside the barrier, everything would seem normal. A truly splendid barrier.

Well, whether it was Glaskan or whatever, Taylee would handle it by running around. I just needed to pass the time by browsing through a book here until it was over.

There was absolutely no need for me to exert myself. If there was any effort to spare, it was better invested in improving my shanty's completion. Getting involved unnecessarily would only result in a lot of trouble and physical harm.

Moreover, I didn't even want to get close to a place where many key characters from the scenario had gathered. Future knowledge and unilateral information superiority were my strongest weapons.

I wouldn't make the foolish mistake of giving up these powerful weapons by providing unnecessary variables.

"Hold on..."

A thought suddenly occurred.

"Isn't this not the time to be doing this?!"

I was leisurely seated at a library table, gazing at the magnificent barrier ritual. A phrase from a strategy guide that I read a long time ago popped into my mind.

- 'If you're planning to invest in the Spirit Skill of the Alchemy System, raising your understanding and response to spirits during this phase will be helpful later on.'

"Right...!"

The climax of Act 1 was a part where dozens of spirits contracted with Yenika and countless lesser spirits derived from them appeared en masse.

This was an opportunity to increase the proficiency of the tedious 'Spirit Understanding' and 'Spirit Sense' at once.

The proficiency of Spirit Skills typically accumulated through contact with spirits. It needed interaction with a spirit, whether that was through communication or combat. Combat experience generally provided the most proficiency.

However, ordinary people couldn't even see spirits. Unless they were as lucky as Yenika, born with a profound 'Spirit Sense'.

Therefore, for someone without innate talent to handle Spirit Skills, there was no other way but to contact a spirit that another Spirit User had materialized.

This closed nature of the Spirit Skills acted as a significant barrier to entry. And the opportunity to leap over that barrier at once was the climax of Act 1.

Being the final boss was a Spirit User, there was an opportunity to amass a lot of combat experience with materialized spirits during this part.

It was foolish to remain idle in the face of such a golden opportunity - an event promising an explosion of experience points.

Besides, this battle was the real deal. Unlike the minor mock battles sporadically embedded in the curriculum, this one provided an opportunity to accumulate practical combat skills.

The primary goal was to subdue as many spirits as possible, thereby fostering my personal growth.

"No time to waste!"

I quickly jumped off the table, swung open the library exit, ready to bolt. But then, I caught sight of the librarian sprawled across the table.

"Hmm..."

Though it seemed safe inside the building, just in case, I picked up the parchment and quill that lay in the corner.

- 'When you come to, stay calm and stay put. All will be resolved by dawn, so keep the entrance securely blocked and don't provoke the spirits. Your safety is paramount, don't move recklessly.'

A single note felt insufficient.

While it seemed unlikely that the roaming spirits would barge into the library to attack the sleeping girl, one could never be too careful. If she were injured or worse, the guilt would be unbearable.

I propped up the blackboard in the corner of the reading room and, picking up a

stray piece of chalk, wrote the same message in large letters. I wanted to ensure she wouldn't miss the memo.

Before leaving, I moved a cabinet to cover the wall near the windows, shielding the interior view and, feeling the entrance was too exposed, I casually covered it with a tattered blackout curtain.

This ensured the entrance was less visible and would not hinder movement should an escape be necessary.

The interior darkened somewhat, but surely she would notice the glaring message on the chalkboard.

I had done what I could. I dashed out towards the corridor.

A wave of experience points was imminent. I needed to move swiftly.

I could readily subdue fluid spirits and elemental traces, and with some effort, even lower spirits.

In a normal scenario, my first concern would be how to subdue that vicious Velosper before thinking of my own growth... However, I was grateful someone else would bear the burden of all the hardship and adversity...

Taylee...

I'm clueless, so it's all up to you.

You'll have a tough time, but... fight on!

* * *

- 'How could the burden I carry weigh more than the burden borne by Your Highness?'

- 'Surely, it's important to worry about complicated political and social situations, but shouldn't you let your mind rest a bit?'

The echo of these words was the result of Princess Penia's bad habit.

While she had an uncanny ability to penetrate the hearts of others with ease, she rarely had her own inner self scrutinized by another.

As a result, the rare instances when her vulnerabilities were probed lingered in her memory, impossible to forget.

A seemingly careless comment by Ed Rosetail lingered in the air, a byproduct of his particular temperament.

Princess Penia still felt far off, but she shook off her doubts and refocused on the present.

"Our situation stands as such."

Began Ayla, a freshman, summarizing everything.

They congregated at a temporary gathering place in the student plaza. The time was 11:30.

The unexpected appearance of a magical barrier around the student hall marked the beginning of this calamity. It had been nearly two hours since then.

The plaza was teeming with students trapped by Velosper's barrier - an improvised bastion. Haphazard barricades, built around the central fountain from whatever they could gather, blocked the entrances from all sides.

It was crude, but sufficient to hold off the spirits that were scattered around the area.

"This large-scale barrier can't last forever. It will be discovered soon, and we'll get help from the outside. Once the professors catch wind of this, they'll step in."

Nods of approval met Ayla's words.

In this makeshift stronghold, voluntarily formed by the students, Princess Penia naturally emerged as their leader.

In times of crisis, there is a pressing need for someone to take control and responsibility. Someone with the authority and power to steer through chaos is crucial.

Unsurprisingly, Princess Penia was best suited for this role, and her authority was indisputable.

There were 57 students gathered in the stronghold at the student plaza.

Taylee McLore, a freshman from the combat department, had been instrumental in this swift response.

He had made his way through the throng of spirits that occupied the professors' building, clearing a path for the students to gather in the plaza.

Thanks to Taylee's efforts, more than half of the students who were left in the professors' building had managed to converge at the student plaza.

At the heart of the stronghold was a council of key members from the gathered students, engaged in a heated discussion.

The Princess of Mercy, Penia. The Golden Daughter, Lortel. Ziggs of the Northern Plains. The Knight Captain Cler. Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman, Taylee. The Companion, Ayla. The Meddler Elvira. The Gloomy Clevius...

Whether sitting on the ground, leaning against the barricade walls, or standing, they huddled together in various poses to deliberate on their plan. Needless to say, at the center of it all was Princess Penia.

"As I've said before, I think we need to infiltrate the student hall."

Taylee McLore, battered from fighting through spirits, suggested, slowly standing up.

"We can't just wait for outside help. This barrier is nothing more than a delay tactic. If Ayla is right, and Glaskan is indeed summoned, there could be serious casualties."

Information consolidated by Ayla, skilled in spirit magic, and Taylee, who had been active on the field, was profoundly shocking. The spirit seal blanketing the night sky was for summoning Glaskan, a High-Spirit of Darkness.

The number of individuals possessing such superior 'Spirit Sense', capable of summoning a spirit of that degree, was minimal within the school.

By process of elimination, the perpetrator had to be Yenika Faelover, the

valedictorian of the second school year of the Magic Department.

"Princess Penia, I must object to this course of action. Above all, your safety is paramount. At this time, we should adopt a conservative approach. You must not venture outside the temporary shelter."

Urged Cler, the Knight Captain, who was primarily concerned about the safety of Princess Penia.

"Those outside the barrier will soon notice the anomaly. The Royal Guards stationed in the residential area, along with the school's professors, should be able to handle this situation promptly."

"The barrier of a High-Spirit of Darkness won't be dispelled easily unless forcibly broken. Honestly, I'm not sure if we have enough time. If Principal Obel were to intervene directly, it might be possible, but as you know, he often leaves his post vacant. Hmm."

An alchemist caught Cler's words. It was the valedictorian of the first school year of the Alchemy Department, known as 'Meddler Elvira'.

"Hmm~. I agree with Taylee's opinion~. Above all, if members of this level combine their strengths, we might be able to suppress a High-Spirit, even if the highest spirits are out of reach. Hmm~. Honestly, are you all lacking confidence~?"

"So, now there... we're going to... bust in...? Eek... I object..."

Gloomy Clevius, a male student with pronounced dark circles, pointed towards the student council building.

The lesser spirits and low-level spirits spread throughout the professor building weren't particularly dangerous. If a group of this caliber gathered in one place, it would be considered entirely safe.

However, the situation at the student council building was entirely different.

It was where Yenika Faelover, the master of all these spirits, resided. That place was heavily guarded by mid-rank spirits and spirit trees, standing double and triple lines of defense.

"Are we going to break through those mid-level spirits, suppress all the spirit trees, enter the building, and restrain Yenika...? Is that... even possible...? Moreover, that's not all! There are two high-level spirits inside! The Fire High-Spirit Tarkan and the Dark High-Spirit Velosper!"

Clevius's words silenced the room.

They had clearly witnessed the power of a High-Spirit during the joint combat exercise.

The Fire High-Spirit Tarkan, summoned by Yenika, roared as it wrapped around the top of the Iron Hall.

Even Lortel, one of the A-grade students acknowledged by Professor Glast, had been unable to make a peep, let alone resist.

Moreover, Tarkan was likely even more formidable than before. All the spirits occupying the professor building were under Velosper's 'Frenzy' magic. There was no reason why Tarkan would be an exception.

"I won't do it... I can't commit such an act!"

"Calm yourself, Clevius."

"Ah... my apologies, Princess Penia."

At Princess Penia's rebuke, Clevius bowed his head deeply.

Still, the words he'd let slip stirred an atmosphere of despair among the students.

Over fifty students were maintaining a vigil in this small garrison. Because their conversation was heard by everyone, there was no room for discouraging talk.

"Isn't she way too powerful, even for a second-year top student? A mere student was capable of manifesting so many spirits, and even casually performing Glaskan summoning?"

The one who answered Lortel's question was Ayla, Taylee's childhood friend.

"Most of it must be Velosper's power. Senior Yenika is merely a vessel for manifesting

that power. That's why all spirit users purify their minds to avoid being consumed by dark spirits."

The explanation given by Ayla was something Princess Penia was well aware of.

Dark spirits, the archenemy of spirit users, wielded immense power but wouldn't follow the user's will.

Instead, these entities were more like demons, controlling the spirit user and having their own way.

"However, nobody knows how Velosper managed to control Yenika, who had more expertise in spirit studies than anyone else. She should've been well aware of the danger posed by dark spirits."

"What's important now isn't that."

In response to Ayla's explanation, 'Ziggs of the Northern Plains', who had been sitting in a corner, spoke up.

"What's important is deciding on our course of action now, right?"

His voice was serious and dignified. The long-haired boy, who seemed indifferent yet assertive, continued speaking.

"And the only one capable of making that decision... is Princess Penia."

At Ziggs' words, silence once again filled the room.

Over fifty students turned their gaze towards Princess Penia. From the other side, Knight Captain Cler's worried gaze stung Penia's back.

Cler, who was more concerned about the safety of the princess than anyone else, understood. However, the princess was not one to sit idly and wait for help.

"Let's move in. If something unexpected happens, we'll retreat."

At the princess's words, the room's reaction was divided.

Knight Captain Cler and the timid Clevius, along with other conservative students, let

out a deep sigh, while the more aggressive students smiled.

"However, not all students can move in. If we all rush in recklessly, we'll only increase the damage... Only those who can protect themselves should go."

The general students wouldn't stand a chance against high-rank spirits, let alone mid-rank ones. There was no need to increase the damage by bringing everyone along.

"Members gathered here, my knight Cler, top students from each year, and Class A students will move in. Everyone's abilities have been verified."

"Surely it's not really necessary for the princess to go herself, right?"

"No, I plan on going along too."

Cler's face visibly paled at the unexpected declaration, yet Princess Penia swiftly countered with a firm shake of her head.

"It'd be preposterous for me to issue commands from the safety of the rear while everyone else is on the frontline."

"Your Highness, your royal person isn't solely yours. As your protector, I must voice my disagreement."

"Rest assured, Cler. I haven't neglected my magical studies. Also, Taylee and Ayla should accompany me. They've been patrolling the student council building's outskirts while looking for other students, so they should have some idea of what's happening inside."

Thus, the membership of the expedition team was set. Regrettably, there was not a single upperclassman. Except for Cler, the adult, they were all freshmen.

However, each member was exceptionally competent. This group of freshmen, to begin with, had a disproportionately high number of strong individuals.

It was indeed regrettable that 'Lazy Lucy', who had unaccounted whereabouts, could not join, but this group alone would present a considerable challenge to many upperclassmen.

"We'll commence our action in an hour. Everyone should finish their preparations and steady their nerves."

At the princess's words, the group collectively nodded.

"Princess! Princess Penia!"

Suddenly, a student dashed in, shattering the somber atmosphere.

"We've managed to account for everyone remaining in the faculty building."

A young man with reddish-brown hair weaved through the barriers and made his way to the princess. In this abrupt crisis, identifying key individuals was of paramount importance.

Given the timing, most people would have retired to their dorms, and so the number of those who stayed back in the faculty building and got caught by the barrier was limited.

Thankfully, when all the known information was consolidated, a rough estimate of the total number of people could be made.

The male student responsible for this investigation was panting heavily but began his report rapidly.

"Students from the alchemy department, who were conducting potion research in the Thanos Magic Tool Storage, have reportedly barricaded themselves in. They're mostly third-years, so there's probably no need for concern."

"Anything else?"

"The staff members who were in charge of managing the building and doors are gathered in Audrey Hall. However, they're regular staff members and lack the power to confront spirits."

"Do they require assistance?"

"I've heard that Professor Cali is overseeing them. However, linking up with them seems to be a challenge."

Although most professors would have returned to their dorms by this time, there were a few who remained.

Still, protecting and managing the numerous non-combatant staff members would be a substantial task.

The distance between Audrey Hall and the student square was considerable, and it would be unreasonable to expect them to guide the staff group here. But they couldn't just leave the staff members there either.

"I guess they're planning a sit-in, too."

"Right. I imagine they'll take steps to keep the damage to a minimum. They won't recklessly expose the general admin staff to danger."

"It seems we're the only ones fit to make a move on the student council building."

Princess Penia steeled her resolve again. Regardless, their current location, the student plaza, was directly in front of the contentious student council building. They were uniquely placed to deal with the situation promptly.

"We haven't identified any other students yet..."

"There are!"

A voice, loud and clear, reverberated from one side of the barricades that surrounded them from all four directions.

Instantly, all eyes turned towards the source of the sound. A freshman girl, her fists balled tightly against her chest, her eyes squeezed shut in a mix of fear and determination.

"I'm... I'm sorry... The situation was so serious... I couldn't speak."

"Give us the details."

"I... I'm Tishika, one of the apprentice librarians who manage the student library... actually, I left a friend behind in the student library."

Her face twisted with distress as she confessed. It was as if each word was an

enormous effort.

"We were supposed to finish up and leave together, but today, one of the readers wouldn't leave until closing time. My friend stayed back to wrap things up and insisted that I head back to the dorm... so, I left."

"So, one librarian and one reader are stuck in the student library. Wait... apprentice librarian?"

Ziggs, who was silently observing from a corner, rose from his seat. He approached the girl, who seemed to struggle with her story, and looked her straight in the eye.

"What's your friend's name, the librarian?"

"Elka. Elka Islan."

She looked away, beads of sweat on her forehead, as she said the name.

Ziggs' eyes widened briefly as he heard the name.

"Elka... really? Are you sure you're not mistaken?"

"Yes... We are both apprentice librarians, learning about magic book management..."

Suddenly, Ziggs slammed his fist into the barricade behind the girl. It was a startling move that caused the girl to step back, resulting in the makeshift barricade of benches and decorative items tumbling down.

"Damn it! Princess Penia, we need to go rescue her now."

"Ziggs?"

"Elka's a whiz at managing magic books and studying mana, but she can't defend herself. She wanted to be a scholar, after all. If we don't do something, she'll end up a victim of those rampaging spirits."

Ziggs paced back to the center of the encampment and knelt before Princess Penia.

"We must head to the student library and save her immediately."

"Ziggs Ebelstein, do you realize you're acting on emotions right now?"

However, the response came from an unexpected direction, from 'The Golden Daughter', Lortel.

"The student library is a fair distance away. Even with an all-out sprint, it would take quite a while to get there, and we'd have to contend with spirits along the way. There was no way to predict how long it might take. It seemed more prudent to first deal with Senior Yenika, the underlying cause of all this."

Lortel's tone was cool and precise. Her plan was intensely practical.

She showed a polite and calm demeanor towards those in authority, but there was no mercy for those she saw as equals or lesser.

It was a worldview born of survival within the cold realities of the Elte trading association.

"I know you care about Elka, Ziggs. But we have to assess the gravity of our situation."

Elka Islan.

To 'Ziggs of the Northern Plains', who was living life on the brink, she was nothing short of a savior.

A girl who understood and supported Ziggs, a descendant of a northern nomadic tribe whose life had been steeped in blood since his coming of age.

A girl who taught Ziggs what human warmth was, at a time when he had given up on the possibility of a normal life.

The image of her smiling softly from behind a thick magic book at the staff desk in the student library reading room came to mind. Because of her, Ziggs could abandon the life of a bloodthirsty monster.

The thought of losing the smile that had given him a new life was scarier to Ziggs than the prospect of death itself.

"Uh..."

Yet, Lortel's words were frightfully rational and practical. Her arguments were too convincing to disregard.

She was a crafty and greedy merchant, but there was always a sense of righteousness to her words. That was Lortel for you.

"Ease up, Ziggs. You're not normally this emotional. There's some truth to what Lortel's saying."

Ziggs of the Northern Plains was typically the calmest among Class A's trifecta.

Unlike the oddball Lucy and the undeniably shady Lortel, Ziggs was always just, reasonable, and easy to communicate with.

Ziggs' steady demeanor was so renowned among the first-year students that 'You can trust and depend on Ziggs' became something of a catchphrase.

His present behavior was a stark contrast to his usual self. Even without the Princess's insightful gaze, one could tell how much Elka meant to Ziggs.

"And besides, as Tishika pointed out earlier, there's still another student in the library. Why don't we put our trust in that student for now?"

"That is... uh....."

Indeed, Yenika, the root of all the problems, was right in front of them in the student council building. Leaving Yenika behind to rush to the student library seemed like a selfish choice.

Ziggs was acutely aware of this, which is why he couldn't contradict the Princess's suggestion.

"Tishika, didn't you say there was another student?"

"Tha... that is..."

As Tishika avoided eye contact, sweating profusely and stepping back, Princess Penia felt an unsettling sensation creep up on her.

Tishika, avoiding their gaze and nervously stepping back, broke out in a cold sweat.

A sense of unease pricked at the back of Princess Penia's mind.

"Are you hiding something?"

"I... um... ugh..."

Before the princess could respond, Ziggs was on his feet. He stormed back to Tishika, grabbing her by the collar.

"Out with it!"

"Uh... um... I'm sorry... so sorry!"

Finally, Tishika fell to her knees, her face crimson with shame. Her confession tumbled out.

"It was... Ed Rosetail."

As the name filled the room, a silence as heavy and foreboding as the depths of the ocean descended upon them.

"He was there, late into the night. I didn't want to interact with him, he was just too irritating... You all know the kind of person Ed Rosetail is! So, I left him with Elka. Elka doesn't pay attention to gossip, she's like that... Plus, she didn't even know who Ed Rosetail was, so I thought she'd be safe..."

The guilt was overwhelming, pressing the girl deeper into her own misery. The realization that she had left her friend in a perilous situation weighed heavily on her conscience.

"And just as I suspected, Elka didn't make a fuss... She let me go... And now... I'm just so sorry... ugh... uhuh..."

A sound like a snapping string echoed in Ziggs' mind. His patience had reached its limit.

Ed Rosetail.

Ziggs, too, having gone through the school entrance exam, was all too familiar with that man's hideousness.

- 'Hands off! Don't you know who I am?! I am Ed Rosetail, the second son of the Rosetail Family! Take your filthy hands off me, you swine! How dare you touch me!'

- 'Why would I bother to tarnish a dropout like Taylee or whoever? Hands off! What do these dirty, ignorant commoners know, going on and on like that!'

- 'Taylee? Ha... A dropout rat of low birth only knows how to talk.'

He was a caricature of indulgence, hedonism, arrogance, laziness, and incompetence.

He was the epitome of a wretched human being, scraping the bottom of the barrel of humanity.

Given the chance, he would throw even his closest friend under the bus, never once considering the favors he received—an embodiment of sheer selfishness.

The murmurs of the gathered students were all too predictable.

"Ed? That Ed Rosetail? Isn't this a serious issue?"

"I've heard a ton of rumors about how deplorable and pitiful that guy is."

"So, does this mean the librarian is alone with that kind of person in this situation?"

"Damn it....."

Spirits, enraged, blocked every path, making it dangerous to step out of the room, let alone the building.

The heinous Ed Rosetail and Elka were caught in this dire situation.

It seemed unlikely that anything good would come out of this. If the situation continued to worsen, the powerless Elka might be used as a scapegoat by Ed Rosetail, or worse, he might lay hands on her frail form.

Ziggs had a clear understanding of the true nature of this man named Ed.

Ziggs had a crystal clear conviction about Ed's true nature as a human being, reinforced by the whispers he'd heard.

The very thought that Elka's fate was hanging on the capricious mercy of such a man utterly shattered Ziggs's rationality.

"I'm leaving for the student library. Right now."

His voice, icy cold from fury surpassing its bounds, delivered a firm declaration.

The one on the receiving end of this announcement was none other than Princess Penia, the 'Princess of Mercy', a figure even Principal Obel addressed with respect.

His words were a clear defiance of the royal command.

"You've crossed the line, Ziggs Ebelstein."

The first to step up was Cler, the Knight Captain. But Ziggs was unmoved.

In the absence of Lazy Lucy, no one could subdue Ziggs of the Northern Plains. Not even Cler, a royal guard, could guarantee a few good strikes against him.

He, alongside Lazy Lucy and 'The Golden Daughter' Lortel, was the top wizard of the first school year at Sylvanian Academy, recognized solely for his prowess by Professor Glast.

In the lands of his northern nomadic tribe, he'd already tasted human blood by the time he'd come of age.

Living always at the brink of life and death, no one could match him when it came to the 'sense of actual combat'.

If Lazy Lucy represented a formidable tank or fighter jet that couldn't be stopped by individual might, Ziggs of the Northern Plains was a well-trained special operative.

He might be overwhelmingly outmatched in sheer force and scale, but in his specialized field, he exercised his power to the fullest.

That field, needless to say, was in the thorough dueling situations free from outside intervention.

"Anyone who stands in my way of leaving, I will subdue."

"We can't let you do that."

'The Golden Daughter' Lortel chanted a spell. In an instant, the humidity in the air froze, creating a giant ice spear out of thin air. It was the intermediate magic 'Ice Spear' that had once shattered the ceiling of Iron Hall.

The two top students of Sylvanian's first school year Magic Department, Ziggs and Lortel, glared at each other. It was an extraordinary sight.

The tension spread among the students who had gathered, each swallowing dryly as the situation escalated dramatically.

"I'll give you this, Ziggs. Among all the people gathered at this garrison, you hold a significant part of the total power. If you leave the punitive force, our chances of succeeding in this operation will drop drastically. I'm sorry, but you absolutely can't leave."

"That's hilarious, Lortel. Do you really think that keeping me here against my will is going to make me cooperate?"

"You've lost your reason, Ziggs. I understand how much you care about Elka, but you have to distinguish between public and private. Look there."

Following Lortel's gaze, one could see the summoning ceremony of Glaskan turning a deep crimson and all sorts of spirits occupying the student council building.

"With that going on, where do you think you're going?"

Lortel stared directly into Ziggs' eyes. His passion-filled, blazing gaze made her sneer.

Passion, enthusiasm, fighting spirit, loyalty, bravado, vigor, resilience - these were words that Lortel detested when they sprang up in urgent situations.

In her view, these were nothing more than excuses that those swayed by their emotions, rather than rational thinking, often invoked.

Indeed, humanity must be rational, composed. No matter how dire the straits, how harsh the circumstances, one must not succumb to misguided emotions. The right decisions must be made.

One who can do that, is truly reliable.

Regardless of how outstanding one's magical abilities might be, how powerful their strength, if they lack a strong heart, they do not deserve trust.

This had been Lortel's first and foremost principle as she walked her path in the world.

"I might not beat you, Ziggs, in a one-on-one fight. But, if I resist with all my might, it won't end without a scratch for you."

"Heh..."

In terms of individual combat skills, Ziggs stood above Lortel. However, she was no pushover either. A lengthy battle, marked by repeated clashes, was inevitable. Neither time nor unscathed bodies would be spared.

For Ziggs, who had to fend off spirits and reach the library, the pressure was intense. Yet, Ziggs shook his head.

"If that's what you believe, then I have no intentions of backing down."

And so, an uneasy tension hung between them. It was a moment where a single step forward could initiate a battle, a moment right before a large skirmish could break out.

"Why are we causing divisions among ourselves now!"

Finally, Princess Penia, pushed to her limits, cried out.

"But, Princess Penia! It's Ed Rosetail...!"

Ziggs responded with more desperate vigor. His almost shrieking voice softened peculiarly as he concluded his words.

With a completely desperate look on his face, half-choked up, he continued. The reliable and respected 'Ziggs of the Northern Plains' that the first-year students were familiar with, was nowhere to be seen.

"If something happens to Elka, I... I don't know how I'd live..."

His emotional spectrum had shifted from anger to sadness, and then to desperation.

Princess Penia hadn't expected this response.

She intended to chastise an enraged Ziggs, to retake control of the situation. But Ziggs' utter desperation was too stark in the princess's perceptive eyes.

His desperation was more than that of a man facing his own death. For Ziggs, Elka was truly as family.

"But..."

The raw desperation in his voice stammered Princess Penia. Her mouth opened, but no sound came forth.

"You know that man Ed Rosetail well... don't you, Princess!"

Don't you, Princess.

At these words, Princess Penia found herself unable to nod.

In reality, she didn't fully understand anything.

Whenever she thought about Ed Rosetail, her thought process would become more complicated, and even the facts that seemed clear would feel like they were fading into fog.

The intricacies of human emotions, usually so clear and understandable, were impossible to discern in him.

But what of the circumstances?

An immediate crisis, no guarantees. A reality where every second was precious. Yenika's summoning circle grew increasingly dark with a bloody hue.

The safety of the students could not be ensured. The gathered crowd looked up at him expectantly, asking for a decision.

The decision-maker and the responsible party. She was acutely aware of the weight of her position.

Despite this, she gritted her teeth and tried to maintain a steady appearance. But soon, the uncertainty of the situation pushed her to her limits.

"Even so..."

All eyes at the outpost were on Princess Penia and Ziggs. The urgency of the situation, the complexity of her thoughts, those awaiting judgment, the position of responsibility, the consequences of a wrong decision.

There could be no excuses for resulting casualties.

The crackling sound of firewood. The boy, haphazardly poking at the fire, his back turned. His gaze, devoid of any emotional fluctuation, meeting the princess's eyes.

His words piercing through her thoughts as he left through the training ground's door.

The embarrassing sight of his entrance exam, his indifferent face passing by the princess to follow Taylee. He revealed nothing of his intentions.

Cornered, Princess Penia's rationality was... finally provoked into speaking. Her instincts pointed clearly in one direction, despite the mounting pressure.

"Even so... Shall we... trust... him?"

A silence spread through the assembly.

For a long time, they stood there in the silence, saying nothing.

Their expressions were as if someone had just stated that the sun rose in the west, an unbelievable sight.

"Why..."

But, Ziggs lamented.

"Why would you say such cruel things? The Princess of Mercy I know wouldn't... say such irresponsible words..."

To Ziggs, Princess Penia's suggestion to trust the man felt like a mere excuse to

silence his opinion.

"I... will go."

Ziggs shook his head and turned towards the exit.

"Where the hell...!"

"Lortel."

The person who stopped Lortel from going after Ziggs was, unexpectedly, Princess Penia herself, who had just proposed an absurd idea of trusting Ed.

To be honest, even Princess Penia couldn't comprehend why she had said what she did.

"Just... let him go."

"Your Highness."

"Just remember, Ziggs, you are responsible for the consequences."

There were too many immediate concerns. Princess Penia's mind was pushed to its limit.

"I will bear the punishment upon my return."

Finally understanding, Ziggs turned around again and bowed respectfully. He was fully aware of how selfish his choice was.

However, if he was going to save Elka, as the Princess of Mercy, she couldn't prevent him from following his beliefs.

With a heart heavy with regret, Ziggs had slowly raised his head and made his exit from the outpost.

"Princess Penia."

Lortel called out to Princess Penia, her eyes following the retreating figure of Ziggs as he receded into the distance.

Turning her head, Princess Penia found Lortel looking at her, her expression calm and serene.

Even without her special insight, Princess Penia could predict Lortel's thoughts.

Being a hardened realist, Lortel would undeniably question Princess Penia's decision. Regardless of the harm or suffering it could cause, Lortel would have argued that Ziggs shouldn't have been allowed to leave.

With this in mind, and a heart filled with resignation, Princess Penia braced herself to face Lortel.

To her surprise, Lortel smiled broadly.

"You know, in hindsight, perhaps respecting his opinion was indeed necessary."

"Lortel."

"Considering it was a decision you arrived at after much thought, Princess. Ziggs's resolve was noble, so we can't simply label things as right or wrong without proper consideration."

Lortel's tone was cool and composed, affirming Princess Penia's decision as if the recent tense encounter was of little consequence.

"Anyway, if we're sticking to the plan of entering the student council hall within an hour, we should start prepping. I'll take a short break and check on my condition. I suggest you rest as well, Princess."

With a warm smile and a respectful nod, Lortel Keherun brushed past Princess Penia.

Despite the situation not going according to her plan, Lortel's comforting words to the princess and graceful exit was indeed a lesson in nobility.

But the princess saw right through it.

Beneath that genuine smile and encouraging words lay a deep-seated sense of disillusionment.

As Lortel walked past her, Princess Penia felt a strange sense of foreboding.

While she and Lortel had never really seen eye to eye, she now felt an unbridgeable gap forming between them.

She was certain that no matter what turned the world on its head, Lortel would never side with her.

The harsh reality of this conviction hit her to her very core.

"I need a break as well, Cler."

She announced to her loyal escort and leaned against a nearby barricade in the outpost. Cler acknowledged her with a nod and stood guard with a somber expression.

Thus, the once tense situation at the outpost found temporary closure.

The one with the greatest power, 'Lazy Lucy', was nowhere to be found.

'Ziggs of the Northern Plains', one of their vital assets, had completely left the outpost.

The usually practical and level-headed 'Golden Daughter, Lortel' now seemed to harbor strong resentment towards her.

But in spite of all that, she was the only one who could keep this group of students together.

CHAPTER 23

Ziggs of the Northern Plains, a character often described as 'a dragon that sprung from a small creek', was much more than what that saying might imply. He was nothing less than a miracle.

In the northern prairie lands of the empire, even the voice of the royal family scarcely reached. It was a land of savages, a place where, as the day came to a close, you had to check if your throat was still in place.

Ziggs was a descendant of the nomadic tribes that lived in those harsh conditions.

By the time he reached his teens, he was already separated from his family. He had no idea when he was abandoned, why he was abandoned, or if he could ever return to the tribal life.

Before he learned to read letters, he learned to skin a deer. Before learning to buy goods at a store, he learned to scavenge supplies from corpses on the roadside.

Needless to say, it was a life more akin to a beast than a human.

- 'Ziggs, you're like a wolf walking on two feet'

Elka had remarked when they first met. Ziggs had nodded in response without a second thought.

It wasn't hard to see why she had said that. At the time, Ziggs had been dragging a muddy elk carcass behind him, his hair tousled, and his appearance, ragged.

Nowadays, he was a well-groomed, trustworthy individual who commanded more respect than any first-year student at Sylvanian Academy. The only person who knew about his past wild life was Elka.

Regardless, his initial agreement with Elka's statement wasn't just because of his ragged appearance.

The encounter with the girl now seemed like a distant past. Civilization moved faster

than Ziggs had anticipated. The monotony of his days in the prairies was now a faint memory.

Elka's father, who was an archaeologist, recognized Ziggs's magical potential. He was taken in, brought to their mansion.

He remembered his first taste of a civilized meal: warm soup and bread. He was taught the norms of civilized society step by step.

He first tried elemental magic and accidentally uprooted an old tree in the mansion's garden. He was accepted into Sylvanian Academy along with Elka, remembering the day they walked out of the entrance exam hall together.

His life's fleeting memories swiftly became distant past as he struggled to keep up with the fast-paced civilized world.

But sometimes, while looking up at the night sky, he was reminded of his beginnings.

The life of roaming the boundless northern prairie, tearing at the corpses of animals he found on the roadside, preserving his own body with magic he discovered on his own, and sleeping under the moon...

The young boy was certainly an abandoned wolf cub.

Realizing this truth in his youth, all Ziggs could do was nod in agreement.

Looking back, his life had been filled with loneliness.

On the day he met his first companion in life, Ziggs finally recognized the emotion of loneliness.

That was an old story.

"Huff, huff..."

It was already a new day. Only after midnight did Ziggs reach the student library.

Ziggs was more than a match for the lesser spirits and minor spirits obstructing his path. However, the problem was their relentless onslaught.

Even for Ziggs, sprinting all out while casting spells like a madman was a strain on his vitality. If he'd been genuinely battling it out with Lortel, his arrival at the student library would have been seriously delayed.

Every second counted, and at this juncture, he was profoundly thankful for Princess Penia's intervention against Lortel.

Ziggs had returned kindness with hostility, but he decided to postpone facing that reckoning.

"Huff... Huff... Phew..."

The library vicinity was eerily quiet, contrary to his expectations.

The irritating swarm of spirits, which had doggedly hindered his progress at every turn around the faculty building, was strangely absent here.

But signs of their past presence remained.

"This, this is..."

Reading the scene from the traces was second nature for Ziggs, given his keen battle instincts.

The sporadic traces of magic around the student library entrance indicated a previous battle.

The grooves sliced into the ground and benches were likely from 'Wind Blades', while the scorches on an otherwise unharmed floor and walls were traces of 'Ignition'.

He took a moment to scan his surroundings calmly.

The stillness persisted, as though mocking the calamity that had unfolded at the faculty building.

The student library, perched atop this desolate hill, stood undisturbed, almost defiantly so.

The signs of a struggle began at the library's entrance and traced its exterior. These

weren't just defensive battle traces, they were the marks of suppressing every visible spirit in the vicinity.

Footprints were overlaid in the same spot, suggesting that someone had stood guard, ensuring the student library's safety.

Someone had subjugated all the spirits surrounding this library.

It didn't matter who had left these traces. Ziggs' priority was finding Elka. He quickly moved into the library.

As he pushed through the enormous wooden doors, a stylish lobby came into view, flanked by extended corridors on either side.

And at the entrance of this lobby,

There was a familiar boy leaning against the statue. The boy's name fell naturally from Ziggs' lips.

"Ed Rosetail!"

A boy in the throes of exhaustion, trying to catch his breath. That name had once nearly sent Ziggs into a frenzy.

Ziggs was at Ed's side in an instant, quick as a bullet.

"Hey, what's up. You."

Leaning back against the statue, resting with a knee raised to prop his elbow,

Ed Rosetail was clearly far from alright. His uniform was torn and ragged, his body was bruised and battered, and his vitality was depleted.

Evidence of him enduring repeated, extreme battles. But Ziggs didn't have the luxury to carefully assess the situation.

"Elka! Where's Elka!"

"Why are you... why are you here...?"

"First, tell me where Elka is!"

Ed's gaze at Ziggs was hard, filled with confusion and frustration. Ziggs, in his present state of emotional upheaval, seemed beyond reasoning.

"Reading Room 3."

Before he had even finished his answer, Ziggs was already racing down the hallway towards the reading room. His first priority was to secure Elka's safety.

As he madly dashed down the hall, a sign that read 'Reading Room 3' appeared in the corner of his vision.

The entrance wasn't a welcoming sight. Blackout curtains hung at the doorway, bookcases serving as a makeshift barricade surrounding it. A fortress in miniature, its entrance alone was impressively fortified.

Ziggs, darting forward like a bullet, pushed aside the curtain and flung the sliding door open with a force that threatened to shatter it.

"Elka!"

He shouted her name as he entered the room.

Just as he hoped, Elka was there, lying on a reading table, seemingly safe. But she was unconscious.

"Elka! Are you alright, Elka!"

Ziggs swallowed hard, quickly assessing her condition.

She was breathing softly. A quick glance from head to toe showed no visible injuries. She didn't appear to have been attacked by a spirit.

The sensation of pressing down a sticky, black muck in his throat eased.

"Phew.....!"

Drained, Ziggs sank down into a nearby chair, as if collapsing. Elka was safe. That single fact was an immense relief to him.

"Thank goodness... truly... thank goodness..."

With the softly sleeping girl in front of him, Ziggs brushed his face for a while.

About five minutes passed. Ziggs gathered himself.

His breathing stabilized, and as his body recovered some strength, his mind started to clear as well. With Elka's safety confirmed, it was time to objectively assess the situation.

Seated in the chair, Ziggs surveyed his surroundings.

The windows were well shielded by massive bookshelves. In case any rampaging spirits might locate Elka from the window, all lines of sight were blocked.

On the other hand, the entrance was obscured by rolling blackout curtains. It wouldn't be wise to block it entirely with bookshelves.

If they needed to flee, they would effectively be blocking their own escape route. Hence, the curtains were a compromise.

It was a sensible and astute judgment. Due to insufficient curtains, the back door was barricaded with bookshelves, and a simple defense was set up outside in case spirits invaded from the hallway.

Unless Elka was to leave first, the setup would prevent exposing her to danger.

"Right, Elka... You always stay calm and make the right decisions, no matter how critical the situation... I knew that..."

It wasn't that he didn't trust Elka, but his worries just wouldn't settle.

But soon after, a strange discomfort arrived. Looking around, the perimeter of the room was barricaded with bookshelves. All were so large that even a full-grown man would struggle to move them.

It was difficult to conceive that Elka, frail by nature, could have orchestrated all of this on her own. Simply raising a hand ax was a challenge that left her grunting with effort.

So, who had prepared the reading room in this way?

Narrowing down the possibilities left only one probable person.

"That individual...?"

In his fury, Ziggs hadn't initially paid much attention. After all, there in the lobby's epicenter was Ed Rosetail, battered and bruised.

Rumor painted Ed as an utterly self-centered, cunning man—a veritable trash heap of a human who took perverse pleasure in backstabbing others.

However, considering the circumstances and the evidence, didn't things seem peculiar?

The remnants of a skirmish trailed into the reading room from outside, a makeshift fortress cleverly constructed around it, sheltering an unconscious girl.

In addition, Ed's wounded form gave the impression of a one-man stand against a wave of spirits, charging into the student library, all to safeguard Elka.

Standing resolute in the midst of an unending tide of spirits—Ziggs had no difficulty envisioning the image of the boy who had braced himself in that lobby.

"But..."

Ziggs had endured a harsh life in the northern wilderness. In such a crisis, the optimal choice of action was evident.

Though it might sound cold and indifferent, in situations like this, a comrade like Elka was undeniably nothing more than excess baggage.

The most rational choice—to ensure his own safety, even at the risk of her life—would have been to abandon Elka, to run, or worse, to use her as bait.

Although such actions might stir feelings of guilt, when cornered, individuals often prioritize their safety first.

Ziggs, keenly aware of this truth, had assumed that someone like Ed Rosetail could perform such deeds without an ounce of guilt.

And so, Ziggs had charged in, fueled by unbridled rage.

"That person... He couldn't have..."

Ziggs muttered this refrain to himself.

Ed Rosetail's reputation was already in ruins. There wasn't a soul within the academy who held a positive opinion of him. Ziggs himself had witnessed his outrageous antics.

There was no chance that someone like Ed could possess even a shred of altruism.

That's what Ziggs had believed, but—"Don't panic when you wake up. Stay calm and stay here. Everything will be done before dawn, so calmly block the entrance and don't incite the spirits. Always consider your safety first and avoid hasty actions."

"..."

A chalkboard stood conspicuously in one corner.

The hurried, off-kilter writing revealed the urgency of the situation.

Visualizing the scene—desperately erecting a chalkboard amidst the chaos, pausing to collect his thoughts, then methodically inscribing each word—it was a narrative all too easy to piece together.

Ziggs found himself sitting, staring blankly into the abyss for a considerable amount of time.

* * *

[Magic Ability Details]

Classification: Average Magic Student

Expertise: Elemental

Common Magic: Quick Casting Lv 5; Mana Sensing Lv 6

Fire Elemental Magic: Ignition Lv 12

Wind Elemental Magic: Wind Blade Lv 11

Spirit Magic: Spirit Sense Lv 7; Spirit Understanding Lv 7

"Damn, what a waste. Sigh..."

I struggled to maintain my posture in the student library lobby, heaving a sigh of regret.

I'd pushed my limits, squaring off against spirits until I was at the brink. At last, my foundational magic skills broke through the tenth level.

'Ignition' had even advanced to level 12, and when used efficiently, this fire magic could subdue lower spirits in a snap.

It seemed I had finally laid a robust groundwork, enough to take a shot at intermediate magic. This was indeed a momentous progression, but still, I found myself sighing with a sense of missed opportunity.

Spirit Sense and Spirit Understanding were both at level 7 - just a hair's breadth away from where they needed to be.

If the combined levels of these two skills exceeded 15, the realm of Spirit Magic would open up, activating the spirit contract slot.

At that point, depending on my intellect, total mana, and spirit understanding ability, I could establish a contract with a fitting spirit.

If I managed that, my combat and crafting abilities would broaden tremendously.

I could infuse arrows with diverse spirit magic using the spirit formula, or I could elevate my crafting level to experiment with making magic tools under a spirit's blessing.

Even though I was buoyed by such hopeful dreams and had trained to the point of exhaustion, I found myself stuck at the final hurdle.

Spirits, once teeming around the professor's building, were now a rare sight. Hardly any spirits were spilling in from the student library either.

The implication was clear as day. The Glaskan extermination squad had penetrated the student hall, indicating that the climax of the first act had entered its second phase.

The student hall, where Yenika was summoning Glaskan, would now be the scenario's primary setting.

"It's damn harsh. After I've caught so many..."

The two skills had reached level 7 quite a while back. I persisted, hoping for just one more level! Just one more! I kept firing spells until my body was on the verge of collapse.

However, it seemed that the proficiency required at this boundary had surged, and the levels refused to increase.

"Guess it figures... since I've only been catching lesser spirits and lower spirits..."

If I'd been able to capture mid-level spirits or spirit trees, I might have racked up proficiency quickly and unlocked the slot.

But to accomplish that, I would've had to cut through the lower spirits and reach the student hall. That might be possible now, considering the dwindling number of spirits, but my physical condition was in shambles.

And let's not forget about the main characters of the scenario, who were all gathered in one place... I saw no advantage in hanging around the place buzzing with the first-year all-star members.

All I could do was wait for the next opportunity. The bitter taste of disappointment was still on my tongue as I looked to what the future might bring.

The main scenario.

That phrase, momentarily pushed to the back of my mind, suddenly resurfaced, bringing a wave of renewed confusion.

"Why is Ziggs here?"

It was a hurried departure, and I'd let him go without thought, but it struck me that

Ziggs was a key player in the extermination squad.

A sense of unease washed over me when that thought hit. There was a need to reassess the situation.

-Thud, thud.

The sound of calm, measured footsteps echoed from the hallway near the third reading room.

Glancing in the direction of the sound, I saw Ziggs slowly walking toward the lobby, a girl draped over his back.

Upon reaching me, he paused, his lips slowly parting to ask,

"What were you doing here?"

"..."

I couldn't quite read the emotion in his voice. But it seemed difficult for him to ignore my presence, as I was taking a break, beaten and bruised.

"What were you doing?"

There was no need to offer a falsehood in response.

"...Training."

"Ha."

With a short burst of laughter, Ziggs carried on.

"Ha ha. Indeed. Training."

I hadn't expected a laugh. Ziggs's voice had an unexpected lightness as he continued.

"In a crisis situation where we can't see what's next. When a magical barrier covers the sky, and spirits are endlessly flooding in... you're telling me you were just training?"

A smirk spread across Ziggs's face.

"I don't think even the most naive person would believe that."

"..."

"Yes, I think I'm starting to understand you. You were always like this, weren't you?"

A brief silence fell.

Ziggs fixed a hard stare at me for what felt like an eternity before closing his eyes and losing himself in thought.

Then, in a move I hadn't anticipated, he offered a formal bow, all while keeping Elka on his back.

"...I owe you a great debt, senior Ed."

His sudden formality was unsettling, but there was a certain gravity to Ziggs's demeanor that was hard to dispute.

"When the opportunity comes, I promise to repay this debt."

It was only then that I fully understood the situation. The girl on Ziggs's back, Elka, was unmistakably his lover, a woman who had shared his tumultuous past.

I couldn't blame myself for not recognizing it sooner. After all, the backstory of 'Ziggs of the Northern Plains' had never been a focal point.

Elka's name was only mentioned in passing, making it difficult for even the most avid fan to recall.

"Fine. You should get to the student council room, and be quick about it."

Ziggs reflexively spat out those words, his face a grimace as if he'd been punched in the gut. He'd been hanging his head in silence until then.

"You came running all this way to save Elka, didn't you? You left the student council building to its own devices, didn't you?"

Ziggs didn't bother asking how I knew. There was no point. Ziggs, still feeling as though he'd been gut-punched, didn't have the mental capacity to question further.

"I won't bother chastising you for such a selfish decision. You're not in your right mind... No need for that old-fashioned nonsense. As long as you know Elka's safe, you need to get going and do your job. Fast."

There was no need for further discussion.

Ziggs of the Northern Plains was one of the top performers in the first school year at the magic department of Sylvanian Academy. His presence or absence could decide the outcome of a raid.

Having him here could potentially disrupt the entire scenario. Without him, the raid might not even be viable.

If it were just the second phase, a raid without Ziggs might stand a chance. However, the Fire High-Spirit Tarkan, which appeared in the third phase, posed an entirely different problem.

According to the main scenario, Ziggs was crucial for overcoming Tarkan.

Our protagonist, Taylee, would strip off Tarkan's shell with his 'Elemental Slash' skill and cut off his tail.

Then Ziggs, with his excellent battle instincts and agility, would climb onto Tarkan's body and accurately embed magic into the ripped flesh.

Then Taylee, leaping down from the ceiling, would cut off Tarkan's neck as it howled in agony, revealing a gap.

In order for this battle sequence to take place, Ziggs was absolutely indispensable.

"Go help Taylee. Whatever he wants to do, just go along with it. Somehow, things will work out."

"Taylee... Are you talking about Taylee McLore?"

"Yes, that guy who just barely manages to scrape through each day without flunking."

Well, considering we've come all the way to the final chapter of the first act, he's probably not completely hopeless.

His related stats should have been strengthened a bit, and he probably picked up some special skills or abilities from various events.

If he really managed to develop his abilities to the absolute peak efficiency, he might even be able to use intermediate-level magic... But that's probably not the case...

From my perspective, which has gotten a bit jaded when it comes to character development, his stats certainly won't be impressive.

But he's been doing his best in his own way... With the opening of the Swordsman's Trial following this scenario, he'll probably start pulling his weight.

Thinking all this, Ziggs made a strange face.

"Weren't you... Didn't you dislike that guy, senior Ed?"

Oops.

If Ziggs remembered the scene from the entrance exam, the words I just spat out would have seemed incredibly out of character.

"You're stalling. Is that really what matters now?"

I cut him off with a wave of my hand. He was a key character in the scenario, after all. There was no need to give him too much information or try to be too friendly.

"And, I don't understand why you hold Taylee in such high regard... I mean, I've never really spoken with him..."

This was an issue from a time before the evaluation. Specifically, the hide of the High Fire Spirit Tarkan was impervious unless Taylee landed his 'Elemental Slash'. It wasn't about destructive force, it was about compatibility.

At this stage, offering some guidance seemed acceptable.

"So, listen well. Don't make the mistake of trying to pierce Tarkan's shell with magic. Wait until Taylee manages to penetrate it with his 'Elemental Slash.' As of now, I

doubt anyone in our team can get through Tarkan's shell purely with firepower. So, don't waste mana unnecessarily. The key will be waiting patiently for the right opportunity."

The main strategy was to aim for the section of Tarkan's shell that Taylee had cracked open with his 'Elemental Slash'.

Though I wasn't fond of predicting future events, this was necessary precaution. From the moment Ziggs had shown up in such a place, it was clear something had gone wrong with our 'operation'. It only seemed sensible to prepare for all possible eventualities.

"...I will bear it in mind."

Ziggs looked as if he had more to say, but he held his tongue, seemingly accepting my advice.

He was aware, too. The summoning circle of Glaskan that painted the sky continued to shift and deepen in color. We were running out of time.

"There's a makeshift base made by first-year students in the student square. I'll escort you there."

"No need. Go on your own. We're short on time, so move quickly. I'll stay here and rest a bit."

"But Ed, we can't predict when the spirits will attack again."

We were at the end of Phase 1. If we made it this far, the student library should be safe. I understood Ziggs' concern, not knowing this fact, but still,

"Just go. I can handle things here."

"..."

"Recapturing the student union building is our primary objective. You know this as well."

Despite fully understanding this, Ziggs had rushed over here, leaving everything else behind. At the jab at his oversight, Ziggs momentarily wore a dark expression.

"Whether it's guilt or embarrassment, deal with that after everything's finished. Got it?"

I ensured Ziggs clearly understood my point.

Ziggs closed his eyes for a moment, deliberating, then nodded with a firm face. While still carrying Elka, he responded decisively.

"I appreciate the advice."

With that, Ziggs headed towards the entrance of the library.

Watching Ziggs trudge away, I let out a sigh and leaned back against the statue again.

Man, this is quite a task.

Still, the situation had reached a temporary standstill. Once Ziggs returned to the student union building before we initiated Phase 3, everything would somehow work out as planned.

This is good, this is good.

".....Hold on...?"

Just as I thought this, a sense of unease welled up in my chest.

Watching Ziggs slowly walking away, an odd resonance started spreading within my mind.

Endless replays of 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' had etched the story into my mind. I had become adept at grasping the nuances, mitigating variables, and subtly manipulating the narrative to avoid any undue influence.

Yet, a strange unease was seeping into the corner of my heart, a feeling from a source I could not identify.

The root of my disquiet, I realized, could be traced back to a single line spoken by Ziggs:

-And I really don't understand why everyone rates Taylee so highly... I've never really

had a proper conversation with him... '

Ziggs, 'Ziggs of the Northern Plains' as I knew him, was a dependable ally to our protagonist Taylee. Always there in moments of crisis, always in sync when it mattered. He was, in essence, a trustworthy comrade, or even a friend.

Yet, his indifference towards Taylee was oddly disconcerting, despite the fact we were still in Act 1, without much time for any significant bonding.

But still... Ziggs speaking about Taylee as if they were complete strangers was indeed strange.

Recollecting my memories of the game, I tried to recall when exactly the friendship between Taylee and Ziggs took root.

Act 1, Chapter 9, during the end-of-term assessments. The first duel between Taylee and Ziggs was the cornerstone of their growing bond.

Ziggs acknowledged the continuous growth of Taylee, transforming with every passing moment in the heat of battle.

With that thought, numerous possibilities started to unravel in my mind, a twisty knot of potential outcomes.

A sudden wave of anxiety sent shivers down my spine.

"Hey, Ziggs."

"...Yes?"

I called back Ziggs, who was about to leave the student library.

"I changed my mind. I'll head to the Student Union."

That place, buzzing with important characters like a bustling marketplace. There was no real need for me to go there.

However... unfortunately, the ground underneath my assumptions just crumbled.

We were currently in the final chapter of Act 1, in the midst of the Glaskan

Subjugation Battle.

For some reason, what should have been the final chapter of Act 1 at the end of the semester had been moved forward by a month.

I had no clue why Yenika's actions were expedited, or what variable had triggered the shift. The actions of Yenika Faelover remained a missing piece of the puzzle.

But there was one solid fact.

Due to the premature Glaskan Subjugation Battle, Chapter 9 of Act 1, the final exams episode, hadn't taken place.

What did that imply?

Suddenly, a fragment from an old guidebook flashed across my mind.

■Page 3. Conditions for the Iron Hall Corridor Battle:

Make your way to the combat training field where the Spirit Master Yenika is.

Appearing enemy:

Fire High-Spirit Tarkan * 1

✂ The key is to continuously deal damage to the tail using 'Elemental Slash' obtained in 'Act 1 Chapter 9'. After cutting off the tail, you can target the head using the same 'Elemental Slash'.

At this point, without Chapter 9 of Act 1 having taken place, Taylee hadn't learned Elemental Slash.

Therefore, the current Taylee wouldn't be able to defeat Tarkan.

Needless to say, this would lead to a total collapse of all my preconceived strategies.

CHAPTER 24

'Someday, you must save Yenika.'

Suddenly, I recalled a prophecy from the Merilda, the guardian of the forest.

When a cryptic message like this surfaced, I couldn't help but raise questions about its multiple facets.

How could it foresee what was going to happen to Yenika? It didn't even possess knowledge of the story's progression like I did.

And what was it trying to imply by 'save her'? What was I supposed to do?

Was I to abandon all, including future prospects, hidden agendas, and everything else, and single-mindedly storm into the student council building to seize Velosper? Did that even seem plausible?

Or was I supposed to preemptively comprehend all of Yenika's thoughts so that her destiny didn't align with the predetermined course, control every variable as if I were some kind of deity, and tailor an environment in which she could only encounter happiness?

There are limits to the degree of impossibility in requests.

Merilda wasn't a fool.

She must have had a reason to relay that message to me, especially when she could communicate with Lucy Mayril, who was right there with us.

Given that she had observed my daily life in the forest, the message must have been relayed after thoughtful consideration.

Unfortunately, conjecturing her intentions right at that moment was neither a simple task nor one that carried significant importance.

Problems were scattered all around me. I barely had any mental energy left to dwell

on peripheral matters.

* * *

In a world brimming with difficulties, there's no reason to willingly challenge the impossible.

People who suffer while tackling the impossible typically fail to grasp the true extent of its impossibility.

From my viewpoint, having repeatedly triumphed over 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', assessed diverse characters and enemies' stats, and even conducted various types of concept plays, my current endeavor to defeat Tarkan was tantamount to courting the impossible.

'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', the final scene of the first chapter, third significant boss. Fire High-Spirit Tarkan.

In his own right, he was a formidable High-Spirit, but coupled with Velosper's 'Frenzy' buff, his supremacy over magic was unbeatable.

His thick exoskeleton negated almost all magical attacks on contact. Moreover, swords couldn't make a dent in it either. The situation was ludicrous.

At this juncture, seasoned players have an instinctive realization. This boss wasn't crafted to be overcome merely through stats or strategy.

Ultimately, Tarkan was fundamentally an event boss. He was designed to drive the use of 'Elemental Slash' that Taylee had recently acquired, a character implemented due to plot necessity.

Those damned games inevitably engineer a narrative flow requiring the utilization of a newly introduced skill, feature, or element.

It's also laughable if they incorporate a feature and fail to introduce it, but eventually, it culminates in a situation where you're left to unlock a sealed door without a key.

Naturally, it was an impossible task.

"What's in there?" Ziggs asked.

"Nothing special. Not exactly necessary, but good to have."

"Is that so?"

Ziggs was looking at the leather pouch I had taken from the reading room, but there was no time to answer. I quickly stuffed it into my pocket and made my way down the hallway.

When faced with a seemingly impossible situation, you have to think outside the box. If the front door is locked, you've got to find a way to sneak in through the back.

Wasn't the smooth-flowing scenario now tangled? I needed to temporarily set aside my usual stance of following the preset flow and exploiting only the parts that benefited me.

The current challenge was to realign the wayward scenario flow back to its original track. This was no longer a matter of calm consideration; it was a game of quick thinking and adaptability.

Had there been enough time, I might have found a simpler solution. Time was on my side in the world of 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', so long as I played my cards right.

However, given the circumstances, I had to rely on what I had at my disposal. This was where my unique advantage in this world, the 'information superiority', came into play.

Fortunately, I did come up with a promising solution. It was absurd, but it was the most reliable method.

"I apologize for being late. I promise to make up for it."

"That's okay. You'd have been beaten even if you were there, Ziggs."

My encounter with the punitive force happened sooner than expected.

I couldn't take Elka into the student council building, so I had to leave her at the student square base.

The situation was so urgent that I had arrived out of breath, yet surprisingly, all the

members of the punitive force were already back at the student square.

Their state was far from good.

"Fortunately, we managed to retreat, but..."

Princess Penia gazed up at the vast night sky. The summoning circle of Glaskan had already turned a deep crimson, hinting that the summoning ritual might be completed at any moment.

The protective spell that covered the professor's building remained intact, so any help from outside seemed unlikely.

"At this point, whether we fail or succeed, we have to reenter."

Time wasn't on our side. There was no room for waiting for outside help, especially after looking at that ominous summoning circle in the sky. Time was so precious, and yet we had wasted so much in retreating.

I surveyed the surroundings, assessing the situation—how far we had progressed, where we had been stopped, the extent of the damage.

The members gathered at the student square base were indeed a sight to behold. A collection of main characters who would each play their role until the end of the scenario were gathered together, like a grand gift set.

'Failed Swordsman' Taylee, 'The Companion' Ayla, Princess Penia—the 'Princess of Mercy', Lortel—the 'Golden Daughter', Ziggs of the Northern Plains, Knight Captain Cler, Gloomy Clevius, Meddler Elvira...

Each person bore bruises of all sizes, a map of pain and struggle etched on their skin. But Knight Captain Cler, she bore the worst of it. One entire leg was scarred, a victim of severe burns.

Her injuries were critical, reducing her to a soldier unable to fight.

Gloomy Clevius wasn't much better, with his arm immobilized by a splint. A clear sign of a fractured bone. His fighting prowess was significantly diminished by this setback.

Nonetheless, Taylee, who mattered most, seemed to be in a reasonably good shape. Once I ascertained that, I shifted my focus to assessing the current scenario's progress.

In the midst of this, Cler, struggling to maintain her stance, voiced her opinion.

"If you're contemplating re-entry, I suggest recruiting willing volunteers from the students. Once my leg pain alleviates, I could..."

"That's enough, Cler. Rest at the base."

Cler shook her head in response.

"Princess Penia, if you truly hold concern for me, retract your commands."

"But Cler, you can barely walk. I too... am worried."

Her words were eloquent enough for me to surmise the truth. Knight Captain Cler's critical injuries were most likely a result of protecting Princess Penia. Although Penia's words were resolute and firm, I could sense her inner turmoil.

Regardless, Penia's refusal to display any hint of weakness was very characteristic of her. However, an overwhelmed heart wouldn't solve the crisis at hand. It was tangible capability that mattered.

I scanned the surroundings.

Centered was the student square, framed by Neris Hall, Obel Hall, and the Student Council Building.

Out of these, Gloct Hall was in ruins. Clear signs indicated the capture of a mid-level spirit in the main hall of Gloct Hall during the second phase.

It seemed they even defeated the Spirit Tree Altar at Iron Hall's entrance, as it was visibly open.

As anticipated, they breached up to the second phase, but the punitive force faced defeat at Tarkan's hands in the third phase.

Fortunately, the retreat appeared to be successful, but it cost them valuable time, and

they lost a key player, Knight Captain Cler. Clevius, the first school year's top combatant, was operating at less than half his capacity.

Time was slipping away, their fighting strength diminishing. The summoning circle looked ready to spring to life at any moment.

Simply waiting was not an option, but there was no guarantee of victory should they choose to plunge back in immediately.

Princess Penia, visibly tense, gritted her teeth. At this point, she bore the responsibility of commanding this base. She was under pressure to devise a strategy.

"We should divide the punitive force in two."

I suggested, having swiftly evaluated the situation.

The unexpected interjection of an outsider. The mood in the base was already bleak, with all ace members of the first school year returning injured. The atmosphere seemed to thicken even more.

"Looks like the summoning ritual's nearly complete. We don't have the luxury of time to deal with Tarkan."

"What's that, Ed Rosetail?"

The response came from Gloomy Clevius, a grimace crossing his face from the pain of his fractured bone, yet he continued to engage in the conversation.

"Look, this isn't the time for..."

"Let's hear him out first, Clevius."

Clevius was cut off by Ziggs of the Northern Plains, even before he could get a word in.

Everyone's eyes widened in shock at this. They couldn't believe the stark change in attitude of Ziggs, who, up until they left the base, seemed ready to tear Ed Rosetail apart.

What had happened at the student library? Of course, they had no time to spare

pondering over trivial matters.

"The Fire High-Spirit, Tarkan, relies more on hearing and touch than vision to understand its surroundings and the position of its enemies. If we make enough noise, we can lure it. One team can distract Tarkan while another infiltrates the battle training field."

"But Ed, you haven't actually faced Tarkan before. That's why you can say that."

Lortel, a girl who had engaged Tarkan one-on-one during the joint battle practice, argued.

"It's not the same Tarkan we saw during the practice."

"I know. Velosper must have set up a Frenzy spell. I saw that clearly when I was suppressing the lower spirits."

"Tarkan isn't an enemy we can distract or buy time against. We're lucky to have escaped without being killed or severely injured. It was purely luck that we managed to retreat."

Lortel calmly explained the reality. I asked for clarification.

"So, did we escape while it was pinned down by a column?"

"..."

How did I know that?

Her eyes conveyed surprise at my knowledge, but I didn't have time for explanations.

Being this involved in the scenario wasn't comfortable. If it wasn't for the unexpected twist, we wouldn't be discussing it here in the center of the base, surrounded by important figures.

I shouldn't waste my informational advantage by disrupting the flow of events.

Yet, now, it was time to temporarily put that policy aside.

'During the battle, there are three scenes where the pillars in the corridor collapse.

Be sure to avoid getting pinned, or it's instant death.'

Defeating Tarkan isn't difficult if you have the 'Element Cutter' skill. That's a fact that's surprisingly unknown unless you're an experienced player.

The three massive stone pillars at the corners of the Iron Hall corridor – if you lure Tarkan well and get it pinned under one, you can create a moment of opportunity.

"Lucky escape."

Indeed, they were fortunate. Tarkan had been pinned by one of the stone pillars, giving them a chance to escape. It was as if the heavens had favored them.

"I won't prod you for every little detail, Ed. But the proposal you've put forward, it's a bit of a pipe dream. We barely made a dent in them fighting together, and you're suggesting we halve our forces. We might buy some time, sure, but it won't be long enough to matter."

Lortel's opinions always resonated with a realistic and rational tone. Her exceptional level-headedness was arguably the main driving force behind her status.

"If the team confronting Tarkan is taken down before they even buy time, we're in trouble. And if Tarkan manages to join the battleground, we might find ourselves dealing with Velosper and Tarkan simultaneously – the worst-case scenario."

If she had to sum up her thoughts in one phrase:

"The stakes are just too high."

That being said, I wasn't without my own perspective.

"We can only quantify the risk when we have an alternative on the table, Lortel."

My retort, seemingly indisputable, left her momentarily silent. She scanned around, perhaps looking for a rebuttal, but she failed to conjure any feasible alternatives to navigate through the current predicament.

"At this juncture, we can't afford to lose sight of our prime objective, Princess Penia. Isn't it to prevent Yenika from succumbing to Velosper's influence?"

An awkward silence followed. Given my identity as Ed Rosetail, they probably resisted aligning with my viewpoints, even though not a single word I uttered was untrue.

"Tarkan doesn't need to be subdued. Bypass Tarkan and somehow progress to the combat practice area to impede Yenika. With a team of this caliber, we ought to be capable of restraining Velosper. In fact, we must."

The root of our inability to suppress Tarkan, despite boasting such an exceptional lineup, boiled down to a fundamental disadvantage in terms of tactical match-up.

We could tackle the final phase featuring Velosper and Yenika, even with an incomplete team. The linchpin was Taylee's swordsmanship – we just needed sufficient members to back him up.

"Ed Rosetail."

Princess Penia's gaze met mine. The mood was anything but cheerful.

A multitude of variables and evolving circumstances had pushed her into a corner.

Had she taken a tumble? Her once lustrous dress was smeared with dirt, torn in places. The silky ends of her hair bore the scorch marks of Tarkan's fire, stark reminders of the savage battle.

Her body and spirit pushed to the edge, she locked eyes with me once more.

"You... again..."

"Given the crunch situation, I'll spare the small talk."

The vicinity was already buzzing with students' murmuring. 'Who does he think he is, acting all high and mighty', 'Going along with Ed Rosetail's viewpoint is lunacy', 'Is he proposing collective suicide?'.

The conversations didn't need spelling out.

"I'm not lying."

Regardless, they weren't the final arbitrators. The one person with the authority to

make decisions for this hastily assembled fortress was the sole ruler.

Princess Penia stared at me for a while, then, as if lost in thought for a moment, she nodded in approval.

"Regardless of the intention, there's no fault in your argument."

The verdict was delivered calmly.

"Princess Penia! Are you suggesting we follow his advice?! That's Ed Rosetail!"

"Calm down, Cler. I'm not saying we follow Ed Rosetail's opinion, rather, we're following a 'valid argument'. He has presented a sufficiently valid argument."

Having made her final decision, Princess Penia addressed the assembled members of the fortress.

"We can't defeat Tarkan at this point. However, it's certain that if we suppress Spirit Master Yenika, Tarkan will also be neutralized. But... there's one thing we must decide,"

"Who will stop Tarkan."

Ziggs, with his ability to get straight to the heart of the matter, silenced the entire assembly.

"Ahaha... So, we're just looking for someone with a death wish, huh?"

"Watch your mouth, Elvira."

"Oh, I'm sorry, Your Highness."

Despite the dire situation, Meddler Elvira, who didn't hesitate to interject, quickly fell silent at the princess's rebuke.

"Neither side can claim to be particularly safer. We're dealing with a high-ranking darkness spirit and a high-ranking fire spirit."

That was the reality.

From their perspective, there was no guarantee of increased safety even if they managed to bypass Tarkan and enter the combat training ground.

Yet, from my position as someone who knows everything, Tarkan was more dangerous.

Tarkan, a foe created specifically to teach Taylee the technique of 'elemental cleaving', had an overwhelming advantage in terms of characteristics.

On the other hand, the high-ranking darkness spirit, Velosper, was just a 'strong enemy'.

She wasn't an opponent that had to be handled with a specific 'strategy', but a textbook final boss who could be dealt with using our abilities and strategy appropriately.

In the current situation, Tarkan's existence was unreasonable. As we had strategized, he was a lock that needed to be opened without a key.

Yet Velosper, if I had to make a comparison, was merely a complex labyrinth... With the members we had, with some effort, we could break through.

"But... I... I don't want to face that fiery lizard!"

Clevius, with his cowardly nature, lamented in this way.

"I...! Me! Put me in the combat training ground entry team! I'd rather go that way! It's more important to suppress Senior Yenika!"

That's right. At this point, the biggest difference between Tarkan and Velosper was the palpable fear they induced.

Tension spread throughout the group. The princess was unable to immediately deny Clevius's ominous words. For a moment, she too felt again the fear she had experienced when facing Tarkan.

A mysterious opponent they had yet to directly confront, and an adversary who had once caused them to retreat right before their eyes.

At that juncture, Tarkan's reign of psychological terror had undoubtedly intensified.

Tarkan, the High Fire-Spirit, amped up by Velosper's frenzy enhancement, had morphed into a waking nightmare.

The terrifying spectacle of it lashing its tail, decimating whirlwind columns, belching fire, and wreaking havoc made it an adversary nobody wanted to face twice.

No one stepped forward to volunteer for the Tarkan subjugation team.

A wave of tension washed over the crowd. There was no avoiding it, someone had to shoulder this burden.

"I'll go."

The first to volunteer was Taylee McLore.

"Quit the idiotic talk."

I instantly dismissed Taylee's proposal, no room for second thoughts.

"What did you just say...?"

Taylee's eyes, glaring at me, still harbored an undertone of hostility. It was inevitable.

"Even if you resurrected this instant, you couldn't withstand that beast. You wouldn't endure a minute."

"...There's no assurance anyone else could fare better. If someone has to be abandoned, logically, it should be me."

Taylee scanned the surroundings. The faces of the members encircling the center of the student plaza shimmered with a sense of unease. It was a rare sight to witness these members immersed in such intense deliberation.

Amid them all, one person teetered on the brink of expulsion. An odd duck among swans.

He had certainly honed his skills considerably by now, but the vast gap in abilities remained daunting.

"I'm fleet-footed. I don't know how long I can evade, but if someone must be

sacrificed, it should be me."

"You're under a serious misconception. We aren't scouting for a sacrificial lamb right now."

Turning him by his shoulder, I interrupted and pushed Taylee back into the crowd.

"Don't raise a commotion and stay put. You're in the combat training team, no question about it."

Then, I turned my gaze to Princess Penia.

"I have a strategic plan. I can stymie Tarkan until Yenika is subdued."

"What might that be?"

"Do we have ample time for an explanation...? It's going to be quite extensive."

As I looked up at the sky, the color of the Glaskan summoning incantation showed no sign of alteration. It had turned a deep, ominous red, poised to unleash the disaster-like Glaskan any second.

"We don't need to split the task force. Give me two members. One for the frontline, one for firepower."

Having said that, I closed my mouth.

"Wh... What? To stay and face Tarkan alongside you, Ed Rosetail?! Who in their right mind would sign up for such madness! I'd rather resort to divine intervention! I'd rather flee to the edge of the barrier than place my faith in you...!"

"For the frontline, I choose that noisy Clevius who's currently making a fuss."

"What? No! Why me? I didn't mean that! I don't want to die!"

"Would you just... Shut up already, you dunce, Clevius!"

Elvira, the meddler who had had enough, fetched a piece of cloth, typically used for sealing alchemical potions, and roughly gagged the injured Clevius. Choking and spluttering, he could do nothing but emit intermittent screams.

"Lortel, you're handling firepower. Stick around."

"Me?"

The Golden Daughter, Lortel, stared back at me, surprise etched onto her face.

"You might not know, but I've even lost to a Tarkan who wasn't frenzied."

"And you think that matters now? Who in this situation can take down a Tarkan one-on-one?"

"Well, there's that, but..."

With a sly grin, Lortel started to defend herself.

"I happen to value my own life. In these circumstances, wouldn't it be normal to decline, no matter who was asked? Especially if it wasn't that idiot Clevius."

Through the cacophony, Clevius's offended 'who are you calling an idiot' seemed to echo, but none of the task force members paid him any mind.

"That may be so. But your opinion doesn't really carry much weight here."

"...Fair point."

Lortel accepted the fact coolly. The single entity holding the decision-making power over the course of action of the task force was clear.

I turned my head. There she was, the girl who held the definitive power, Penia Elias Kroel.

"Your decision, if you would."

"You're asking me to trust you?"

"Do we have another option?"

Every gaze around us had zeroed in on this exchange. The stationed students generally held a skeptical view.

Ed Rosetail's notoriety was known to all, spies included. To expect a favorable response from them would be downright heartless.

"Princess! No! This can't happen! Absolutely not! We can't trust him with anything!"

With a vehement protest, Clevius spat out his gag.

"I think it's worth a shot. If there are no other alternatives, we should follow Ed's opinion. It's the only choice we've got."

Ziggs of the Northern Plains seemed to support my case.

"Yeah, we might be better off following that advice. Better than waiting around to get slaughtered. Ahaha."

Elvira, the meddler, appeared to side with me, but closer inspection revealed her indifference.

"I... I won't say much."

The Golden Daughter, Lortel, silently observed the unfolding scene.

"..."

Taylee remained silent, lost in a whirlpool of thoughts.

At the epicenter of this chaos, Princess Penia closed her eyes.

She attempted to sift through the torrent of opinions, to discern the right path. Whose advice to trust, and whose to disregard needed careful consideration.

After a considerable period of silent deliberation, she finally opened her eyes and uttered the much-awaited words.

"There's a catch. It might be a bit difficult."

With those words, the wheels of the plan were set in motion.

"Just promise me one thing - don't die. Not under any circumstances."

The expedition was divided into two groups.

The first, responsible for dealing with Tarkan, was composed of Clevius, Lortel, and myself.

The second group, tasked with suppressing Yenika, consisted of the remaining members.

Designating Clevius and Lortel specifically wasn't arbitrary. We required one vanguard and one firepower specialist.

Within the expedition, potential vanguards included Taylee, Clevius, Ziggs, and Cler.

Dismissing Taylee and considering Cler's critical condition, the choice came down to either Ziggs or Clevius. Strategically, it made more sense to assign the stronger Ziggs to the crucial Yenika suppression team.

All I needed was a vanguard to divert attention, hence choosing a wounded Clevius over a more formidable vanguard wasn't necessary.

For the firepower position, the remaining options were Penia, Lortel, and Elvira. Ayla wasn't yet powerful enough to fulfill the role.

Princess Penia was a non-starter. She was vital to the final battle, defending against Velosper's attack spells, and therefore needed to be assigned to the Yenika suppression team.

Between Elvira and Lortel, I chose Lortel, for a simple reason. As I've mentioned before, Lortel in the first act was a catalyst for a bad ending. There was no need to pair her with Taylee, so I brought her with me.

Therefore, the final composition of the Yenika suppression team was Taylee, Penia, Ziggs, Elvira, and Ayla.

It may seem like a stark contrast to the 'proper' procedure, but if Taylee's Sword Saint form was triggered, they could definitely win, at least in theory.

"It's a bit risky, isn't it..."

There was no avoiding the worries. I had done my best to deduce each individual's abilities at this point in time and to consider their assigned roles for optimal distribution.

Still, compared to the 'proper' way, there were certainly many uncertainties.

If they failed to suppress Yenika with these members, the headache would only get worse. For now, all I could do was trust them and focus on Tarkan.

"So, Senior Ed. It seems the situation has unfolded as you wished."

The time was the early dawn, the sun was just about to rise. The time limit was fast approaching.

Our location was the entrance from where the student hall was clearly visible, with Neris Hall and Obel Hall in sight on either side.

"Damn it! Why do I have to do this? God, please just let me live through this!"

Clevius looked almost on the verge of tears. Well, as whiny as he seemed, he was effective when the situation called for it. He was loud and annoying, like a mosquito, but he sure knew how to act as a decoy.

Lortel, Clevius, and I stood side by side, staring at the open entrance of the Iron Hall. The moment we stepped in, it would signal the start of the Iron Hall Corridor battle.

Once we drew out Tarkan, the Yenika suppression team would seize the opportunity to enter and charge towards the battle practice field, leading straight into the final battle.

Simultaneously tackling Tarkan and Velosper felt incredibly bizarre.

"Shouldn't you be offering some advice by now? How are we supposed to buy time against that fire-breathing monster?"

"We can't. Buy time, that is."

".....Excuse me?"

Lortel shot me a look of disbelief. Clevius, too, was clearly taken aback by my

assertion.

"What, what did you just say? What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's fatal with just a touch, it moves at an absurd speed, and we're in a tight space with pillars collapsing all around. How are we supposed to buy time? If we try to flee without a plan, we won't even last five minutes."

"That's... I'm finding it hard to swallow that, Senior Ed. Our lives are on the line here."

"Flip it around, we can keep things at bay for about five minutes."

I shrugged off my dirt-streaked academy coat and rolled up my sleeves.

"We shouldn't be contemplating an escape, we need to think about trapping it."

My words left Clevius and Lortel speechless. I expected that from Clevius, but Lortel, always the cool and composed one, had a look of pure shock. It wasn't an everyday scene, but I found it amusing.

"Just follow my lead. If we stick to the plan, we're sure to come out on top."

With a casual wave of my arm, I signaled the Yenika suppression team. It was a sign that we were moving in.

CHAPTER 25

Tarkan's roar sliced through the atmosphere of the Iron Hall, a sound so sharp it felt as if it could carve out one's eardrums. It forced a collective dry swallow from those who heard it.

The battle in the Iron Hall was about to commence. Taking the frontline was none other than Gloomy Clevius.

"Darn it! I've got no clue! Guess this is where my life ends!"

Gloomy Clevius, the top student of the first School Year in the combat department, was a sight to behold. He was always full of foreboding words, and complaints were his second language.

On top of it all, he even looked gloomy, prompting feelings of pity in those who glanced his way. But at his core, Clevius thrived in crisis.

Despite his innate cowardice and curious lack of confidence in his abilities - even as the top of the combat department - Clevius held a strength that couldn't be ignored.

The root of his uncertainty may have been a tragic family background or a history of misfortunes. The details, however, were unimportant.

What truly mattered was that his physical prowess was unmatched by anyone in the combat department.

"Arghhhh!"

He'd splinted his broken arm, the pain surely rampaging with every move he made. Yet, Clevius traversed the Iron Hall as if he didn't feel a thing.

The Iron Hall, located in the center of the three student union buildings, was a spotless, well-managed place used for various assemblies and combat training.

The marble floor of its sprawling corridors was free of a single speck of dust.

At the end of this 50m stretch, there stood a massive door leading to the combat training grounds. This was the very place where first and second-year students had their joint combat training.

The welcoming, spacious door was now blocked by a burning, monstrous lizard.

Just a glance at it was enough to bring back the terror from their last encounter.

Tarkan slowly rose from his position, letting out a roar akin to the crunching sound of shattering stone. The sight of Tarkan caused Clevius' legs to shake uncontrollably, as fear started to take over his body.

"Arghhhhh! Ahhhhhhh!"

With gritted teeth, Clevius barely managed to control his trembling body. Every fiber of his being screamed at him to run away. He knew, however, that to abandon everything here would be a worse fate.

Fortunately, he wasn't alone. He didn't have to face this monstrous terror by himself.

Calm and confident Ed Rosetail was there, as was Lortel Keherun, who could coolly analyze any crisis. They were the polar opposites of Clevius, who was prone to panicking at the slightest sign of trouble.

While he didn't harbor any hopes of causing significant damage to Tarkan, he was at least not entering this hellish battlefield alone. That fact brought him a shred of solace in the face of this bleak situation.

"It's coming! The battle begins! What now? How should we...!"

Seeing Tarkan charging as if ready to devour him on the spot, Clevius turned around to seek guidance from his comrades.

Unfortunately, there was no one there.

Regrettably, Clevius had dashed into the scene without glancing back once. Caught in a state of panic and running at full speed, he had no room for distractions.

Only the hallway of the Iron Hall, which he had sprinted into, stretched endlessly in his vision, with his comrades who should have been running alongside him nowhere

to be seen.

Crazy amounts of cold sweat started to spring from Cleavius's back.

"He tricked me! He tricked me!"

With a face halfway to tears, Cleavius screamed.

"Hey you maniacs! Hey! Where are you! Come out! What am I supposed to do with this! Why am I the scapegoat! If you had to sacrifice someone, why not send Taylee, who offered to be a sacrifice! Why me! Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Running away in the most pitiful way imaginable, Cleavius continued to scream, not even looking back at Tarkan rushing towards him.

If he knew this was going to happen, he wouldn't have trusted that damned Ed Rosetail. He should have persuaded Princess Penia, even if it meant acting like a child, throwing a tantrum and banging the floor.

Looking back, he deeply regretted giving in so easily to Princess Penia's strong resolve and following her plan.

"Why are you doing this to me! Ahhhhhhhhhh! I hate this! I hate everything! Please save me! I've made a mistake! Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

The sight of Cleavius, running with tears welling up in his eyes, was pitiful.

* * *

-'First we will convincingly move in with Cleavius, then, when he seems distracted, we'll slip out again. He's a coward and would never go in alone, so it's a necessary step.'

Dawn was breaking in the east. The long night was about to end.

Lortel blinked once. She was standing at a corner of the student square, quite a distance from the student council building.

She could see three large buildings: the Iron Hall, which Cleavius had stormed into, the shattered Gloct Hall in front of it, and right next to it... Obel Hall, which Ed

Rosetail had just dashed into.

She gathered her wits and channeled her magic. A conversation she'd had with Ed Rosetail played again in the back of her mind.

- 'First, we need to push Clevius into the the Iron Hall auditorium.'

- 'So you're planning to sacrifice Clevius. Not a bad choice, perhaps, but it will face moral criticism.'

- 'I wouldn't have proposed it if it were such a one-dimensional plan.'

Lortel focused on the sound of Clevius's screams echoing in her ears.

- 'Your most important role will be securing the entrance route for the Yenika Suppression Team, Lortel. In fact, you'll be dealing the fatal blow to Tarkan.'

The words spilled out of the fallen noble with no hesitation. Despite the tumult, confusion, and urgency of the situation, there was no indecision in his resolution, only unwavering confidence in the plan he had set himself.

Lortel closed her eyes.

Ever since she came of age, she had walked the path of a merchant and, despite her young age, had faced countless crises.

A crisis was so-called because it was unforeseen. From logistical issues like blocked supply chains or cash flow problems in the paperwork, to more tangible crises like rival merchant guilds' plots and subterfuge.

Lortel had always maintained a certain philosophy: crises provided a unique window into the human soul, laying bare the essence of a person in a way that nothing else could.

She carried with her a vivid image of Ziggs, his back turned to her as he left their outpost.

His decision to prioritize his feelings in the heat of an impending crisis was, to her, an act of selfish sentimentality that she found nothing short of repulsive.

And then there was Princess Penia, who had stood by Ziggs through it all. Lortel found herself scorning the Princess' lack of resolve, her inability to remain firm and steady in a situation where her position demanded it.

To Lortel, a person worthy of trust was one who, in the face of any crisis or sudden change, relied on their firm belief to guide their actions.

This was someone who didn't let fear take hold, who didn't become a puppet of their own emotions, who didn't entertain a single doubt about their established convictions.

- 'Our immediate priority is to help the Yenika Suppression Team to enter the combat training grounds. We can think about handling Tarkan afterwards. So for now, concentrate, listen, and when you feel Tarkan is sufficiently distanced... simply demolish the wall leading to the combat area.'

Her primary goal was to divide Tarkan and Velosper.

Facing both Tarkan and Velosper at once was a situation that the Yenika Suppression Team would find challenging at best.

"Huh... You make it sound so easy..."

Lortel was no stranger to being in control, preferring to give orders rather than receive them.

Though she was just a freshman, living alongside the elevated royal family helped her maintain a low profile.

However, within the Elte Commerce society, even seasoned and well-respected merchants would defer to Lortel.

Born and raised among merchants, she was the type to never set foot in an educational place like this. Yet here she was, in Sylvenia due to some unavoidable 'necessity', but she never lost her essence.

Being ordered around by a fallen noble or a penniless pauper was not something she could tolerate.

Yet, there was something about Ed Rosetail's words, a strange sense of conviction

and assurance.

He confidently suggested that even this crisis, one that had even the lifetime-sovereign Princess Penia hesitating, could be surmounted if everyone just followed his instructions.

His tone, devoid of a shred of doubt, suggested that he had experienced and navigated through countless similar crises before.

What lay beneath the surface of this man called Ed Rosetail?

Three golden coins had found its way back into the hand that had shaken his.

"Hmm..."

Having survived on the streets before being taken in by 'Elte, the Gold King', Lortel understood the psyche of the desperate.

She knew exactly how much allure a single gold coin held for those who had no guarantee for their survival the next day.

"Well, he doesn't seem like the type to pass judgment on hearsay."

A massive ice spear hovered over Lortel's head. Despite Clevis' remarkable strength and agility, he was gradually being caught up by Tarkan.

The decision was a rash one, a decision so audacious it shattered the wall of the Iron Hall with its storied history.

It was simple when thought about, yet it didn't come to mind easily.

The students of Sylvanian Academy, who strolled around the faculty building and made themselves at home in the student council building, held the the Iron Hall as one of their school's prides.

The imposing structure represented the student council, standing as a proud landmark.

Because it felt like a backdrop that should rightfully be there, the thought of destroying it with their own hands was a blind spot, something beyond their realm

of imagination.

However, wasn't Iron Hall already half destroyed? No matter how historic a building, it couldn't take precedence over human lives.

When the scale of a crisis expanded, such audacious and rash decisions became necessary. Buildings could be rebuilt, and the interior was likely not in great condition, given Tarkan's rampage.

Who would question the responsibility for this destruction? It wasn't a time to fear such things, but to the naive students, the realm of such value judgement was an uncharted territory.

The grand student council building was the treasure of this school, and it shouldn't be vandalized recklessly. Trapped in such a mechanical school regulation, they couldn't make flexible decisions even in extreme situations.

If a house caught fire, one should escape, even if it meant breaking a window. No matter how expensive the stained glass or how precious the unique artwork, one must break it without hesitation and run.

As for such an old building, there was no question about it.

"To think that I would shatter the Iron Hall with my own hands, where else would I have such an experience?"

Having said that, Lortel remembered that she already had an experience of blowing up the roof of the Iron Hall during the joint battle practice.

With that thought, the intent behind the words Ed Rosetail threw at her before leaving for Obel Hall became clear.

- 'You're good at this sort of thing.'

Lortel chuckled at that. Thinking about it, he was quite an interesting man.

Once the situation was over, perhaps they could have a leisurely chat.

- "Kwaaang!!!"

Then, she thrust all the ice spears into the exterior wall of the Iron Hall, where the battle practice field was.

Dust clouds billowed, and the wall of the Iron Hall crumbled.

Watching the entry team on standby on the outskirts of the student square, she gave a neat smile.

Their stunned expressions were impressive. In any case, the entry path was secured.

All that was left was to deal with Tarkan.

All she had to do was buy time for the entry team to subdue Yenika. What she had to do was clear.

- 'Once the shell is somehow dealt with, your magic will be an effective hit against Tarkan. I'll take responsibility for the shell, so gather all the mana you have and focus on the strongest ice magic you can cast.'

Looking at the man giving instructions without wasting a single word, Lortel felt a strong curiosity.

The possibility was slim, but perhaps she had found a 'kindred spirit'. If so, it would be an incredibly exciting development, but she was not so naive as to get excited over such a slim chance.

Lortel stood quietly, beginning to recite a spell as she watched Yenika's suppressive troops enter the training battlefield.

Compared to the command of the naive princess, who seemed tossed about in every direction, her own position was a thousand times better.

There was a baseless conviction that things would work out somehow. Such a belief could lead astray, but for now, she didn't feel that way.

"Arrrrrrrrrrgh! Lortel! Ed! You bastards really want to die! I won't let this go!"

Clevius, on the verge of being caught and devoured by Tarkan, bolted out of the the Iron Hall, screaming at the top of his lungs.

"No! I feel like I'm about to die! It's dangerous! Save me! I'm sorry! I'm sorry I said I'd kill you! I'll forgive everything! Just save me this once!"

Watching his pitiful display, Lortel focused on gathering all the magical energy within her.

* * *

A tremendous roar echoed across the campus.

The Obel Hall, located southwest of the student square, was a place the students frequently visited after Princess Penia became the student council president.

It was filled with storehouses and meeting facilities for student council assets. Currently, it was a minor location pushed out of the main narrative.

Running madly up the stairs, I glimpsed the crumbling exterior wall of the the Iron Hall through a window.

While Clevius was running in terror, Lortel had secured their entrance. Yenika Suppression Team were visible, moving into the the Iron Hall's battle training field.

Having confirmed that everything was proceeding according to plan, I continued my strides.

The final act of the first round had finally entered the fourth phase. The summoning ritual for Glaskan was almost complete, and the energy of dawn was gathering from the eastern sky.

This was probably our last chance. If they couldn't suppress Yenika from the other side, everything that followed would be completely unknown.

This crazy situation of having to conduct the battles against Tarkan and Velosper simultaneously.

Fighting Tarkan with magic without the 'Elemental Slash' was arrogant.

It was akin to the idea of burning someone to death who had layered on two or three fireproof suits.

A minor burn or fainting could probably be induced, but to burn someone to death, an unrealistic amount of firepower would have to be unleashed. Or maybe even pouring magma.

At least among the members of the punitive force, no one was capable of such a thing.

Among the members of the 'punitive force', that is.

-Kwaang!

I kicked open the door to the rooftop of Obel Hall and rushed out. The rooftop view greeted me... and a familiar witch's hat caught my eye.

If I had a bit more time, I would have visited Obel Hall first, but the summoning ritual was on the brink of completion so I had to let Yenika Suppression Team in first.

Nonetheless, I managed to reach the rooftop of Obel Hall on time, so everything was fine now.

In the end, when discussing a strategy to break through Tarkan's defenses, I had to contradict the scenario of the final act of the first round and return to the strategy of the first phase.

'■Page 1. Rally the Troops.

Objective: Gather 'Princess of Mercy Penia', 'Ziggs of the Northern Plains', 'The Golden Daughter Lortel', 'Companion Ayla', 'Meddler Elvira', and 'Gloomy Clevius' in the student plaza!

(Bonus Objective) Find 'Romanticist Adel'.

(Bonus Objective) Find 'Lazy Lucy'.

(Bonus Objective) Find 'Senior Maid Bell'.

✂ Bonus objectives contribute little except a slight increase in faction favor. These characters will not join the strike team.

If you're shooting for a perfect score, Adel strums his ukulele in the brush behind the

west archery range, [Lucy takes her siesta on the roof of Obel Hall], and you'll find Bell next to the statue in Orlin Plaza.

The final chapter is already time-crunched, so few try to achieve all first-phase bonus objectives.

Locating them doesn't mean they'll join the strike team, and the rewards aren't particularly exciting, often treated as end-game content for completionists.

Still, having cleared this daunting final chapter numerous times, I knew the hiding spots of the bonus objective elements. Some of them could even upend the narrative.

I saw before me a 'grenade' that could penetrate Tarkan's armor in a single shot.

A girl perilously hanging over the rail, snoring away, was a lance capable of breaching the sturdiest shield.

Facing the unreasonable required unreasonable responses. Dealing with cheats meant I had to cheat as well.

Given my incomplete training, overcoming Tarkan relied on 'information superiority' gleaned from past experiences.

So, no hard feelings. Each of us were desperate in our own way.

-Clang!

I kicked the rail, scooped up Lucy. She was so light it felt like daily firewood hauling was more laborious.

"Huh? What? Eek?"

She was blissfully napping amidst the chaos that was our faculty building. Even good nature has its limits.

"What, what's happening? Ugh, I'm dizzy... oh..."

It wasn't daytime, it was night. So late that calling it a nap would be generous. I wanted to ask how she could sleep for so long, but the reason was obvious.

For Lazy Lucy, sleeping was a means of regenerating magical energy. This nonchalant girl, showing no sense of impending crisis, had exhausted an outrageous amount of mana running from Senior Maid Bell last night.

She'd utilized high-ranking spatial magic with Quick Casting and no chant, spanning the distance from Ophelis Hall to the northern forest.

After such a wild episode of magic exhaustion, rest was the only way to replenish her vast mana reserves. The fact that she chose to rest by napping on the roof of Obel Hall was truly in character for Lucy.

Sadly, it was not a time for relaxation.

Counting the jerky she had wolfed down in the meantime, she had even shattered my painstakingly crafted drying rack. She had to make amends for that. Nothing in this world was free.

However, I wasn't entirely heartless. I pulled out my leather pouch I'd fetched from the reading room and opened it. It was full of dried meat I had prepared in advance.

"Hmm... Jerky...? I smell jerky..."

Despite still seeming groggy from sleep, she possessed an uncanny ability to detect the smell of jerky.

-Kwaaak

I grabbed a handful of jerky and stuffed it into Lucy's small mouth.

"Uh-Uhk-! Uhk-!"

"Eat up!"

With Lucy in tow, I vaulted over the railing and ran.

"Too much! It hurts!"

It sounded like she said her jaw hurt, and that it was too much.

Beyond the railing, I could see Tarkan, the Fire High-Spirit. Clevius, gloomy as ever,

was running over with an expression that seemed about to break into tears.

Lortel, casting the largest ice spear I'd ever seen from her, was also faintly visible in the distance.

Lucy probably hadn't fully recovered her mana yet. To put it into perspective, she had only managed to recover a small fraction of her sea-like mana reserves.

Nevertheless, that was enough. Just as Tarkan's existence was inherently absurd, so was Lucy's.

"Enjoyed your meal...! Let's deal with that one's shell now!"

"What, what?"

Balancing Lucy, who was struggling with pronunciation due to the pile of jerky in her mouth, I took aim.

Given that the target was a flaming lizard, it was surprisingly easy to spot, even in the dim surroundings.

Was the range okay?

No need to worry. I had done this countless times in the military.

Target confirmed - safety off - pull the pin, and throw!

"Everybody down!"

With that, I screamed at the top of my lungs, a roar echoing throughout the hall, and flung Lucy with all my might towards where Tarkan was visible beyond the railing.

"Mmmammam-!"

With that scream, Lucy's face seemed to finally wake up from sleep.

"That's too much-!"

That seemed to be what she said.

I regretted it a little, but I didn't have any other options.

Lucy's screams echoed through the student plaza as she sped away with a mouth full of jerky. Too much - too much - too much. Then silence, as Lucy fell and a quiet moment passed.

-KwaAAAAAA!

A high-grade Lightning spell, 'Heavenly Punishment'.

The power of lightning radiated from Lucy, engulfing the area. The shockwave was so instantaneous that a gust of wind swept through the area. I had to grip the railing to withstand it.

"Kuh!"

Once the shell was blown off, we could definitely handle Tarkan with the current team.

I collected myself, then climbed back onto the railing. It was time to wrap things up.

Up until now, there had been a sense of unease, worrying whether things would pan out as planned. But having come this far, there was only one thing that mattered.

Some might call me materialistic in such circumstances, but in my view, it was a serious issue.

Tarkan was a Fire High-Spirit. It goes without saying that the vast amount of spirit system skill experience one gained upon defeating it... was something that couldn't be wasted. In some ways, it was the most crucial moment.

Having come this far, there was one thing I was absolutely unwilling to compromise on.

"The last hit...!"

The final hit!

I had to land the final hit!

I absolutely wouldn't yield it!

With that determination, I began sprinting toward the edge of the student square where Lortel and Clevis were waiting.

* * *

- 'Yenika, our beloved daughter, you make us so proud.'

- 'Yenika, I take great pride in being your friend.'

- 'You are the hope of the second-year class. You were the only one who demonstrated actual skill during this combined combat practice.'

- 'Yenika, with you as a student, we have faith in the future.'

- 'Without you, this year would have been disastrous for the second-year class. We're fortunate to have you, Yenika.'

Memories bubbled up, causing a painful throbbing in her chest.

Across the crumbled wall of Obel Hall, the sky was starting to lighten.

The shimmering stars fading from the girl's sight seemed to melt like snow. Even amidst these circumstances, she chuckled at her romantic sentiments.

The rushing punitive forces weren't as numerous as anticipated.

The girl, sitting serenely at the center of the combat training ground, rose quietly.

Her ever-present oak staff was stained black.

The auras of the protective spirits around her were unusually eerie, causing those observing to feel uneasy.

Among countless lesser spirits, lower spirits, and spirit trees, the girl was casting a spell in silence... Then slowly, she turned around.

She searched for a certain boy's face as though in a trance, but he was not among the punitive forces. That was to be expected.

The punitive force members, watching the girl, wore stern expressions.

To them, the curse markings of Velosper on her body appeared to be chains shackling her. Smiling ruefully at this realization, the girl quietly murmured.

"Welcome."

The climax of the first act's final scene. The Punitive Battle of Yenika Faelover.

Unfortunately, time was not on their side for an exchange of admiration.

CHAPTER 26

Her nose tingled.

It was a sensation Yenika had become familiar with.

Whether it was when she'd sprinkled too much pepper on cream soup at the school cafeteria, fought with Clara—her steadfast companion, witnessed her beloved father severely injured by a cow on the farm, or when the long vacation had ended and she was returning to Sylvanian Academy.

Each time, Yenika would endure the tingling sensation, rising through her small nose, with a furrowed brow.

'I want to cry.'

She knew the feeling all too well.

Despite her whimsical smile, akin to an innocent princess from a fairytale, everyone knew Yenika was a woman of profound depth.

Spend just one day with her, and you'd easily discern that the source of her buoyant and sweet demeanor paradoxically resided in her mature interior.

This attracted the adoration of everyone around her - family, friends, faculty, and juniors. The fact that she'd never stepped down from her position as the top student in her second school year only heightened their admiration.

Living under such expectations, Yenika found herself facing an unthinkable situation.

The Dark High-Spirit, Velosper, reigned ominously atop the Iron Hall's battle training field. Resembling a humanoid figure with grotesque goat-like head, its bat-like wings spread wide, threatening to overshadow Iron Hall.

In its hand was a burning hammer that seemed ready to sweep the audience off their feet at any moment.

Without a doubt, it was the manifestation of a clear demonic presence, compelling those who saw it to involuntarily step back. However, the monster hunting team stood their ground, eyes steadfast.

Taylee McLore, Ayla Tris, Penia Elias Kroel, Ziggs Ebelstein, Elvira Enisston.

Peering into the faces of the monster hunting team, they were ablaze with resolve and fighting spirit rather than fear.

Even a casual observer would naturally sense defeat in this battle.

'I will be defeated miserably in this battle.'

The doubt had turned into certainty. However, the emotion welling up in Yenika's chest was not frustration or lamentation.

Yenika slowly opened her eyes and once again, she lifted her wooden staff.

Indeed, her nose tingled again.

To Yenika, it was a rather familiar sensation.

* * *

Upon landing on the outskirts of the student plaza after a frenzied jump from the rooftop of Obel Hall, the battle against Tarkan was nearing its conclusion.

-Kwaang! Kwaang!

"Uaaahhh! Kaaaaak! Die, you lunatic, just die!"

Lucy's high-level electric magic was frightfully potent, but it wasn't enough to instantly kill Tarkan.

Even considering Lucy's abnormal magic state and the lack of time to properly cast her magic due to the sudden situation, Tarkan's endurance was commendable for surviving her attack.

However, Tarkan's shell had completely burned away, leaving his enormous level of magic resistance nonexistent.

Her magic hit him squarely.

Just this fact alone drastically reduced the difficulty level of subjugating Tarkan.

Clevius dodged Tarkan's attacks while screaming in terror. His eyes streamed with tears as he shook in fear, but his agile dodging of Tarkan's tail and foot sweeps was impressively uncanny.

This wasn't just due to Clevius's remarkable reflexes.

Tarkan's movements had become noticeably slower compared to the beginning of their battle.

Tarkan resembled a beast in its death throes, struggling in desperation.

"-----."

Tarkan's roar pierced the air once again, resounding across the student plaza.

The roar he had let out in the Nail Hall had been filled with the valor of warriors heading into battle. However, the roar Tarkan was now emitting was nothing more than a scream, writhing in agony.

It would be over soon.

I moved closer to Lortel, who was providing firepower.

"Where's Lucy?"

"She's skulking around nearby. It would be great if she could finish him off, but I'm not sure she has the energy left."

"That's fine."

It was, in fact, a relief. I had been worried about what would happen if Lucy had managed to finish him off. Despite her depleted magic power, Lucy was capable enough to easily subdue Tarkan.

As repeatedly stated, my ultimate goal at this point was to land the final blow on Tarkan, and suck up his massive amount of spirit system skill proficiency. Lucy's

power could, in fact, pose a significant impediment to this.

"Clevius, surprisingly, is quite effective in the vanguard. Despite his injuries, he's drawn Tarkan's attention this much. If only he'd shut up, he'd be a decent warrior."

"That mouth of his is the crux of the matter."

"Hey! Ahh! Help! You guys! What are you staring at! Help me! Please, cast your spells! What are you doing! Ahhhhhhh! I'm going to die at this rate, please!"

Clevius's greatest strength was his absolute unthreatening nature. His constant screams made him an easy target to underestimate. He appeared easy to take down, yet proved surprisingly resilient.

He was still top of the class in his first year of Sylvanian Academy's combat department.

His shockingly low self-esteem, ironically, often turned out to be a strength. From Tarkan's perspective, Clevius was as annoying as a buzzing mosquito.

It seemed as if one tail strike could finish him, but he continued to evade capture.

"You guys are really in for it! I'm serious! You're using me as bait and just standing there! You'll regret it!"

Even as he screamed and ran around wildly, his limits were starting to show.

"Let's finish this."

"That's the plan. Despite gathering all my magic to thrust two mighty ice spears, he's still gritting his teeth and holding on. I don't know where he gets the strength."

"We need to cut his throat."

I pulled up the last of my magic power and focused it on my fingertips. In my madness to strengthen myself at the student library, I had nearly drained all of my magical power. Still, I had just enough to cast a few basic spells.

"Your ice magic isn't really suited for precise cutting tasks, so I'll handle it. It's my responsibility, after all. Just stop him from moving, can you do that?"

"I can. Especially now."

The crux of the issue was exploiting the weakness.

If that shell was absent, even Taylee, whose training was far from complete in the dueling field, would have had enough prowess to strike it down.

My Wind Blade, which had already exceeded level 10 in proficiency, was more than capable of dealing the blow.

The issue lied in the range. Tarkan, who was recklessly swinging its tail and feet, obliterating everything in its path, was a threat.

A single misstep within its range could be fatal. Clevius, avoiding attacks almost circus-like, was quite a sight to behold.

"I'll need you to halt Tarkan's movement the moment I approach. In that brief window, I'll slice through Tarkan's throat with a close-range Wind Blade. If Tarkan isn't subdued at that point, I'd be in danger;"

Ed clarified, giving Lortel's shoulder a light tap.

"I'm putting my life in your hands here. You need to get it right."

"Haha. You sure make it sound easy, Ed. Saying things like you'll handle it, you'll stake your life on it. We're all gambling here, really."

"It's not a gamble."

Ed had plenty of experience dealing with Lortel, the Golden Daughter. She was a monster of rationality who, from act one to the finale, no matter what happened, instantly processed any surprise and faced reality.

She may not have been fully confident, but Ed knew her capabilities well. There had been far more pressing and delicate situations in the dueling field.

For a situation that demanded utmost calm until the end, Lortel was the best fit.

"This is an investment. Life isn't cheap, so do your job well."

At these words, Lortel's expression hardened for a moment. But soon after, as if amused, she replied.

"Investment, huh? That's my field of expertise."

She let out a sly smile.

"To be realistic, wouldn't it be better to leave such close combat to Clevius? He is, after all, the battle department's head and a sword would be more appropriate for cutting through things."

Indeed, her opinion held merit. There was no need for me, a member of the magic department, to get tangled in close combat.

Clevius, who was currently dodging Tarkan's attacks with his peculiar movements, could potentially dive into the beast's maw and slice through its throat.

However, I had to be the one to do it.

Why?

Because I had to deliver the final blow!

The massive amount of battle proficiency and spirit skill proficiency that the high-level Fire Spirit Tarkan provided was a treasure that couldn't be wasted.

However, I couldn't openly say that and ended up making up an excuse.

"Do you really think Clevius would do that?"

At my question, Lortel's pupils seemed to dilate slightly before she let out a beautiful laugh, blossoming like a flower.

"That's right. Drawing Tarkan's attention and risking your life to dive into it are two completely different matters. The coward Clevius couldn't possibly do such a thing. Alright, Ed."

Even as they were conversing so lightly, Clevius was still being chased around by Tarkan, screaming his lungs out. Yet, no one paid it any mind.

If Tarkan were in his frenzy buff state and in good health, it would be a different story... But a weakened Tarkan would struggle to easily subdue Clevius. That guy was nimbler than a mosquito on steroids.

"Please try not to die. Seriously."

Her tone was steeped in sarcasm. She exaggeratedly narrowed her eyes, a grotesque expression on his face as she mimicked the princess's words. Anyone could tell she was mocking her.

"That's disrespecting the royal family, you know."

"Do you think the 'Princess of Mercy' would punish me for a silly impersonation like this? If you're curious, you can always report me to her."

Sh continued, her tale of discontent quite remarkable.

"To be blunt, I don't like Princess Penia. Sure, she might have her reasons, but being tossed about under such an immature leader is annoying."

"That's a dangerous thing to say."

"I find it amusing that people let such an immature person play the part of a ruler, simply because she was born into royalty. If the world were to function properly, ranks should be determined by capability, not by blood."

He fell silent, simply listening.

"Dangerous words, right? It's been a while since I last spoke my mind so cleanly."

"What would happen if I reported you to the princess?"

"Who knows? I sure don't. She might not believe it, or she might impose a harsh punishment. We wouldn't know until we try, right?"

"Why the sudden frankness?"

With a playful smile, Lortel's subsequent words were so like her that I didn't feel like retorting.

"You gambled your life on me without a second thought. So, I'll place my life in your hands too."

She playfully mimicked a balance scale with her hands.

"The balance of a two-arm scale should always remain level. After all, fairness is the secret to a long business career."

Pointing out that it was hypocrisy seemed dull, considering they both knew it well.

On reflection, this was Lortel Keherun. The girl's method of expressing respect was overly complicated. She never simply revealed her inner thoughts.

This was a trait of her merchant lineage.

* * *

Before Clevius pissed himself in fear, it was about time to wrap things up.

The Velosper battle and the Tarkan battle were unfolding simultaneously. It sounded insane just by hearing it, but somehow, the final battles of this awry first act were coming to a close.

Once they entered the Velosper battle, Taylee's Sword Saint form would manifest, and there would be no more unexpected twists.

The Sword Saint form became somewhat ambiguous as the game progressed, but at least at this stage, it was an overpowered ability filled with superior techniques.

Everyone knew how much the Sword Saint form helped break through the early scenarios.

Certainly, with Princess Penia to handle the protective spells and Ziggs to handle the front lines, Taylee could subdue Velosper all by himself. The story had righted itself from the moment they cleared Tarkan off the path.

The next events were obvious. Yenika and the subjugation team would face off, Velosper would trigger a mass rampage of spirits using his frenzy magic, pushing their group into a corner.

At that moment, Taylee's Sword Saint form would manifest, slicing Velosper down in a single stroke. But, cornered and on the brink of death, Velosper would use Yenika to trigger the incomplete Glaskan summoning circle.

Of course, with an incomplete summoning, he couldn't bring forth the full form of Glaskan. However, he managed to summon an arm.

The power of that one arm from Glaskan was enough to cover the professor's building, about to annihilate the subjugation team in an instant. Then, Taylee's second Sword Saint form would manifest, cutting that arm down.

In that moment, Taylee would understand the way of the swordsman. That was the starting point of the whole story.

Now that things were back to normal, all I needed to do was watch out for myself.

After all, I couldn't waste this golden opportunity to subdue Tarkan, the high-level Fire Spirit, a boss in his own right.

With things as they were, it was best to seize Tarkan and massively increase my proficiency in spirit realm skills. It was a chance to increase my proficiency levels that were just shy of the target.

"Let's go."

I took a deep breath and walked out towards the edge of the student square.

Lortel, who had been preparing an ice spear, nodded. Her casual demeanor was gone, she was under the impression that I was risking my life.

Although it required enormous courage, it wasn't impossible. I knew Tarkan's stats inside and out, and he was in a weakened state. If I received timely support, I could comfortably win.

The key was to strike at his weak point. I had to cut his throat.

"Craaaaaaaah!"

Clevius, who had lost his mind, was running around like crazy. His drug was about to wear off. Though Clevius looked easy to beat, Tarkan realized he was not as weak as

he seemed.

As I steadily approached, Tarkan turned his gaze towards me.

We were both battered and bruised. Tarkan and me.

We both knew it.

Without any further ado, Tarkan roared and lunged at me. The ground shook, and my ears throbbed. Seeing Tarkan charging at me, I could understand why Clevius, who was scared out of his wits, ran away.

Even in such a battered state, he was charging at me like a madman, with a single-minded intent to kill.

Not yet. I had to get closer.

Lortel knew this too, so she didn't fire the ice spear. I kept getting closer, closer, until his neck was within the range of my magic. That was the moment to create an opening.

The sudden groan, a low, guttural sound echoed through the space. An anomaly broke the quietude. It was Glaskan's summoning circle, transforming the sky into a canvas of wonder.

"What in the world is that!"

Screamed Clevius, his voice the first to shatter the silence.

With the dawn sky as its backdrop, Glaskan's summoning circle blazed with light, a sight so radiant it was near blinding. Erupting from that circle was a titanic right hand, vast enough to dwarf the entirety of Iron Hall.

Velosper was subdued.

It was a signal. The story had reached its fifth phase. It was now up to Taylee to dispatch Glaskan, bringing an end to the narrative.

The unfolding calamity would have been clearly visible from any corner of the professor's building.

The sight of the massive right hand, a construct of overwhelming energy bursting from the skyward summoning circle, could have easily been mistaken for the apocalypse.

An anticipated anomaly, perhaps, but the timing left much to be desired.

It was impossible to ignore such a spectacle. An event akin to the end of the world. It would be unusual to remain unfazed.

The issue at hand was Tarkan's unyielding resolve.

Seeing Tarkan charging at me, wild and unhinged, I swiftly wheeled around.

As I was about to shout at Lortel — who appeared lost in her thoughts — an ice spear whistled through the air.

The incoming ice spear struck true, impacting Tarkan's face, robbing him of his senses and eliciting a scream of surprise and pain.

When I turned back, Lortel was gazing at me with a stern expression. Amidst such chaos, her focus remained solely on me. I noticed her lips move subtly. "It's now", she seemed to say, leaving the rest up to me.

The subsequent events posed no difficulty.

Turning around and looking upwards, a gargantuan lizard writhed in agony.

With a swift motion, I plunged the Wind Blade — a spell I must have cast hundreds, if not thousands of times — into the creature's neck.

[The Fire High-Spirit Tarkan has been defeated!]

[The proficiency of the Spirit Magic 'Spirit Sense' has increased!]

[The proficiency of the Spirit Magic 'Spirit Understanding' has increased!]

[The proficiency of the Spirit Magic 'Spirit Sense' has increased!]

[The proficiency of the Spirit Magic 'Spirit Understanding' has increased!]

[The proficiency of the Spirit Magic 'Spirit Sense' has increased!]

[The proficiency of the Spirit Magic 'Spirit Understanding' has increased!]

[A Spirit Contract slot has been opened! You can now make contracts with spirits!]

* * *

"I've seen a lot of people who claimed to risk their lives. Most were cowards."

Not a trace remained of Tarkan, who had been thoroughly subdued and then eliminated.

Lortel, Clevius, Lucy and I were sat against a zelkova tree, situated on the fringes of the student square.

Clevius was a quiet sobbing mess, eventually running out of energy and simply collapsing in place, while Lucy, munching on jerky, leaned against me and dozed off. I couldn't help but think that she'd vanish again at any moment.

Beyond the shattered Iron Hall, the sun was on the rise. Upon looking at the sky, the barrier that had been shrouding the professors' building was beginning to crack.

The story following the summoning of Glaskan's right arm was self-explanatory. Taylee, who manifested the Sword Saint form, had leaped into the air and cut the fiend down in a blink of an eye.

It was a sight so refreshingly thrilling that I couldn't help but chuckle. Surely, from the Iron Hall's perspective, it would have been an extraordinarily dramatic scene.

But this was the landscape from a step back off the stage of the story.

Despite the final battle being designed as the Glaskan subjugation operation, it was amusing how Glaskan himself was removed in a single cutscene.

How come it felt so eerily similar to when I'd played this?

Still, the sight of the professors' building area being engulfed by a gust of wind, and the summoned right arm of Glaskan being suppressed and disappearing, truly was befitting of the protagonist's path.

Everyone but the sleeping Lucy was captivated by the dazzling spectacle.

And so, the curtain was falling on the final scene of Act 1.

"The main force for the subjugation must have been the team entering the combat practice area. They must have fought for their lives over there. But we had our own life-or-death battle too, so we can proudly share our experience. We really did put our lives on the line."

Lortel, wearing a playful smile, offered this rather frivolous remark.

"Well, there were certainly life-or-death moments in the lives of the upper class too. But this was my first direct crisis, so it's been a learning experience."

Even though she had just narrowly escaped death, her nonchalance suggested her life must have been as fraught as Taylee's. She must have faced this kind of crisis quite a few times.

"Right."

I casually nodded, gazing at the brightening sky.

Not satisfied with such a succinct response, Lortel propped her upper body up, pressing her face towards mine.

"What's the matter, senior? We just got through a life-or-death situation, and your reflection is too succinct."

"I'm dead tired. Didn't get any sleep. You're in the same boat."

"Yeah, but this is no small feat..."

As the sun rose and the dawn light brightened the day, it marked the end of a long night.

From the breached Iron Hall, the subjugation team could be seen emerging.

Taylee, who had manifested the Sword Saint form, was leading the group. His voluminous hair was tinted a silvery white, and his eyes glowed a bright red.

Following him were Ayla, Penia, Ziggs, and Elvira. All of them had varying degrees of injuries. Ziggs, who took the lead in the forefront, was limping, and Elvira seemed about ready to collapse at any moment.

Despite their conditions, they all looked safe. It seemed like the narrative had unfolded as it should have.

Lortel rose from her spot to welcome the victorious subjugation team.

Then, as if remembering something, she turned around to face me and extended a hand, introducing herself with a smug grin.

"Lortel Keherun."

"...I know."

"I'm formally introducing myself again. Well, I won't play pointless tricks on you anymore, senior. Not from now on."

I remembered the time she sprung up on me out of nowhere, stuffing cash into my pocket under the guise of needing my help. As I had suspected, the girl had her own motives. I anticipated it, to be honest.

"Alright... you planned this out well."

Tired, I reluctantly accepted Lortel's handshake. But what happened next was unexpected.

Lortel grabbed my arm with her petite hand, gave it a hearty shake, then quickly let go. She hopped back, creating distance between us.

Her retreat was full of mischief.

"I won this round."

Her cunning grin was her signature.

In my hand, I held three gold coins. These were the same coins I had returned earlier, now she claimed they were her form of payback.

"Did you get cocky? Now you owe me a favor. What are you going to do about it?"

With her impish smile unwavering, Lortel spun around to meet her friends.

- 'Catch you later, senior.'

After those words, Lortel was the first to walk away.

I sighed deeply, watching the dawn break.

I knew Lortel had a sly side. I didn't have to feel indebted just because I got some money, and Lortel probably knew that when she handed it over.

But she intended to keep a connection with me, a pretext for maintaining this tie, no matter how it played out in the future.

- 'Investing is my specialty.'

Her consistent execution of these words deserved applause.

Anyway, the Glaskan subjugation had concluded successfully.

Watching the subjugation party stroll out against the backdrop of the rising sun seemed like a moment for reflection.

It was a rough battle, but we seemed to pull through. As the sky brightened, I gave myself a pat on the back.

Good job, me. This was only the beginning, but I've managed to get through it somehow.

".....So, what about Yenika?"

Suddenly, I felt a vital part of the story was missing. A feeling of emptiness lingered as if something crucial had been overlooked.

Everything about Yenika was like an empty puzzle piece, still missing.

The Glaskan subjugation had wrapped up rather well. There were hitches, but we ultimately got the story back on track, without any casualties.

That's a success, right?

But too many things felt unresolved.

"Now that I think about it, I don't see Senior Yenika."

Yenika was not among the party emerging from the distant Iron Hall. If Yenika had been defeated, someone should be bringing even an unconscious Yenika out. Isn't that the logical sequence of events?

"Everyone was probably too focused on Glaskan's right arm. Yenika must've been pushed into the background."

Lortel, who had walked ahead, gave a casual shrug.

"I think I have a guess about how Senior Yenika ended up like this."

"What?"

"I bumped into Senior Yenika in the Ophelis Hall corridor. We happened to resolve the joint combat practice issue."

Lortel continued her story nonchalantly.

"I peeked into Yenika Senior's room."

As Lortel strolled leisurely ahead, she struck up a conversation with me.

"Do you want to hear my story?"

CHAPTER 27

"Thank you."

He had raised his head in the muggy air of dawn.

The dire situation was barely resolved at the last moment, due in large part to the exploits of the first-year aces. Taylee's Sword Saint form seemed to have manifested just in time.

Having this form meant that the plot was unlikely to stagnate anytime soon, which was a relief.

The shattered Iron and Gloct Halls.

Fallen trees, benches and fences were piled up here and there, used as barricades. Tarkan's rampage had left the marble floor of the Student Plaza in ruins. Other parts of the campus were likely in a similar state.

Estimating the extent of the damage was pointless. It would be impossible to calculate it accurately, anyway.

There were many injured, with casualties too numerous to count. But, thankfully, there were no fatalities.

"To put it bluntly, I resent you."

Taylee said, his body littered with wounds. It was he who had gathered the punitive force, running across campus, swinging his sword in each battle, and slicing through Velosper and Glaskan.

Although his accomplishments were worthy of praise, Taylee didn't crack a smile.

"I think you know why."

His eyes still brimmed with hostility.

I surveyed the surroundings.

Members of the punitive force, who had fought hard through the night, had gathered. We stood in front of the Student Hall, wrapping up. It was the path of a glorious return.

When they returned to the camp in the center of the Student Plaza, the students there would applaud them, cheer for them, and bring closure to the story of this long night.

It had been a long and grueling night, but we had pushed through. With that sentiment, the first act concluded. The second act would shift to the tension between the Elte Commerce Association and the university professors.

"Still, I owe you."

Taylee declared, his hostility unabated.

"I have to at least thank you. No matter how much I resent you, if you hadn't stopped Tarkan, the punitive mission wouldn't have been possible."

Grinding his teeth in resentment, Taylee made a clear point of acknowledging his debt. That was the kind of person Taylee McLore was.

"Taylee, you're so stubborn. Ha-ha-ha. If you don't like something, just say so. Shouldn't it be easy to sort out your feelings like this is good, this is bad?"

Despite her disheveled appearance, the meddling Elvira laughed.

"That's right! Taylee! You don't have to be courteous to such a person! He probably just helped because his own life was in danger. If our interests don't align, he might stab us in the back again. When we were catching Tarkan, he used me as bait and treated my life like it was disposable...!"

"Clevius, you're being too loud."

"You sure have a lot to say, Clevius."

"Pipe down, Clevius."

Were the words that echoed.

Penia, Lortel, and Ziggs countered Clevius's words, each at their own pace, which led him to slump his shoulders in resignation and follow in silence.

"Taylee makes a good point, Ed. Trust isn't something to be given lightly, but you've managed to pull off some notable achievements. You deserve recognition. If we put your name up for consideration to the student council, you're likely to get something in return."

"You're giving me too much credit, Princess."

My reply was based solely on the facts.

"Consider this: Lucy is the hero of the Tarkan expedition, and Taylee bested both Velosper and Glaskan. My contributions pale in comparison. I suggest you focus on their accomplishments."

"Listen to you, playing down your role. The entire school knows about Lucy and Taylee's heroics. We're discussing your actions specifically. Are you being modest, or just shy?"

"Elvira, you ought to show some respect. He's ahead of you by a year."

Ziggs casually fired back at Elvira. As she huffed and puffed behind us, scratching her head, Ziggs turned his attention back to me.

"Let's leave the details for when we get to the barracks, Ed. We shouldn't be making decisions on the street."

"..."

Silence was my only response.

The members of the expedition party began to drift away, heading toward the student plaza. As they gradually disappeared, I stood still, simply observing. When they realized I wasn't following, some turned back to look at me.

In the breaking dawn, the weary warriors proudly waved their victory banners.

Taylee, Ayla, Penia, Ziggs, Lortel, Clevius, and Elvira.

Watching the procession of these main characters—those who would inevitably shape the narrative—I felt a peculiar sense of reassurance.

It was an unfounded confidence that they would, in their own ways, overcome any trials that lay ahead.

I had been a silent observer of their lives, watching them navigate through countless challenges and unexpected situations.

This Glaskan expedition was hampered by a situation so absurd it threatened to shatter the entire narrative, but unless we encountered such extreme circumstances again, they would likely manage just fine.

Looking at these individuals, I couldn't help but have such thoughts.

I had always kept my distance from these main characters to avoid interfering with the narrative. Yet as I watched them, a sense of warmth washed over me.

I had observed them navigate this world, facing their own problems, and growing from those experiences.

Taylee, growing stronger with each challenge.

Ayla, becoming stronger for Taylee.

Penia, slowly maturing as she accepted her destiny as a ruler.

Ziggs, carving his own path amidst civilization.

Lortel, challenging her previously materialistic life.

Clevius, finding self-assurance.

Elvira, realizing life was about more than just thrill-seeking.

Each of them had faced numerous trials and achievements, standing tall in their respective arenas.

They were the leading actors of their stories, and although the journey often proved rough and treacherous, they could always count on the glimmering red carpet to welcome them at the end.

A trophy of success waited at the finish line, a beacon of a life well-lived that would earn everyone's admiration.

"I left something in the Iron Hall. You go on ahead."

Knowing this truth well, I turned my head. Now that the situation had temporarily settled, it was time to fit the missing pieces of the puzzle. Our destination was the battleground of Iron Hall.

Walking along the broken hall, pushing open the large wooden doors, the sight of the devastated practice field was beyond words.

Ziggs's wind magic had scattered the seats, the floor was riddled with craters, the curtains were reduced to ashes, and the walls were full of holes.

Glaskan's right arm had ripped a refreshing hole in the ceiling, providing a clear view of the sky as the darkness began to retreat.

These were the remnants of our final battle with Velosper.

The stage after the story concluded.

It was akin to the backstage, an area unreachable during the course of 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' scenario. I trudged through the wreckage of the seats and made my way to the rostrum.

Underneath it was a spare podium. It was the very spot where Lucy used to nap during our combined battle practice.

-Thunk

Opening the wooden door underneath revealed Yenika, with her knees drawn to her chest, laughing awkwardly. She seemed sheepish, as if embarrassed at being discovered.

* * *

"This place is cozier than I thought. I think I can see why Lucy would nap here."

Yenika and I sat side by side at the rostrum of the ruined practice field, looking up at the sky. Little by little, cracks were forming in the barrier that had isolated the professors' building.

"I didn't expect to be found so easily. Everyone else was preoccupied with Glaskan, so I guess they forgot about me."

"With Glaskan summoning that monstrosity in the sky, who had time to worry about you, Yenika?"

"Still, it hurts a bit. After strutting my stuff on such a big stage, now that everything's settled, I'm forgotten. I thought they would wonder, 'Where could Senior Yenika be?' and look around a bit more."

The punitive squad members were all in rough shape, so instead of scouring Iron Hall for the missing Yenika, they probably wanted to return to base as quickly as possible.

The professors and staff would take care of the remaining issues as they broke through the barrier.

"Yet, you were the one hiding because you didn't want to be found."

"I can't really argue with that. Hehe."

Yenika wasn't in the best condition either. She was covered in dirt, and her shawl was torn in places. They were signs of the intense final battle.

With her knees drawn up to her chest, Yenika lifted her head to gaze at the sky. Velosper's curse that had enveloped her entire body had almost completely vanished.

As Yenika's magic power returned and began purifying her body, her skin would soon regain its pure, white complexion.

"I didn't expect you to find me so soon. I wanted to stay hidden a bit longer."

"Once the seal breaks and the professors rush in, they'd find you anyway."

"I wanted to be alone until then. I didn't want anyone to see me."

"Why?"

The girl chuckled at the question.

"Well... I was planning to have an ugly cry."

She said it as if it was not an unusual thing.

"It's embarrassing to cry in front of others, right?"

After hearing her words, I felt a sense of relief, as if the question that had been tormenting me for years was finally resolved.

Why was Yenika Faelover designated as the first act boss?

Unlike other bosses, her actions were incredibly passive. She didn't have a grandiose philosophy of her own, or a destiny to fulfill, or the traits of a pure villain who could never gain empathy.

Amongst all the bosses with their dazzling presences, Yenika Faelover being the first act boss that kickstarted the narrative felt out of place.

No matter how much I researched, the answer eluded me, leading me to the implicit conclusion of, "It's impactful, so it must be for that reason".

Always cheerful, sincere, and universally loved - that was Yenika Faelover.

And the shocking and radical scene of such a character being corroded by a dark spirit, blocking the player's path, would surely have enough impact.

What sort of hidden message could there be? The impact was substantial enough as it was.

Once I reached that conclusion, I didn't think any further about the darkness inherent within Yenika's heart.

But, in reality, it wasn't a complicated story. Rather, it was so simple and common that suspicion never touched it.

-I happened to peek into Senior Yenika's room'

The room Lortel peeked into was Yenika's. The scene unfolding within that room made me feel as if all the fragmented memories were finally converging.

On the last day of vacation, while capturing the mid-boss of the second act 'Ellis, the Maid Chief of Ophelis Hall', you can enter Ophelis Hall from Taylee's perspective.

During the pursuit of enemies inside Ophelis Hall, you can enter various character's rooms, among which was definitely Yenika's room.

Even though it was a brief sight in a tense situation, Yenika's room was undeniably strange.

Numerous pictures and writings were plastered all over the vast room.

Centered around Yenika's personal desk, family portraits, supportive letters for Yenika, encouraging messages from beloved friends, certificates filled with praises and expectations from academic staff, and picture postcards sent from home were densely pasted on the wall.

What about the scenery on the desk? From cute accessories gifted by friends to lily and rose flower pots gifted from the academy, meticulously maintained to prevent them from withering.

Shiny trophies from various academic competitions took up one side of the desk. On one wall, four oak sticks gifted by seniors to celebrate Yenika's contract with Tarkan were leaned.

One corner of the room was adorned with a finely carved, cosmos-shaped wooden statue, a gift from Yenika's family.

A meticulously preserved bouquet, a collective endeavor of her club mates, was in its prime, and an elemental spirit-shaped ornament, a special present from her Elemental Studies professor, sat neatly arranged.

The first magical tool she ever used, elegantly packed and sent over by her family, was now stowed under her desk because of its size.

On opening a drawer, it was chock-full with letters, each one overflowing with

heartfelt respect and love for Yenika.

Every letter had been meticulously written by people who cared for her: her family, friends from her hometown, alumni, and faculty. Yenika had kept all these cherished mementos intact, not throwing away a single piece.

Each of these letters was a warm and grateful remnant of true feelings. However, imagining Yenika sitting there with her eyes shut would evoke an odd scene.

Her desk, large as it was, barely had enough space to unfold a handful of books.

The words attached to her wall felt like a massive rock pressing down on her shoulders.

The solution was almost too simple, one that was obvious to everyone.

Clear the words from the wall, find a corner in the room for the gifts cluttering the desk, and toss out the age-old letters that were no longer of any importance.

Not everyone needs to take every bit of earnest respect and sincerity shown towards them seriously. If it becomes burdensome and weighs you down, knowing when to let go is also essential.

But, the tragedy was that Yenika couldn't do this, which was the root cause of her misfortune. Velosper was slowly eating away at her, creating this dark side within Yenika.

Yenika Faelover was engulfed in a compulsive belief that she had to reciprocate all the goodwill and sincerity shown to her from everyone around her. She was, in every way, like a character out of a fairy tale.

It goes without saying how reckless that act was.

"Hmm..."

We could easily deduce the reason behind Yenika's actions predating the main event by a month or more.

The emotional burden that Yenika was carrying was expanding at a much faster rate than during the main event.

When we dig deeper into the reason... the conversation inevitably leads back to the joint combat drill.

In the joint combat drill event, the person who should've been in the limelight was not Yenika, but Taylee.

Taylee, who performed exceptionally by defeating Lucy, coupled with Yenika, the only second-year student who showcased her stature, were the top stars, elevating the reputation of this episode.

However, when Lucy toppled Taylee in one go, all the attention suddenly shifted to Yenika.

Even the first-year students were outshining the second-year students. At this juncture, the hopes pinned on Yenika surpassed even those on an idol, almost reaching a level of adoration reserved for deities.

Finally, if we trace back to the origin of this anomaly, a surprising conclusion emerges.

The spotlight was thrust onto Yenika because Lucy had knocked out Taylee in a single round.

The reason Lucy effortlessly outmatched Taylee in one swift motion stemmed from a pact she'd made with Merilda.

Her ability to forge this pact with Merilda traced back to her peculiar habit of frequenting the northern forest.

Lucy was a regular visitor to the northern woods due to an idyllic spot there that she found perfect for napping.

The existence of this serene haven was attributable to a particular character, who should've been written out at the start of Act 1, but who remained.

The delicate flutter of a butterfly's wings set off a metaphorical hurricane.

The reaction was so vast that lamenting its excessiveness seemed futile.

The only cause for a sigh was the unexpected shape of the missing puzzle piece.

Nevertheless, the lingering mystery in my mind, the reason behind Yenika's placement as the Act 1 boss, was suddenly apparent. The message from the 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' wasn't as cryptic as initially assumed.

Yenika Faelover stood as a stark contrast to our hero, Taylee McLore.

Taylee was a man who grew stronger with every challenge. No matter the hardships, torment, or excruciating pain, he triumphed over each hurdle, embodying the essence of a true protagonist.

In stark contrast, Yenika led a life that was the exact antithesis of Taylee's.

Born with immense talent and doted on by her family, Yenika was a girl who maintained her radiant smile amidst the high hopes and heartfelt sincerity of those around her. But her life led her to this conclusion:

In the world, there are individuals who battle various challenges, conquer them, and achieve momentous success, embodying the role of a dramatic protagonist.

However, there are others who, despite the weight of expectations, the support and love received, and the tremendous effort put in, must ultimately confront the bitter taste of failure. These people are the extras.

Yenika was chosen as the Act 1 boss, likely to shed light on the hidden darkness lurking behind such a character as Taylee. In the end, she represented a counterpoint to our protagonist Taylee.

Despite her tremendous efforts, it wasn't surprising that she would be placed as the Act 1 boss. However, burying the message so deep could frustrate the players. What twisted hidden elements exist?

"Oh..."

Suddenly, I let out an involuntary expression of awe at the sight unfolding before me.

Spirits can't die. Even if they're slashed, they simply revert to a fluid form when 'Materialization' is undone. It's just that their strength is significantly diminished, and recovery takes considerable time.

The spirits had been absent for a while. But looking at the battlefield through eyes

adept in Spirit Sensing, I saw the spirits slowly rising from the remains of the demolished building.

Their resurgence, against the backdrop of the rising sun, was a stunning sight.

The spirits, their rampant magic now dissipated, began to gather around Yenika one after another, almost as if to console her.

"What will become of me now?"

"It's going to the disciplinary committee."

"So... I could be expelled?"

"I'm not sure."

As far as I was aware, it wouldn't escalate to expulsion. After all, Yenika made a brief cameo in the end credits.

Nevertheless, the future was uncharted territory.

Once Yenika exited the stage, she was an entirely separate entity from the main narrative. She turned into a former villain relegated to the backburner, having no further significant influence on the plot.

This odd familiarity was likely because the situation wasn't foreign to me.

"For now, you're viewed as a victim under Velosper's control, so there should be some leniency."

"Will there be?"

"Still, your transgressions won't vanish entirely..... But Professor McDowell, who is the highest-ranking Dean, is known for being student-friendly. It'd also be reckless to expel the top student of the sophomore class."

A sophomore year without Yenika would spell doom. All professors responsible for the second-year class would pull out all the stops to prevent her expulsion.

Moreover, Yenika's commendable conduct, good reputation, and a list of

achievements, coupled with a potential student petition on her behalf...

With some fortune, this could result in a close call or temporary suspension. But luck would need to be on her side.

"You know, Ed. Can I share something a bit awkward?"

"Go ahead."

"When the punitive force charged in, I envisioned something."

Abruptly, I looked at the breaking dawn and watched the fracturing barrier. It shimmered in the sunlight streaming from the east, a truly dazzling display.

"I imagined someone appearing with extraordinary power to resolve everything, grabbing my hand and leading me away. They would make it so that I didn't need to worry about a thing, assuring me gently that everything would be fine."

"Do you think that's possible?"

"Probably not. Yeah, that sort of thing only happens in fairy tales."

Yenika let out a soft, playful laugh.

Then, chuckling heartily, she nodded in agreement, saying, yeah.

-'Please save Yenika someday.'

It was then that the prophecy of the Wind Wolf surfaced in my mind. A spirit who cherished Yenika more than anyone else, a spirit with a heart brimming with love.

An oddity that I had tucked away in a corner of my mind, but on reflecting...

The prescience that Yenika would fall under Velosper's sway and cause chaos in the faculty building was something only I was privy to.

And yet, the spirit was pleading for Yenika's salvation. It was as if the Wind High-Spirit also foresaw this future. Of course, that was an impossibility.

I was in a position to know all that would transpire in Yenika's future. If I were to tell

such a person to rescue Yenika, it would naturally seem like I was seeking deliverance from this imminent crisis that Yenika was about to face.

The prophecy of the Wind Wolf wasn't designed to carry such weight.

The very advantage of superior knowledge, ironically, became a deadly poison.

Perhaps the Wind Wolf had sensed Yenika's dire circumstances before anyone else.

But well-meaning support, concern, and advice morphed into poison for the young woman.

The greater the sincerity, the heavier her burden became.

What she required was as light as a feather, but not cold... comforting words, warm as a soothing soup.

But such supportive words were to her more valuable than gold. Those who knew the charming girl genuinely opened their hearts to her.

In the end, the person she distanced herself from to an oddly severe degree proved to be the ideal counterpart. At least, that was the Wind Wolf's conclusion.

She yearned for someone to lean on emotionally, someone who wouldn't trivialize her burden under the guise of profound sincerity.

"Hey, Yenika."

And so, I gently addressed her.

"You've done a good job."

A simple, casual phrase, which shattered Yenika's emotional barricade as she sat, hugging her knees.

Soon enough, Yenika tucked away her forced smile, quietly burying her face into her knees.

In the end, Yenika Faelover had fallen short.

She tried to forge a contract with a new High-Spirit, but due to her rush to perform the summoning ceremony, she was overtaken by a dark spirit and ended up decimating the faculty building.

It was a colossal failure, challenging to rebound from, yet the process was undoubtedly sincere.

Working late into the night, honing her magic skills, always offering a smile to the faculty and classmates who enthusiastically supported her, she must have given it her all in those unseen corners.

Because the journey was beautiful, paradoxically, so was her failure. The comfort that might offer was uncertain.

Spirits gathered as if to console the silently trembling girl. It was as if they were saying, you've done enough.

The girl who would usually welcome the spirits with open arms merely quivered in place, unable to react.

Dawn arrived. The stage was set for the next act.

Cheers erupted for the victorious expeditionary force returning from the student square, triumphantly waving their flags.

The parade of proud heroes moved across the stage amidst an outpouring of applause.

In stark contrast, the backstage was quiet and gloomy. The departure of Act 1's villain was overshadowed by the protagonists' strides.

I left the girl, who was tasting the bitterness of her first life failure, silently weeping among the spirits.

I didn't console her wholeheartedly or encourage her. That was the right response.

It was Act 1, a scene I had observed countless times.

It was only then that I felt I had genuinely witnessed the end.

[Magical Ability Details]

Rank: Average Magic Student

Specialty: Elemental

Common Magic: Quick Casting Lv 5; Mana Sensing Lv 6

Fire Elemental Magic: Ignition Lv 12

Wind Elemental Magic: Wind Blade Lv 11

Spirit Realm Magic: Spirit Sense Lv 10; Spirit Understanding Lv 10

< New Spirit Slot: Empty >

< New Spirit Slot: Empty >

[A Fire Lesser-Spirit, Elgo, takes interest in you.]

[A Wind Lesser-Spirit, Dris, takes interest in you.]

[A Wind High-Spirit, Merilda, has a strong interest in you.]

CHAPTER 28

A balmy wind stirred.

In the heart of a verdant forest, a hidden, sun-kissed flower garden unknown to most caressed the senses.

Yenika was there, making a floral crown amidst the vibrant blooms. Leaving her school uniform—symbol of rigorous formality—behind in her room, she opted for a comfortable beige skirt that reminded her of home.

She hummed a melody, meticulously crafting her crown from the gathered blossoms.

Out of nowhere, a man emerged from the forest. He rode an opulent white horse, its gait resonating through the trees. As the horse approached the flower garden, its steady footfall grew faint.

The rider, none other than Ed Rosetail, alighted with grace.

Yenika rose, her face brightening at the sight of him. Ed reciprocated her beaming smile and stepped into the garden. Yenika crowned him with her flower tiara, took his hand, and with a shared laughter, they began to dance.

-Ahahaha~

Petals swirled around them, butterflies joined the dance, and the trees themselves seemed to make room, as if to bless the pair.

-Ahahahahaha~

Their movements were synchronized, as though choreographed. A lute strummed and a harp sang, their sources mysterious, as their melody filled the air. It was a picture-perfect fairy tale scene.

-Hahahahaha~ Ahahahahaha~ Hahaha~

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Chirp- Chirp-

The song of sparrows filtered through the windows of Ophelis Hall, announcing the dawn.

Yenika stirred.

After a deep slumber, her hair was a mess and her face still swollen from sleep. With her disheveled look, Yenika embraced her pillow and sunk her face into it.

"Why on earth... am I having such dreams at my age....."

Feelings of self-derision and embarrassment gradually washed over her.

The unexpected happened the following afternoon.

"Clara, why is there such a gap between liking someone and loving them?"

Clara, mid-bite into a tomato from her salad, froze. Anise, their regular lunch companion, reacted similarly. The two of them, arguably Yenika's closest friends, paused with forks halfway to their mouths, doubting their own hearing.

Lunchtime in the student cafeteria.

Despite the opulent meals available at Ophelis Hall, Yenika opted to dine with her best friends. For her, this was just another ordinary day.

It had been ten days since Yenika's disciplinary hearing.

The disciplinary committee—comprised of the three deans and Principal Obel—conducted the hearing in a somber atmosphere. It was indeed a warzone. The serious incidents were so many that even a cursory summary would take time.

Yenika, admitting her mistakes and willing to face disciplinary measures, had

effectively surrendered. This sparked an outcry from second-year students and responsible teachers, setting the stage for the first trial.

There followed a flood of petitions against the student council and the academic headquarters.

A total of 1,417 petitions filled the academic suggestion box to overflowing, necessitating the creation of a separate box solely for petitions.

In spite of the Knight Captain's objections, Princess Penia declared during the second hearing that she wouldn't press charges for the assault attempt on the royal family.

This choice was significantly swayed by the flurry of student petitions. Her resolution later played a crucial role in gaining the sweeping support of second-year students in the Student Council election.

But that's a tale diverging from the main plot.

Moreover, since Yenika had been under Velosper's manipulation at the time, her intent was disregarded, and the academy revoked her expulsion.

However, this didn't absolve Yenika entirely, as there remained financial losses and injuries to answer for. That's when Lortel stepped in.

Securing low-interest funds from the Elte Commerce for the rebuilding of the Iron and Gloct Halls, Lortel negotiated non-repayable grants for the injuries.

In exchange, she proposed that the import tariffs on school supplies from Elte Commerce distributed within the dormitory facilities be cut in half. The clause offering leniency for Yenika was just icing on the negotiation cake.

As a result, Elte Commerce's school supply products held a dominant edge within the dormitory commercial facilities. Elte Commerce evolved from being just a Sylvanian Academy donor to an actual creditor.

Also, it wiped the slate clean for Yenika Faelover, an up-and-coming spirit mage.

Lortel was a woman who never let a chance slip by. Even Dean McDowell wore a scowl the day the agreement was signed, but her inherent propensity to flash an innocent smile remained.

As turmoil spiraled with Penia and Lortel at its core, the students kept tirelessly advocating for Yenika, and the outcome was a victory in and of itself.

Yenika received a ten-day curfew and a twenty-day suspension.

She lost her Gloct Foundation scholarship eligibility, her residency at Ophelis Hall from the following semester, her top-student perks for the year, and she had to return all academic awards. No fine was imposed.

Upon hearing the verdict, the second-year students erupted in joy. It was beyond anything they had ever dreamed of. It felt as though they were characters in a feel-good coming-of-age drama.

Still, Yenika's shoulders slumped, listening to the cheers from the outskirts of the crowd.

Among the onlookers, no one could discern why.

"What... what did you just say...?"

Regardless, that was history. Dwelling on it was fruitless. Clara's only hope was that Yenika wouldn't remain so downcast post-curfew.

The previous night, Clara and Anise had meticulously planned what they'd discuss with Yenika upon seeing her for the first time in ages.

The Glaskan incident was off-limits. Sympathy was to be avoided, and inquiring about her feelings was absolutely out of the question. They were to invite her out to lunch simply because it had been some time since they'd last met.

The conversation topics were to remain as inconsequential as possible.

Anise and Clara had pondered over potential topics of conversation. They reminisced about when Assistant Professor Anna had clumsily tripped while handing out the practice exam papers.

They remembered the trumpet flower in the corner of the defensive magic training grounds, which had already begun to creep up the outer wall.

They recalled the delicious egg tarts from the dormitory bakery that had caused

quite a stir.

Armed with these subjects, they felt well-prepared.

"So... what does it mean to say you love someone? Isn't it a lot weightier than saying you like them? Both in the dictionary and in real life. But... that weight... it comes from the gravity of the emotion... and then that emotional weight... it varies for each person..."

"Yenika, hang on. Let's eat this first."

"Huh? Ahahaha. Sorry."

Flashing a radiant smile, Clara took a bite of her tomato. Without letting her smile fade, she stole a glance at Yenika.

Sweat had already begun to bead at her neck, trailing up to her forehead. Anise appeared to be in the same condition. Despite exerting every ounce of willpower to maintain a poker face, this was already verging on a crisis.

Yenika had launched into a philosophical discussion, straight out of a book. And the subject was none other than love. She was earnestly grappling with the difference between love and like.

Yenika's feelings were a major concern. They often envisioned her sitting alone in her room at Ophelis Hall, gazing out the window.

They fretted over what she might be thinking in that solitary space... if she was burdened with needless guilt, wallowing in self-pity.

Fortunately, Yenika seemed to have partially shrugged off that guilt. Ten days is no fleeting span.

Her heart may have been weighed down for the first few days, possibly even a week, but they were comforted to see she had somewhat bounced back.

Nevertheless, they hadn't anticipated the subsequent concerns. This impromptu debate on the definition of love was the prelude to an event of unfathomable impact.

-Thud!

She inadvertently slammed her fork down. Yenika, who had been munching on a sandwich, jumped.

Clara rose slightly from her seat, her eyes filled with severity, and surveyed their surroundings. The student dining hall was nearly deserted for late lunch. They were approaching the end of the lunch hour. This was a blessing.

There was no one nearby to eavesdrop. Given that she hadn't had a proper conversation with anyone during her recuperation, only Anise and Clara were privy to Yenika's train of thought.

Assuming a serious demeanor, Clara resumed her seat. Beside her was a trusted ally, Anise. Clara swallowed her dry saliva and exchanged a nod with Anise.

It felt as though a myriad of words had been communicated in that fleeting exchange of glances.

"So...?"

This girl's innocence was a treasure to be guarded at all costs. Clara and Anise had persevered thus far, surmounting every challenge without a single misstep.

Every time Yenika was in danger of getting hurt or facing hardship, these two girls had done their utmost to shield her from the world's harsh realities.

Yenika had been spared from the relentless taunting of envious upperclassmen.

They had repelled the overly affectionate teaching assistants who seemed inexplicably fond of Yenika, a classroom favorite, and had even safeguarded her from the detestable Ed Rosetail.

When it came to Ed, a recent rumor among the first-year students was making rounds, its origin unknown: "He's brash, but possibly more capable than he seems".

Yet, this wasn't a matter to be lightly dismissed. His fundamental disposition was arrogant and malevolent.

Such a risky element couldn't be allowed near Yenika.

"Why on earth would Yenika bring up something like that...?"

Clara pondered out loud, her heart heavy. Anise, who appeared overwhelmed just maintaining her facade, needed a moment to regain her bearings.

Any harm to Yenika's remarkably delicate heart had to be circumvented, and the conversation had to be navigated with utmost caution and consideration.

This was about Yenika Faelover's love life. It wasn't just a baseless rumor spreading like wildfire. If such a colossal, nuclear-grade rumor spread among the student body, by the morning meeting, it would be common knowledge.

What kind of toll would that take on a young girl's heart? Clara clenched her teeth, lifted her head, resolute to prevent such a scenario at all costs.

Yenika hesitantly began to speak.

"This is... a story I heard from a friend a while ago..."

No, Yenika!

You've been cooped up in your room for the past ten days and haven't interacted with anyone properly! Who would believe such a thing...!

Clara forcefully repressed an impending outcry.

"Uh, yeah. What did that friend say?"

"When she is just sitting in her room, staring off into space, suddenly someone's face pops up..."

"Wow, would you look at the time! I completely forgot I promised to help Assistant Professor Anna this afternoon! Apologies! I'll take off now! Bye, see you next time!"

Perhaps unable to maintain her composure any longer, Anise opted to make a swift exit.

A comrade had fallen, leaving Clara to shoulder the burden alone.

Clara gazed at Anise with a mournful expression, but seeing her cheeks turn crimson, she had no choice but to let her leave. Anise was clearly out of the fight.

Yenika was typically so innocent. Her actions were like poison to a girl's heart.

Clara was at her wits' end. She yearned to ask who the person was, when and how these feelings emerged, what the trigger was, what her future plans were, but she repressed this urge by biting her tongue.

Her spirit and determination were akin to a noble general, standing steadfast, single-handedly fending off a volley of arrows.

A girl's first love needed to be protected at all costs. The memory of first love should remain a beautiful reminiscence, never to become an embarrassing part of her past.

"I keep... She keeps having dreams about him..."

"Really?"

"Yes. Dreams where they're dancing or frolicking in a meadow... What do you think...?"

Clara couldn't help but smile at the corners of her mouth. She seriously contemplated jabbing her own thigh with a fork to regain composure.

"That's something for you... No, for your friend to ponder over..."

"Yes, probably... But what's peculiar is... She don't seem to have a reason... You know. Usually, you have a reason to like or dislike someone."

"Um, yeah..."

The words she longed to express lingered at the edge of her tongue.

In that moment, she felt like a parent preparing to send their child off to marriage. A third-rate melodrama quickly took shape in her mind, yet Clara was acutely aware that all of this was beyond her control.

Yenika was attempting to conceal her love story. Therefore, prying prematurely could cause her distress.

An internal tug-of-war took place between Clara's heart as Yenika's closest friend and her youthful curiosity regarding Yenika's romantic tale.

This emotional agony was decidedly more severe than when she had to manage the disciplinary committee's hectic demands.

But the priority was Yenika herself.

It was a well-known fact, but Yenika's innocence needed to be safeguarded at all costs. Clara took a deep breath, exhaled, and barely managed to regain her composure.

A genuine smile.

"Yenika, don't you think you might be overthinking this? Feelings of affection or aversion are often more mystifying than we give them credit for."

"Really?"

"Yes. Sometimes, you might despise someone just for their subtle demeanor, and you might grow fond of someone simply because they've stood by you during the highs and lows. Human emotions are incredibly unpredictable. I don't think you need to dwell on it so much."

Unraveling the fundamental reasons behind liking or disliking someone was surely a pursuit for psychologists or philosophers.

"Such complexities can be dealt with later. I believe it's better to be truthful with your current feelings... for your sake... No, for your friend's."

"Hmm... right. That does make sense. Clara, you always have such wise insights."

Watching her beam with that radiant smile felt like a dagger piercing my heart.

"But Yenika, from her perspective, she might not appreciate her intimate worries becoming the topic of gossip amongst friends. So, rather than sharing these concerns with others, it might be better to reflect on them personally."

She also took precautionary measures to prevent the spread of rumors. Clara was indeed a conscientious person.

"Do you think so? But she... um... might not mind..."

"No, Yenika. Even if she doesn't, circulating sensitive concerns amongst friends... It's not good for your image either."

"Wow! You're absolutely right, Clara! You're not upset with me, are you, Clara...?"

Clara had to collect herself once more, patting her flushed face. She was such a charming girl.

"It's... it's fine, Yenika..."

"Thank you, Clara. I really appreciate you taking the time to chat with me. I should head back to Ophelis Hall now to report the end of my suspension."

"Sure... I'll stay here a while... I need some time to think..."

"That's great! Even though we haven't seen each other in a while, you look well! Let's meet again after the suspension period, Clara!"

With that cheerful farewell, Yenika exited the bustling student cafeteria.

After a moment, Clara dropped her face onto the table, exhausted.

I did it, Anise.

Every ounce of energy seemed to drain from her body. Clara remained sprawled on the table for some time, needing to recoup.

* * *

[Name: Ed Rosetail]

Gender: Male

Age: 17

School Year: 2nd

Race: Human

Achievement: None

Vitality: 7

Intellect: 7

Dexterity: 9

Willpower: 8

Luck: 6

Combat Ability Details>>

Magic Ability Details>>

Life Ability Details>>

Alchemy Ability Details>>

Armed with a shiny saw, hammer, and a batch of sturdy nails, I was heading towards the northern forest. I had purchased the supplies with the gold coins I received, ready to build a shelter.

Now that the preliminary work was done, it was time to start the real job.

The day of the Glaskan extermination. Astonishingly, my intellect stat had jumped by two levels overnight.

Despite months of dedicated magic study, the stat that had scarcely moved made a significant leap. It was an improvement that could bring a grown man to tears.

In addition, I managed to advance Spirit Understanding and Spirit Sense to level 10 simultaneously.

Furthermore, with the opening of the Spirit slot, I gained the ability to use the Spirit Magic and even had a shot at forming a contract with a Wind High-Spirit.

Certainly, at this point, making a pact with a high-spirit might be a stretch considering my current abilities, but Merilda isn't going anywhere. So, if I sharpen my magic skills, I should be able to command the Wind High-Spirit.

But that wasn't the end of it.

- 'We've received the recommendation letter from Princess Penia. The Gloct Foundation offers a wide range of benefits. We strive to accommodate the needs of the students as much as possible... '

- 'Scholarship.'

- 'Certainly, financial assistance is crucial, but let's discuss the benefits first... '

- 'Scholarship.'

- 'Our foundation promotes academic pursuits, provides preferential facility usage, additional academic service points, and even aids in qualifying for top-tier dormitories... '

- 'Neutral country... No, scholarship.'

Regardless of the perks they offer, it's irrelevant if my name doesn't make it into the school record.

Princess Penia recognized my contribution and fulfilled her promise by recommending me to the academic council and the Gloct Scholarship Foundation.

I seized the rolling opportunity, gritting my teeth to secure a tuition exemption for the upcoming semester.

In this way, I had managed to secure additional time for training. It was a truly fortunate twist of events.

Thus concluded a disastrous night, marking the start of the drama's second act.

Clutching woodworking tools, I trekked into the northern forest.

The narrative arc of the second act was already mapped out in my mind.

The power struggle between Elte's business consortium and the academic faction, the bidding war for the 'Sage's Scripture'. These concepts were at the forefront of my thoughts.

The intriguing aspect of the second act was the 'Golden King Elte', who consistently gave off final boss vibes, turned out to be a decoy.

In the later part of the act, Elte was betrayed by his adopted daughter Lortel, leading to his departure. The spotlight then shifted onto the real villain, 'Researcher Glast'.

Professor Glast, overseeing the first-year students, was a daunting adversary. However, before reaching him, Taylee had several minor villains to conquer.

In contrast to the first act, the second act featured as many as three sub-bosses.

'Totet the Wind Catcher', 'Elris the Head Maid', and 'Lortel, the Golden Daughter'.

Each of these characters played distinct roles as the story unfolded, but if I had to pick, Lortel's actions were most notable.

Her part as the hidden heroine is a tale for another time. For now, in the second act, Lortel was a formidable force, embodying the persona of a true villainess.

Lortel was adept at recognizing and seizing opportunities, manipulating circumstances to her advantage. She demonstrated a mercenary-like greed, calculating the potential gains in every situation.

In the end, she even exploited her adoptive father, the man who had adopted and used her, revealing the painful marks of a life lived in harsh reality.

Regardless, the battle to subdue Glaskan served as a lesson. I needed to continually assess whether the narrative was unfolding as intended.

Given the unpredictability of variables, I had to ensure my own safety and avoid unnecessary losses. After all, my primary concern was self-preservation.

"Huh?"

As I neared Ophelis Hall, deep in thought, I spotted Yenika in the distance.

It struck me that her period of isolation was nearly over. Although she was likely still on academic leave, she probably needed a breath of fresh air.

I realized then that I hadn't devised any specific plans concerning Yenika.

"Hmm..."

It would seem awkward to feign familiarity now, especially since I had maintained a distance from Yenika.

However, at this juncture, Yenika had completed her role and exited the stage. She no longer had significant influence on the scenario, her relevance not much greater than that of the senior maid, Bell Meiya.

There was plenty to accomplish if I wanted to live comfortably in this world: personal training, pursuing a degree, improving my living conditions, and more.

Yet, of all the assets I could amass, 'connections' held a unique and irreplaceable value.

Reflecting on this, Yenika seemed to be a promising individual who had already preemptively settled her debts within Elte's business alliance.

Upon her graduation from Sylvenia and attainment of a degree, she might truly make her mark.

Moreover, she had already exited the main storyline, so perhaps it was time to start building a stronger connection?

What concerned me was the current perception of me, Ed Rosetail.

It seemed that some of the key characters had started to overestimate my abilities, while among the first-year students, the whispers had evolved, casting me from a villain to an uncouth character who nonetheless had some redeeming qualities.

However, whether the second-year students shared this view was another matter entirely... Yenika must have heard quite a few unfavorable things about me today as well.

I found myself in a precarious position where my reputation could flip at any moment.

Still, Yenika didn't seem to be swayed by such rumors... Her responses remained largely cordial.

Perhaps it was okay to greet her and try to foster a closer relationship? Considering the long-term perspective, opportunities to build a connection like Yenika were few and far between.

"Alright..."

With a nod, I made my way towards Yenika, who was making her way rather gingerly towards Ophelis Hall.

"Hi, Yenika. Seems like you've just wrapped up your training."

I kicked off the conversation casually.

Yenika must have been accustomed to unexpected greetings. After all, she was an idol adored by all second-year students.

Returning my greeting with a cheerful response and indulging in light-hearted chatter, she'd bid a lively goodbye before returning to her duties. This was the flow I had visualized in my mind as I waited for Yenika's reply.

"Ah, um! Ah!"

However, as soon as our eyes met, she gripped her staff tightly and backpedaled a few steps.

"Y-Yes, Ed! Y-Yes!"

Her demeanor appeared difficult to engage with. She could not meet my gaze and her eyes were darting around nervously. Soon, her expression turned flustered as though something had overwhelmed her.

"I! I have to go to Ophelis Hall! Catch you later! Bye!"

As if fearing further conversation, she dashed off in haste.

-...

Being shunned by the saintly Yenika was an accomplishment of sorts.

Indeed, rumors can be powerful. And I understood.

Even a steadfast individual might be influenced by rumors or hearsay, especially if they persist over a long period of time. The sway of the crowd is potent.

I didn't feel awkward or depressed, but there was a sense of loss at seeing a potential ally rush off. Well, what could be done?

With a nod, I silently wished the best for Yenika, now a lost opportunity for networking.

Don't let it get to you. Eat well, live well, Yenika...

Carrying the materials for the cabin construction, I resumed my journey. Now that the basic design was finalized, it was a perfect opportunity to further hone my craft.

With the extra time on my hands... More training it was.

CHAPTER 29

The scent of affluence was palpable.

Lortel had a nose for the aroma of wealth.

The venue was Trix Hall, home to the key administrators of the academy... it was essentially the nerve center of the faculty area.

Its exterior was neatly layered with dark black bricks interspersed with occasional marble fixtures, giving the building a sense of venerable dignity.

Regardless of the hour, the glass windows always glimmered with a polished sheen, and the entrance was so imposing that personnel were stationed at both front and back gates.

Here gathered the top brass of Sylvanian's administrative ladder, those wielding the ultimate decision-making power. They managed finances, academic scheduling, student complaints, and overall academic policy.

Even the offices of Principal Obel and Vice Principal Rachel were located here.

Few students ever stepped foot in this place. The area was usually bustling with staff, professors, or contractors.

Preoccupied with their studies, students had little reason to venture into this administrative building nestled on the outskirts of the faculty dormitory.

Greeting the guard at the entrance with a sly grin, Lortel made her way to the lobby.

The overpowering smell of wealth was at its peak here.

At the heart of Trix Hall's main lobby, encased in a glass display, was the school's pride and foundation, flaunting its grandeur.

At first glance, it wasn't particularly striking. Just an old grimoire, worn and frayed in places.

But when its name, 'Sage's Scripture', was uttered, it was enough to make anyone swallow hard.

This was the record of the great sage Sylvenia Robester's research and discourse on 'Divination Magic'.

Astrology, predicting the flow of stars and using their power to manipulate destiny, was recognized as one of the most complex and profound domains of magic.

Many researchers had tried to interpret and replicate the scripture's records, but their studies were yet to conclude. In essence, it was an enduring academic challenge.

Even excluding its academic worth, the book was a symbolic entity of Sylvanian Academy.

The book's outings from its display case were scheduled.

Apart from being required for astrology studies, it only emerged during official school events, like the entrance ceremony for freshmen, the inauguration of the student council president or principal, or the year-end graduation ceremony.

"Hmm~."

Standing before the display case, Lortel drew a deep breath as she admired the Sage's Scripture.

"Yes, it smells like wealth."

Wearing a charming smile, Lortel softly whispered.

That book was the catalyst for all events, the heart of Sylvanian Academy, and the prime acquisition target of Elte Trading Company.

[Lifestyle Ability Details]

Rank: Novice Craftsman

Specialty: Carpentry

Hand Skill Lv 10

Design Lv 4

Gathering Ability Lv 8

Carpentry Lv 10

Hunting Lv 7

Fishing Lv 6

Cooking Lv 5

Mending Lv 5

A toolbox, replete with a saw, hammer, sharp axe, shovel, machete that could double as a dagger, and a handful of large nails was nonchalantly dumped onto the floor. Its worth was just shy of a gold coin.

Sylvanian Academy served as an educational establishment.

My initial concern about marketing carpentry tools within the academy's dormitory life turned out to be unfounded, indeed, I managed to stockpile a considerable amount of quality merchandise from Elte Keherun's trading company.

Perched on a log bench in the camp, I flexed and stretched my body.

The concluding chapter of the first act had drawn to a close, and, for the time being, there were no significant events in the pipeline.

With the next semester far off, there was no immediate concern about tuition, freeing up plenty of time to build up my physical strength and improve my living conditions.

The real start of the second act would kick off from the second semester. There would be a semester-end assessment episode, but it wouldn't bring any major upheaval.

Taylee started earning his stripes in earnest, and was getting the hang of skills like

Wind Blade and Elemental Cutting. These were just precursor episodes that had to take place prior to the Glaskan subjugation operation.

Then, after the closing ceremony, it was vacation time. Once the first semester was over, the time otherwise occupied by classes could be devoted to upgrading my camp. Such a golden opportunity couldn't be wasted.

Above all else, securing a stable living space was paramount.

With a nod, I went back to the blueprint of the log cabin I had visualized in my mind.

It would've been great if I could draft a proper design plan, but even with meticulous planning, it wouldn't be built to exact specifications.

Any issues encountered would have to be resolved on the spot, and the cabin would merely take a similar form.

Rough edges didn't matter as there were no plans to sell it. This body seemed to harbor significant potential for production, so I had no choice but to trust that things would somehow work themselves out.

Life was set to be tougher than when I first began living in the wild. The silver lining was that every hardship faced would serve as a stepping stone towards my growth, so there was no need to blindly endure.

Though it offered little consolation... when opportunities to accumulate proficiency presented themselves, I should seize them as much as possible...

With that thought, I rose, brandishing my sword.

I then made a horizontal incision on the massive oak trunk near me, leaving a mark. It was the shape of a horizontal line, representing "one."

As of today, the log cabin's construction would commence, with today being day one.

Day 1.

I identified the location to build the cabin.

I didn't want to construct it too close to the river. A flood would spell disaster. After

picking a moderately shady, spacious, and inconspicuous spot, I began the leveling work.

I cleared away various undergrowth and all the large stones. Slightly sloping areas were dug out with a shovel to flatten them.

By the time the ground leveling was completed, it was already time for bed. I checked my food supply.

It was time to replenish it. With a resolve to focus on hunting the next day, I fell asleep, committing the major events of magical history to memory for the written exam.

Day 3.

I began collecting timber. With a decent level of proficiency in Wind Blade, it was a relatively simple task. However, overuse of mana started to affect my vitality, so I used it sparingly.

The process of trimming the tree proved more strenuous than felling it. There was no hope for neat, standardized lumber or planks, so everything was done in a rather primitive fashion, stripping the bark and cutting it down.

The task of pruning branches from one downed tree, peeling its bark, and converting it into lumber took over two hours. It seemed this routine would go on for some time.

A side note worth mentioning was... I crossed paths with Yenika again in the lecture hall, only to be snubbed once more.

Watching Yenika bolt away without acknowledging me, her friends Clara and Anise seemed rather pleased. Their smirks were a clear warning to stay clear of Yenika, not that I intended to linger around her anyway.

Day 6.

After a while of working with the lumber, muscle soreness began to set in, something I hadn't experienced since I started living in the northern forest.

Despite feeling adjusted to the early mornings and physically demanding lifestyle,

the additional task of building a hut led to my body protesting loudly.

However, I chose to endure it, knowing it would eventually contribute to my growth.

Day 11.

A sizable pile of lumber had been amassed, although the task seemed far from over.

During my wanderings in the forest with a saw, I came across a low-rank wind spirit resembling a sparrow. I inquired, out of concern, if my recent intense logging had bothered Merilda.

However, it simply shook its head. She appeared to be more forgiving than I had imagined.

The thought of forming a contract with it crossed my mind, but I refrained, not wishing to squander a spirit slot needlessly.

Day 14.

With the end-of-semester evaluation looming, the lumber work had to be put on hold.

Most of my nights were dedicated to studying. While I felt confident about the theoretical aspects, the practical skills required more honing.

Despite this, my progress was commendable, considering I started with zero magical abilities. My skills were significantly above average compared to the other first-year students.

In front of the exam hall, I encountered Yenika once more, and once again, I was coldly disregarded. Clara and Anise seemed quite content, seeing me completely shunned.

Day 18.

The lumber work was nearing completion. It seemed slightly inadequate, but I figured I could always cut more when needed.

The academic calendar was reaching the end of the semester. My grades were quite

satisfactory. Although not enough to secure a scholarship, maintaining this pace might make me a contender for one next semester.

My Wind Blade proficiency leveled up a notch. Despite the high proficiency requirement, the daily tree and branch cutting seemed to have boosted it.

As there was no proper way to transport the lumber, I borrowed a makeshift wagon with wheels from the student union building's repair site.

Of course, it wasn't free. After handing over a bit of cash, they cheerfully let me use it during non-construction hours.

With this, I began stacking the lumber near the camp.

Day 20.

The vacation started. For a time, I could dedicate my entire day to the camp.

The majority of students had returned to their hometowns for the holiday break. I didn't have a hometown to go back to, so I was in the process of constructing one.

First on my to-do list was splitting a log in two with Wind Blade, creating a flat surface to craft floor joists. After putting in a day's worth of labor, I had made about half the progress I needed.

The need to secure food presented itself again. Checking the trap I had set up earlier, I found Lucy, sound asleep and ensnared within. I realized that using jerky as bait might have been a misstep.

I relocated Lucy to the wooden shelter, then resumed my joist work.

Day 23.

Ziggs had ventured to the forest. Like me, he was going through the motions of training.

I asked him why he hadn't returned home for the holidays. He replied that since Elka wasn't going because of some academic meeting, he didn't either. He was nothing if not consistent.

Observing my grueling house-building efforts, he asked if there was anything he could assist with.

Though the hut's construction was also part of my training, and I initially thought about rejecting his offer, I realized it would be wise to accept help for tasks that were beyond my individual capability.

I enlisted his aid in erecting one main pillar and four peripheral ones, and in securing them. We managed to add the crossbeams, too.

Exhausted from our labors, we both collapsed onto the ground, soaked in sweat. As dusk approached, Ziggs departed for Ophelis Hall, saying he'd be around if I needed more help.

Day 27.

It rained. The logs, now saturated with water, became too burdensome to handle. They wouldn't dry in a day or two, so my focus shifted towards mere survival.

As night fell, the senior maid, Bell Meiya, stopped by and shared some herbs and mushrooms with me. She then subtly inquired about my relationship with Yenika. I candidly confessed that I felt I had earned her animosity.

Bell gave a puzzled tilt of her head and returned to Ophelis Hall. Apparently, Yenika and her close friends had also decided to stay on campus for the holiday.

Day 30.

With the joist and pillar work done, the structure began to take form. The next task was to stack logs to construct the exterior walls.

Simply stacking wouldn't ensure stability, so I had to carve out sections at the ends of each log that would serve as joints.

The work was grueling. Using saws, planes, and hammers to create joints that would fit the logs together nearly drove me to insanity. But, somehow, I made it through.

Day 32.

One side of the wooden wall, centered on a pillar, collapsed. I learned the hard way

that crafting good joints and fitting them together wasn't sufficient to ensure sturdiness.

Damn it.

Day 34.

An idea came to me to drill holes into the wood with a hand drill and insert strong metal rods into each joint section. To procure the necessary supplies, I headed to the general store managed by Elte Trading Company.

Near the Living Bakeries, I encountered Yenika's group again. As usual, Yenika darted off the moment our eyes met. I anticipated her two closest friends to be grinning as before, but only Anise among them wore a smile.

Clara's eyes flicked between Yenika and me, before her face turned ghostly pale. It appeared as though she was struggling with some type of stomachache.

Day 37.

"As you'd suggested, senior, Taylee turned out to be a pretty good guy—better than I initially gave him credit for."

I had to flag down Ziggs, who was in the middle of a jog, to help with hoisting the taller logs and the roofing. The work was simply too demanding to tackle on my own.

While I've recently rethought my approach and concluded that getting too intertwined with the main characters in the scenario may not be the best course of action, distancing myself too much could mean losing touch with the plot's progression.

I can't afford to repeat the blunders of the Glaskan subjugation battle. Bearing this in mind, I decided to subtly extract some anecdotes from the freshmen while keeping Ziggs occupied.

We were perched on the roof of the half-built cabin, hammering nails into each joint.

"I had a spar with him during the end-of-term evaluation. He's persistent, growing stronger with each passing moment. He's not on my level yet, but someday he could prove to be a formidable swordsman."

"Really?"

At least this confirmed that Act 1, Chapter 9, was progressing without a hitch.

"Are we going to leave this side as it is?"

"Yes—it's the planned spot for the chimney."

Even though it would be a makeshift setup, I had the intention of constructing a chimney for a fireplace. For heating the cabin's interior, a way to let the smoke out would be crucial.

I'd likely need materials other than logs, but that was a concern for another day.

Day 40.

The vacation was in full swing. The heat was so intense that the threat of heatstroke was real, so I decided to take the day off.

Day 42.

The scorching heat forced me to work without a shirt. My body, once thinly muscled, had developed to a point where I could confidently say I had 'muscles'.

Whenever the heat became unbearable, I'd jump into the river for a respite, and then return to filling the gaps between the logs with mud.

For the roof, I covered it with large leftover leaves from the time I constructed the lumber shelter, as a preventive measure against potential leaks.

I also repurposed the leftover netting from when I built the fish farm, securing it tightly.

I tied the remaining netting to nearby trees, fashioning a makeshift hammock. If another need for it arose, I could easily untie it.

Day 45.

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On the tree where I had initially made a mark with my sword, nine full strokes were now etched.

I lifted my gaze to survey the scene ahead.

A decently constructed log cabin greeted me.

[New Item Completed]

Log Cabin: Logs have been uniformly trimmed and stacked according to the pillars and crossbeams. It boasts exterior walls and a roof, although the interior remains empty.

Crafting Difficulty: ●●●●○ [Your crafting proficiency has increased.]

[Your crafting proficiency has increased.]

[Your crafting proficiency has increased.]

[Your crafting proficiency has increased.]

[Your crafting proficiency has increased.]

"Phew..."

With a sigh of relief, I tossed the hand ax I had been gripping onto a nearby pile.

Gradually, I strolled toward the small cabin I'd erected. There was no door as of yet, but with a well-placed hinge, I could craft something akin to it.

Nonchalantly, I sauntered inside and perched myself in the center of the cabin.

It measured around 5 'pyeong'. (TL Note: Around 16.5 square meters. Or 178 square feet for all the freedom lovers reading this novel)

The lumber had turned out bigger than expected, resulting in a larger cabin.

However, this wasn't necessarily a drawback. Although the heating efficiency might have suffered slightly, it was a sacrifice I was willing to make.

Spaces for windows had been etched out, though the panes were not in place yet. A designated spot for a fireplace was present, but without suitable materials to construct a stove, it remained unoccupied.

The walls and the floor remained unrefined, and there was a stark absence of furniture. It was a simplistic cabin, made purely of logs.

Still, it boasted an exterior wall and a roof.

With all the entrances sealed, even insects would find it impossible to invade. If I could locate a viable light source, I could easily study even into the night. A desk or a chair would be a welcomed addition.

I rubbed my weary face.

Finally, I had a home to call my own.

This realization stirred deep emotions within me, reminding me how strenuous life had been up till now.

In my relentless fight for survival, I had overlooked this basic necessity.

The reality of having a space of my own hit hard, prompting me to take the rest of the day off, just relishing in the quietude.

[Life Ability Details]

Rank: Novice Craftsman

Specialty: Carpentry

Hand Skill Level 13

Design Level 8

Gathering Ability Level 11

Carpentry Level 12

Hunting Level 8

Fishing Level 6

Cooking Level 6

Mending Level 5

This is a 4-tier quality product.

I chose to defer assessing the surge in my life skill proficiency, the dexterity statistic, and the vitality statistic, which had soared due to the manual labor.

Advanced crafting skills were on the brink of unlocking, but I didn't feel inclined to examine them just yet.

There was still a long journey ahead.

Materials for walls and floors, furniture, finalizing the fireplace, perhaps a fence, replenishing food provisions, a modest storage space for firewood and other items, not to mention the installation of a door and windows.

But, at this moment... all I yearned for was to bask in the solace offered by this roof and these walls.

Thus, I remained motionless in the center of the cabin for quite some time.

"Ooooooh!!"

Lucy had somehow made her way to the cabin, her tiny frame dangling from the window cut-out, legs swinging joyfully, her eyes gleaming like stars.

For her, my hard-won cabin was nothing more than a giant playground. She enthusiastically scampered about.

The thought of shooing her away crossed my mind, but... I too wanted to relish this newfound sense of achievement.

As the sun dipped beyond the horizon, the day came to a serene close.

CHAPTER 30

Bell Meiya, the senior maid, was recognized as the most systematic and effective among the cream of the crop maids at Ophelis Hall.

Her outstanding efficiency granted her the 'senior' title, a position where she tutored and disciplined new maids.

Speculation was rife that Ellis, the current head maid and overall manager of Ophelis Hall, was contemplating stepping down.

Understandably, this sparked a buzz within the walls of Ophelis Hall about her potential successor. Bell Meiya was widely regarded as a strong contender. It was a sensible assumption.

"Miss Yenika."

Even though Bell held an elevated status among the maids of Ophelis Hall, she never shied away from any tasks.

From the grungiest, menial tasks to the duties performed by the lower-tier maids, Bell embraced them all with unwavering determination.

Assisting the students with their attire was also part of her duties. It was unusual for a senior maid to perform this task, but Bell approached it with her sleeves rolled up and an air of indifference.

As she was brushing Yenika's hair in front of the vanity, Bell initiated a casual conversation.

"I stumbled upon Lord Ed's encampment on my last stroll through the woods. It was quite remarkable."

"Eh? Oh... you mean, the cabin?"

"...How did you come across that information?"

Hearing this, Yenika chuckled, shrugged her shoulders, and twirled the ends of her hair, shaking her head in amusement.

"I... I just chanced upon it."

"I see. Regardless... He asserted that he built it himself, and to my surprise, it was very well-crafted and symmetrical. I was thoroughly impressed. I had no idea he possessed such a skill."

"Really? Is that so."

"I felt a little apprehensive about overstepping, but I was drawn to explore the inside. I wanted to assess its sturdiness."

"So, even Bell harbors such thoughts."

"I am human, after all. This is 'natural'."

Bell epitomized the ideal maid. A true servant does not merely excel in cleaning or performing tasks proficiently.

They know how to give their utmost to their employers while respecting boundaries.

"Anyone who spots such a cabin would naturally wonder about its creator, the construction process, and its interior, right? It's a completely natural and ordinary curiosity."

Bell's repeated emphasis on 'natural' and 'obvious' had an ulterior motive. She was subtly nudging Yenika. The underlying message was to encourage Yenika to visit the camp, converse with Ed, using the cabin as an icebreaker.

Of course, Yenika, not prone to skepticism, wouldn't question the motives behind Bell's kindness... She merely nodded her head in agreement.

"Absolutely, that does make sense. Yes, it's perfectly natural. Anyone would be intrigued by something like that."

She accepted Bell's words with a thoughtful expression, taking them at face value.

As Bell skillfully plaited Yenika's hair, she heaved a silent sigh. It was only fitting for a

girl of Yenika's age to develop feelings of affection, yet when such emotions were ineptly handled, complications were almost inevitable.

Of course, any further interference from Bell would be crossing a line, so she focused on making Yenika's hair look as beautiful as possible.

On this particular day, she added a touch more vigor to her strokes as she gently combed through the back of Yenika's hair.

* * *

The entrance to the Northern Forest was just as inviting as ever. Its verdant canopy stretched out like an open invitation to all who approached.

Despite the gradual descent of the sun, the entrance radiated warmth, more welcoming than eerie. For Yenika, it was a sanctuary as familiar as her own backyard.

The Northern Forest was her go-to retreat whenever she needed a breather.

Whether it was leaning against the Guardian Tree of Merilda, immersed in a book, basking in the breeze, or losing herself to the rustle of leaves, she found comfort in these simple pleasures.

They transported her back to her childhood, when she'd laze on a hill near her home, swept by the gentle gusts of wind.

So, whenever nostalgia overwhelmed her, Yenika would make her way to the forest.

However, her visits to the Northern Forest had been scarce lately.

She was embarrassed to admit that the main reason was the likelihood of bumping into someone who had recently made the forest their home.

At the outset, her interest was purely out of curiosity.

Merilda, the forest's Wind High-Spirit taking on the form of a small wolf, would often visit Yenika, engaging in light-hearted banter whenever she had the chance.

Their late-night chats under the lunar glow, seated by the window, became a

cherished part of Yenika's routine.

The Ed Rosetail that Merilda painted with her tales differed vastly from the rumored persona, appearing more like a determined woodland creature battling fiercely for survival against all odds.

The anecdotes Merilda shared often tickled Yenika's funny bone—like the time when Ed suffered from indigestion after eating tree bark, or his grueling attempt at constructing a basic log cabin, or when he collapsed out of exhaustion from chopping firewood.

Yet, when Merilda narrated the proud moments of Ed catching his first fish with a painstakingly crafted rod, successfully erecting a handy drying rack, or nailing his first hunt with a homemade bow, Yenika couldn't help but beam with second-hand pride.

These story-filled nights, spent by the window, were precious to Yenika.

They echoed memories of her parents, who used to gently stroke her hair as they read her bedtime stories from fairy tale books. A ritual she grew too bashful to request as she aged.

And so, she ended her day, lost in tales about Ed.

"Hmm..."

Yenika paused at the threshold of the Northern Forest, tapping her foot in hesitation. She was painfully aware of her own melodramatic behavior.

The recent Glaskan incident may have been the immediate catalyst, but she realized she'd been harboring these emotions even before that.

It wasn't anything extraordinary.

Feelings of love were akin to a light drizzle. You're only conscious of the soak when it's already drenched you through and through.

Merilda's vivid accounts were a bit much from the get-go.

With her elaborate descriptions of how Ed's muscles rippled once he shed his shirt,

how his biceps bulged, and how his abs began to take form, the naive Yenika found herself blushing uncontrollably.

Whenever she ran into him by chance, her gaze would inevitably dart to the sinews near his collarbone or the veins on the back of his hand. Maintaining eye contact became a Herculean task.

Her abrupt departures, not unlike someone fleeing a scene with a nosebleeds and all, had sent her best friend Anise into a fit of concern. Even Clara seemed unnaturally anxious, breaking into cold sweats.

Quite peculiar considering Clara wasn't one to overreact.

"What in the world am I doing..."

She caught herself pondering about Ed in her idle moments, which felt utterly ridiculous. Her internal frustrations often left her pacing restlessly.

Initially, Ed Rosetail had been exiled from the Rosetail Family. Despite still being called Ed Rosetail out of habit, he'd been reduced to a commoner, getting by with merely the name Ed.

Effectively, there wasn't a significant status gap between him and Yenika anymore. While it didn't seem like a big deal, this fact incited Yenika's fanciful musings.

She envisioned them working side by side at her hometown ranch, which was in dire need of help, or collaborating on research at some Eastern Region Magic Society post-graduation, or staying back at school to pursue teaching degrees...

Such thoughts would prompt her to aim frustrated kicks at her innocent blanket.

She never fathomed she could daydream so extensively. The ensuing self-disgust was an added perk.

"How much longer will I continue this... Ed probably thinks I'm strange too..."

While Ed's reputation had improved marginally, it was still far from ideal.

Being aware of this, Ed didn't perceive Yenika's standoffish behavior as odd... But from Yenika's viewpoint, things were different.

Objectively speaking, blatantly avoiding someone was simply impolite. This was a matter of basic human courtesy, irrespective of personal feelings. She knew she couldn't keep up this charade any longer.

Nodding to herself in affirmation, Yenika made her way toward the camp where she suspected Ed to be.

* * *

[Name: Ed Rosetail]

Gender: Male

Age: 17

School Year: 2nd

Race: Human

Achievements: None

Vitality: 8

Intelligence: 7

Dexterity: 10

Willpower: 9

Luck: 6

Detailed Combat Ability>>

Detailed Magic Ability>>

Detailed Life Ability>>

Detailed Alchemy Ability>>

Finally, the dexterity stat hit 10.

With this, it was safe to say I'd fully honed a dexterity-centric skillset.

Upon the dexterity stat hitting 10, the proficiency growth rate for production skills saw a slight boost. Additionally, if certain conditions were met, I could unlock advanced production skills.

The practice of utilizing spiritual power in one's creations was known as 'Spirit Infusion'.

'Magical Engineering' involved the crafting of various magical items.

'Magic Enchantment' gave ordinary creations a range of magical effects.

'Artisan's Spirit' boosted combat power through one's own handmade items.

'Pharmacist's Eye' promoted the skilled combination of diverse potions and herbs.

And the list went on. If the conditions were right, one could employ specialized skills that branched into an array of forms, merging battle, magic, and alchemy abilities.

Currently, the only advanced production skill within reach was 'Spirit Infusion'. Yet, with a bit more effort, various other sophisticated skills could become accessible.

With the rapid development and successful construction of a cottage, a sense of accomplishment swelled, making more tasks feasible and fueling further motivation.

My mind was already racing with ideas to fill up the cottage with crafted items. The immediate concern was the door.

I'd slapped together a wooden plank and some bought hinges, but it wasn't particularly sturdy. Due to some off-kilter measurements, the wind could easily slip through.

As I mulled over a solution, I busied myself with carving wood in the clearing outside the cabin.

"Ahoy, Ed!"

A peculiar greeting startled me, and turning my head, I found Yenika. She'd trekked all the way to the camp.

Eschewing the crisp school uniform she typically wore during school sessions, she was donned in a casual indigo skirt and a loosely-fitted white blouse, courtesy of the holiday break.

She'd taken to wearing a hat and a somewhat toasty-looking shawl to protect her skin from tanning — a smart move. Yenika's fair complexion seemed particularly susceptible to sunburn.

Though the sunset's gentle rays posed little threat at the moment, it wasn't wise to be reckless.

In stark contrast, there I was, sawing away at the workbench, sleeves and trouser legs rolled up. The disparity between the two of us was palpable.

"Oh, hey there, Yenika. What brings you out this way?"

I reciprocated her greeting, though somewhat surprised given her recent evasion. Her journey to the camp suggested she must have a reason.

"It's... it's nothing much...!"

Yenika blurted out in an unusually quick tempo.

"Just passing by! Heading to see Merilda! Saw the cabin! So I came!"

Her hurried explanation gave off a sense of urgency.

"When you see a cottage like this, don't you wonder who built it, how it was built, what's it like inside! It's only natural, right? Right?"

"Uh... sure?"

"So, naturally and logically, I thought those things and came to check it out, yes. The cabin looks great, Ed."

I set the saw aside on the workbench and dusted off my hands.

"Yeah. Just got it done recently. But didn't the spirits tell you?"

At my words, she hiccupped as if stung by something, and Yenika quickly shook her

head from side to side.

"They did mention it, but just in passing? Like, oh, this exists, a fleeting thought? Barely there? Just a hint? Hardly a mention...? I don't converse with the spirits all that much, to begin with. Yeah. Sporadic chats...? Sort of like swapping updates...? So, I'm not fully clued in on Ed's day-to-day. Truly. Yeah."

"I see. Feel free to go in. It's quite sturdy. I'm rather proud of it."

I gestured casually towards the cabin. Yenika approached with some hesitation, exploring and scrutinizing the construction.

It was a simple log cabin, but I felt an unexpected sense of pride, having built it single-handedly.

As evening fell, the natural symphony of chirping insects filled the air. The moon began to surface, and stars, resembling specks of salt, started to punctuate the darkening sky.

I steeped tea using herbs given by Bell, serving it in a wooden mug I'd purchased from the market. Yenika quietly cradled her mug of herbal tea, her gaze lost in the hypnotic dance of the fire.

Despite having constructed the cabin, I hadn't yet completed a proper fireplace, meaning indoor fires were out of the question. The thought of accidentally incinerating the cabin I'd labored over was a nightmare scenario.

So, until I could finish the interior work, outdoor camping remained my living arrangement. However, there was something oddly romantic about the scenario, sitting under the stars beside my nearly finished home.

"Ed, you're truly remarkable. Most people would've surrendered in your shoes."

"I'm not really praiseworthy."

"No, you really are something."

Her typically tense demeanor seemed to have ebbed away. The serene ambiance of the quiet nighttime forest has a curious way of soothing souls. Having a cup of warm herbal tea in hand certainly added to the charm.

"If I were in your shoes, Ed, I'd be completely at a loss."

"You'll be leaving Ophelis Hall soon, won't you...?"

"Yes. I'm likely moving to Dex Hall."

Sylvanian boasted three primary dormitories: Ophelis Hall, Lorel Hall, Dex Hall.

Among them, Dex Hall was renowned for its outdated facilities, housing a majority of the regular students.

Depending on the price, dorm rooms could accommodate 4, 8, or even up to 10 students. Transitioning from Ophelis Hall to Dex Hall would be a significant adjustment.

But for Yenika, hailing from a less affluent background, it probably wouldn't be too much of a shock.

"How about your tuition? Can your family manage it?"

Yenika shook her head.

"Febri offered to lend me the money. She said I could pay her back slowly after graduation."

Febri was the second daughter of the Regent of the Kroel Royal Family.

Given that Yenika will likely be able to secure employment post-graduation, it's not an inherently risky loan. At the end of the day, they're also lending with the expectation of repayment.

Yenika's determination to move into Dex Hall was likely rooted in her tenacity.

While Lorel Hall offered superior amenities, she couldn't bear to live comfortably, leaning on the benevolence of her friends, particularly after sparking such a significant upheaval.

"I've accumulated a vast debt. I never anticipated the extent to which everyone rallied for me at the disciplinary committee, nor did I foresee their assistance with my tuition. The lengths that even Princess Penia and Lortel went to on my behalf

were beyond my expectations. Despite my blunder, everyone offered comfort post-disciplinary committee meeting? Everyone... I'm profoundly grateful. Words fail to encompass my appreciation."

Few grasped the depth to which Yenika's sincerity overwhelmed her, precipitating the incident. Ultimately, no substantial change occurred.

The destructive cycle remained unbroken.

"But... how am I to repay all of this?"

"If repayment isn't feasible, then you should just let it go."

Despite the sea of support and lofty expectations, Yenika faced failure.

The aftermath of the shock hadn't fully evaporated, and fresh debts were accruing.

"Isn't the notion of repaying all debts somewhat obsessive? Borrowing doesn't necessarily mandate repayment, does it?"

"Huh, I've never considered it in that light."

Innumerable people in the world default on their debts, living life accordingly.

However, for Yenika, such an outlook was inconceivable. It contradicted her very essence.

"In any case, you're weathering a storm. And now, you're transitioning to a new dormitory."

"If I relocate to Dex Hall... the facilities may not be as refined, but I envision a more enriching experience. I could spend the entire day with such wonderful friends. Sharing the same room from dawn to dusk, we could exchange hilarious stories, pillow-talk before sleep, enjoy midnight snacks, and engage in all kinds of dialogues. Yeah."

Ophelis Hall provided individual rooms for each student.

After an exhaustive day, it served as a sanctuary, a peaceful space where one could retreat into solitude.

There, neither peers nor underclassmen glanced at Yenika with envy. If she nestled quietly on her bed, gazing at the moon through the window, she could ease some of the burdens she carried.

Hence, Dex Hall incited a visceral fear within Yenika.

From the moment of waking to the hour of sleep, the communal lifestyle felt akin to shackles binding her throughout the day.

Yenika's gaze drifted from the crackling fire to the night sky above.

The pristine forest air complemented the clear Aken Island night sky. The desolate ambience morphed into a serene tranquility, and the initially eerie darkness of early evening became enveloping warmth.

Leaving her in such a delicate state felt somewhat unsettling.

"If you ever crave solitude, feel free to retreat here. I won't object."

I imparted these words nonchalantly. In navigating this relationship, overbearing concern and earnestness could inadvertently become a venomous presence.

"Really? That's fantastic. Hehehe."

At long last, Yenika dropped the tense mask she'd been wearing of late, revealing a lighthearted, carefree grin that I hadn't glimpsed in quite some time.

"Ed, if you ever find yourself in a bind, or wrestling with something alone, let me know."

Yenika murmured, her gaze fixated on the unclouded sky above.

"I promise I'll be there to help."

* * *

"Ophelis Hall has been a bit chaotic of late."

Yenika's herbal tea mug sat empty. Retrieving her shawl, she straightened her attire and rose from her spot, preparing to exit the encampment.

"There's gossip going around that the head maid is on the brink of resignation. It seems she's been dealing with quite a bit of stress."

While brushing off her clothes, Yenika continued to chat.

"It's peculiar, right? I haven't interacted with her much, but she always struck me as dedicated and cheerful. Granted, I'll be leaving Ophelis Hall soon, so it won't directly affect me... still, it has me somewhat concerned."

Yenika concluded her thoughts with another display of her endearingly naive smile.

"Anyway, thanks for the cabin tour, Ed. I'll be sure to visit often. Would it be... uh... overly intrusive if I came by daily...?"

"Do as you wish."

"Hehehe. I'm pleased I stopped by today. So, I'll catch you later... no, next, next time."

As I bade Yenika farewell, I latched onto the tidbit of information she'd nonchalantly tossed out. The second semester was indeed fast approaching.

This marked the onset of the incident dubbed the 'Ophelis Hall Occupation,' ushering in the second act.

Initially, it was meant to be a minor event, an outlet for inferior students to voice their discontent regarding the prevailing unfair treatment. Given their lower status, their influence was limited.

But when the head maid, bought off by Lortel, got involved, the incident swelled in magnitude... morphing into the second act's main event.

The conflict eventually escalated into an economic war between the Elte Merchant Association and the school, centered around the 'Sage's Scripture'. This event could be regarded as the genesis of all ensuing situations.

Things are going to get rough, Taylee.

As I watched Yenika recede into the night-shrouded forest, I silently extended my sympathies to Taylee.

You're in for a damn tough ride..... Hang in there, Taylee...

CHAPTER 31

The primary objective was to create a livable space before summer break wrapped up.

The makeshift wooden shelter was so astoundingly subpar that it had been ages since I'd had a good night's sleep.

I'd been hopeful that I could get everything in order before the break was over, so I could commute to school from the cabin once the second semester kicked off.

Yet with the start of the term only a week away, there was still plenty left to do.

"Hmm..."

The finished cabin boasted a wooden door and windows. I'd opted for oversized hinges, fearing the hassle if they were to loosen...

Now my worry was the potential for an annoying, creaky noise should they rust. But, on the bright side, it beat hinges falling off altogether.

Regardless, there were several issues that needed addressing before moving into the cabin, with the fireplace and furniture being the top priorities.

The fireplace was a particular source of concern. Despite the current weather being warm enough that nighttime chill wasn't an issue, when the seasons shifted, indoor heating would become crucial.

Plus, during the evenings, the fireplace's glow would be the only legitimate source of light. It would also be needed for cooking... Essential survival activities called for a working indoor fire.

However, hastily building a fireplace out of wood, only to cause a fire, would spell catastrophe. So, securing durable materials for the fireplace's construction was paramount. The first thing that sprung to mind was bricks.

While Elte Trading offered a diverse range of goods, they still wouldn't stock

construction bricks at an educational institution. And the chances of acquiring or purchasing bricks from Iron Hall's construction site were slim...

They were unlikely to part with their bricks, given they'd been allocated in a quantity just sufficient for their needs.

So, I decided to start crafting bricks today.

[New Product]

Using leftover scrap from the brick mold construction, I shaped it into a square and drove in a nail. Filled with mud, it would serve as a perfect brick mold.

Creation Difficulty: ●○○○○○

"Phew..."

Within about five minutes, I'd completed one casting mold. Casually tossing the hammer onto the workbench, I wiped the sweat from my brow.

My plan was to gather mud from the riverbank, stuff it into the mold, press it firmly, then move it to a shaded area and remove the mold.

I'd repeat this process hundreds of times to mass-produce uniform bricks, let them dry for approximately a week, then stack them to construct a fireplace and chimney.

The issue of cement – necessary for maintaining the joint state between bricks – also had to be addressed with mud, which seemed insufficient and likely to crumble soon, leading me to believe a support structure was needed.

Additionally, it would be a big win if I could craft some interior furniture, though I hadn't yet figured out a specific plan for that.

Given the steady improvement in my woodworking skills, I felt I could easily create simple furniture. Ideas for methodology were coming to me quite readily.

It seemed that building items like chairs and tables would be relatively simple, provided I had the necessary materials.

Constructing the bed frame seemed straightforward. As for the mattress... If he could

secure a large piece of cloth or some kind of bag, stuffing it with feathers, cotton, or hay might do the trick.

I also wanted to replace the windows with glass panes, but the sourcing of these was another issue entirely.

While grappling with these considerations, he ambled through the forest, bow at the ready, on the hunt for my day's sustenance.

[Detailed Combat Ability]

Rank: Beginner Archer

Bow Proficiency Lv 6

Vital Point Snipe Lv 3

Rapid Fire Lv 2

Retreat Fire Lv 1

Aim Sensing Lv 2

Vision Expansion Lv 1

I was reminded of it yet again. Ed Rosetail had no knack for combat skills.

I forced myself to employ the bow each time I hunted, but despite a full school year and half a vacation's practice, my proficiency in bow-related skills was still uninspiring.

I sensed the need for drastic measures. Some kind of opportunity had to be engineered to truly jumpstart his development.

"I've found one."

Suddenly, I glimpsed a young deer in the forest. Drawing my bow and taking cover among the trees, I murmured to myself.

Of late, my camp had attracted quite a variety of visitors.

Bell Meiya would drop by now and then, generously sharing assorted food ingredients before taking her leave. However, her visits had become increasingly infrequent.

Every three or four days, Ziggs would be seen jogging through the forest. It appeared he wasn't just running within the woods but traversing all of Aken Island – his stamina was nothing short of phenomenal.

If he hadn't committed to the magic department, Ziggs would have undoubtedly joined the combat division.

There were other occurrences: one distressed student fled in terror after encountering me with a horde of squirrel carcasses.

Knight Captain Cler, the bodyguard of Princess Penia, stopped by to ensure my wellbeing.

How could I describe it? It seemed like an ever-growing number of people were becoming aware of my residence in the northern forest... I just hoped it wouldn't cause any complications with the academy...

Regardless, not all of Aken Island was under the academy's jurisdiction, so there was no immediate justification to evict me. There wasn't too much cause for concern.

Among my regular visitors, though, three stood out.

Guest A was a famed prodigy of a mage, but her visiting schedule was utterly unpredictable.

At times, she would saunter in during broad daylight, napping by the campfire. On other occasions, she'd be found perched atop the roof of the hut, still a work-in-progress, at the crack of dawn.

She'd also recline in the hammock – a makeshift creation from a net – eyes twinkling as she observed the hut post-riverside hunt. She seemed to relish the vibe of a covert base or hideaway...

She never missed an opportunity to give her opinion.

"Hey, you planning on adding a chimney?"

"Wow! You've got a door now!"

"We should install a backdoor too!"

While I was down by the river splitting firewood, she'd emerge from the woods.

"Why don't we use glass for the windows?"

"Think it might cave in, huh? We should probably avoid using magic around it."

"What if we punched a window in the roof?"

Such was her casual banter as I collected nets to upgrade the hunting trap amidst the verdant forest.

"Can I test out some magic inside?"

"Why not first lay down some deer hide in there?"

While I sharpened my dagger's edge against a rock, she sat atop it, her legs swinging back and forth as she spouted suggestions.

"What if we orient the entrance toward the sun?"

"You know, they say proper ventilation requires at least two windows."

If someone chanced upon us, they'd likely assume she was the mastermind behind the project.

Her incessant chatter left me too exhausted for individual replies, so I hoisted the mage, deposited her inside the wooden shelter, and kept repeating this process.

Such was my guest A.

Guest B was the top scholar of the second year class, an adept spirit mage. In truth, it was I who should have been paying her homage.

"Voila, I brought eggs. Word is, Bell will be thrilled if you gift them to you."

She chuckled as she set a basket of eggs next to the campfire. A priceless friend from

the neighborhood who often supplied rare forest ingredients and various necessities.

She dropped by so regularly that my offer of unlimited visitation seemed redundant. This spirit mage could be found beneath a tree each day, either immersed in a book, engaging in photosynthesis, or conversing with spirits.

One day, she commanded spirits to transport a hefty, pot-like object, and suddenly, she was heating water.

"I'm about to perform a little magic of my own. Just keep doing what you're doing, Ed!"

While I was busy hauling clay for brick molding at the riverbank, I tried to ignore her impish laughter. By the time I returned for dinner, she had rolled up her sleeves and hiked up her skirt, pounding something in the pot.

Upon closer inspection, I realized it was my uniform shirt.

It was the same shirt I relentlessly laundered, scrubbing it to the brink of tearing. Nevertheless, after a semester of regular wear, stubborn stains had set in.

The spirit mage appeared quite perturbed by this sight.

"Voila, if you stomp it in boiling saltwater like this, it turns white. Pretty neat, right? Back on the farm, my folks would do this whenever our clothes got dirty."

With a triumphant grin, she showcased the freshly whitened shirt. Confronted by her expectant smirk, as if awaiting praise, I found myself compelled to applaud.

As I clapped and cheered, "That's genius! Incredible! Knowing stuff like this is invaluable!" she suddenly grew bashful and lowered her gaze. She had a penchant for showing off.

Yet for all her apparent transparency, she maintained an enigmatic aura... For example, when Lucy made an unexpected appearance at the camp, she'd greet her without any sign of surprise.

Yet, she'd then ask, "How often does Lucy swing by the camp?"

Her actions, without any discernible rationale, often struck me as peculiar.

This girl was indeed Guest B.

But the real crux of the matter was... Guest C.

Guests A and B were routine visitors, so their presence didn't raise any eyebrows. They were treated as usual, as one would expect. However, when it came to Guest C, I found myself thinking, "What's her business here?".

As the day advanced, the sun started its descent toward the west, bathing the forest in a warm, rosy hue.

A missed first arrow led to an hour-long chase. It was around the time I had successfully captured the fawn and was returning to camp, its carcass slung over my shoulder.

Two unfamiliar figures were awaiting my arrival by the campfire.

One stood serenely, hands neatly clasped, draped in the attire of a meticulous maid.

The other lounged on a log, propping up her chin with both hands, humming a casual tune.

"Ah, senior. We've been waiting. Your task seems to have taken a bit of time."

The lady publicly known as the 'Golden Daughter'.

She was Guest C.

* * *

The 'Ophelis Hall Occupation Crisis' was an event that transpired at Ophelis Hall on the final day of vacation, a beacon that marked the commencement of Act 2.

Even a bare-bones summary is quite lengthy.

As vacation drew to a close, the less privileged students, who were making their way back to school, harbored resentment against the Ophelis Hall students who relished in numerous privileges and special treatments.

They decided to seize the dormitory.

At the forefront was 'Spokesman of Lesser Privileged Students, Willian'. His issued statement was a verbose manifesto that extended well beyond twenty pages.

The privileged students, essentially living a noble's life due to the dormitory amenities, held the right to choose their seats first during lessons, enjoyed a more flexible meal schedule, had the luxury of personal maids, and reaped the benefits of an academic level that offered unparalleled conveniences.

These grievances accumulated gradually and detonated during the season of returning from vacation.

At the time of school reopening, a heavy downpour beset the southwest Belor region, home to Aken Island.

An announcement indicated that the academic department would arrange return carriages and ship services for Ophelis Hall students, even tolerating a few days delay in their return.

The indignation of the less privileged students, fretting over potential point deductions for tardy return amidst the downpour, reached boiling point.

Starting from a Dex Hall student meeting, the less privileged students rallied together and devised a plan to air their grievances by occupying the opulent and elite Ophelis Hall.

Naturally, it was a harebrained scheme.

Ophelis Hall housed students with the highest aptitudes from each year, and the maids managing the place were far from inept. They were all competent with a rapier, and the senior maids were even capable of intermediate-level magic.

Regardless of the number of less privileged students gathered, there was simply no way they could overtake a stronghold like Ophelis Hall. From a distance, the spectacle resembled a procession of lemmings hurtling towards a cliff.

Even if they managed to occupy it, raising a ruckus in Ophelis Hall—home to all sorts of nobility and children from influential families—would inevitably lead to repercussions. Thus, the situation was naturally limited in scope.

That was, until Lortel surreptitiously entered the picture.

"There's an interesting scheme brewing among the underdogs."

Across the crackling flames, Lortel revealed a sly grin. I remained impassive, continuing to hone my dagger.

Lifting your gaze and veering off to the side, you'd spot a seemingly reserved figure—Ellis, the Head Maid of Ophelis Hall.

Her demeanor gave the impression of serving Lortel... Yet her silent, still posture wasn't out of place.

She alone had access to all the protective magic symbols within Ophelis Hall. These protective spells, with a mere twist, could be reconfigured for other uses.

The importance of such authority goes without saying, hence, only someone who has served for a lengthy period and earned the academy's trust can hold the title of Head Maid.

In other words, she wasn't someone you could easily sway with a bit of spare change.

"So?"

"I was hoping to enlist your assistance, senior."

"You need my help specifically?"

"Because you're the right person for this, senior."

Lortel let out a long, resigned sigh before proceeding.

"I initially planned to task that opportunist, Tote, with the job, but after a severe injury, everything got derailed."

Hearing this, I paused the sharpening of my dagger.

This conversation demanded attention.

"Well, at last, you seem to be taking my words to heart, senior."

"What happened to Tote?"

'Tote, the opportunist'. Not an important player, but a name I remember distinctly.

A mini-boss that pops up at the beginning of Act 2. During the vacation season, he instigates a quarrel with Taylee, gets a beatdown, and then resurfaces as Phase 1 Boss during the 'Occupation of Ophelis Hall' in Chapter 3 of Act 2.

While not as large-scale as the Glaskan subjugation event, the Ophelis Hall incident undoubtedly has subsequent influence... It indeed features five named bosses.

1st floor boss 'Opportunist Tote'.

2nd floor boss 'Gloomy Clevius'.

3rd floor bosses 'Crockery Supervisor Shenny', 'Bedding Laundry Supervisor Kelly'.

4th floor boss 'Spokesman of Lesser Privileged Students, Willian'.

5th floor boss 'Chief Maid Ellis'

Among them, Tote, who initially stirs up the scene before disappearing post thrashing, was supposed to be involved in the Ophelis Hall predicament, as one of Lortel's hired hands.

"He was rather audacious, not exactly endearing... but he knew how to keep a secret. I trusted him and considered delegating the task to him. I didn't expect Ziggs to beat him so severely. He's in the hospital now."

Events were veering off course in ways unbeknownst to me. There shouldn't have been any significant developments during this vacation period.

"Ziggs beat him up?"

"During this break, Tote seemed to have rubbed Taylee and Ziggs the wrong way. Honestly, I can't fathom why he'd do such a thing."

I already had a grasp of that.

Tote was initially just a small-time troublemaker at the start of Act 2. His role was to create issues over insignificant matters, only to get knocked down by the protagonist and his companions.

In essence, he was a character introduced to put Ziggs in the spotlight. Poking fun at Taylee, The Failed Swordsman, and boasting about his non-existent skills, only to have his hubris crushed by Ziggs—that's likely how it transpired.

By vacation time, Taylee and Ziggs were probably quite tight, so the progression of Act 2's introduction was predictable. I was well-versed in this.

Still, it appeared that I had overlooked some details.

Like, for instance, the exact content of the remarks Tote made to Taylee.

"He told Taylee he was lower than an insect... even worse than Ed Rosetail? That's rather harsh, don't you think?"

"Sigh..."

"In essence, he insulted both Taylee and senior Ed simultaneously... No wonder Ziggs was doubly infuriated."

That's why I always tried to steer clear of the main characters as much as possible... but managing such a scenario can be challenging.

"Normally, Ziggs would've just given him a mild scolding, but according to Elvira, he was particularly incensed that day. He did apologize once he cooled off, but it was quite a passionate outburst."

At this point, Lortel heaved a sigh.

"I can't place my trust in such an emotionally volatile individual."

Then, she fixed her gaze squarely on me.

"In any case, the task isn't complicated. You simply obtain the key from Miss Ellis, enter Ophelis Hall, and when the lower-class students flood in, you open the door."

"There must be others capable of doing that."

"Fewer than you might think. One needs to remain composed under any circumstances, and most importantly... one needs a reason to get embroiled in something like this."

What was Lortel's motive behind these words?

"Even if you're offered a significant sum, there's no rule preventing you from spilling the beans to the school's internal investigator after the incident concludes. If you blab 'Actually, all of this is because of first-year student Lortel', what do you think will happen to me? I can't just blindly trust anyone."

After hearing her rationale, I thought I grasped why Lortel had approached me.

I was the one who was expelled from Ophelis Hall. I was the one who had been mocked, diminished, even loathed by the students, leading a school life brimming with disdain.

Truthfully, it didn't bother me much. After all, Ed Rosetail was the type of person who warranted such treatment. From my standpoint, it felt a bit unfair, but my main concern right now was survival.

As for the students' assessments, they'd eventually fade with time. In fact, among the first-year students, some positive feedback had already begun to surface.

"Don't you feel like striking back, Senior Ed?"

Lortel responded with a light chuckle.

She likely suspected I held some grudge against the academy. Of course, this was baseless conjecture.

"I don't have such an inclination."

"Oh, really?"

"Even so, I'd like to hear your terms."

I kept my cool and made my decision promptly.

Indeed, by the time I fully grasped the situation, things had gone askew. But this distortion wasn't as extreme as in Act 1. At this juncture, it seemed almost endearing.

If I turned down Lortel's proposal here, forcing her to seek out another prospect, it could lead to further complications. It was entirely uncertain who would step into

the role of windcatcher vacated by Tote in Phase 1.

On the other hand, if I took up that role, conveniently opened the door, and conveniently lost to Taylee, the matter would be settled. After all, Tote was only capable of doing so much.

The issue was that Tote, the figurehead of Phase 1, was unable to fulfill his duty. If we could address this, everything would fall back into place.

But that didn't mean I would offer my services for free. They had the means to compensate, so I should earn as much as I could.

"Twenty Gold Coins."

Lortel uttered quietly. Given the task's difficulty, it was a laughable sum, but it made sense if viewed as hush money.

From my standpoint, hoping for a smooth resolution, I had no intention of exposing Lortel's involvement. It was essentially easy money.

In the first place, if I handled things cleverly, I might not even come under scrutiny. I'd simply keep a low profile, promote Taylee, slip into Yenika's room, enjoy a cup of tea, then make a quiet exit. Simple as that.

"Agreed."

With that, I returned to sharpening my dagger.

There was no need for further discussion. My actions communicated this clearly.

In the end, I had assumed the role of Phase 1 boss.

* * *

"This feels odd."

In the nocturnal forest.

The young merchant and Maid Ellis strolled side by side back to Ophelis Hall.

The typically silent Maid Ellis, who had yet to utter a word, finally spoke up when alone with Lortel.

"That man scarcely used the word 'why' in his speech."

The mature maid possessed a knack for reading people. At least, she could discern that Ed Rosetail was no ordinary individual.

In truth, their conversation had been unremarkable. It would be absurd to suggest they could glean Ed's true nature from such a trivial exchange.

However, the sense of unease that Maid Ellis alluded to... Lortel perceived it keenly as well.

"Ms. Ellis seems to share the same sentiment."

Lortel responded with a broad grin.

"Now that I think about it, he always conducts himself in that manner."

He didn't display the typical human curiosity one would anticipate.

Given Lortel's proposition, one would logically expect the question 'why?' to surface multiple times.

Why was Lortel involving herself in the takeover situation at Ophelis Hall?

Why was Chief Maid Ellis collaborating with Lortel?

Why didn't he exhibit any hesitation towards such collective actions by the lower-class students?

A myriad more 'whys' should've surfaced. It was a transaction involving twenty gold coins. What was the goal, why were they undertaking this? Being human naturally incites curiosity.

She even had a fabricated rationale ready to appease this inquisitiveness.

Yet, Ed Rosetail had only queried 'why' once.

Why had they specifically sought his help?

"Such a reaction... indicates one of two things. Either he's someone solely driven by money with no interest in anything else..."

For the first time in a while, Lortel felt a rush of exhilaration.

"...or he's someone who grasped the entire situation from the get-go."

She could still vividly recall the warmth of the three gold coins she had received. Ed Rosetail, at the very least, wasn't someone who valued gold above all else.

Thus, by process of elimination, there was only one possibility left.

"I wonder how much he's aware of. There shouldn't have been any hints."

Lortel narrowed her eyes slightly, revealing her distinctive fox-like smile. It was a sensation she hadn't experienced in a long time - 'fear of the unknown.'

Night deepened. Lortel's strides through the dark forest were confident.

While Lortel was engrossed in her musings, the young man on the other side of the bonfire was quietly sharpening his dagger.

After Lortel departed, the young man sat before the bonfire. What was he pondering?

Unable to discern his thoughts, Lortel felt her heartbeat quicken.

A familiar scent permeated the air.

Unmistakably so. Most certainly.

CHAPTER 32

Her most acute sense was her sense of smell.

Those in the merchant trade relied heavily on their olfactory senses. Lortel was no exception.

She could pick up on scents others missed, allowing her to react just a bit faster.

The chance for swift wealth often hinged on that slight lead. Even finding a solution when backed into a corner relied on that crucial half-step.

- 'Ophelis Hall New Student Return to School Assistance Proposal'.

Lortel carefully folded her handwritten proposal at her desk, tucked it into an envelope, and sealed it with wax.

"It's really coming down out there."

Rain drummed against the windowpanes. The gloomy sky seemed to mourn the end of vacation.

More than half of the rooms in Ophelis Hall were vacant. Only toward the end of the week, when the return-to-school period concluded, would the prior bustle come back. Until then, the somber and quiet ambiance would persist.

Strolling alone down the dimly lit hallway as rain pelted the windows was somewhat melancholic. Ironically, Lortel found solace in this shadowy atmosphere.

This place of learning, brimming with romance, was too well-lit.

The faces of hopeful students, diligently preparing for a promising future, were blindingly bright.

Was this the light of youth? A painfully sentimental term. Clearly, it was an alien world to Lortel.

A glaring light only exposes the filth.

Peering at her desk, documents laced with dark intentions came into focus.

She had already made contact with 'Spokesman of Lesser Privileged Students, Willian'.

He was eagerly awaiting the opportunity to challenge the students of Ophelis Hall and the academy. The extended rain coinciding with the return period could provide the perfect opportunity.

The discontent had already built up. Just toss a believable reason to the underperformers and general students, and Willian, skilled in stirring up emotions and making speeches, would take action.

The head maid overseeing Ophelis Hall and a segment of the academy's administrative review department were already in Lortel's corner.

They would fervently back Lortel's proposal—a proposal to recognize exceptions for Ophelis Hall's students and proactively manage and support the return period.

This was undeniable favoritism, a stark contrast to the general students forced to grit their teeth and return amid the torrential rain.

At this point, whether the academy actually accepts Lortel's proposal or not is irrelevant. The mere fact that such a proposal is being seriously considered is enough to stoke the underperformers' ire.

"This tranquility won't last much longer."

The situation needs to be as spectacular and destructive as possible. The more property damage, the better. Ideally, Ophelis Hall would be completely ruined.

The logic of money works flawlessly within the ledger—Lortel's territory. The academy's financial flow and structure become clear to her after just a few glances.

The academy's finances are already on shaky ground. They're at a point where they have to tap into the Elte Merchant Guild's funds for the restoration of Iron Hall and Gloct Hall, which were devastated during the Glaskan incident.

For Lortel, understanding the persistent cash flow issues at Sylvanian Academy was easier than downing a bowl of cold oatmeal. She didn't even need to crack open the ledger.

Throughout the academic year, she'd scrutinized the situation firsthand. With a few simple equations, a piece of parchment, and a quill, she quickly estimated the academy's quarterly cash flow.

Principal Obel's incessant external activities were also telling.

They were his desperate attempts to navigate the increasingly tough cash shortage for the semester. Every dignitary he met with held substantial assets. He was tirelessly fundraising, working himself to the bone.

In isolation, the academy's asset structure wasn't too concerning.

However, when all payment deadlines converged, it could potentially topple even the sturdiest asset structure. 'Assets' and 'Cash' are, after all, fundamentally different entities.

Bankruptcy due to poor management is a bitter pill to swallow. Yet bankruptcy due to a temporary cash crunch—a 'profitable bankruptcy'—can feel so unjust, it's as if one is crying blood.

The academy's administration had to do everything in their power to avoid such a scenario.

Lortel pushed her creaky chair back and leaned against the window.

Of all the buildings within the academy, Ophelis Hall was the most lavish and impressive.

Overflowing with precious and artistic treasures, the stained glass gracing the walls was crafted by a renowned artisan whose work would make history. The walls, carpets, and wooden furnishings were all hand-delivered by celebrated craftsmen.

Some pieces didn't even belong to the academy. Several works of art, on loan from influential noble families, were on display to boost the hall's prestige.

Even a slight indulgence could critically wound the already fragile finances of the

academy.

This would undoubtedly give the Elte Merchant Guild a significant edge in the ongoing negotiations for the acquisition of 'Sage's Scripture'.

The 'Sage's Scripture' was like the heart of Sylvenia, a magical tome. But when cornered, some would even gamble with that heart.

"I wonder when the rain will let up."

Lortel gazed at the window where the rain rapped insistently.

The heavy sky was void of any brightness. It was reminiscent of the sky she used to watch through gaps in the ramshackle roof of the slums, offering her an odd sense of comfort.

Lighting a fire in a shanty in the slums would send cockroaches scurrying from their hiding places into the darkness. The memory stirred a strange sense of kinship in Lortel.

As previously mentioned, this dreamy place of learning was excessively bright.

Living in this sticky darkness, her body smeared with grime, her own image was becoming more distinct.

The signs of conspiracy strewn across her desk were proof.

They were evidence of a life spent constantly betraying others, doubting their motives, and never revealing genuine emotions. Despite becoming this in the fight for survival, her grubby, tainted essence remained unchanged.

...And so, like a wandering holly, they roamed, searching for their own kind.

Despite the Sylvanian Academy being populated with individuals who shone brightly, perhaps there was someone who would understand and acknowledge the grimy, rat-like existence they endured. They clung to this slim hope.

Gazing at the dark clouds above, Lortel quietly whispered.

"I'm lonely."

No matter the circumstances, their true nature remained unaltered. The approach Lortel adopted to survive this harsh reality never wavered.

Lortel was always the shadowy veil concealing the grim truth behind the spectacle.

The spectators labeled her as the puppet master.

* * *

-[Life Ability Details]

Rank: Intermediate Artisan

Specialty: Carpentry

Hand Skill Lv 13

Design Lv 8

Gathering Ability Lv 11

Carpentry Lv 12

Hunting Lv 8

Fishing Lv 6

Cooking Lv 6

Repair Lv 5

< Advanced Craftsmanship Slot: Empty >

< Advanced Craftsmanship Slot: Empty >

-'Relentless rain'

A torrential downpour had begun.

They had experienced occasional rain since living outdoors, but this was their first

encounter with an extended deluge.

The dried bricks were sheltered under a makeshift tent, but they were bound to get a bit damp. Given another week, they could quickly bake them with magic and store them separately... the timing was unfortunate.

During a prolonged rain, outdoor work had to be suspended. If their food stock dwindled, they'd have to risk the rain and go hunting, but for now, they had sufficient food.

They sat by the campfire under the tent, quietly listening to the patter of the rain while browsing the elemental science book for their second year.

Their cabin was far from cozy, with leaks being a major issue. It turned out that simple mud wasn't entirely waterproof. They needed to figure out how to resolve the problem with the floor and wall materials.

On rainy days like these, their focus turned to studying. Intermediate magic theory was of paramount importance.

The ability to cast intermediate magic was a significant benchmark that distinguished professional mages. If they could master a handful of spells by the end of their third year, they would be deemed quite successful as mages.

They needed to step up their efforts.

Only three days remained until the new school year. The Ophelis Hall occupation incident would occur on the last day of the vacation, looming ominously near.

The Ophelis Hall occupation was a milestone event.

It was a malicious act orchestrated by Lortel to strain the school's finances, setting the stage for the main event of the second act – the contest for the 'Sage's Scripture'.

It was this incident that cemented Lortel's role as the mastermind. From the viewpoint of the player empathizing with Lortel, it marked the greatest increase in emotional distance between them.

Lortel was set to form an independent faction within the academy, the 'Upper Echelon', crafting a power dynamic with Princess Penia's student council.

In my experience, maintaining a balance of power between the Upper Echelon and the student council was essential.

Princess Penia's idealism and inclusivity had a unifying force. Yet, high-minded ideals disconnected from reality gave rise to contradictions and inconsistencies in the academy's policies.

Conversely, Lortel's pragmatism and driving force were potent for leading a group effectively. But her stark and calculating value assessments risked turning members into dispassionate and cold individuals.

Ultimately, it came down to which side Taylee would align with. Whichever faction he chose would inevitably come out on top, so my best strategy was to observe the lay of the land and side with the expected winner.

If you'd label me an opportunist, I could only agree.

That was preferable to letting golden opportunities slip by because of an inability to accurately read the situation and act judiciously.

After all, I needed to make a living...

"Ugh, maybe I should head back to the dorms. I thought the rain would let up today..."

Despite it being just after lunchtime, the sky remained shrouded in clouds, giving off the impression of early evening.

Yenika wrung out her soaked skirt and moved towards the fireplace.

"You must have it rough, too. At least I have somewhere to return to, so this feels more like camping... but you have to endure here, even during the rainy days."

"You get used to it after a while."

Yenika, having a fondness for wandering the northern forest, would often visit the camp, cook by the fireplace, or sit under a tree engrossed in a book.

With the academy curriculum on hold for the holidays, she had ample time, and this seemed to be her chosen method of relaxation.

She didn't have to worry about others' scrutiny, and she could spend her day with the spirits she loved so dearly.

Of course, for me, this camp represented a harsh survival ground.

It might seem inconsiderate to treat someone else's battleground for survival as a casual drop-in spot... But considering the food and tools Yenika brought along, it appeared more beneficial for me.

"Come to think of it, I'll have to vacate Ophelis Hall soon..."

"It is about that time, indeed."

"Meaning, I'll have to discard quite a bit of stuff. Dex Hall is smaller than I anticipated."

Students typically moved dormitories about a week before and after the start of the semester.

With the rush of activities at the onset of the semester, most students prefer to move their belongings and clear their rooms about a week in advance.

I wasn't certain when Yenika planned to vacate her room... but her starting to sort through her belongings indicated that she would be staying in Ophelis Hall for a few more days.

"So, if you need anything, just let me know. You could use a lot of things, right, Ed?"

"I could?"

"Sure. Things like extra blankets, cushions, clocks, lanterns, and so on. Plus, there are plenty of miscellaneous necessities and consumables. It's a waste to just toss them, and honestly, it's a pain to do so. I can't offer any furniture since they're property of Ophelis Hall, but everything else is up for grabs."

Even though most furniture and necessities could be constructed if I had the materials, and making them would be beneficial for honing my skills... It wasn't bad to accept whatever I could. Not everything could be solved by crafting.

"That works for me."

"Great. I'll bring them when the school starts again."

Yenika warmed her hands by the soothing heat, chuckling gently.

"But Lucy... is she always like this?"

"...Sometimes."

Suddenly, Yenika shifted the conversation to Lucy as if it was the primary subject.

Glancing up towards the cabin, I noticed Lucy standing motionless on the roof.

The rain was falling steadily. The raindrops landing on her skin weren't cold, but they soaked her, resulting in discomfort.

Her neatly styled white hair, likely arranged by an Ophelis Hall maid, was saturated by the rain and had started to unravel on one side. Her pricey uniform was failing its primary function.

Lucy seemed unbothered by these inconveniences, just standing there, gazing skyward.

Her usual nonchalant and disheveled demeanor hadn't changed. Her clothes were still a mess, and her large witch's hat was askew. However, something about her seemed subtly off.

It was likely because she was contemplating that archmage illusion she encountered on a rainy day like this.

Lucy's extraordinary power that defied logic wasn't something she received without a cost.

Life was a series of evasions from the chains of destiny, with laziness serving as her excuse. She had avoided complex thoughts and lived her life blissfully ignorant of her predetermined fate.

When she finally woke up to reality, several years had already slipped away.

On a rainy day like this, even such a carefree girl might find herself introspecting.

"She seems lost in thought. How should I put it... Lucy always struck me as... free-spirited...? That was my impression."

"You can just say she seems oblivious. That's fine."

"Eeek! That's... rather harsh, isn't it?"

Well, it's the truth, so what can you do?

"She gets like that on rainy days sometimes. You don't need to worry too much about it. I usually don't pay it much mind."

"I see... You seem... pretty indifferent towards Lucy, don't you...!"

As if she'd made a major discovery, Yenika blurted out, making a mountain out of a molehill.

"Anyway, Yenika."

There was something I needed to verify before Yenika headed back to her dorm.

As I've said time and again, the Ophelis Hall takeover wasn't that massive of an event.

Although the scale of the incident was significant, there weren't many unpredictable factors.

The incident commenced when the Chief Maid, Ellis, triggered a large-scale protective spell stationed for emergencies on the rooftop of Ophelis Hall.

The magic array, personally etched by Vice Principal Rachel, was only accessible by the Chief Maid, the ultimate authority of Ophelis Hall.

To draw a parallel, the magic was akin to a fire shutter constructed of robust steel.

It was a sophisticated magic array that sealed all doors, windows, and other passageways of Ophelis Hall. Naturally, it wasn't easily breached.

Late in the night before the start of school, all the students were confined to their rooms, preparing themselves for the inauguration ceremony the following day.

Ironically, the protective space spell, originally devised for dire situations such as terror strikes or natural calamities, served as a barrier that kept the students of Ophelis Hall from leaving their rooms.

The maids, oblivious to the unfolding situation, were summoned to the staff meeting room under the guise of an urgent meeting but ended up being confined there.

As such, the corridors of Ophelis Hall fell into complete isolation.

Those wandering these halls were the students participating in the takeover, the maids aligning themselves with Ellis, and a handful of students fortunate enough to be outside their rooms.

Gloomy Clevius and Meddler Elvira were the only notable characters in the text.

Undoubtedly, among the students, there were individuals possessing formidable power, capable of demolishing walls or depleting all their mana to cast a space magic for escape.

However, their knowledge of the situation outside their rooms was imperfect. They couldn't discern if it was a temporary event or a major disaster, or whether it would be resolved swiftly.

Hence, it wasn't easy to make the audacious decision to break the walls or completely exhaust their mana before the start of school.

The takeover of Ophelis Hall was a scheme that capitalized on such... psychological voids. This complacency eventually resulted in the fall of Ophelis Hall.

"Huh? What's happening? Ed."

Yenika, who was about to return to the dormitory, halted when I beckoned, and I mulled over in silence. Yenika smiled innocently at my hesitation.

But I didn't have much on my plate.

I simply had to open the door at the opportune moment and inspect the condition of the doors on the ground floor while the less influential students took control of the fourth floor of Ophelis Hall.

It was likely that Taylee would have no other option but to infiltrate Ophelis Hall as Elvira, who left valuable herbs in her room, would want to go back.

When Taylee and Elvira storm in, my job would be to stall them, lose intentionally, and direct them to the second floor.

Then, I could transition into the second phase, apprehending Clevius, who would be quaking in fear and attempting to flee.

Honestly, it wasn't much. Well, there's no room for any unexpected complications.

Nevertheless, complacency was off-limits.

Didn't I learn that the hard way during the Glaskan suppression operation? Even the slightest miscalculation could severely distort reality.

Hence, I needed a contingency plan.

It would be prudent to have a backup power set in place to tackle any unforeseen situations.

Yenika was a crucial player whose presence or absence no longer swayed the main scenario. She fit her role perfectly.

And besides, it was only fair to heed a close friend's request. Honestly, considering everything, we had become quite close, hadn't we?

"I need a favor."

"Hmm? What is it?"

With a radiant smile that suggested 'ask away', Yenika responded. I mulled over for a moment.

How many students would be up and about late into the eve of the school's opening ceremony? Most would be resting in their rooms. The same would apply if Yenika hadn't left her room yet.

If one were to stay quietly inside the room, they'd be ensnared by the magic circle activated by the maid.

At the very least, if I intended to keep Yenika as a backup, I needed to convince her to wait outside Ophelis Hall.

However, it felt unjust to leave her outside in the gentle drizzle, and I also couldn't dispatch her too far from Ophelis Hall.

"Could you meet me at the pavilion in the rose garden in front of Ophelis Hall around 9 pm on the eve of the school's opening ceremony?"

".....Huh???"

I could elaborate on the details when the time came. It wasn't courteous to detain someone who was about to take leave for too long.

"There's something I need to discuss."

Upon hearing that, Yenika looked thoroughly taken aback, and then she began to swallow nervously. She darted quick glances around to check if anyone was observing, fidgeting with her skirt while averting my gaze.

"U-uh, okay."

With a somewhat strained voice, she agreed, then said..."Well then, I'm off! Bye!" and vanished into the woods as if driven away.

In her haste, she didn't even properly put on the hat of the robe she had brought along as a makeshift raincoat.

"..."

I, perched on a log, shut the book I was holding with a snap. Resting my chin on my hand, I absent-mindedly stared at the cabin. Lucy continued to gaze at the sky with a vacant look.

The rain persisted in a light drizzle. The rhythmic patter of rain against the makeshift tent had a soothing effect.

The forest had a unique aroma when it rained. The scent of damp grass was more intense and distinct than usual.

The rain would likely cease only on the morning of the opening ceremony. By then, I would finally be able to gaze at a clear sky after a long while.

After that, the rich aroma of ripe autumn would undoubtedly envelop this forest.

Let's wrap up this event swiftly and concentrate on honing my high-level production skills.

With that thought, I sat enjoying the sound of the rain, adding a few more logs to the fire.

The rather lengthy holiday was drawing to a close.

After all, they were privy to Lortel's plans, her objectives, and the outcomes. At this point, there was no need to interfere with Lortel's machinations.

CHAPTER 33

"So, the second semester starts tomorrow."

That was the thought that struck Ziggs Ebelstein, alone as he trained in his room. He was suddenly aware of the passage of time.

Staring out at the relentless rain, he found his energy lacking.

The persistent gloomy weather of the past few days had disrupted his daily routine: jogging was out of the question, and the conditions were less than ideal for outdoor magic training.

His goal to maximize his training over the vacation had hit a snag. He had hoped to hone several basics to keep pace with class progress, but he still felt woefully underprepared.

The A-class curriculum, led by Professor Glast, was proving quite tough for Ziggs, who struggled to grasp the material.

Even setting aside Lucy, who seemed to conquer any task with her overwhelming magic power, he thought he could stand to learn from Lortel's finesse with magic and her quick-thinking approach to problems.

While Ziggs likely outclassed her in practical combat ability, when it came to the skills and subtleties necessary for civilized life, he lagged behind Lortel.

"I need to keep a lid on my emotions too..."

With a deep sigh, Ziggs voiced his thoughts.

His companion, Elka, was genuinely upset with him for losing control and attacking Tote in a fit of rage. It was a rarity for Elka to express such anger towards Ziggs.

Her icy glare had pressured him into apologizing to Tote, but his impulsive nature persisted.

"Hmm?"

Out of the blue, he spotted a familiar figure in one corner of the rain-soaked garden. It was the eccentric who lived in a cabin in the northern woods, trekking through the rain towards Ophelis Hall with his robe on backwards.

- 'Wasn't he expelled? If he barges into Ophelis Hall, he'll just get thrown out by the maid... '

Even as he worried that the situation might spiral into unnecessary trouble, he figured he didn't need to fret over someone who didn't understand such a basic fact.

Deciding to return his focus to his training, Ziggs shifted away from the window.

* * *

When you open the door, you were greeted by the grand hall on the first floor of Ophelis Hall. Typically, the entrance was securely locked.

Whenever dormitory students came and went, the maid on duty at the entrance would quickly verify their identities before letting them in.

Without the red brooch, a unique token issued only to Ophelis Hall residents, identity confirmation was impossible. And since the maids recognized all 53 dormitory students, it was impossible to trick them.

"You're Ed, right? The Chief Maid passed along a message."

Normally, I would be stuck in the rain in front of a closed entrance, but today, the doors of Ophelis Hall were open.

'Bedding Laundry Supervisor, Kelly'.

A petite figure, immaculately dressed in the uniform of a low-ranking maid. Alongside her sister Shenny, she was one of the mini-bosses during the Ophelis Hall takeover event.

The devoted maids of Ophelis Hall would never engage in such a takeover event. But Shenny and Kelly were different. They had been persuaded by the Chief Maid, Ellis, and were now wrapped up in her scheme.

Brandishing her rapier, Shenny stepped to the front while Kelly, gifted with significant skill in basic magic, took command of the hallway. We encountered opposition on the third floor, but it was far from formidable.

If Kelly, their main offense, was suppressed, it was easier to advance than anticipated.

Naturally, this was a task suited for Taylee.

"If you'd arrived a few moments later, you'd have walked straight into a shift change."

It was, in fact, Kelly's turn to man the entrance. Acting on the orders she'd been given, she let me into Ophelis Hall.

"I'll be relieving the other maid and heading off to my own duties soon. Sella, a new recruit, will be taking over. You should be able to subdue her with minimal force. She's unarmed."

"Is she even qualified enough to guard the front door?"

"Does it take much to check IDs and permit entry? She's got a magic tool to report emergencies straight to the Chief Maid, but the Chief Maid won't be responding today."

I nodded in understanding.

I would lay low within the hall, and when the moment was right, I'd take out the maid on guard duty and open the front door. That would be the signal for the underclassmen to storm in and head upstairs.

By then, the Chief Maid, Ellis, would have activated the Ophelis Hall protective spell, sealing off each room. My job was to patrol the first floor and confirm the magic spell was functioning correctly.

Assuming all went well, I'd return to the hall on the first floor to await Taylee.

The ideal lineup for this operation included Taylee, Ayla, Elvira, and Clevius.

Clevius was scheduled to join them on the second floor, according to the plan, leaving me with the remaining three.

"What about the rest of the maids?"

I questioned Kelly as I surveyed the quiet hall.

"Outside of the essential staff, the majority are holed up in the conference room. The Chief Maid called them together, claiming there was an important matter to discuss."

My plan was to confine them to that room and block the door. It seemed like things were running smoothly with the higher-ups taken care of.

"The thing you asked for is ready, too."

Kelly gestured to a large jar near the entrance, filled to the brim with a viscous liquid.

"Ah, thank you."

"Should I just leave it in the corner?"

I gave a nod of approval and turned my attention to the hall.

For such a grand structure, the entrance was appropriately impressive. The main hall was immediately visible upon opening the door, its polished marble floors and towering ceiling giving the impression of still being outdoors.

A majestic chandelier hung from the center of the ceiling, smaller chandeliers dotting the area around it like stars twinkling in the night sky.

Standing in the center of the hall, I felt a sense of emptiness. Antique cabinets lined the walls, stone doors leading to the corridors imbued the space with a sense of history.

"The floors and walls are completely marble."

Without question, it was an upscale locale. Though Taylee had already experienced this place in the scenario, being there in person gave off an entirely different vibe.

In the corner of the room, I opened a cabinet and stashed away several items I'd brought along.

After gaining a sense of the hall's layout and understanding where everything was

located, I nodded to myself, mentally plotting out the likely unfolding events.

Even in the original narrative, the first-floor boss battle was more of a nuisance than a real threat. It simply ate up time.

The real goal was to facilitate Taylee's smooth progress toward the second-floor boss. Everything should fall into place from there.

The boss of the second floor was dubbed 'Gloomy Clevius'.

This was the scene where Clevius, having grown hysterical, busted through a wall, even though things hadn't spiraled out of control just yet.

After subduing a panicked Clevius, who insisted on making his escape, he would be incorporated into your team, and the ascent would continue. That was the planned sequence.

The task at hand was to stall until the distinctive noise of Clevius demolishing a wall could be heard. Then, they would effortlessly segue into the ensuing action.

I had to concede some truths. As I'd learned the hard way during the Act 1 boss battle, micromanaging the butterfly effect was almost futile... Attempting to control every variable in the world was pure arrogance.

Therefore, once the first-floor boss was defeated, my plan was to retreat to the Rose Garden and monitor the situation alongside Yenika, my emergency backup. I would be on standby, ready to respond to any unforeseen developments.

"It's also an opportunity to assess Taylee's abilities."

If his performance didn't match expectations, it would pose a serious issue. Especially when it came to Act 2's final boss, 'Researcher Glast', who was a notoriously challenging adversary.

His divine magic and curses made it feel as though you were being perpetually stabbed all over, utterly demoralizing you.

If your stats and mental fortitude weren't sufficiently trained, he was a formidable opponent.

I made sure all the prearranged items were safely tucked into the cabinet and then closed the door with a firm click.

* * *

Following that, things progressed smoothly. The events flowed naturally, like water coursing down a stream.

Tucked away behind the grand hall's cabinets, I waited as the duty at the entrance was handed over from the new maid to Kelly, shortly past eight.

After a brief pause, the uproarious shouts of students from outside filtered in, reverberating off the stone walls.

- 'We won't stand for this treatment anymore!'

- 'This is a place of education! Equality in grading is the least we deserve!'

- 'Hear our voices!'

The rallying cries of the underprivileged and average students echoed beyond the front gate. They assembled in front of the locked Ophelis Hall, chanting their slogans.

At the front of this crowd was the 'Spokesman of Lesser Privileged Students, Willian'

His short, sandy blonde hair, horn-rimmed glasses, and rain-soaked gray robe made him a conspicuous figure.

Ophelis Hall was a symbol of the elite students' privilege in Sylvanian society. Students had congregated in front of this monument to voice their grievances.

The original plan should've stopped right there. The gathered crowd was expressing their grievances, nothing more. They couldn't progress any further, not with the doors of Ophelis Hall shut tight.

"Uh, oh dear! What's going on here! I must inform the Chief Maid...!"

Caught off guard by the sudden chaos, a new maid started rummaging for the magical device she was given.

Sensing an opportunity amidst her confusion, I slipped back out of the hall, approached her from behind, and swiftly covered her eyes with a scarf.

"Wa, what! What's happening! Who's there!"

I hoisted the blindfolded maid onto my shoulder, binding her wrists to prevent her from removing the scarf. Then, using one hand, I unlocked the front door and kicked it wide open.

The grand door of Ophelis Hall swung open with an echoing creak.

- '..... Whaaaat?!'

- 'What, what's happening!'

Taken aback, the crowd of students stood dumbfounded for a moment, - 'The door to Ophelis Hall is open! Let's get inside!'

Spurred by Willian's shout, the crowd surged into the corridors of Ophelis Hall.

- 'The administration office is on the 4th floor! Occupy the 4th floor and deliver our manifesto!'

- 'Make sure our voices are heard!'

- 'Demand basic respect! We're not asking for the world, just fundamental respect!'

- 'Let's move! Show them what we're made of!'

I watched the tide of students while restraining the maid.

"You're... Ed Rosetail?"

Willian, the third-year representative leading the charge, recognized me. So, the third-year students were familiar with my name.

"So, you were the one Lortel picked up...!"

"Correct. I'm tasked with securing and patrolling the first floor."

"But why would you..."

I began reciting the prepared dialogue.

"I wholeheartedly support the cause you've been advocating, Senior Willian. Of course, living in Ophelis Hall was comfortable... But it wasn't until I was evicted that I fully grasped the extent of my privilege."

"Ed... Rosetail.....!"

"It finally hit me! Everything you've been saying, Senior Willian, it's all true...! But as someone who enjoyed that privilege until recently, my words won't carry weight unless I back them up with action!"

Willian seemed to shake, profoundly touched by my words. Ed Rosetail, who once enjoyed a life of luxury, had been rudely ousted from his comfort zone. The more such a person acknowledges their privilege, the deeper they comprehend it.

"You're right! You've... you've significantly advanced our rightful demand for justice! I had you all wrong, based on rumors...!"

"No, Senior Willian, I was the one in the wrong. I was inspired by your words and did what I had to do! All credit goes to you, Senior Willian!"

I urged Willian forward.

"Quickly, Senior Willian! You need to seize the administration office on the fourth floor and issue a declaration!"

"R-Right! I'm relying on you!"

Willian was the one who would bear the brunt of the responsibility for this event.

The individual who stirred up the students and allowed school rules to be broken was regarded as the primary offender and faced stringent disciplinary actions.

If the school decided to punish all the students involved, it would hinder its operation. As such, Willian would be used as a scapegoat to take the fall.

The students who simply participated in Willian's takeover would merely be seen as

having fallen prey to instigation and temptation.

Their offenses weren't as direct or severe as Willian's, so their disciplinary measures would be lighter.

It's not pleasant to face disciplinary actions, but given the need to maintain operational stability and a fine of 20 gold coins, it's a manageable risk.

Therefore, the key was to claim, "I was influenced by Willian's words and actions! I was following Willian's lead!". My aim was to blur any potential responsibilities that might fall onto me.

In all honesty, Willian probably didn't even consider destroying Ophelis Hall.

He likely just wanted to take control, make a formal declaration, and peacefully resolve the issue... but things don't always proceed as expected.

Well... I'm sorry... but... since you're already in line for severe disciplinary actions... perhaps carrying me along wouldn't make a difference...?

"Move fast, Senior Willian!"

"Right, and remember, Ed! You're the best junior...!"

I apologize!!!

Don't give up...! Willian...!

The soft luminescence of magical circles permeated the dark corridors. The protective circles inscribed at the entrance of each room were performing their duties flawlessly.

- 'What's happening outside? Can I just stay put in the room?'

- 'Is anyone there? I can't open the door? Should I... can I break it? It looks costly... '

- 'I saw a horde of students storming in through the window, what on earth is happening!'

- 'W-Wait, it will fix itself, right? It's not a big issue, right?'

As I moved along the hallway, I could hear the bewildered voices of students inside their rooms.

The first floor housed primarily third-year students. I meticulously inspected each room to ensure that no magical circles were overlooked.

If all went as planned, there shouldn't be any missed circles. Still, I wanted to verify it with my own eyes.

After spending around 15 minutes on this task, I returned to the first-floor hallway to witness a chaotic scene.

Rain was streaming through the wide-open front door. The new maid who had been stationed at the door was missing.

She likely had gone to report the situation to her superiors, but unfortunately, the superiors worth informing were all trapped in the fourth-floor conference room.

The marble floor, typically kept pristine, was now marred by students tracking in mud from their shoes, and several decorative cabinets and display stands had been knocked over.

"Well, this is more spectacular than I anticipated."

A girl sauntered in through the pouring rain, shaking water off her damp clothes.

"As usual, Senior Ed Rosetail, you never disappoint."

Shaking off her soaked robe, she flashed a broad grin. Lowering her hat, her pale skin appeared even more prominent.

"Ugh, even my socks are drenched. I despise rainy days."

"So, you've been observing from outside, Lortel."

"I had to, so I could comprehend the unfolding events. I needed to ensure the students were assembling appropriately. I hadn't foreseen the rain would be so torrential. I'm drenched to the bone."

Lortel, with a cunning grin, removed her robe and shook it dry. Her usual attire, a

pristine white dress, was thoroughly soaked, leaving no room for debate.

With one hand, she held up her tousled auburn hair to dry it, while with the other, she folded up her robe, now rid of the rainwater.

"As soon as the school staff intervenes, this situation will be promptly curtailed, so we need to expedite our plans."

"Indeed, you're doing an excellent job."

Beaming cheerfully, Lortel neatly bundled up her clothes and headed towards the hall. Presumably, she intended to climb up to the fifth floor to confer with Ellis on the next steps.

Likely, the strategy involved instigating a magical disturbance in Ophelis Hall, passing the control of the magic circle to Willian, the representative of the underclass students, and escalating the situation.

In this scenario, 'Representative Willian', safeguarded by the multitude of defensive magic spread throughout Ophelis Hall, would become the master of the fourth floor.

The plan was to swiftly subdue Willian, who would be too overwhelmed by the incessantly chaotic magic circle to focus.

"Senior Ed, may I ask you something completely unrelated?"

As I was ruminating, Lortel, who was en route to the hall, paused to question me. Her subsequent query was quite unforeseen.

"Have you ever taken a life?"

Lortel's voice remained lively as she spun around, yet her demeanor was as grave as the current weather.

Upon seeing my furrowed brows, Lortel responded with a hearty laugh and turned back to face me. Her wet auburn hair collected together, dripping down her shoulder.

"No."

"Me neither. Ahahaha."

Then Lortel confessed, as if admitting a sin.

"However... I've committed deeds that are akin to that."

It was no exaggeration to state that Lortel's past wasn't without blemishes.

The numerous clandestine operations, coercion, and manipulations she had orchestrated at the Elte Merchant Guild must have invariably led someone to disaster.

Though not as harsh as homicide, in terms of ruining a person's life, it could be considered similar.

This was a fact that Lortel, more than anyone else, fully comprehended.

"I had to survive, you know."

Survival in a harsh reality meant that it was inevitable to hurt others. Any pang of conscience would fade after the first or second time.

Suddenly, after being anointed with the high honor of 'tycoon', she found herself trampling over countless individuals along the way.

The world is rife with people who'd willingly pierce their own hearts if given a shot. It's only upon reaching this juncture that she begun to question the path she had taken.

In her struggle for survival, she'd tread on others' lives and struck preemptively.

She's justified her actions by claiming that her circumstances left her no alternative, but in truth, it was nothing more than a convenient excuse.

"Senior Ed. What's your take on such a person?"

Even when one comes to this realization, the stains already ingrained within don't simply vanish.

Any benevolent actions now would merely be perceived as hypocrisy, and she can't muster the courage to renounce the wealth she's amassed over her lifetime.

There's no turning back.

She's privy to too many sordid secrets of various merchants, nobles, and those in power to abandon the path of commerce. The moment the name Lortel loses its value, it becomes an inescapable reality.

Ultimately, like a runaway train, she had no choice but to barrel towards the final station. She's journeyed too far to feign hypocrisy now.

As a merchant, a villain, a mastermind, she finds herself being gradually consumed by the very swamp she first dared to tread, as her entire being succumbs to the darkness.

Who can she turn to for help? This calamity is of her own making. She, more than anyone else, knows that she has no right to sympathy.

That's why she seeks out those akin to her, as if in pursuit of salvation.

"Do you feel sympathy for such a person, senior?"

For she knows all too well that she can't expect approval or pity when she's mired deep in the muck.

Loneliness is a sensation that arises, regardless of one's moral compass.

The only way to escape this solitude is to find someone who is wallowing in the same mud as her. Only by finding someone who'd willingly sink to the bottom of this swamp with her can she glimpse a sliver of redemption.

"No."

Needless to say, I am not that person.

"You must bear the consequences of your actions, Lortel."

At these words, Lortel remained stoic for a moment, before managing a smile.

"You're absolutely right, senior."

Lortel Keherun is a girl who's devoted her life to logic and rationality.

I know this all too well. Even when all the narratives of 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' reach their culmination, this girl never lost her rationality nor demonstrates an unhealthy fixation on anything.

"I've been rambling. My apologies. Haha."

Swiftly reclaiming her playful grin, Lortel promptly dispelled her introspective demeanor.

"I suppose it's time to do what needs to be done. Time is of the essence."

With these words, Lortel ascended the staircase and vanished from sight.

I nodded, reaching for a chair strewn about randomly and settled into it.

From here on, my only task was to sit tight and wait for Taylee to show up.

At this point in Act 2, I had a firm grasp of Taylee, Ayla, and Elvira's stats, their skills, and their combat strategies.

They wouldn't be able to overrun me solely with the sheer number disparity and stats. After all, my primary goal was to buy time, not to completely dominate them, so it was hardly a concern.

If I held out long enough and then faced defeat, Taylee would be compelled to dash up to the second floor.

Nevertheless, in the heat of battle, there might be a few blows and bruises.

Well... it was a necessary sacrifice...

* * *

"Why is there a carriage at this hour...?"

Tucked away in a corner of the rose garden, some distance from Ophelis Hall, Yenika found herself watching the road.

A grand carriage rolled past the rose garden. It was the most lavish she had ever seen, with the striking image of a golden crown emblazoned on its side. Perhaps it

belonged to a person of significant importance.

-'An unexpected issue has cropped up, so I may be running a bit late. I'll be there as soon as I can. Apologies.'

She carefully folded the note left by Ed and tucked it into her pocket, her gaze lingering on the rain cascading amidst the resplendent roses.

This was for the best. She had some time to gather her thoughts.

"Did he plan something special...?"

The gazebo in the rose garden was a sight she was accustomed to. It always caught her eye as she made her way towards the faculty building, after departing from the main gate of Ophelis Hall.

It was quite late, rendering the entirety of Ophelis Hall invisible, but she could still make out its vague silhouette through the downpour.

Something peculiar seemed to be afoot.

Numerous students appeared to be flocking towards Ophelis Hall, and just moments ago, an enormous carriage had vanished in its direction.

Yenika was curious but refrained from moving, fearing she might miss Ed.

Over the past three days, she had been fraught with uncertainty, racking her brain over what Ed might wish to discuss.

Could it be that? Or was she overreacting? Was there a plausible reason to summon her here? She had worried her friends with her incessant musings throughout the day.

Despite the gnawing guilt, she continued to hang onto every word of news regarding Ed coming from Merilda.

More individuals than she had initially thought were aware of the camp where Ed resided. As per Merilda, not only Lucy but also Princess Penia, Bell Meiya, Ziggs, and even Lortel had witnessed the spectacle of Ed's camp.

Given that Merilda wasn't monitoring round the clock, there might be others who had come and gone.

It was a heart-wrenching revelation for Yenika that most of them were female students... but she wasn't in any position to make a fuss about it.

So, from what standpoint could one intervene? As she mulled over this, she could feel the blood rushing to her head again.

"Did I... did I go overboard? Ah, does this look right on me?"

She had adorned the rare orange persimmon flower hairpin, a precious gift from home. She had brushed her hair an extra time, making certain her clothes were impeccably smooth.

On reflection, the cosmos pin she used to sport at festivals might have been more appealing. It seemed to clash with her outfit, and being nightfall, it wasn't particularly noticeable. Perhaps a more vibrant color would have been better.

"Sh, should I switch it out now...?"

With the prospect of crossing paths with Ed, she had been sitting motionless amidst the throng of students and the procession of grand carriages. It seemed absurd to return to her room now just because of a hairpin.

However, Yenika, catching sight of her reflection in a handheld mirror, seriously contemplated it.

"If I, if I dash and return, it should be fine."

Having decided, it was best to not delay and act swiftly.

Swallowing her apprehension, Yenika promptly pulled up her robe's hood and stepped back into the rain.

The concern that the robe's hem would ruin her meticulously arranged hair gnawed at her, but despite that, Yenika sprinted.

A bit of hair dishevelment could be quickly remedied in her room.

"Was it truly wise to enter Ophelis Hall?"

"Do you have any idea of the value of the herbs I left in the room?! Taylee!"

"Perhaps we should wait for the school staff to intervene..."

The rain persisted unabated. Taylee, Ayla, and Elvira were engaged in a heated discussion in front of the main gate of Ophelis Hall.

"If we don't harvest the herbs promptly and cast preservation magic, their properties will alter! That subtle distinction influences the outcomes of the experiments! You understand the gravity of it, Taylee?"

With cheeks puffing, Elvira admonished Taylee.

Elvira, who had been conducting secretive chemical experiments in a lab she had set up on the cliffside shore, had no involvement in the Ophelis Hall incident.

However, her anxiety about the herbs left in her room eventually led her to round up whoever she could find, asking for their help to gain access to Ophelis Hall.

Taylee and Ayla were her hapless recruits.

"The three of us can overpower them all! We only need to take down that ring-leader, Willian!"

With that proclamation, Elvira marched toward the main entrance of Ophelis Hall.

"Ayla... Try to dissuade her...! She's attempting to infiltrate Ophelis Hall on her own!"

"Ca, can't we just feign ignorance? Elvira is the head of the alchemy department, she can fend for herself."

"I'm not worried about Elvira, I'm worried about those students! When Elvira loses her composure, she indiscriminately sprays whatever potions she has at hand!"

At those words, Ayla gulped. If an unrestrained Elvira initiated a conflict, she could possibly lob an array of explosive potions at those rebellious students.

Taylee had a point. The real threats weren't the underperforming students, but Elvira.

Both Taylee and Ayla promptly followed Elvira toward the main gate of Ophelis Hall.

"Elvira! Wait! I said wait!"

"Quit complaining and follow me! We have to reach my room on the fourth floor!"

"So... we just need to get to your room? We don't have to do anything else?"

"Correct. As long as my herbs are safe."

Upon hearing this, Taylee sighed and rubbed his forehead.

"Fine. Let's just head to your room, Elvira."

"If anyone obstructs us, we need to push past them, understood? Taylee."

"We should aim not to harm anyone, Elvira."

With that, Taylee shot a glance at Ayla. His companion, Ayla, let out a deep sigh and joined them.

They soon arrived at Ophelis Hall, where Elvira briskly kicked the main door open. With a resounding crash, the door swung open, revealing the vast main hall on the first floor.

At the heart of the hall, a man sat quietly on a sizable wooden chair. They all recognized him.

In the first floor of Ophelis Hall, filled with the rhythmic patter of rain, the man lifted his head to gaze at the trio.

The peculiar boss of the first floor in Act 2, Chapter 3, The Siege of Ophelis Hall.

The fallen noble swept up in the aftermath, Ed Rosetail.

Just as he had during Tarkan's capture, he sat there, arms crossed and fists clenched, anticipating their arrival.

CHAPTER 34

Rain continued to pour down relentlessly.

Echoing through the vast main hall of Ophelis Hall were the insistent taps of the raindrops.

As Taylee and his party stepped inside, the main gate was shut, muting the invasive drumming of the rainstorm from inside the hall and replacing it with the rhythmic patter against the exterior walls.

A bolt of lightning momentarily lit up the entire hall with a chilly flash. Seated in the center, Ed Rosetail greeted Taylee's group with an unreadable expression.

"Ed... Rosetail..."

It was the name of the person who was disowned by the Rosetail clan, but to Taylee, it remained a name that churned his stomach.

"Why are you... in Ophelis Hall?"

Taylee's voice turned icy. The incident from nearly half a year ago had died down, but Ed Rosetail remained someone he couldn't bring himself to be near.

Ayla and Elvira were well aware of this.

"..."

Elvira quickly took in the scene before her.

The marble floor of Ophelis Hall, usually immaculate, was marred by muddy footprints, and the furniture was haphazardly strewn about.

Signs of a group of students making their way through, and one man sitting quietly in the chaos they left behind.

"Haha. This isn't your typical day, is it? Exciting. I didn't see this coming."

Elvira laughed. She didn't fully grasp the situation, but she knew one thing - that things were about to get interesting.

"I'm sorry, but..."

Finally, Ed, who had been silently sitting in the center of the hall, spoke.

"You can't proceed from here."

If asked why, he didn't seem to have a reason, or at least not one he intended to share. There was no need for words. The sight of Ed seated, mouth tightly shut and expression blank, was explanation enough.

In that case, Elvira's response was predictable.

"Haha, interesting! If I say I'm going to pass, can you stop me?"

Elvira Enistun was the star pupil of the Alchemy Department during her first year at Sylvanian Academy.

In reality, Alchemy Department students aren't known as direct combatants.

Their focus lies more on dissecting the structure of magic, studying the properties and origins of substances, and analyzing and researching the effects of various herbs and magic potions.

However, if asked whether an alchemy student's strength can be dismissed in a combat situation, the only logical response would be a shake of the head.

Armed with a variety of magic potions, equipped with numerous magical tools, and students of the Alchemy Department who can assess the situation of the entire battlefield...

They're the wildcard factors that can turn the tide in combat situations.

Witnessing the Alchemy Department students brimming with uncontrollable mischief, one can't help but marvel at the professors handling them. They're more unpredictable than the Magic Department students, infamous for their quirks.

Elvira Enistun was a standout among these oddballs, renowned as a top eccentric in

the Alchemy Department.

While not specialized in direct close combat or magical skills, she was in no way inferior to a second-year student only capable of basic magic.

However, he certainly wasn't so weak as to be bested by a second-year student proficient in only basic magic.

Elvira chortled mockingly.

"If you value your hide, I suggest you step aside."

Taylee was fully at odds with Ed already. Simply the fact that Ed, who had no reason to be involved in this, was sitting here blocking their path, was enough for him to sense that something was awry.

The idea that things would end with a peaceful protest by the lower-ranking students didn't seem likely. Such a premonition started to trouble the group.

Yet, the situation wasn't overwhelming.

Ziggs had once commented that Ed's mastery of basic magic was rather commendable, but that couldn't bridge the absolute gap in firepower and numbers.

It was three against one.

A swordsman beginning to make his mark, a magician versed in at least first-year level magic, and an alchemist with the top skills in their school year.

Despite his daunting posture in the center of the hall, it didn't mean he could offset the overwhelming difference in force.

Taylee unsheathed his sword.

"What are your intentions, Ed Rosetail. Tell us what's happening on this floor, now."

Ed remained silent. He simply sat, observing the group.

"Then... we'll have to coerce you to talk, by force if necessary!"

Those words marked the commencement of battle.

Taylee dug his foot into the ground, and Ayla assumed a firm stance, her mana starting to coalesce. Just as Elvira was reaching into her alchemy bag filled with various potions... Ed kicked his chair aside and rose to his feet.

-Bang!

The chair skidded across the floor, and mana began pooling in Ed's hands. Elvira could easily discern the flow and pattern of that mana. It was the basic wind magic 'Wind Blade'. Who was his intended target?

Taylee, Ayla, Elvira.

Among the trio, the one a magician like Ed would be most wary of was Taylee.

In a magician's battle, the key was to maintain an ample distance. Only if an environment where mana can be constantly gathered and magic can be cast is maintained, can victory be secured.

The importance of distance in a duel between magicians might be downplayed, but when a warrior skilled in close combat is involved, that's precisely the factor that becomes pivotal.

The moment a magician concedes distance to a swordsman, their chances of triumph evaporate. Therefore, the first target Ed would aim to subdue would be Taylee McLore, who was closing in.

If Elvira and Ayla's supporting fire struck Ed in the interim... the victory for the expedition party would be all too easy.

-'Whoosh!'

However, the Wind Blade wasn't aimed at the group... but at the ceiling.

A blind spot in the hall. Precisely at the ceiling.

With a single stroke, the chain holding up the large chandelier in the main hall was severed. The metal squealed in protest, and soon after, the imposing chandelier plummeted into the center of the main hall.

-Bang!!'

-'Thud.'

Naturally, Taylee was more than ready to react.

His forward surge was quickly reversed by pushing forcefully off the ground. Mere moments later, the grand chandelier drove itself into the spot Taylee had initially aimed for, the dust cloud obscuring the hall's visibility.

"Aaagh!"

"Ayla! Are you okay?!"

"I'm okay, Taylee! Just got knocked over from the shock!"

When the deafening noise finally subsided, hushed whispers echoed around Ophelis Hall. The students trapped within the room started to quake with unease. Thoughts of breaking free from this opulent building became a serious consideration.

The first to surrender to this fear was Clevius, who still hadn't emerged from the room.

"Elvira! What about you?!"

"I'm fine...!"

-'Whoosh'

Elvira's mandarin-hued hair, tied high on her head, fluttered. A few strands were snipped off by the wind blade, floating eerily in mid-air.

The blade's target was not Elvira's hair, but the alchemy bag she was carrying. The leather tore open, spilling an assortment of magical potions.

-Clang! Bang!

Slamming the massive chandelier unhesitatingly onto the floor was an unexpected move.

He had thought a few rounds of skirmishes would easily subdue his adversarie.

The antique interiors of Ophelis Hall exuded an atmosphere that should never be damaged. Such a radical act of destroying a seemingly expensive chandelier without hesitation. How would he take responsibility?

To Elvira, Ed's actions seemed reckless, but in Ed Rosetail's eyes, it wasn't all that audacious.

If everything went according to plan, Ophelis Hall would be half-ruined, and no one would bat an eyelid over some damage to the main hall.

With this knowledge, even the magnificent chandelier seemed nothing more than a tactical instrument to introduce variables into the battle. Elvira found it odd to see Ed going to such lengths to block their entrance.

-'Anyway, he means business, huh? Something's definitely going on upstairs.'

Elvira's attention returned to the potions scattered on the floor.

A variety of low-grade potions had tumbled out, but not a single one was broken. These were potion containers reinforced by Elvira herself, maintaining their high durability until she chose to lift the fortification.

As Elvira moved toward them

Whoosh!

A column of fire, originating from Ed, cleaved the distance between Elvira and the potions.

This fiery barrier was the result of the basic magic, 'Ignition'. But the scale and heat of it were exceptional. It was evidence of relentlessly refining the same Ignition magic to its limits.

Ed's Ignition-created firewall split the main hall, much like slicing a cake into several pieces.

Walls of fire, two, three, four layers deep, orbited around the central chandelier, segregating the main hall into isolated sections, as if individual rooms.

'This... isn't good.'

The battlefield had naturally taken form, fluid as water.

Ed Rosetail's judgment was swift and unerring.

Elvira was the core strength of the punitive force. However, the most dangerous disadvantage of Alchemy students was their lack of direct combat capability unless they leaned on magical tools or potions.

Thus, the critical task was to render Elvira's potions and magical tools useless.

Even a bag brimming with alchemical supplies, by merely scattering its contents and raising walls of fire to block access, could significantly reduce Elvira's potency.

Typically, Alchemy students carried emergency magical tools designed as rings or necklaces, but Elvira, overly confident in her abilities, didn't bother with such precautions, finding them cumbersome.

Questioning whether he had perceived that far in advance, she shook her head, brushing the thought aside.

Regardless, maintaining an Ignition spell of such a large scale would be challenging with Ed's average mana pool. It appeared he was aiming for something specific.

In the startling spectacle of the chandelier's downfall, there was a fleeting moment when rational thought was lost. She, during that moment of indecisiveness, allowed an attack on her bag. That was a serious misstep.

-'Luckily, I still have something left...!'

Elvira extracted a petite glass artifact from her bosom. It was a rabbit-shaped magical tool. She had an additional magic tool set aside for further investigation. She was fortunate.

By shattering it on the ground, a summoned magic created by Elvira was manifested.

-'Grrrr'

It was a rabbit. However, its fearsome teeth and gleaming eyes weren't those of a

herbivore. Its size was comparable to a tiger.

Elvira rapidly pooled mana, bestowing fire resistance on the summoned rabbit's skin, enabling it to pass through the wall of fire.

Because it was a hastily constructed magic circle, it would undoubtedly affect the summoned creature's body negatively... But as a disposable summon, it wasn't a concern.

Blood sprayed from the rabbit's back, it cried out in agony, but Elvira ruthlessly imbued it with fire resistance.

-Roar!

Another Wind Blade.

Assuming that Elvira was now out of the fight, this time it was aimed at Ayla.

"Kyaaah!"

-Crash!

Taylee's 'Elemental Slash' shattered the Wind Blade.

"Pull yourself together, Ayla!"

The hall was brimming with walls of fire. The hulking body of the chandelier and the dust that rose from the crash.

Unable to accurately track Ed's figure, weaving in and out of the segmented fiery barriers.

"Damn it...!"

The wall of fire, the product of ignition magic, shifted according to the user's command. There was no billowing smoke, no unnecessary expansion, but the heat... the heat was palpable.

Taylee was destined for the life of a sword saint. If he wished, he could cut through fire or wind, but his growth was still too limited to control a large area all at once.

He could potentially push through the wall of fire, but he was unsure if he could overpower an opponent who kept changing positions.

Adding to his frustration, Ed was openly targeting Ayla.

Ayla Tris, despite her extensive knowledge of magic, was not particularly strong in actual combat. She was a mere freshman, only just starting to learn basic magic.

She couldn't formulate a defensive magic circle capable of repelling Ed's proficient basic magic.

In the end, unless Taylee assisted her, she would soon be overwhelmed.

He hadn't anticipated things would spiral out of control to this extent. He regretted his decision to bring Ayla along because of this.

If he dared to plunge into the fire to subdue Ed, Ayla would be left utterly defenseless.

"Taylee! I'll head outside the hall...! Just cover me until then...!"

Ayla was painfully aware that she was a hindrance at this point. Aware of the problems she was causing, she thought of an immediate solution instead of succumbing to despair.

Given the circumstances, it was most advisable for Ayla to retreat to a safe location.

-'Kyaahhhhhh!'

A colossal rabbit, fully endowed with fire resistance, charged towards the chandelier. It barely taxed her mana, and it wasn't a very refined summon, so she didn't have high expectations.

However, it would momentarily limit Ed's movements and reveal his location.

"Taylee! If you can close the gap, can you subdue him?!"

From the spaces between the flames, Elvira yelled. She had lost most of her magical tools and potions at this point, but if she could create a single opportunity, they could suppress Ed.

"It's not about whether I can or can't, I have to!"

"Good, I like your spirit!"

Elvira flashed a grin, and with her still slightly damp robe wrapped around her body, she leapt into the wall of flames.

"Elvira!"

Taylee cried out in surprise, but Elvira forced her way through the thick wall of fire and rolled on the other side. She quickly discarded her burning robe.

A lock of her auburn hair was aflame, but after quickly shaking it out, only a charred lock remained. Her right forearm seemed a bit burned, but she chose to ignore it for now.

Magic potions were strewn across the floor. Despite the brief separation, she had missed them.

Ed Rosetail's tactical advantage hinged on controlling space and obscuring visibility.

If she tried to suppress him all at once with magic potions that required tossing, or magical tools that required precise aiming, she would only waste time.

Therefore, she had no choice but to leverage the difference in combat power.

'He seems to be well-prepared, but we do have a warrior skilled in close combat...!'

She selected a valuable magic potion she'd held in high esteem and hurled it towards the chandelier at the center of the hall.

-Crash!

-Whoa!

A potent aura of magic infiltrated through the spaces between her comrades. The potion, brewed from night butterfly flowers and galb mushrooms, had been imbued with the 'Release' spell. Its effect was so well-known that everyone was familiar with it.

Suppression of mana emission. Temporary control over byproducts created through mana. In essence, it was a potion that could pose a significant threat to any mage.

Its principle involved distorting the flow of mana into irregular patterns, rendering it difficult to control, hence it was ineffective against middle-tier mages or above who were adept at mana sensing. Furthermore, its effect was short-lived, only lasting a few minutes at most, rendering it almost useless unless in a fleeting confrontation.

However, the opposition was merely employing basic magic, and a brief confrontation was precisely what they needed. Taylee, clearly understanding this, also took an offensive stance.

The walls of fire engulfing the hall began to recede.

Opposite the chandelier, amidst the rising dust and ashes, stood a man drenched in blood.

He held a hunting dagger in one hand, and in the other, he supported a rabbit carcass as big as himself.

The man, soaked in rabbit's blood, kicked the carcass aside. The rabbit, rolling on the floor, quickly turned into ashes and disappeared. It had fulfilled its purpose, affording them sufficient time.

The outcome was acceptable considering the effort invested in its creation.

There was a scratch on the man's right shoulder, a parting gift from the rabbit's teeth, and his blood-soaked uniform was utterly disheveled.

Yet, he stood unmoving, observing opponents with an unchanged expression and not the slightest hint of movement. His eyes exuded a chilling aura.

"Ed Rosetail!"

Taylee shouted, charging forward, while Elvira examined the labels on each of the assorted potion bottles.

Since the Night Butterfly Flower potion was deployed, magic use in this hall would be disrupted for a while. This was a significant setback for Ayla and Ed, who were mages. Ayla was relatively weak, so it was a beneficial trade-off.

For a brief window, only Taylee, adept in swordsmanship, and Elvira, proficient with magical tools and potions, possessed any substantial power.

It was the perfect moment to strike a debilitating blow to Ed Rosetail.

-Bang!

But, Ed Rosetail had no plans of blocking the charging Taylee, he instead knocked over a sideboard next to him.

The tray that had been on top toppled over, and the thick liquid it held spread out across the entire hall. It was something he had instructed Kelly to prepare in advance...

"This scent... It's oil! Taylee!"

-Clang!

Ed toppled a candlestick in the corner of the hall. The oil ignited, and flames sprang up once again. A fresh source of light overtook the dark hall, and the burgeoning flames resumed control of the space.

The flame wasn't the product of 'Ignition' magic. It was a genuine fire, fueled by oil.

Not just the wooden part of the chandelier that had been suspended above, but the decorative cabinets arranged around the perimeter also started to ignite.

"Have you lost your mind?! This is the Ophelis Hall!"

Elvira cried out.

Unlike the fire column produced by Ignition magic, the raging flames were a natural calamity that consumed everything in its path indiscriminately.

Should the fire spread to the corridors, casualties were likely.

With that thought in mind, she surveyed her surroundings, but a shiver ran down Elvira's spine.

Her inspection in the ensuing chaos had not been thorough.

However, the number of decorative cabinets that had cluttered the hall was notably less. Most of the highly combustible furniture and valuables had been preemptively removed, reducing their quantity.

The smoke that kept clouding her vision was being expelled through the skylights of the emergency stairway, all of which were open.

As if orchestrated, the floor and walls of the main hall, extending to the front door and the doors leading to the corridors, were all constructed of antique stone.

Securely shut, these ensured a smooth exit for the smoke, and if the scent was adequately blocked, a fire of this size would go unnoticed in the corridor. It was just a few cabinets burning in the expansive hall.

Precautions had been taken in advance to prevent the fire from extending further into the hall.

What did that imply?

'Everything was arranged up to this point...!'

Elvira gritted her teeth and seized the potion bottles. The flames spread, and the hall was illuminated with a bright red light. In the midst, a blond fallen noble could intermittently be seen.

If there was a plan to start a fire, it should have been initiated this way from the outset.

If the fire was real and not the Ignition magic controllable by mana, Elvira wouldn't have used the Night Butterfly Flower potion.

If there's a reason to create this situation...

"Regardless, you're unable to use magic now!"

Taylee bellowed again from within the rampaging flames.

The largest unpredictability restricting Taylee's movement had been Ayla's presence. If the strategy of targeting Ayla from a safe distance was gone, there were no more means to intimidate the approaching Taylee.

The heat of the incendiary flames was severe, but Taylee, born a Swordsman, effortlessly cleaved through that flame.

Elvira felt a tangible sense of impending danger creeping up her back.

The adversary was merely an ordinary second-year Magic Department student, while they had a close combat warrior capable of using Sword Saint form. The power discrepancy was so ridiculous it wasn't worth stressing.

But the counteraction was too seamless.

It was as though the adversary had seen through all their tactics. Operating as if they had deciphered all their moves and responses.

First neutralizing Elvira's magic tool, making Taylee hesitant to close the distance, and relentlessly targeting the weak spot named Ayla. Their strategy was flawless, and there was no wastage in their actions.

Elvira felt alarmingly vulnerable, as if their full strength, viable tactics, psychological vulnerabilities, even the potions within her bag were all on full display...

It was akin to standing exposed before a scrutinizing gaze, and Elvira's unease intensified.

If their magical power's flow was impeded, magicians would typically flounder until they fell.

Yet, the battle approach of a foe who bridged the power gap through tactical control and exploitation of weaknesses was... more tactician than magician.

In such a case, the current situation was atypical.

If magic couldn't be utilized, the fire confronting Taylee was nothing more than a minor obstacle.

A single preparatory stance and timed attack could sweep the fire aside and forge a path towards Ed. This would expose the enemy's movements, even enabling Elvira to provide support.

So, was the fleeting moment of opportunity the key? However, Ed Rosetail was in a

condition where he couldn't use magic...

"No, Taylee!"

Elvira cried out when her thoughts arrived at this point.

But Taylee, already set on closing the gap with Ed and planning to cut through the fire using 'Elemental Slash', was at full momentum and couldn't halt now.

This indicated that there were still 'trump cards' left...!

There remained a method to attack without magic... an unidentified long-range physical attack method!

The realization came too late. As Taylee's sword cut through the flames, unveiling Ed Rosetail, a bow was in Ed's possession. It must have been concealed in the toppled ornamental cabinet.

"You... are skilled with a bow...?"

The aim was already set.

Taylee wouldn't be deterred by a single arrow. Indeed, with his inherent reflexes, he might swat the arrow aside with a sweep of his sword. This wouldn't restrain his movement but rather provide an opportunity for a counterstrike.

So, to effectively immobilize Taylee, one should not target Taylee himself. The aim was his companion situated in the hall's corner.

"Ayla...!"

By the time he grasped the situation, it was too late. The bowstring's tension was let go, and the arrow unrelentingly pursued its target.

Among the fundamental teachings for first-year students was basic defensive magic.

This defensive magic lessened the 'physical force' affecting the user's body. Ayla knew its usage, but the effects of Elvira's moonflower potion were unbiased towards all magicians.

Defenseless, an arrow was launched towards Ayla. Taylee, with his superior reflexes, twisted his body and dashed towards Ayla, but he couldn't outpace an arrow already in flight.

-Whistle, thud!

However, the arrow never reached Ayla.

"Hoo..."

The sound of a glass bead shattering echoed.

Among Elvira's myriad magical tools, one was the 'Claw Hand'.

Given line of sight, the glass bead could generate a force capable of pulling even small objects from a distance.

The arrow headed towards Ayla's abdomen lost its momentum mid-flight and was ensnared by Elvira's hand.

"Finish him off, Taylee!"

As soon as she assured this, Taylee, his eyes ablaze with fury, turned his focus to Ed.

Elvira didn't understand what was happening. Despite his desires to obstruct Taylee and his team's intrusion, smashing the chandelier and igniting it was unquestionably insane.

It was nothing more than a peaceful protest by the lower-class students.

She was clueless about why they were barred from ascending to Ophelis Hall's upper floor, but... Firing an arrow at Ayla was a blatant overstep. It went beyond mere magical threats.

If such an arrow had struck the delicate Ayla, she could have lost her life. This was unequivocally a criminal act.

With these thoughts, Elvira tried to release her grip on the arrow. And the moment her gaze reached the arrow's tip... she held her breath once more.

The arrowhead was blunted.

The tip, expected to be sharp iron, was lopped off, and a swath of straw was tightly wrapped around it to offset the physical force as much as possible.

Undeniable proof of lethal force being removed.

Did he anticipate the difficulty in inspecting the arrowhead under such pressing circumstances?

Certainly, one could faint or sustain an injury from the arrow shaft's impact alone, but even then, the target was the lower abdomen and thigh, areas lacking vital points. If hit directly, it would probably have resulted in a mere bruise.

'Was he... exercising restraint?'

Upon this realization, Elvira yelled again.

"Taylee! Be on your guard! There's still..."

Just as she was about to say, 'There's still something else... '

-'Kwaang!'

Along with a sound akin to a second-floor wall breaking, a terrified shriek filled the air.

By the time she gathered her wits, Ed was already pinned to the wall by Taylee's sword strike.

"...What?"

While watching Ed, who was silently leaning against the wall nursing his shock, Elvira felt a surge of dissonance.

* * *

"Are you out of your mind?!"

The chandelier had plummeted. Most of the decorations were aflame. Ed, sitting

against the main hall's wall in the chaotic scene, brushing off his bloodstained clothes, remained... devoid of expression.

"There has to be a reason for going to these lengths!"

Taylee, shaking his fist, was bellowing.

Watching him, Elvira held her tongue.

Ed eventually conceded to Taylee's approach, and due to the inherent advantage a swordsman held over a magician, he was eventually overpowered.

He'd fought tooth and nail, but in the end, he'd come out on top.

Despite this, Elvira's relief was nowhere in sight.

Throughout the face-off, she had an overwhelming sensation of a knife twisting in her heart. Every aspect of the fight, every move and countermove, seemed orchestrated by Ed's hand.

If Ed Rosetail had genuinely wanted to suppress Taylee and his group, he could have brought down the chandelier without even making himself known.

If he were an overconfident magician, that might explain it. But the impression Elvira had of him during their battle was vastly different. Something was off.

Taylee and Ayla, lost in the immediacy of the situation, couldn't look beyond the obvious. But Elvira, contrary to her typically nonchalant demeanor, was on high alert.

'Something doesn't add up'.

While Taylee was hollering in the background, Elvira sought out her opponent's face.

He'd been beaten, but there was no frustration in his features. He merely leaned against the wall, waiting out Taylee's tirade.

Finally, as Taylee paused to catch his breath, he raised his head.

"Is it over?"

Despite everything, his voice remained even.

"If it is, get lost. Enough of your jabbering."

He made no move to block their exit.

"What did you say...?"

Ignoring Taylee's indignant response, Elvira strode up to Ed, looming over him. She needed to ask, no matter the circumstances.

The pitter-patter of rain against the exterior wall echoed throughout the main hall of Ophelis Hall.

"Why did you let us go?"

His face was an emotionless mask in response to her pointed question. The only ones caught off guard by her inquiry were Taylee and Ayla.

"What are you saying, Elvira?"

"Let us go? Him? Us?"

Elvira disregarded Taylee and Ayla's queries, her focus solely on Ed.

"Answer me."

A beat of silence. But Elvira wouldn't let it linger.

She was ready to stay put until Ed gave her an answer, her gaze unwavering as she observed him leaning casually against the wall.

No matter how long it took, she would get a response.

But of course, she couldn't interrogate him forever.

-Boom!!

Once more, the front door of Ophelis Hall swung open.

The soft rhythm of rain on the outer wall was drowned out by the deluge rushing in from the open doorway.

Lightning struck.

For an instant, the world was illuminated, casting the girl shedding rainwater from her robe hood in sharp relief.

A glance at the iris hairpin she wore – a choice made after a night of contemplation – revealed her naive innocence. She had every right to indulge in blissful daydreams, even if they clashed with reality.

The boy she had imagined meeting under the gazebo, looking handsome and composed, was instead strewn across a battlefield, battered by an unruly mob.

Standing in the open entranceway, the girl emerged from the darkness, the downpour framing her figure. The usual spark in her eyes was gone, replaced by shadowy depths.

“...What are you doing?”

Her question hung heavily in the air, her tone heavier than ever.

CHAPTER 35

-I might run late because something unexpected came up. I'll do my best to hurry. Please hang on for a bit. I apologize.'

To say there was no unease would be dishonest.

Given the tone of the note he left behind, it was clear that Ed Rosetail had been caught up in some unforeseen predicament.

However, Yenika Faelover kept her worries for Ed in check. He had a knack for handling crises efficiently.

His actions were always measured, and his response swift. Whether it was something as simple as chopping firewood or crafting household tools, or stepping in when the student council was backed into a corner because of Yenika's missteps...

Ed Rosetail had this way of instilling the expectation that he could overcome any problem, regardless of its magnitude.

It's only after being caught out by the blind spot of such complacency that a person is forced to self-reflect.

-Then, I'll definitely help you.'

She remembered saying this while sitting in Ed's camp, stargazing.

He had told her to ask for help if she ever faced an insurmountable problem or severe hardship.

Yenika Faelover was very much aware of her capabilities. Her humble nature and thoughtful demeanor meant she didn't flaunt it... but she was confident that she could lend a hand when disaster struck.

Yet, Ed Rosetail never requested her help.

He fought until he was battered and bruised, ultimately collapsing from exhaustion.

Despite Yenika being ready to offer her aid at a moment's notice, he fought solo till the end.

What was his reasoning?

Why had he led Yenika away from Ophelis Hall with an uncharacteristic note, battling here, spilling his own blood?

She had no idea what was transpiring in Ophelis Hall, but maybe he didn't want Yenika to get involved.

Yenika Faelover's strength wasn't something Ed could overlook.

But Yenika had already faced significant consequences due to the Glaskan incident. If she caused more issues here, it could negate the disciplinary measures that her classmates had made sacrifices to soften.

But could she have stood idle while witnessing Ed Rosetail fight until he was bathed in his own blood? She involuntarily shook her head.

So, Ed Rosetail had purposefully kept Yenika out of the conflict zone.

When she realized this, a wave of rage welled up inside of her.

She didn't know why Ed Rosetail was fighting like this. However, she knew he wasn't the type to behave recklessly or engage in villainous actions, as others might suspect.

What had she been doing while Ed Rosetail was here, battling like this?

When someone was stepping onto a battlefield heavy-hearted, what had she, Yenika, been contemplating?

She had allowed her flights of romantic fancy to take hold, transforming into a lovestruck girl, kept awake by needless anticipation, worrying about her hairpin's color, whether her hair was messy, or how her clothes were arranged.

Her anger was directed at herself.

But it was time to put that aside for now.

-Swoosh.

With the pitter-patter of the rain in the background, she dipped her head and quietly questioned Taylee and the others.

"What were you guys up to?"

Her voice was laced with frost.

"Senior Yenika?"

Taylee was the first to respond.

Understandably, there was no way for Taylee to grasp Yenika's feelings at this juncture.

"Looks like you managed to avoid the mess, Senior Yenika! Right now, Ophelis Hall is overrun by other students. But... I think there's more to it. Given how Ed is barring the way, there must be something else..."

"Is that so?"

Yenika's gaze, under her bowed head, is indistinct. But it's clear that she is staring intently at the group.

Suddenly, a surge of magic power erupts from the main entrance of Ophelis Hall.

The mana-sense abilities of a second-year top magic department student are so impressive that even graduates would be taken aback. Clothes billowed, wind brushed against the skin, and even the miniature chandeliers from the ceiling swung wildly, ready to join the already destroyed main chandelier.

"What, what's going on?!"

"Senior Yenika! What, what are you doing!"

She didn't call forth Tarkan, the Fire High-Spirit.

Its considerable power was still not fully recovered from the recent damage caused by its death.

But she didn't need to rely on the strength of a high-spirit to handle a group of first-year students.

The Mid-Rank Fire Spirit, Olgogas.

The Mid-Rank Wind Spirit, Feshi.

The Mid-Rank Water Spirit, Flan.

The Mid-Rank Earth Spirit, Tyke.

Even one of these intermediate spirits would require a whole group to face, yet here she summoned four.

Numerous lesser spirits stirred, making the scene appear like an army.

The storm engulfed one first-floor window after another. The rain, mingled with fragments of glass, whirled in the mana tempest, soaking the main hall.

"Get it together, Taylee! We're under attack!"

Elvira, with the quickest assessment of the situation, started collecting all the potion bottles. She was putting them into the worn alchemy bag one by one, but the rain's torrent, akin to a storm, obscured her sight, making it quite challenging.

"You know, I wasn't all that interested in what you guys were up to."

Yenika's question wasn't overly complicated.

Did you guys do this to Ed?

She just... didn't ask so bluntly.

What was transpiring in Ophelis Hall, or what Taylee and the others had been thinking when they entered Ophelis Hall, no longer concerned Yenika.

"Yenika!"

Finally, amid the storm, she heard the boy's voice.

Barely able to hold himself upright, the boy mustered the strength to whisper 'Yenika'.

The sight of him, pitiful and struggling, pricked at Yenika's heart. Not wanting him to push himself further, she quietly said to Ed,

"Just hang on, Ed."

It was a mere moment, at most.

That was all the time she needed to gauge the situation.

The potential backlash from damaging Ophelis Hall, harming the younger students, and violating school rules, was vivid in her mind. But despite this, Yenika's actions were driven by her past self.

A desire to meet expectations, an aversion to causing harm, and the image of herself worn thin from striving for her close friends—all of these were mirrored in her own reflection.

Ed, who had collapsed from exhaustion while handling things alone for Yenika's benefit, was a reflection in the reverse mirror.

That sight stoked Yenika Faelover's sense of defiance.

Yenika, who knew better than anyone else how heartbreaking and pitiful this situation was, couldn't leave Ed Rosetail behind.

The fiery eagle, the wind-formed lion, the water-built giant, and the mud-made horse all rallied for their master. Each one was a Mid-Rank Spirit that would take several people to suppress.

Taylee and his crew braced themselves, cold sweat trickling down their faces.

"We need to bail, Taylee."

Elvira said, accurately reading the room.

They couldn't fathom Yenika's rage, but rashly charging at the well-known second-year student council president was akin to a suicide mission.

Even Lortel, known amongst Class 1-A as the best at fine-tuning magical power, was swiftly defeated in front of the formidable spirit user.

"We have to face it. We can't get through here."

The unexpected obstacle, Ed Rosetail, a dispossessed noble, kept watch on the first floor of Ophelis Hall.

Despite the significant power gap, he had taken a considerable amount of time to subdue. Now, the second-year president had arrived and tamed the Mid-Rank Spirit. They couldn't gamble their lives over a handful of pricey herbs.

"But still..."

Nevertheless, Taylee couldn't shake his unease.

It seemed that what was happening in Ophelis Hall wasn't merely a sit-in. He sensed something much larger and more sinister at play.

From Taylee's viewpoint, it might all be someone else's issue, but if actual students began getting hurt, it was a different matter.

Taylee's sense of justice was inherent, and his characteristic of never shying away from adversity was a trait that would follow him to his end.

Undoubtedly, Taylee was destined for a hero's journey.

He had already encountered the formidable obstacle that was Yenika Faelover. Could such a staggering power disparity truly be overcome with sheer determination?

But that uncertainty didn't matter to Taylee.

Taylee was the type to act on his beliefs. He had weathered challenges that seemed insurmountable, simply by bearing down and pressing on.

But Taylee's recklessness could only be considered fitting because the world had always viewed Taylee as its hero.

Challenges were destined to be surmounted somehow, and Taylee would evolve through those experiences. This pattern of the world... as long as the narrative of the

'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' persisted unhindered, the cycle was guaranteed to repeat.

However, Yenika, who he had encountered once more, existed outside of this 'script'.

Would Taylee's inherent heroism be effective against this adversary who emerged outside the course of the narrative? Could he overcome even such a massive power disparity with his fortitude for trials?

It was common knowledge, real-world trials were far from being as straightforward as those in a theatrical game plot.

If the power gap was enormous, defeat was unavoidable. Overcoming trials through sudden power awakening, fate's intervention, or coincidence... these were usually narratives within a script.

"Taylee! Pull yourself together! Face reality! Since all the windows are busted anyway, over there..."

"When I tell you to leave, just leave...!"

The one who interrupted Elvira while standing up was Ed Rosetail.

* * *

"Yenika! That's enough, it's okay, cool down!"

Yenika, rage radiating to the tips of her hair, resembled a calamity in itself.

Her flowing robe and crimson hair were soaked with rain, making her look like a vindictive phantom risen from a swamp.

If all had gone to plan, they would have ushered Taylee and his group upstairs, sat in the rose pavilion with Yenika, chatted, and merely watched until the Ophelis Hall situation was resolved.

In case Yenika decided to depart, they left a note and pledged to return soon.

Given Yenika's fundamentally naive and kind character, they assumed she would stay put if she made such a sincere promise and even apologized...

But he couldn't fathom why she returned to Ophelis Hall as if driven by some peculiar wind.

At any rate, Yenika's good nature had shockingly backfired.

They had exchanged various stories at the camp, spent time together, and thought they had grown quite close...

But Yenika was not one to stand by while a close friend was in trouble.

Regardless, if left unattended, Taylee and his team would surely be defenseless and battered.

"Listen up. I'll take care of Yenika, you all head to the second floor as planned."

"Huh?"

Ayla Tris looked at me like I was spouting nonsense.

"After putting so much effort into blocking us, now you're telling us to head upstairs?"

Initially, I had concocted various schemes to assess Taylee's abilities. If he wasn't up to snuff to clear the second act, it would have spelled major trouble.

"I've changed my mind, so get upstairs quickly."

"Ha, for real? You think you can halt those spirits in your current sorry state?"

I gave Elvira's head a solid thump for laughing even in this predicament. Clutching her head, she stumbled back, taken aback.

"Mind your potions. Sorry about the bag."

Elvira's varied and potent potions had been handy during the strategy against the twin maids on the third floor. Elvira was the most formidable adversary in the Ophelis Hall expedition. I first sealed her potions and then initiated a fight...

After this, there wouldn't be anyone as troublesome.

The takeover of Ophelis Hall wasn't such a challenging event to start with. We had ample power, so we could afford to unwind a bit afterward.

"What, what... what the heck is happening...!"

Elvira stared at me, dumbstruck, but I couldn't spare the mental energy to attend to her.

Trudging through the rain spilling in from the shattered window, I headed towards the center of the hall.

Amid the chaotic spirits, I finally caught Yenika's eyes properly. The icy look in her eyes was starkly different from her usual warm demeanor.

Nevertheless, the reason Yenika was fuming from head to toe was because of her intrinsic personality.

But what's so great about having a wide network...

Fortunately enough, I was already close friends with Yenika.

In this world, there's nothing as valuable as people.

Family ties, school ties, local ties...! These are the invaluable... three gems of relationships that clear obstructed paths in our vexing lives.

No matter how affluent, competent, and humble people are, they treat those around them well because they never know how these relationships might benefit them...!

It was time to behold the strength of those connections.

I strode straight towards Yenika.

Although the hall was teeming with all kinds of spirits, they ignored someone their master didn't perceive as a threat.

Navigating through them, I finally reached Yenika.

"Ed, don't push yourself, step back. I'll handle the rest."

"Yenika."

"We can discuss the details later. Let's wrap this up quickly and get you some treatment....."

I placed my hands on Yenika's shoulders and stated plainly.

"I'm genuinely okay, you can relax now."

Normally, sudden physical contact is deemed impolite. I understand how uncomfortable it is when someone puts their hand on your shoulder and gazes at you directly without uttering a word.

However, when dealing with someone whose emotions are high and they're not listening, a gesture signifying they should pay attention to what you're saying is also necessary.

"Uh, huh?!"

It was then that Yenika regained some of her usual composure.

"E, Ed! Your hand! Your hand is on my shoulder!"

"Yenika... please dismiss the spirits first. The wind is too intense, it's hard to stay upright..."

"Ah, eh?! Oh, you're right. I can barely stay standing. I'm sorry...! What have I done... I must be an idiot..."

From there on, everything happened in an instant.

The tempest of magical energy swirling around abruptly subsided, and all the spirits awaiting their master's attack command promptly withdrew.

A second later, the only sound filling the grand hall of Ophelis Hall was the rain's return.

"..."

Feeling uneasy under the baffled gazes of Taylee and his team, I hastily waved at

them.

They all wore expressions as if they'd seen a specter.

If they end up losing track of Clevius, who's roaming around the second floor, this situation will get even more complicated.

"Hurry upstairs... You probably don't have much time..."

Saying that, I finally relinquished the strength I was using to support my body.

Yenika, who was frantically trying to hold up my collapsing frame, was struggling.

* * *

-Sssooooaaahh

"I'm so frustrated."

The downpour was only growing stronger.

Yenika's voice, as she sat beside me, hugging her knees, was low and not very pleasant.

The main hall of Ophelis Hall on the first floor was a disaster. Taylee and his crew were heading to the staircase leading to the second floor, and only Yenika and I remained, leaning against the outer wall, listening to the rain's rhythm.

We were both thoroughly soaked, which seemed somewhat ridiculous...

But there's a sense of liberation or gratification that comes from being drenched in rain.

Anyway, it appeared that Taylee's specs were steadily improving.

Judging by his elemental attack range, his agility, and his sword strike accuracy... he must have successfully completed all the standard events.

Sure, from my viewpoint, it doesn't feel especially rewarding. But then again, I'm someone who's utterly invested in physical enhancement... I should be content

simply by meeting the clear specs.

From this point on, for a while, it's about mental toughness. The scenario becomes increasingly mentally draining as it progresses.

The divine magic that Professor Glast uses will trap Taylee within a time gap, making him experience death hundreds, even thousands of times.

The highest-ranking magic that Lucy employs will indeed bring Taylee to the brink of death once, and the evil god Mebula, summoned by the Rosetail Family head, Krepin, can trap the enemy in the worst nightmare they can conceive.

Even after all of these trials that pushed the boundaries of human mental endurance, Taylee will never surrender.

I've said it over and over... I want nothing to do with such trials.

I thought I'd only care about my own comfort, only chase after what benefits me, only savor the sweet honey... but when I came to, here I was. As expected, things in life don't always go as planned.

"Why do you keep getting injured without saying anything? I told you to let me know when something like this happens..."

"There was a bit of a situation. I'll fill you in next time..."

I persuaded Yenika, who was insisting we should seek a healer immediately, to sit tight until the incident on the first floor of the main hall was over.

We had moved from the Rose Garden to the Main Hall of Ophelis Hall, but regardless, as per the plan, I held my position, scanning for possible variables.

For a time, I sat beside Yenika, watching the relentless rain through the damaged main hall.

Despite a few unforeseen factors, we had navigated the first floor safely, and it seemed Taylee's overall capabilities were on the rise.

The day had progressed as planned...

"Those kids are too much. I can't pinpoint exactly what happened, but there's no excuse to thrash someone like that. Next time I run into them, they're in for a piece of my mind."

Given Yenika's perspective, oblivious to my deeds - like dropping the chandelier, starting a fire, and firing arrows, I could empathize with her sentiments.

I appreciated her staunch support, but clarifying my actions to her didn't make for a comfy chat.

Well, that was a conversation I could postpone.

"Anyway... Ed... don't get hurt anymore, will you? Promise?"

"Yeah, thanks for your concern."

With those thoughts, I tended to myself and got some rest. Even though the plan had deviated slightly, as the boss of the first floor, I had fulfilled my role...

It was about time to kick back a little, and attend to my camp duties.

I heaved a sigh of relief, finding solace in the sound of the rain.

Finally, a sense of tranquility.

Until Yenika opened up again.

"But, Ed. When I was sitting in the Rose Garden, I spotted a huge carriage."

"It sped by so swiftly that I barely caught a glimpse... but it bore a golden crown. Looking back... isn't that the symbol of the Elte Merchant Guild?"

"I read about it ages ago. The golden crown... undoubtedly... isn't it the mark of the Elte Merchant Guild's chief... the 'Golden King', Elt'?"

Golden King Elte, the phony boss who was ousted by Lortel in the 'Sage's Scripture' following the Ophelis Hall siege.

The reality that he had landed in Sylvenia sooner than anticipated.

This could hint at some strange developments beyond my awareness.

Once again, my heart raced.

* * *

"Any other injuries, Taylee?"

"Nah, Ayla seems alright too. What about you Elvira? Are you stocked up on potions?"

"We're good. Don't fret."

The rain was still coming down hard at Ophelis Hall, on the staircase leading to the second floor.

The three-member team climbed the stairs, verifying each other's preparedness.

Something was definitely stirring at Ophelis Hall.

Simply observing Ed Rosetail's conduct on the first floor, it was evident that things were out of the ordinary.

Confronting the elusive Ed Rosetail had taken a toll, and there was a near miss with Yenika Faelover turning into an adversary.

He still couldn't fully grasp what was transpiring, but he knew better than to let his guard down.

The adversaries that would meet Taylee and his team on this upper floor could prove as tricky and challenging as those on the first floor... or possibly even more so. The thought alone gave him goosebumps.

Yet, retreating was not an option.

Steadying themselves, their group continued to ascend. There was no room to relax.

CHAPTER 36

"Did you know, Ellis? That's my carriage."

In the 5th-floor hallway of Ophelis Hall.

A space consisting entirely of storage for gear, resting spots for maids, and multipurpose rooms remained hushed, seemingly oblivious to the bedlam below.

Students rarely ventured up to the fifth floor. The guest quarters were primarily located on the lower levels, and most of the maids were confined to the staff conference room on the fourth floor, so the expansive fifth-floor corridor was predictably silent.

The clamor from the chaos downstairs wafted up. Ed Rosetail seemed to be creating quite a ruckus, exceeding expectations. The bigger the stir, the better for Lortel's purposes.

The terrified screams of Clevisus soon added to the cacophony, likely heightening the anxiety of students trapped in their rooms. If things escalated further, they would inevitably bust through the walls and flee.

Ellis watched the girl who stood and spoke with composure in the shadowy corridor.

"You're aware, aren't you, Ellis? That man who comes across as unsavory and vile."

"Do you mean Master Ed? The man we encountered at the camp last time?"

"Yes, that's him."

"I didn't realize he was your cup of tea."

"...Well, he's fairly good-looking, but that's not really what I'm getting at."

Lortel Keherun was perched atop a wooden cupboard in the equipment storage room, drying her hair. It was time to assess whether things were progressing as planned.

"I detected the same scent from him that I detect from you, Ellis. I said something unusually sentimental, didn't I?"

"Is that so?"

"And then he coldly dismissed me. Asserting that I should bear the brunt for my own decisions."

Lortel, shaking out her hair, grinned.

"Our kind, we're meant to live hearing such things, aren't we?"

Ellis could neither agree nor disagree with that statement.

As the Chief Maid of Ophelis Hall, Ellis was a seasoned maid with over two decades of service.

She started as a novice maid at the tender age of 15, green as grass. Eventually, her skills were acknowledged, and she assumed the role of manager at Ophelis Hall at a comparatively young age.

Such individuals are creatures of habit. Thus, they can't be easily swayed by money.

For them to defy the principles entrenched in their hearts, a monumental sum of money must be dangled, enough to shatter those values.

This very place was where the most substantial investment had been made to amplify the magnitude of the Ophelis Hall takeover.

To persuade them to renounce their lifelong allegiance to their workplace, escalate the situation, rip Ophelis Hall apart, and shoulder the blame for all this.

Bribing them to commit such acts would require compensation for all their sins and an offer of a life free from financial woes.

Consequently, a vast deficit was left in the account books of the Sylvenian branch of Elte Merchant Guild. While appropriate investments for increased profits are critical, the substantial loss incurred by buying off a senior employee of Sylvenian Academy was not easily recouped.

Still, Lortel believed the expenditure was not wasted, not in the slightest.

It was more than an investment for a more substantial return. The chain of actions was also a quest to find her own kind.

She had witnessed numerous individuals forsake their faith, seduced by the allure of gleaming gold.

These individuals were typically in dire straits or clung to flimsy, insubstantial beliefs as the crowning glory of their lives.

They weren't worthy of being labeled kin.

The real kin were those who had cast aside the firm beliefs and values they had dedicated their lives to, swayed by gold.

The more noble and precious those beliefs and values were, the more Lortel felt a surge of emotion in her chest.

Because only those individuals could alleviate Lortel's loneliness.

"I'm lucky that Miss Ellis is here."

Even the Chief Maid, who had served the students at Ophelis Hall for more than 20 years, fell prey to avarice.

In the face of a heap of gold, any nobility loses its luster.

Lortel herself was all too aware that this was a hollow comfort.

A life devoted to gold, sacrificing everything, a simple psychological defense mechanism to justify such a life.

Even with that knowledge, Lortel didn't cease her search for her kin.

"Otherwise, how could this scheme ever succeed?"

The involvement of Ophelis Hall's general manager became a key factor in this situation, a point that doesn't need to be stressed further.

"If we coordinate it with the moment when the 'Spokesman of Lesser Privileged Students, Willian', takes over the 4th-floor office and casually hand over the control of the berserk defense magic to him... He'll bring down Ophelis Hall without even knowing it."

Considering all the people Lortel had exploited to survive until now, this was relatively mild.

Amid the hordes of impoverished vendors in the rundown slums or merchants who risked their lives for a single coin.

If she didn't strike someone down first, she'd be the one struck down. Such was the life she led.

Even if it was done for survival, there was no valid excuse for such transgressions.

Just because it was a means of self-preservation... It could be somewhat understood, but never wholly justified.

"Since everything seems to be falling into place, I'll stay in the warehouse. I need to play the part of an innocent student who knows nothing and, in terror, quickly hides in the warehouse."

"Got it, Miss Lortel."

Regardless of her tragic past, her desperate situation, Lortel was the indisputable villain, the final adversary.

If there is such a thing as reincarnation, she'll be condemned to eternal damnation.

She neither warrants understanding nor sympathy. Lortel knows this all too well herself.

That's why she keeps seeking her kin.

She desperately longs for comrades who would sink with her into the depths of the quagmire.

Even though she knew deep down that no such person could possibly exist.

Such a pitiful creature.

She'll probably die a lonely death, never having loved someone or opened her heart to someone as a family in her entire life.

Coming to this realization, Ellis let out a sigh of frustration.

...Unsheathing her rapier, she aimed it at Lortel.

"Miss Lortel, there's something I need to get off my chest."

When a Mage is restricted to this much space in a sword fight... the outcome was already determined.

"I'm not, strictly speaking, one of your kind."

* * *

"...This isn't as tough as I'd thought."

The third-floor hallway of Ophelis Hall.

Through the window, the rain continued its relentless downpour.

Gliding through the corridor, Taylee and his crew steadily advanced.

Taylee, Ayla, Elvira, Clevius.

Clevius, who attempted to flee from the second floor, was apprehended and compelled to join the group.

On the third floor, 'Bedding Laundry Supervisor Kelly', tried to obstruct their way, but they easily overpowered her and restrained her.

- 'I'm sorry, Miss Ellis... I couldn't complete the task you entrusted to me... '

Kelly continued to murmur to herself until they had securely tied her up and tossed her into a corner of the corridor.

One couldn't help but wonder where Shenny, Kelly's twin sister whom she was

nearly inseparable from, had gone.

Of course, such thoughts didn't cross the minds of Taylee's group.

"If we keep this pace, we should be there soon, right?"

Before they knew it, they were on the fourth floor.

Was it due to heightened nerves? Things seemed to be unfolding more smoothly than anticipated.

From the get-go, the first floor had posed an unusual challenge. But since then, there hadn't been an adversary deliberately exploiting the party's vulnerabilities.

"..."

Elvira, contrary to her typical demeanor, maintained a stoic expression.

The image of a sophomore mage, standing amidst roaring flames, his sweat-drenched shirt sticking to him, kept flashing in her mind.

His uncannily shrewd maneuvers, starkly different from his embarrassing tumble during the entrance exam, persistently irked her.

Elvira is a bundle of pride. Ed's deliberate defeat had deeply wounded her pride, but she wouldn't let that cloud her judgment.

'I'm irritated. He definitely concealed his capabilities.'

She needed to uncover the truth, at the very least.

Elvira's curiosity, once aroused, couldn't be quashed by any obstacle. Surely, there was something about Ed Rosetail that Elvira didn't yet know.

"Ru, run!"

"Ahhhhhhhhhh!"

Elvira's concerns were fleeting.

From the far end of the fourth-floor hallway, a horde of underperforming students burst out. Overcome with terror, they all sprinted past Taylee's group toward the exit of Ophelis Hall.

"The defensive magic is out of control!"

"That idiot Willian! We warned him not to tamper with it!"

"Damn! Where are all the maids who oversee the defensive magic! Let's make a run for it!"

"I had no idea it would come to this!"

Their panic-induced shouts turned the hallway into a scene of chaos as the students stampeded out.

"Hey, hold up! What's happening? Why is everyone freaking out?"

Taylee's shout, trying to halt the pandemonium, was swallowed by the chaos.

The ground quaked, and Ophelis Hall began to tremble subtly.

From a corner of the fourth-floor hallway, near the control room entrance, a man stumbled out.

It was Willian, known as the representative of the underperforming students in the Magic Department's third school year.

Complex defensive magic circles erupted around him, intricate to the point that even adept magicians would find them challenging. Usually, a team of maids with sufficient Mana Sensing would scramble to adjust the magic circle in unison.

The system, acting as the emergency alert for all of Ophelis Hall, would only grant access to authorized individuals. Willian caught up in the magic circle was an aberration.

This was a scheme orchestrated by Ellis and Lortel, who had conspicuously left the crystal ball—the system's trigger—unattended in the control room's heart.

"Ugh, ugh! Help, someone help me!"

Under the weight of the magic circle enveloping him, Willian lurched. As he flailed his arm, the magic circles etched into the walls and ceiling sprang to life, blasting apart a portion of the corridor's outer wall.

A cloud of dust rose amid the cacophony, and rain started pouring into the hallway.

"I can't control it! Save me!"

As Willian fell clumsily, his tumble triggered a ritual that detonated the ceiling and shattered the wall.

The self-defense rituals scattered throughout Ophelis Hall were initially designed to safeguard the noble students from external threats.

However, the present scene resembled a child brandishing a loaded gun—without understanding the danger and incapable of handling it, the weapon was bound to backfire.

"We have to incapacitate Willian, the conduit, first! Deactivating each magic circle while he's like this is too difficult!"

Although Ayla's actual mana sensing abilities were subpar, her understanding of magic was exceptional. She quickly sized up the situation.

Once Ayla concluded her analysis, Taylee gave a terse nod and sprang forward, aiming to neutralize Willian by smacking him with the flat of his sword.

"Aaaaaaah!"

Naturally, being charged at would cause anyone to be startled and adopt a defensive posture, which in turn stimulated the activation of another magic circle.

-Paaang!

A surge of magical energy erupted from the windows and the storage room door, sending Taylee flying backward. He managed to brace his fall and get back up, but new spells continued to flood the hallway in response to Willian's incessant shrieking.

Wind Bullet, Ignition, Earth Wall Summon, Shadow Blade, Earthquake.

A slew of magic circles materialized, turning the corridor into a chaotic battlefield and preventing any approach toward Willian.

It went without saying that the murals adorning the walls, the wooden cabinets lining the hallway, the outer walls, and the floor were all smashed and torn apart.

Already on edge from the crashing chandeliers, the students' nerves finally snapped.

- "What the hell is happening out there!"

- "We're gonna be in real trouble if we don't get out of here! We should bust a hole in this wall and book it!"

- "Where the hell are the maids?"

- Crash!

From a room in a corner of the second floor, a girl finally breached the wall and started making her way outside.

This wasn't like the previous incident with Clevius. The building was genuinely on the brink of collapse. There was no choice but to make a move or face a dire fate.

- Crash!

- Boom!

As more students followed suit, tearing down walls and making their escape, the others, caught up in the hysteria, began finding their own routes out.

The students on the first floor smashed windows, sprinting into the rain, while those capable of using flight magic or skilled enough to make a high-altitude landing also broke windows and emerged.

Those unable to do so demolished corridor-facing outer walls, used their maximum magical energy to teleport a short distance, or even wrecked the floor to reach the first floor.

- Crash!

- Bang! Bang! Crash!

- Smash! Crumble!

The cacophony of destruction reverberating through Ophelis Hall seemed endless. A frenzy of students, each employing various methods to escape, unfolded before the eyes.

Taylee and the rest had a gut feeling that things were spiraling out of control, yet the defense spell that Willian was manipulating showed no sign of halting its rampage.

"Elvira! Do you have any more of that night butterfly flower potion?!"

"Don't be ridiculous, Taylee! The night butterfly flower potion makes a mage's magic control haywire. It's useless against pre-engraved spells like this!"

Elvira stuck her tongue out and hunkered down. She spritzed a potion concocted from devil's snare seed and ground emperor clamshell at her feet. A surge of magical power erupted from the center, temporarily blocking the basic spells flying from the defense spell.

Its limited range made it somewhat impractical, but in a narrow corridor like this, the devil's snare potion did the trick.

"That defense spell is just a support magic! It's vast, but we can handle its power! Just bust through and try to take down Willian!"

With that, Elvira yanked Clevius, who was discreetly hiding behind a dresser's debris, by his collar.

"Ah! Ahhh! I thought no one would find me!"

"Whenever there's trouble, you always sneak off, you cowardly Clevius!"

Elvira gave Clevius a swift kick as she yelled at Taylee.

"If you two team up, you can surely subdue him! I'll back you up from here, so take down Willian before the damage gets worse!"

Hearing that, Taylee nodded, while Clevius looked shell-shocked.

- Crash!

- Boom!

The outer walls of Ophelis Hall were being blasted apart. The fourth-floor boss fight had commenced.

Minus the fifth-floor boss, Ellis, considering the relatively low difficulty, there wasn't much time left before the Siege of Ophelis Hall was over.

"Ed, where do you think you're going! Your wound is gonna reopen!"

"It's nothing! Most of this blood ain't even mine!"

Yenika sprinted after me as I darted through the rain-soaked grounds of Ophelis Hall.

Not too far away, I noticed a large, ornate carriage parked near the service entrance at the hall's back end.

The carriage, decorated with an array of gold embellishments, looked nothing short of extravagant and eye-catching. But, given who was inside, it could be considered modest at best.

Whenever he traveled, he usually had at least a dozen other carriages in tow. So, his choosing to travel with such modesty hinted at some urgent matter that necessitated his hasty arrival.

From the looks of it, the carriage seemed to have been parked there for quite some time. As if... it was waiting for Ophelis Hall to crumble.

Soon enough, a maid, impeccably dressed and holding an umbrella, emerged from the service exit.

'Crockery Supervisor, Shenny'

One of the orphans that Chief Maid Ellis had taken in and raised, under normal circumstances, she and her younger sister Kelly would be on the third floor of Ophelis Hall, staving off Taylee's party.

But this wasn't a normal circumstance. Instead of staying put, Shenny had left her post and was now knocking on the carriage door.

Something wasn't right. This was a clear sign.

As Shenny stepped back, bowing, a thin man opened the door from the inside. It was Victor, a long-time executive of the Elte Merchant Guild.

Victor swung the door open, holding an umbrella with an air of courtesy, clearing the way for the carriage's occupant to step out.

And then, he emerged from the extravagant carriage.

His outfit—a crisp white shirt, a dark red belt, and tight leather pants—was rather modest. But the overcoat, gilded and encrusted with a vast array of jewels, was worth a ship, and his gem-laden rings, each worth a house.

He was neither young nor old. His neatly trimmed beard was sharp as a razor. The aura of authority that surrounded him had become an integral part of his persona.

The leader of the Elte Merchant Guild, 'Elte, the Gold King'.

A gut feeling washed over me.

This was the beginning, the first sign of a series of unusual events.

If my memory was correct, Gold King Elte's visit to Sylvanian Academy should've happened much later, after the Ophelis Hall takeover, during the 'Battle for the Sage's Scripture' event.

Elte, increasingly cornered within his own company, had planned to make a comeback by buying the 'Sage's Scripture'. But Krepin Rosetail, head of the Rosetail Family, had quoted an exorbitant price for the book.

In the end, though, he was betrayed by Lortel and got kicked out. That spelled the end of his career as a merchant.

And yet, here he was.

The exact sequence of events was unknown. Only the end result remained.

I had no idea how, when, or where things had gone awry to lead to this scenario. It was beyond my comprehension. Trying to piece it all together now would be nothing but hubris.

Still, one could venture a guess at what was about to unfold next.

The maid sisters, Shenny and Kelly, were known for their unwavering loyalty to the Chief Maid, Ellis.

The fact that Shenny was in cahoots with Gold King Elte... it suggested that Chief Maid Ellis had a secret alliance with Elte.

Yet, according to the usual narrative, Ellis had undoubtedly been swayed by Lortel.

She accepted a substantial sum of money, taking the fall for the failure to maintain Ophelis Hall's protective barrier.

After facing a barrage of disciplinary actions and punishments for a job she had devoted decades to, she stepped away from her lifelong career.

Ellis wasn't one to be bought easily. She was a woman of strong principles and convictions.

The exact reasons for her selling out were never thoroughly explored. It was assumed that she was swayed by a vast amount of money.

Lortel, for one, was known to coax principled individuals into sacrificing their beliefs for money. It was a sort of obsession for Lortel, who was on a quest to find her family. But the scene playing out before us deviated significantly from the standard narrative. It was as if...

"Ed... you're getting a chill...! You've lost so much blood, and your body temperature's plummeting!"

Yenika, who had trailed behind, rushed forward, removing her shawl and hurriedly draping it over my head.

"Why are you being so damn reckless! Seriously!"

"Yenika."

"Yeah, what?"

This isn't a situation to just stand by. I haven't fully comprehended what's happening yet, but I have a rough idea of what's coming next.

"There's something I need your help with. It's urgent, and it might be a bit too much for me to handle alone."

As Yenika reached to adjust the shawl over my head, she quietly listened to my story...

It's clear what Yenika's response will be. Anyone hearing such a sudden request would naturally want to know more about the situation. What's going on? How urgent is it? What happened? Explain yourself. Things like that.

How should I explain so Yenika will understand... how can I succinctly and bluntly sum up the situation... While I pondered these things, Yenika cut to the chase.

"Alright. Understood."

Is she considering the urgency, or is she indifferent to the details from the get-go?

"What do I need to do?"

Watching her coolly ask about what needs to be done, without fussing over the particulars, I couldn't help but feel grateful for such a reliable friend.

* * *

[Letter to Lord Elte Keherun]

Dear Esteemed Elte, President of the Upper Commerce Association, Gold King Elte Keherun,

I am Ellis, currently serving as the Chief Maid of Ophelis Hall at the distinguished Sylvanian Academy.

This letter is enchanted with an Ignition spell and will self-destruct after being fully read. Please be cautious not to get burnt.

I, who ordinarily wouldn't reach out, have taken up the pen to write to you, who are always swamped, because there's a matter regarding your daughter, Lortel Keherun, a student at Sylvanian Academy, that I feel compelled to report.

At your command, she's been inciting a financial crisis at Sylvanian Academy to acquire the 'Sage's Scripture'.

Her plan has been unfolding seamlessly. With my involvement as Ophelis Hall's chief steward, success seems inevitable.

If everything goes as planned, Sylvanian Academy's finances will be pushed into a corner, and the Elte Merchant Guild will gain a significant advantage in the 'Sage's Scripture' negotiations.

However, for 'some reason', I've uncovered her true intentions.

Lord Elte, your daughter, Lortel Keherun, isn't on your side. Trusting her would be a mistake.

She... she's aware that you're the one who ended the lives of her birth parents. She understands that you spotted her talent, forced her into a corner, and left her no choice but to collaborate with you.

Behind your back, she's been cozying up to the higher-ups and executives of the Elte Merchant Guild, planning to oust you from your chairman position.

The negotiations for the 'Sage's Scripture' are a mere trap, meant to draw you to Sylvanian Academy, keeping you away from the unfolding incidents at the Elte Merchant Guild headquarters.

I've swiped documents from her room that can serve as evidence. They're secure in my possession.

She was certain she'd gotten rid of these papers by burning them in the incinerator, but it's our maids who manage the incinerator's fires.

Despite her attention to detail, it seems she didn't anticipate that the maids of Ophelis Hall would meticulously salvage each shred of the secret documents from the incinerator.

I'm prepared to blow her cover at a moment's notice.

No matter how this situation develops, the blame for failing to manage Ophelis Hall will fall on me, and I'll face trial.

But if I simply whisper the name 'Lortel'—the true puppet master—while on that stand, I won't be the only one going down.

However, as with everything in life, nothing is free.

She's offered me a hefty amount of gold coins to keep this under wraps.

The only way to turn down such a substantial sum is to be offered an even greater one.

Below this letter, I've listed the 'organizations' I've been quietly managing over time on an attached page. The quantity of gold coins delivered to these organizations will dictate my next move.

My eyesight is fading. For reasons unexplained, my hearing is almost gone as well. I won't delve into why, but it's likely this year will be my last as a Chief Maid.

I'm the only soul who knows the whole truth about this situation, and I'm a person backed into a corner with nowhere left to run. The side I choose to back could either complicate the situation further or simplify it considerably.

I implore you, judge both mercifully and wisely.

Chief Maid of Ophelis Hall, Ellis.

[Attached Document]

Crooks Region Orphanage, Kohelton Orphan Shelter, Athnes Croxel Orphan Shelter,
Odell Region Alton Orphanage, Temil Region Public Orphanage

* * *

"Ed...! You're hurt! If you keep moving around like that, you're only going to make it worse...!"

One hard truth I'd come to terms with was that there were just too many variables in the world to control them all.

All I could do was my best—handle the major variables to prevent major complications.

While slogging through the rain with Yenika, I sifted through my thoughts.

For reasons I couldn't fathom... if Ellis truly had turned against Lortel, then Lortel's downfall was a given.

Lortel Keherun was a significant player in all affairs.

In Act 3, she was pitted against Princess Penia, leading the charge in the academic political disputes. She was also responsible for rallying talented individuals for the Oreunsan search operation and playing a key role as the representative of the higher powers in the Lucy subjugation battle. Her influence was vast.

By Act 4, she was solidified as a protagonist's ally, growing into the primary force opposing the Rosetail family... Her impact on countless minor events and episodes was so widespread that it was impossible to list them all.

Lortel, dead.

A sentence capable of shattering the foundation of every scenario.

A scenario where Lortel Keherun vanished was uncharted territory for me. All my foresight, my informational advantage, was obliterated, leaving nothing in its wake.

Filling Lortel's shoes entirely... It might not be impossible, but it'd certainly be a harsh and grueling journey. It's a cliché, but despite its overuse, I absolutely reject such an ordeal.

Unless I was ready to forsake my academic degree and embark on a journey into this unfamiliar fantasy world, surviving by the skin of my teeth... The absence of Lortel Keherun was an unfathomable loss.

"Yenika, do you happen to know where Ziggs' room is? I need to ask him a favor."

"Uh, huh? Well... I don't really know him that well... so I'm not sure..."

“...Alright, I guess I'll have to find him myself. Although he may have already bolted from the building.”

Wiping away the rain cascading down my face, I made my way back to the main entrance of Ophelis Hall. The students who had evacuated were scattered around, lost and confused.

The Ophelis Hall occupation situation was nearing its end.

With the protective magic triggered, the staff would be arriving shortly.

Even if Lortel Keherun were to fall, she wasn't a character deserving of pity or understanding. Regardless of her personal circumstances, she was, at her core, a villain.

Justice triumphs over evil, virtue conquers malice, righteousness rectifies all wrongs.

These proverbs hold truth, but I'll set aside these fairy-tale morals for now.

The presence of a villain, casting a shadow over all truths on stage, is crucial.

No one can predict where a scenario devoid of a villain might lead, or how a spiraling event might devastate the world.

Standing at the main entrance of Ophelis Hall in the pouring rain, I pushed my brain to its limits and, together with Yenika, gazed up at the partially ruined Ophelis Hall.

CHAPTER 37

"Ugh-hic! Hiiiiic!"

Injured but resolute, Taylee had managed to pin Willian to the ground. By coordinating his attack with Clevius, he'd been able to cut through Willian's magic circle, get to him, and leave him incapacitated—all despite his own wounds.

By this point, Ophelis Hall was a sight for sore eyes. Priceless furniture and artworks lay strewn across the floor. The walls, now riddled with holes, struggled to maintain their integrity.

After successfully incapacitating and securing Willian, Taylee took a moment to sigh deeply and wipe the rain off his face.

The external wall of the fourth floor corridor of Ophelis Hall had been completely torn down, exposing the interior to the downpour. The group was soaked, continually swiping the rain from their faces.

"Phew, looks like the worst of it is behind us, huh? We'll just hang tight until the staff gets here."

"No, Taylee. Something's off."

Elvira's words left Taylee looking perplexed.

"What? What do you mean?"

"You sensed it, Taylee. The protective spell of Ophelis Hall isn't something just anyone can mess with. It would take someone like the Chief Maid of this mansion to manipulate that many spells without restrictions."

"So, you're saying..."

"It's not over. There's still a puppet master pulling the strings."

However, there were no apparent enemies around as they reached the end of Ophelis

Hall's fourth-floor corridor.

The only thing in sight was a staircase leading up to the fifth floor.

"The real instigator behind this chaos is likely on the fifth floor. If we don't nab them before they make a run for it, all our efforts will be for nothing. We need to fully wrap this up and earn some brownie points from the school."

Determined, Elvira rolled up her sleeves and began to head for the staircase leading to the fifth floor. Meanwhile, Clevis was ranting about solving some incident, while Ayla seemed lost about what to do next.

"Elvira, if you're right about all of this... then this puppet master..."

"Yes, it's probably Ellis, the Chief Maid running Ophelis Hall. What are we waiting for? Let's go catch her and make her turn off the protection spell."

Elvira's pressing demands made Taylee sigh deeply, but it was too late to feign ignorance now.

It was indeed clear that there was a mastermind behind the occupation of Ophelis Hall. Looking back on it, it was obvious that the Chief Maid, Ellis, was the guilty party.

* * *

In this world, there's no such thing as unwarranted goodwill, nor is there trust without foundation.

For Lortel, this was a self-evident truth she'd never questioned until she came of age.

She existed in a world where letting your guard down would earn you a sucker punch.

Lortel, who had never experienced the warmth of family love, the bond of brotherhood, or the comfort of friendship or camaraderie. For her, trust was always a calculated structure, based on solid proof.

Thus, a relationship that offered trust unconditionally was as rare as a flower blooming on a cliff's edge.

It was something that existed, yet remained unattainable...

A gem that was only found in the realm of imagination.

Lortel wouldn't dwell on what she couldn't grasp. Such obsessions grew from a dangerously lacking condition.

The only practical solution she saw was to expand her circle.

Those who compromised their values for cash, traded in their beliefs, and ultimately demonstrated the fallacy of unconditional trust or favor were invaluable to her.

She knew she didn't quite fit, that she was skewed, but she didn't see that as a negative.

Yet, there were times when her heart, as firm as forged steel, would falter.

There was a man who gave back the three gold coins in his possession, even while teetering on the brink of disaster.

He had consented to Lortel's scheme for twenty gold coins, but he'd never been swayed by the sum from the get-go.

This man's principles were leagues away from terms like worth, efficiency, finance, or practicality.

Truth be told, there were many like him. Those who acted impulsively, risking their lives on fidelity or affection. They seemed less cool-headed, more foolhardy.

But Ed Rosetail didn't strike her as such. He wasn't someone who'd let emotions like Ziggs or pure-heartedness like Yenika sway him. Nor was he moved by money. When Lortel came across such a person, she felt an urge to pull him into her circle.

The relentless nagging at her instincts was a certainty that sprouted from within Lortel herself. She was sure this man wouldn't be any different.

- 'No.'

- 'You're accountable for your choices, Lortel.'

But he rejected her, flatly.

What was surprising was that instead of feeling suffocated or infuriated, she felt invigorated.

What spurred this refreshing sensation? Lortel already knew.

As she'd remarked at one point, Sylvanian Academy was teeming with too many sources of light. It was starkly different from the underworld she inhabited.

When you stroll through a perfumed flower garden, you start to believe that you too emit the fragrance of flowers. No matter how much you try to remind yourself that you're a rat scurrying in a sewer, your heart eventually surrenders.

Observing people like Taylee, Ayla, Ziggs, and Elka, emotions she'd been evading began to bubble up. Envy and obsession.

Could there come a day when I could forge a bond of trust devoid of justification or self-interest? After all, the cliff where the flower blossomed wasn't as steep or towering as it seemed.

Let's not entertain such empty fantasies. Till my dying day, I'm a villain, dwelling in the underworld, backstabbing others. She pledged and pledged again.

But in the end, witnessing Ed and Yenika, the desire she'd buried came surging forth in full force.

"Stay still. Elte will be at Ophelis Hall soon."

The consequence was a rapier aimed at her neck.

Ellis, the chief maid of Ophelis Hall, was a seasoned staff member who'd spent her entire life in Sylvanian. Yet, her chronic poor health owing to combat and longstanding illness had caused her constant distress, and she'd often sought a shift to the academic side... Yet, there were hardly any competent replacements for her role.

Keeping Ophelis Hall, a hive buzzing with various dignitaries, running smoothly was a non-negotiable task. Ellis' life had been a string of self-sacrifices, all aimed at maintaining this systemic stability.

On a day characterized by closed-door negotiations, Lortel had inadvertently exposed her own secrets to Ellis, who had revealed hers in turn.

This kind of slip-up would have been unthinkable in the merchant world. They had hastily assumed that they might find solace and understanding in each other's struggles. Ellis accompanied Lortel on visits to Ed's camp or the academy, fostering many shared moments of understanding.

"...I didn't realize you had such a look in your eyes. I pegged you as a more cold-hearted type... Well, it's not my place to judge."

What was her current expression? Lortel didn't know, nor did she care to decipher.

"You, Miss Lortel, proclaimed you'd exact revenge on Gold King Elte. But I have to tell you. To my eyes, you two don't seem all that different. Everyone in this world carries a backstory."

She narrowed her eyes and added,

"I suppose, the same applies to me."

-Bang!

Just then, the door to the 5th-floor entrance flew open.

"We've found her, Chief Maid Ellis!"

"She's got a hostage! Be cautious, Taylee!"

Capitalizing on Ellis's moment of surprise, Lortel quickly rolled out of her reach.

"Lortel! Are you alright?!"

Elvira shouted, concerned for Lortel's condition.

I'm fine. The one who stirred up this mess is right there. We need to apprehend her quickly.

It would be best to blame everything on Ellis and flee. But Lortel couldn't voice her thoughts.

"Lo, Lortel! Why does your face look like that?"

What were they referring to with her expression? Alternating glances between her classmates, who were making incomprehensible comments, and Ellis, who remained expressionless, Lortel was at a loss.

After a prolonged silence, Lortel started dashing towards the ground floor.

Gold King Elte was on his way.

The plan to overthrow Elte was almost complete. All they needed now was a pretext.

But if Lortel, the linchpin of all plans, were to be captured, everything would fall apart.

Despite having a heart as unyielding as rock, Lortel was physically vulnerable. A bit of coercion could easily break her.

But no matter how dire the situation, there's always a way out.

Fortunately, Elte had personally made the trip to Sylvanian Academy.

Uncertain about the loyalties of his closest allies, he decided to manage the situation himself.

Now, if there was just a way to get in touch with Elte Merchant Guild's main office immediately, she could salvage the situation. Quite a few executives at the main office were on Lortel's side.

The plan to doctor the books on a grand scale, sneak out the goods, maximize the losses, and place the blame on Elte was already well laid out. The only hitch was that the scheme was so extensive that if Elte were present at the main office, it'd undoubtedly be exposed.

Elte was hell-bent on stifling Lortel with this spectacle. Once she had stepped into the ring, she was in it until the final bell — the dice were already rolling.

In her first-floor room, Lortel had a carrier pigeon stashed away. She just needed to dispatch a message and find refuge somewhere on Aken Island.

Her teeth gritted, Lortel sprinted down the stairs in a panic.

A seemingly attainable desire that remains perpetually out of reach can drive a person to the brink. If it hadn't grazed her fingertips in the first place, she wouldn't be so fixated.

It was inevitable. No matter how stoic she attempted to be, the absence of affection was a potent toxin, slowly eating away at her.

The incubation period may vary, but she understood now that the breakdown happened all at once.

All of this was due to the idyllic Sylvanian Academy. Had she not been born into the cutthroat world of commerce, the incubation period would've stretched longer.

She had been backstabbed and betrayed more times than she cared to remember. Crumbling now didn't align with her character, and it contradicted her actions.

Still, Lortel had no choice but to sprint, her teeth gritted.

For the moment, she had to book it. If Elte reached the main lobby on the first floor before her, the route back to her room would be effectively sealed off.

* * *

-Crash!!

Yenika's magic slammed into the wall, and the resounding crash reverberated through the hallways.

"...?"

Amid the crumbled wall, there stood Ziggs, somehow still deep into his workout despite the current urgency.

Caught off guard by the sudden wall collapse, he gazed at me with wide, shocked eyes.

"What, what's the deal, Ed? What is this....."

"Why aren't you out there when everything's going sideways...? Didn't you hear the ruckus?"

"Well... I didn't want to jump the gun. A little structural damage isn't going to kill me."

Ziggs, naturally sturdy, didn't view the current predicament as dire. He trusted the staff to manage the situation and stayed focused on his training.

In fact, several students hadn't yet emerged from their rooms. If they possessed the skills to protect themselves even amidst a collapse, there was no reason to venture outside and brave the storm.

"Anyway, Ed. Didn't think you'd bust through my wall like that. It's going to get real chilly when I try to sleep."

"You say that because you're out of the loop. At any rate, this entire building needs a total overhaul."

"Is it that bad?"

Ziggs abandoned his push-up position and effortlessly rose to his feet.

Who would've guessed this guy was a magician...?

"Oh, Yenika's here too. This is our first proper introduction. During the Glaskan incident... we weren't exactly pals."

"Uh... about that... I apologize."

Yenika stared at the floor, a gloomy expression on her face. The incident left a sour taste, but Ziggs wasn't about to play dumb and pretend he didn't know.

What's done was done.

"Don't let it get you down, Yenika. It's water under the bridge."

"Uh... yeah. Thanks, Ed."

Overhearing their conversation, Ziggs sighed deeply, perhaps realizing he'd spoken

out of turn.

"I'm glad to see you're holding up since then. You two seem to get along."

"Huh?"

"I'm not completely clueless. Doesn't Ed usually keep a safe distance from freshmen? I mean, there's a swarm of folks ready to fight at the slightest sign of disrespect... It seems like the natural stance for a senior."

Ziggs contorted his body, then flopped onto the bed, stretching out his legs.

"Seeing you act so easy-going around Yenika, I feel like I've uncovered a new facet of you. Are you two a thing?"

"No! No! No! That's not the case!"

At his suggestion, Yenika flapped her arms in a flurry, but then seemed to think she'd protested too strongly and sneaked a glance at my face...

"Uh... Ed. Are you angry?"

"No. I'm cool. Ziggs is just being crass."

"Ah, I get it. My bad."

After issuing a genuine apology, Ziggs, still sprawled on the bed, finally put on a serious face.

"So, I reckon there's a reason you went out of your way to hunt me down, even going to the extent of knocking down walls."

"I need a favor."

"Okay, then I will consider my debt payed."

"Shouldn't I be the one in your debt?"

Ziggs chuckled. It was an admission that he still had a debt to settle.

Recalling the times he lent a hand with building my shack and other minor physical tasks.

"That was just me offering to help."

With that, he waved off the subject and slipped on his coat.

"Judging from the vibe, this doesn't seem like an easy job."

* * *

If things had played out as they were supposed to, Ellis would have stuck by Lortel's side till the bitter end, putting the Ophelis Hall standoff to bed.

As for why she was colluding with Elte, I had no immediate answer.

But that didn't mean there wasn't one.

The fight for the 'Sage's Scripture' that ensued after the Ophelis Hall crisis.

The academy and merchants locked horns over the research documents of Sage-tier magic left behind by the Grand Sage Sylvenia. Amidst the bedlam, Lortel's plot to overthrow Elte takes root.

While Elte prolongs his stay in Sylvenia, forces begin to rally at Elte's headquarters, planning his ousting.

The timing couldn't be more perfect.

Elte's scheme to corner the market on grain from the large farms in the Empire's northwest fell flat, and despite securing an exclusive distribution deal for cotton textiles with the Collet merchants from the overseas Kingdom of Teron, the price nosedived, marking another flop.

No matter how seasoned or tough a trader might be, enduring the rigors of business for an extended period inevitably led to setbacks and losses.

In a stroke of bad luck, such misfortunes might pile up three or four times in a row, tarnishing the merchant's reputation within the organization and even putting Elte's position at risk, as she had been spearheading the company with a staunch emphasis

on meritocracy.

How long had Lortel been plotting this scheme? I had no clue.

However, by this point, Lortel's blueprint to overthrow Elte must have been nearly finalized. All that remained was to concoct a justification, but Lortel, the mastermind behind it all, had tripped up.

Lortel, usually pragmatic and resolute, had erred somewhere along the line.

* * *

-Thud!

Main hall, ground floor.

Surrounded by Elte, who was garbed in a stunning outfit, were about a dozen mercenaries, likely contracted from the trade city of Oldek.

The crew Elte brought along was pretty modest in size. I was certain of this. Elte didn't want this predicament to spiral into a major incident.

"Are you students? Clear out right away."

I had been the only one delaying Taylee, but for this greeting, there were two more members present. Yenika Faelover, the top of the sophomore class, and Ziggs Ebelstein, the second-ranking freshman. Both were students, but their skills rendered them top contenders, even among active duty personnel.

Yenika stood behind me, darting glances all over, and Ziggs was nonchalantly propped against a nearby column.

"Could it be... The chief of Elte Merchant Guild, Elte Keherun?"

I addressed Elte in a slick tone. The titan stationed in the center of the mercenaries nodded, once more requesting us to make way.

"What a surprise! It's an honor to meet you. Who'd have thought that the renowned Elte, who holds sway over the continent, would drop by a backwater like Sylvania. I can't fathom why such an esteemed individual would come..."

The Golden Daughter, Lortel.

The Gold King, Elte.

Chief Maid, Ellis.

These three were the ones navigating the plot's course.

Lortel, who was scheming to unseat Elte, avenge her past, and leave the leader's role vacant.

Elte, who aimed to thwart Lortel's plot and succeed in acquiring the 'Sage's Scripture'.

And Ellis, who was straddling a tight line between the two.

The root of the warped storyline was Ellis' sudden conduct. The reason remained a mystery, but there was no immediate need to rush to the fifth floor to rein in the Chief Maid.

The remainder of the plot was unfolding smoothly because Taylee and his crew were set to put a check on the Chief Maid. I had verified that their capabilities were more than adequate, and the team members were trustworthy.

So, the part I had to handle was Elte's.

"...We are barring anyone from entering the building. Due to the risk of a cave-in, for safety reasons, no one will be permitted to pass until faculty members show up."

"Did the school give you specific orders?"

"No, we're acting on our own discretion. It's a crisis situation, isn't it? Our Sylvania Academy has a well-defined protocol for handling such scenarios."

That was a solid alibi. But Elte would undeniably perceive the underlying purpose.

"...A person of your stature, Lord Elte, surely must have a reason to act... But wouldn't it be better to notify the academy first and receive an approach suited to your standing?"

After saying so, I fell silent.

Elte didn't want to amplify this situation.

Lortel's role as the ringleader of this incident had to remain a secret.

Despite their estrangement, Lortel was a member of Elte Merchant Guild and his foster daughter.

If it became public knowledge that Elte Merchant Guild played any part in this incident... Elte Merchant Guild would bear the cost of repairing the damaged Ophelis Hall.

It was akin to stepping into one's own snare. If there was any aspect that Chief Maid Ellis overlooked, it would be this.

From Elte's viewpoint, simply pushing Lortel into ruin wouldn't resolve everything.

Lortel had to be taken down by Elte's own hand.

In doing so, he had to ensure the silence of Ellis, Shenny/Kelly, Willian, and even me, who knew about the truth of this incident. The road ahead seemed daunting.

"You are, in Lortel's corner."

Without much exchange, he had already realized that I had uncovered some of the truth.

"I will double the amount of gold she promised. Clear the way."

There was no futile emotional struggle or uneasy compromise. Given the urgency, he put forth the best terms he believed the other party couldn't resist.

"Thank you, but I already agreed on the amount of gold. What's the point of piling on more?"

"Ha ha."

Elte let out a curt chuckle.

"You're a poor judge of character. Do you think she'll grant you special favors for staying loyal to her? Or did you get charmed by her pretty face?"

Ziggs chuckled as if amused, and Yenika darted her gaze between me and Elte, but Elte himself seemed indifferent.

"She's got the cunning of a fox. She's the type to stab someone in the back at the first opportunity. I, her adoptive father who raised her since she was young, know this better than anyone. I never thought that the knife would end up pointed at me, who fed and tucked her in."

"Is that so?"

"She's someone who'd betray even her own kin. Rather than pledging loyalty for gold you might never see, take the certain benefit right in front of you. That's the sensible thing to do."

With that, he fixed his gaze on me again. The reason he didn't immediately order his mercenaries to bulldoze their way through was likely because he didn't want to escalate the situation.

"Or is there another reason why you have such faith in that kid?"

"Do I need a grandiose justification?"

"Right, you're not making sense."

I harbored no special feelings for Lortel.

Nonetheless, I wasn't one to buy into such a convoluted narrative. So I simply settled for 'just because' as my reason.

There was no reason, I just trusted her.

Such a senseless declaration might make Elte scoff, but the circumstances on my end were different. Besides, he wouldn't understand them.

I lowered my voice and whispered to Yenika and Ziggs.

"I'm going to scope out the situation. In the meantime, try to buy some time."

With Ziggs nodding in consent, and Yenika looking somewhat anxious behind me, I swiftly kicked open the door to the main lobby and walked in.

From this point forward, I had to find Lortel and fill her in on the situation...

"..."

...there was no need to scramble around Ophelis Hall.

She was already on the other side of the door, tucked in a corner, gazing at me with wide eyes. Obviously, she was already aware of the situation outside as Elte made his grand entrance into the lobby.

"...were you unable to escape?"

"Well..."

Her usual sly grin was nowhere to be seen. Lortel tried to utter something but seemed to be at a loss for words, and simply nodded her head in an awkward manner.

Her usual coolness during a crisis was absent. She was probably taken aback by my haggard appearance from trying to restrain Taylee.

"It's fortunate we can cut the explanation short. Let's get out through the back door for now. Do you still have the strength to run?"

The rainwater mixed with blood was trickling down the back of my hand, causing a prickling sensation. I quickly shook it off and hastily combed my rain-soaked hair with my fingers.

"Stay close and follow my lead."

I seemed to be more entangled with the protagonist of this tale than necessary, but this was a crisis, wasn't it? After returning the course of the story to its original path, I would distance myself again.

Since I was already this deep into it, there was no backing out.

I nodded and quickened my pace, leading Lortel along with me.

CHAPTER 38

Benevolence and trust always had reasons.

Slog, one of the six titans of the Elte Merchant Guild, stood with Lortel because he aimed for the future leadership position.

Setun, president of Meverak Trading, wore a smile as he joined Lortel's scheme, betting that an internal schism within the Elte Merchant Guild might stir the power dynamics of Oldek, the commercial city.

Sharro, a receptionist at Elte Merchant Guild, clung to Lortel hoping for some juicy information to inadvertently spill out.

Kadan, an employee, was unusually friendly towards Lortel, hoping for some valuable tips.

Even Tiny, the Academy's pet bird, followed Lortel for the high-quality millet she offered.

Every act of kindness had a reason tied to it like a price tag. That was the world according to Lortel.

If you could grasp those reasons, you could understand the other party's motives and mindset in no time.

Lacking family ties, romantic commitments, or enduring friendships, Lortel kept a skeptical view of all human relationships since no one showed her benevolence without a reason.

"We don't have time for a thorough rundown. But, Ellis betrayed you, didn't she?"

Despite knowing this, she had trusted Ellis, a foolish mistake indeed.

Her life philosophy of never fully trusting anyone began to waver.

Then, Yenika Faelover came to mind.

A fairy-tale princess, filled with benevolence and love, reciprocating with the same. Her fervent admiration for Ed Rosetail was unmistakable, a pure girl untouched by worldly cynicism.

She shouldn't have forgotten her own hardened and jaded self, or be swept away by the romantic atmosphere of the Sylvanian Academy. She should not have imagined herself becoming such an untainted, romantic individual.

"I saw Shenny speaking with Elte. Shenny is Ellis' loyal maid, right?"

Ed Rosetail commented as he led the way through the first-floor corridor.

"But neither Ellis nor Elte would expose your operations to the Academy. Even Gold King Elte wouldn't want the connection between this incident and the Elte Merchant Guild exposed."

Lortel had bribed five individuals for this Ophelis Hall takeover.

Chief Maid Ellis, twin maids Shenny/Kelly, notorious underachiever Willian, and the fallen noble Ed.

Ellis, Shenny, and Kelly had defected to Elte's side.

Willain would have also sided with Elte.

And Ed, too, was likely persuaded by Elte.

Suddenly, the rushing footsteps stopped. Ed, who had been leading the way, turned back with a puzzled look, then quickly knit his brow.

His voice bore an impatient edge.

"What's keeping you? We're short on time."

Finally, Lortel gathered her composure. She donned a forced fox-like smile and spoke, her words surprising even herself.

"Senior Ed, I can't promise the 20 gold coins I initially assured you. As you see, things are a bit unstable."

A betrayal or two should've been water off a duck's back. But ever since Ellis turned on her, a nagging thorn festered in her heart.

She had to face it, she was physically and mentally depleted.

Otherwise, she wouldn't have been so reckless.

For reasons unexplained, Ed Rosetail chose to support Lortel instead of siding with Elte.

Ideally, she should've scrutinized his motives and exploited them.

Instead, she laid bare her vulnerability.

How ludicrously self-defeating, to willingly reveal to an ally their potential pointlessness.

Yet, Ed was unfazed by her words, his face void of any indecision.

"Did I ask? I've got my hands full here, what are you up to?"

"You do realize if Elte catches you now, you're finished, right? Whatever your grand scheme, you should at least try to escape."

Standing across the corridor, Ed's admonishments flushed her face a deep crimson.

His breathlessness was undoubtedly due to his guarding the first floor of Ophelis Hall at Lortel's behest.

Yet, he offered no complaints about his exertion. He didn't bemoan his hard work.

"Do you have a better plan?"

"..."

"If you do, let's go with it."

His words were direct, promising his cooperation without a hint of doubt.

This man... he gave her the confidence to believe he would support her.

As often as it's been said, goodwill and trust usually have a justifiable reason.

Yet, there was no apparent reason behind this man's goodwill and trust.

Any rational person would expect him to have fallen for Elte's persuasion. If you asked a hundred people, all hundred would have thought the same.

If there's no discernible reason, trust cannot be given. She couldn't reveal her plans to someone whose intentions were unclear. It was a gamble she couldn't risk.

She'd been betrayed by Ellis after placing her trust in her. She couldn't afford a repeat of that mistake.

However, against her better judgment, her mouth began to move. Despite the voice in her head screaming at her to stop, desperation forced her hand.

What spilled from her lips was the inside scoop on the Elte Merchant Guild and the power struggles within.

"...My father orchestrated a plan to manipulate the market at the Guild headquarters."

"Explain."

"Last summer, after the large-scale monster extermination in the Eastern Mountains ended, the Battle Drums market crashed. They bought up the remaining Battle Drums to monopolize it, and then carried out repeated internal transactions..."

"Price fixing, got it. Keep it brief."

Ed interrupted the narrative.

It was all about monopolizing goods from a monster base region, and engaging in a cyclic buying and selling spree on the market.

Insider trading was the essence of the plan.

Traders who were clandestinely bought by Elte Merchant Guild would execute the scheme.

Imagine merchants A, B, and C. A sells goods to B for one gold coin, B then sells to C for two, and C sells back to A for three. This cycle would gradually inflate the market price.

While the cash and goods merely circulated within the Elte Merchant Guild's control, the market price would invariably rise.

They would sustain the elevated market price until the next monster suppression event led to increased demand. At that point, they'd unload their goods for an exorbitant profit.

This brazen scheme of manipulating the market prices may seem far-fetched, but it's a time-tested strategy. The catch is that it demands an enormous capital, making it hardly feasible.

"My father engaged the Duke of Oldogar and the Count of Opher to execute this plan. But when the monster suppression operation was postponed, coinciding with the bond maturity dates, there arose an urgent need for funds."

"So, his solution was the 'Sage's Scripture'?"

"Correct."

Ed caught on remarkably quickly, despite the scant information provided. It was as though he'd done his homework.

"My father... believed that if he could secure the 'Sage's Scripture', he'd find a buyer willing to pay a handsome sum... He commanded me to infiltrate Sylvanian as a fresh student and devise a way to pilfer the 'Sage's Scripture'."

"Okay, I get the picture. You don't need to elaborate."

"Really? That's enough?"

Ed seized Lortel's wrist. Asserting they couldn't afford to waste time, he resumed striding down the corridor.

"I don't need the full backstory. You inflated the scope of this Ophelis Hall takeover to pressure the Academy's finances, thereby legitimizing the 'Sage's Scripture' purchase negotiation. You planned to use that as a lure to draw out Elte from the Merchant

Guild's headquarters, and in that window, sell off the goods."

As he advanced, spitting out the crux of the story, he seemed to fully grasp the essence of the plot. His comprehension speed was extraordinary.

Lortel stared at Ed in disbelief, but he seemed unbothered.

The success of manipulating market prices through price fixing hinges on mutual trust.

Merchants A, B, and C artificially inflate the market price by circulating money and goods among themselves.

But if any of A, B, or C double-cross the others halfway, the scheme collapses. If one sells off their stock once the price has escalated and vanishes, the remaining two are left high and dry.

While A, B, and C are merely representative... considering the scale of the Guild and the market, it's likely that dozens of medium-sized merchants were involved.

For a third of the past half year, they'd been busy amassing Battle Drums. With impeccable timing, they could trigger a colossal market crash by selling them all at once.

Given the manufactured inflation, making the prices nosedive wouldn't be a tall order. It's always a chore to inflate prices, but when the market starts offloading products in droves, they plunge with ease.

From the vantage point of the Elte Merchant Guild, who hold an abundance of Battle Drums, this price collapse would translate into a sizable loss.

Zooming out, it might only seem like a dip in profits, but short term, it would represent a hefty loss in the company's financials.

The here and now is what matters. Macro-scale trends that aren't even on the horizon aren't of prime importance.

Elte's influence, already dwindling due to various losses within the guild, would be dealt a fatal blow by this loss.

Add some petty charges of financial fraud and accountability for losses, and you have a watertight case for dismissal.

All of this crystallized in Ed Rosetail's mind from just those words.

Even if his mind was sharp, human abilities have their limits. Ed couldn't possibly have painted this elaborate picture with a mere summary.

"But there still one thing you need to do."

Ed's words, however, were spot-on.

"So, basically, you need to somehow get word to the guild's headquarters to sell the Battle Drums right away?"

To offload guild assets of this magnitude, normally you'd need the chairman's approval.

But when the chairman's not around, to keep business running smoothly, one of the six elders under him assumes that right.

Slog, one of these six elders of the Elte Merchant Guild, is an old hand who's been promised the next chairmanship and has been part of Lortel's scheme.

If he rubber-stamps the Battle Drums sale nonchalantly, as if it's just business as usual... then the blame would fall squarely on Elte's shoulders.

Even if a furious Elte attempted to punish Slog, it would be too late for him, as they'd already have grounds for dismissal.

This entire scheme was originally meant to be executed during the 'Sage's Scripture' heist.

A livid Elte hollers Lortel's name, but with the sight of Lortel, in a corner of the swaying carriage, barely visible and smiling under his cloak, the event concludes.

Next, act two wraps up with the pursuit of Professor Glast, who had absconded with the seal to a secret lab, culminating in his destruction. In truth, this was the main event and was even more grand in scale.

"In my quarters, there's a carrier pigeon. It's a direct line to my insiders at the guild's headquarters."

"I need to dispatch that carrier pigeon, then lay low until the selling scheme is carried out at the guild's headquarters. That'll be when I win."

"But, my father would be on his guard to some extent. He's likely planning to catch me by tonight, and get me to spill the beans on all the plans and the turncoats within."

No spot was ever truly safe, you could never let your guard down. Despite knowing this, Elte had dashed off straight to Sylvanian Academy. It was impossible to discern who among his trusted circle were true allies or clandestine foes.

He must have moved with a skeleton crew, keeping his plans under wraps, but the rumor mill had a way of delivering news to the top brass swiftly.

Everything was on the line for them. This chase was the final gambit, with the fate of father and daughter hanging in the balance.

"Make your exit out the back door, hug the outer wall, then slip into your room via the window."

"I was thinking the exact same thing."

"Well, great minds, right?"

They truly were in sync. Their discourse flowed seamlessly, like gears meshing in a finely tuned machine.

They were quick on the uptake, keen to align their thoughts, resilient when facing adversity, and not prone to emotional swings.

As Lortel watched Ed's retreating figure, he hurried along the corridor, pulling her along by her wrist, she felt a lump forming in her throat.

The rear entrance to Ophelis Hall loomed into view. While not as grandiose as the main entrance, its tastefully etched designs and motifs echoed the building's prestige.

"Lortel, listen to me closely. Getting spotted now is the worst-case scenario. You need to lay low and stay under the radar."

"I own a separate villa in the Minne region. If I can just make it there by coach..."

"If I were in Elte's shoes, I'd have eyes on both bridges leaving Aken Island. You're sure to be tailed."

Ed had a point.

The man driving Lortel's coach was trustworthy, but the coach itself was quite conspicuous.

Crossing the bridge openly was a surefire way to be followed.

"Tell the driver at the living quarters to take the coach off Aken Island empty. Have him ditch the coach somewhere suitable and then hightail it out of there. They'll be fooled into thinking you're off the island."

"And what about me...?"

"I have a partially built cabin in the northern woods. You just need to lay low there for exactly three days."

It's always darkest under the lamp. If she were hiding in the woods adjacent to Sylvanian, they'd hardly expect to find her there.

"I'll send your messages from your room. Just draft a terse 'Sell at once' message, the people back at HQ should be able to handle the rest, right?"

"...Yes, that's right."

Ed moved with the efficiency of a seasoned business partner, wasting no motion and deftly managing affairs.

Observing Ed, who seamlessly orchestrated actions as if they were second nature, Lortel began to entertain the thought that perhaps it was safe to trust him completely.

Despite being well aware that a romantic relationship was off the cards, her heart, in

tatters, whispered into her ear once again.

This time, it might actually work.

As the saying goes, obsession isn't born out of longing for a flower on some distant cliff.

It was always just beyond reach, a dangerous mirage that teased but never delivered.

"..."

Ed reached for the back door, only to halt as he caught sight of what lurked beyond the narrow opening. He quietly shut the door again.

"Lortel, we've got company at the back door."

In a hushed tone, Ed relayed the predicament.

"Blowing your cover or giving away your next move would be bad news. I'll head out to deal with it, then dash to your room. Keep a sharp lookout, and when the coast is clear, make a break for the living quarters. Got it?"

Lortel offered a hesitant nod, prompting a scowl from Ed.

"Are you all there, Lortel? You seem out of sorts, why are you so scatterbrained?"

"Yes, yes... I've got it."

Ed placed his hands on Lortel's shoulders, gently pulling her towards him and pressing her against the wall. She flinched, her eyes wide with surprise, but quickly realized he was just keeping her out of sight from the door.

"Once you make it to the northern forest, they won't have a hope of catching you. After that, you're on your own."

With that, Ed turned to depart through the back door.

"Ed..."

Almost involuntarily, Lortel called out to him, revealing her inner turmoil.

She had to voice her question, couldn't hold it in any longer.

"Why are you going to such lengths to help me...?"

Every favor is granted for a reason. Understanding that reason often reveals insights into a person's mindset or driving principles.

But asking someone outright about their motives... Lortel was breaking a rule that even a rookie trader would know. Still, she had to ask.

It defied all logic. No matter how one sliced it, Ed Rosetail should have been on Team Elte.

Whether you looked at it from a financial standpoint, weighed the odds of success, or considered influence, Lortel was outmatched on all fronts.

Even when viewed through a moral lens, Lortel was, at best, grey, but far from white.

Despite all this, Ed chose to align himself with Lortel.

Ed pondered over Lortel's query for a moment, a hint of uncertainty playing across his face.

"...Just because? It just seems like the right thing to do?"

With a note of ambiguity, he offered this explanation and, kicking the back door open, disappeared into the night.

* * *

-Shhhhhhhh

-Thump, thump.

The sound of rain filtered in through the open door, accompanied by the reverberating clamor of battle from within Ophelis Hall.

The cacophony seemed to emanate from the 5th floor, likely the clash between Chief Maid Ellis and Taylee's crew.

-Thump, thump, thump

The relentless barrage of noise marked what would be the last battle to grace Ophelis Hall. Lortel had a premonition that the scales of victory would tip in favor of Taylee's group. As formidable as Ellis was, being the Chief Maid of Ophelis Hall, once Taylee shifted into his Sword Saint form, the tide would start to turn.

Lortel stayed silent, pinned against the wall for what seemed like an eternity.

She couldn't make heads or tails of Ed Rosetail's intentions. Kindness and trust always come with an underlying reason, but his motives were murky at best.

There was no evident financial benefit, no ideological agenda, nor was he a man driven by raw emotions. So what was the driving force behind his actions?

-Are you drawn to the kid's good looks?'

The haunting question from Elte popped up in her mind. But she swiftly dismissed the thought. Just as suspected, Ed Rosetail wasn't the kind to act on emotional whims.

After all, wasn't Yenika Faelover constantly in Ed's company?

Yet, the crux of the discomfort seemed to originate from the fact that their relationship wasn't romantic.

Yenika's adoring gaze at Ed was unmistakable, even to a casual observer. However... it seemed to be a case of unrequited love.

-Thud, thud, thud.

Amid the resonating sounds of combat in Ophelis Hall, Lortel slid down the wall and collapsed onto the floor. Exhaustion, both physical from running and mental from the situation, had taken its toll on her.

She sat on the corridor floor, staring vacantly into nothingness for a while.

I just wanted to help, so I did.

Why did such a simple statement leave a bitter taste in her mouth and cause her

heart to race?

Suddenly, she pinpointed the cause of her discomfort - the building wasn't trembling.

Shouldn't there be noticeable vibrations and flying debris given the battle sounds reverberating throughout Ophelis Hall?

But as she glanced out of the window, where only the gentle patter of rain was seen, Lortel had an epiphany about her unease.

-Thud, thud, thud.

Incredibly, the noise was her own heartbeat.

* * *

-Ssssh

Rain was descending on Ophelis Hall, its rhythm slowing, hinting at a nearing end.

The final face-off between Taylee's team and Chief Maid Ellis was imminent on the top floor.

On the ground level, Ziggs and Yenika were gearing up to take on Elte.

In the shadow of these grand battles, by the backdoor, stood a maid, withstanding the rain in the dark evening.

When had she taken up her post there? She stood silently, ready to apprehend any potential escapees, blocking the exit so no one could flee, all out of loyalty to her master, Ellis.

Her maid uniform was soaked through by the rain, her purple hair wild and unkempt.

Turning slowly to confront him was Shenny, one half of the twin maids who was supposed to be obstructing Taylee as a third-floor boss. She quietly lifted her head and my eyes met.

"Didn't expect Lord Ed to show up here, surprising."

Post guiding Elte, she had swiftly moved to secure the backdoor, cutting off Lortel's escape path.

With her usual poker face, Shenny unsheathed her rapier.

Unfortunately, I was all too familiar with Shenny's skills and tactics. More so, she was the kind of boss who exhibited her full prowess when working in tandem with her younger sister, Kelly. Alone, they could barely muster half their potential.

A rather underwhelming final guardian, to say the least.

I squared off against Shenny, soaking in the rain.

This weary role was finally approaching its conclusion.

CHAPTER 39

Act 2, Chapter 3, The Siege of Ophelis Hall.

The confrontation with the fifth-floor boss, Chief Maid Ellis.

Taylee and his crew held their ground in the central hall of the fifth floor, their disposition unruffled as ever.

Regardless of the situation, their composure was unwavering. A swift glance from top to bottom would find no evidence of turmoil. The uniform of the Chief Maid was significantly more grand and adorned than that of an average maid, yet not a single detail had been neglected.

In one hand, she brandished a rapier, exquisitely embossed with a rose motif. In the other, she was amassing mana for a mid-level spell.

Moreover, she had full control over all the defensive wards safeguarding Ophelis Hall since Willian had fallen unconscious.

With her fencing skills, unshakeable even against the combat trainees, her magic prowess, capable of casting mid-level spells, and the added advantage of Ophelis Hall's protective wards...

Unlike Willian, who had spread chaos in Ophelis Hall under the wards' influence, Ellis had already mastered the practical application of these wards during her tenure as the Chief Maid.

However, she couldn't subdue Taylee and his crew. Taylee McLore was the lead character.

Ignoring this inconvenient truth, the climax of Act 2, Chapter 3, was undoubtedly underway.

And the resolution came in a flash, almost disappointingly fast.

* * *

A lone raindrop traced the length of Shenny's rapier.

Her mana was nearly spent, barely enough remaining for a handful of basic spells.

I silently closed my eyes, replaying the recent events in my mind.

Shenny's initial strike was a thrust, aimed at the space between the lower abdomen and thigh. It was a technique repeated thousands of times. All maids of Ophelis Hall shared similar swordsmanship. Even if one resisted it, the pattern became second nature.

The relentless downpour.

With a forceful push off the ground, Shenny closed the gap almost instantaneously, her blade cutting through the rain.

The sight of her puffed-up maid skirt flapping as she charged was like a single flower blossoming in the storm.

Yet, in a blink, Shenny's form spun around. The petal-like hem twirled and vanished, and before one could track her movement, the rapier was driven into the thigh. Or so it should have been.

- Clang!

Instead, Shenny's rapier ended up beneath my foot, plunged into the rain-soaked earth.

I had begun reacting even before Shenny had advanced. It was a level of foresight that extended beyond mere quick reflexes.

Shenny essentially adopted a combat style that synergized with her magic-wielding sister, Kelly.

Serving as the front-line distraction to create opportunities for Kelly, who handled the direct firepower, Shenny utilized nimble and intricate maneuvers to exploit the enemy's vulnerabilities.

Her strategy lacked direct firepower, and her ostentatiously swift and dynamic moves served only to distract. She was quick, but her physical strength was

somewhat lacking.

"What, what!"

I had anticipated a spell cast and had moved swiftly towards her, but the motion that seemed like preparation for a basic spell was merely a ruse.

A mage must never give up ground. Spells that demand broad gestures and time to cast can only fully exert their power from a safe range.

Furthermore, they're typically lacking in physical strength and nimbleness compared to frontline fighters. Therefore, those squaring off with a mage inevitably aim to close in.

Unfortunately for Shenny, there was a stark disparity between our physical capabilities.

"Eekkk!"

Taken aback, Shenny attempted to pull out the dagger fastened to her thigh.

However, I was quicker, my hand reaching out to intercept hers before she could secure her weapon.

Twisting Shenny's wrist, I delivered a kick to the cluster of knives bound to her thigh.

-Clang! Bang!

The secondary weapons she'd brought along for unexpected situations were neutralized.

But then, Shenny's eyes darkened, and mana started seeping from her contorted wrist.

The twin maids, Shenny and Kelly, possessed the ability to share each other's powers to a degree. A unique gift of twin sisters born under the same star.

Suddenly, the dagger skittering on the floor began to levitate. It was Kelly's lower psychokinetic magic - 'Living Weapon', which manipulates armaments like swords or spears to directly assault the foe.

A handful of daggers spun upwards, halting in midair as they targeted me.

As strength returned to the hand gripping the rapier, the daggers sprang towards me. Despite their onslaught resembling a predator's killer instinct, I didn't avert my gaze.

Ducking down to shield my vitals, I threw my shoulder into Shenny with full force.

Shenny's magic wasn't as polished as Kelly's. She could only borrow that power, so it merely served as a diversion.

A dagger found its mark in my thigh, right shoulder, and arm, but the impact was so feeble that they fell off almost immediately. It was as if a child had playfully tossed them. My wounds resulted in minor bleeding.

I kept my hold on Shenny's twisted wrist firm.

Shenny's intentions were apparent from the outset. The levitating daggers were a distraction to divert my attention and provoke a reaction. Shenny's strength lay mostly in her quick movements.

Once I'd curtailed her movements, I had no intention of surrendering the upper hand.

While blood trickled down, I drove my elbow into Shenny's solar plexus, knocking her to the ground.

"Ugh!"

Shenny's breathing faltered for an instant. I dug my nails into her arm, applying more force, as if trying to peel her flesh.

-Clang!

"Uh. Ughhhhhh!"

"Right."

I kicked away the rapier that had dropped to the floor.

She was a foe who offset the gap in power with her speed and agility. Having lost her

weapon and her movements restrained, she was left without a shred of hope.

All this transpired in less than a minute.

"Aghhhhhhhhhh!"

But Shenny resisted me fiercely, her eyes red and swollen from the relentless rain. She clawed at my skin with her nails, delivering forceful kicks with her thighs, an audacity that bordered on madness.

"I can't let Lady Ellis down now! Move! Get out of my way!"

Her usual politeness and elegance were nowhere to be found, swallowed up by the storm. I wiped the blood from my face, grabbed her collar tightly, and confronted her.

"Ellis is going to lose."

A droplet of blood trickled from my face, splashing onto Shenny's pale cheek. It traveled down her face, past her earlobe, finally merging with the rain-soaked ground.

"What do you know? What could you possibly know about Lady Ellis?!"

Frankly, not much.

The events at Ophelis Hall were just one part of a much larger narrative. The plight of a boss character I had merely brushed past was far from my concern.

"Do you know what Lady Ellis has endured? Do you know the battles she's fought to uphold her beliefs?"

"Honestly..."

The 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' didn't delve too deeply into Ellis's predicament.

There were too many narratives to consider, and the sheer volume would become too great and the progression too convoluted if every side character's situation was explored.

"...I don't really need to."

At my response, Shenny's eyes widened. She seemed lost for words, perhaps because I wasn't wrong.

-Boom!

A large explosion emanated from the fifth floor of Ophelis Hall. The brilliant light that pierced the late-night darkness was unmistakably from Taylee's Sword Saint transformation.

The confrontation with Chief Maid Ellis was nearing its climax.

In the aftershock of the explosion, Shenny reached out towards my face, her eyes still bloodshot.

With her nails primed to strike, she attempted to loosen my grip around her neck, but I was already cutting off her airflow. Her breaths were quick and shallow, and she was moments away from passing out.

In a last-ditch effort, Shenny began clawing at the back of my neck and collarbone with desperation.

"You're clueless! You don't know anything about Lady Ellis! How can you side with that wicked woman...!"

Overcome by resentment, Shenny's voice was harsh and strained.

"Do you know how many orphans Lady Ellis has rescued?! I was one of them! Without Lady Ellis, I wouldn't have this job, I wouldn't be able to earn my own money, I wouldn't even be alive!"

"I didn't ask."

"Keu, heuk!"

Ignoring the welts forming on her face and neck, I continued to apply pressure on Shenny. Her gaze, filled with hatred, bore into me, but I didn't back down.

"Unforgivable... taking... Lortel's... side... Ed, Ed Rosetail... Keu, euk..."

Gradually, the strength ebbed away from her pallid hand that clung to my face. Her

arms slackened, dropping limply into the muddy water.

I loosened my hold, looking down at Shenny who had passed out.

Slowly, I rose to my feet.

Shenny's soiled form sprawled motionless on the ground, her tear-stained face and bloodshot eyes imprinted on my mind.

Regrettably, the side stories of the minor characters were unknown to me. I can't act on what I don't know.

I had no insight into how Shenny and Kelly were rescued by Ellis, how they came to be maids at Ophelis Hall, or the extent of Ellis's role in that transition.

The 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman' offered no glimpse into their tale. Neither the plot nor the setting books provided any illumination of their narratives.

In the end, the world is full of stories that remain untold.

Suddenly, I lifted my gaze to the shattered remains of Ophelis Hall.

At its highest level, one of the instigators of this incident, Ellis, must have been apprehended by Taylee.

Yet the decimated Ophelis Hall would remain as such.

The financial repercussions would resonate, adding to the academy's hardships. Some students would be thrust into the search for new lodgings immediately, and others might have been injured by the debris.

Taking it further, the fiscal strain on the academy would trigger a reduction in student benefits and welfare. Scholarship opportunities would shrink, significant alterations would be made to the dormitory support policy, and as a result, someone might be forced to abandon their studies.

What purpose does it serve to compare all this damage to Ellis's rescue efforts and debate over what's right or wrong?

Who's to judge Ellis's actions, if her good intentions make up for any missteps along

the way, or if she should be categorized as a villain like Lortel or Elte...

Those who indulge in philosophical debate while making decisions are often comfortable and free from immediate concerns.

Regardless, my intentions and final goal haven't swayed since my reincarnation into this body.

Survival was the name of the game.

I am all too aware of the chaos this world is plunging towards.

That's why I sided with Lortel - for survival. It's as simple as that.

Regrettably, there's no deep philosophical conflict or moral reasoning behind that decision.

As is often the case with life's decisions.

[You've defeated Crockery Supervisor Shenny!]

[You've awakened the combat skill 'Endure Pain'.]

[You've awakened the combat skill 'Battlefield Vision'.]

'Endure Pain', a skill that temporarily numbs pain and delays physical fatigue, and 'Battlefield Vision', a skill that allows you to perceive your opponent's movements in slow motion.

"I learned... these... just now..."

In the downpour, I cradled the bruises littered across my body.

Regardless, there were tasks left to complete.

I picked up a nearby stone and resumed my mission. After all, I needed to get into Lortel's room right away.

Once I was past that hurdle, the rest was child's play.

-Crash!

I smashed the window leading into Lortel's room and tumbled inside.

Of course, it had to be a second-story room. I felt like I could've died scaling that wall, squeezing into the crevices. With the wind and rain clouding my sight, my hands were slick with nervous sweat.

-Thud.

I rolled through the shower of broken glass, taking in the layout of Lortel's room in a single sweep.

As anticipated from a room in Ophelis Hall, it was capacious, but something felt off.

Yenika's room in my memory was full of lovely frills, adorable ornaments, and the unique fragrance of a young girl's life...

However, Lortel's room, for someone of the same age, felt peculiarly utilitarian.

The high-end wooden furniture and various decor seemed to have been arranged out of obligation. The desk was cluttered with paperwork, and the books lined up flawlessly gave an impression of a regiment in formation.

The stark contrast between Lortel and Yenika was so pronounced that I couldn't help but smirk.

"So like her."

Mumbling to myself, I retrieved a large wooden box from under Lortel's desk. Inside was a birdcage, and naturally, a bird was perched inside it.

I placed the birdcage on the desk, and grabbed a quill from the corner. Flipping a random sheet of paper over, I hurriedly scrawled a message.

'Elte is in Sylvenia. It will take at least 3 days to return to the main store.'

'Sell all the acquired instruments.'

I rolled the note up and tucked it into a small cylinder attached to the pigeon's leg.

Then, I released the bird, freeing it to spread its wings.

The courier dove through the rain, vanishing into the dark sky, soon to return bearing Elte's noose.

Having completed a critical task, I exhaled a breath of relief.

* * *

It had been some time since I had felt a sense of joy upon seeing the Northern Forest.

While the Northern Forest was a place where survival was tough and every day was a battle, after experiencing numerous events, I was reminded that there was no place quite like this forest.

No matter how dilapidated and miserable a home may be, there really is no place like home.

The rain had nearly ceased. No, it had stopped altogether.

The post-rain forest had a charm all its own.

Though the rain had ceased, the dense humidity clinging to my skin lingered, slowing my movements.

Yet even this discomfort felt pleasing due to the allure of the forest. Thanks to the moisture, the aroma of the grass was intensified. Immersed in this fragrance, I felt as if I had melded into the forest itself.

However, to suggest that I was a part of them...

My appearance would be too suspicious.

My shirt was drenched in blood, with wounds gaping on my thigh and shoulder. The bleeding had ceased, but the crimson stains persisted, making me resemble a zombie with my limp.

Yet given my history, I could bounce back from this degree of damage relatively swiftly. It was certainly better than being mauled by a wild boar or taking a tumble from a tree while gathering fruit. Once the healing began, it would progress rapidly.

"Huff..."

I exhaled a deep sigh and propelled myself onward. I navigated a route more akin to a mountain trail than a forest path, pushing past the undergrowth.

If everything went as planned, Lortel would be awaiting my arrival in the cabin.

I was pressed for time. Given the circumstances, it was a situation that would induce cold sweats.

I had to locate Lortel before the royal edict arrived, and the magic ban was enacted. I would then need to confess everything and coerce her acknowledgment, even if the means were somewhat harsh and violent.

Under normal circumstances, this wouldn't be a challenging task.

No one would ever guess that Elte Keherun, the Merchant Guild's President, would show up at such an unexpected location at this hour. Neither Lortel nor I had foreseen this. This was due to the tendency for rumors to circulate in advance of such a figure's movements.

Without the aid of Ziggs and Yenika, and some suitable improvisation, Lortel would have been bound for catastrophe.

But now, we were poised to launch a fight with a reasonably high probability of victory. Time was playing into Lortel's favor. The deadline would likely be from tonight until tomorrow afternoon.

Upon receiving news of Lortel's carriage escaping Aken Island, Elte would be restless.

In a situation where every hour counted, he wouldn't have the luxury of thoroughly scouring Aken Island.

Pursuing the absconded carriage, attempting to track Lortel's actions based on the carriage's path, would likely be a waste of precious time.

Even if he quickly apprehended a driver and extorted Lortel's location, he would be running late by the time he needed to return to Aken Island. His inability to resolve matters at Ophelis Hall had become a grave mistake in retrospect.

Hopefully, upon my return to the cabin, Lortel would be waiting.

With these thoughts propelling me, I noticed a girl at the edge of the gentle slope.

Her typically lustrous, flaming auburn hair seemed dull, likely due to the previous night's tribulations.

Her hair, usually neatly gathered to one side, was now disheveled. Despite the rain having ceased quite some time ago, her soaked body didn't seem to dry.

This was a girl who had lived her entire life in the realm of the wealthy, perpetually weighing gains and losses—aptly dubbed the Golden Daughter.

She donned a hooded robe that obscured her face.

"Ah, you came out to meet me? That's surprisingly thoughtful."

I tossed out the remark, but no reply came.

The girl seemed utterly exhausted, staggering along the forest path.

The rain had stopped, and the clouds had cleared, casting moonlit shadows. As a result, her expression remained hidden.

Then, from within her robes, she drew a silver dagger, its blade gleaming sharply.

A shiver ran down my spine.

".....What?"

Had she snatched up one of the daggers that Shenny was using? Since I had managed to restrain Shenny and then hightailed it through the back door, she would have had more than enough time to grab it.

Maybe she brought the dagger as a precaution, considering magic would be too conspicuous.

I shook my head.

Don't kid yourself. That's wishful thinking.

I tried to backpedal, but my wounded body couldn't manage more than a small step.

Right. Had I let my guard down?

The adversary was none other than the notorious Golden Daughter, Lortel.

She was the sort to use people as tools and then discard them with ruthless efficiency when they were no longer useful.

Indeed, from Lortel's perspective... now was the perfect time to eliminate Ed Rosetail.

No matter what had happened to Elte, anyone aware of the true intentions behind the occupation of Ophelis Hall and its connection to the Elte company, needed to be dealt with.

She had five humans on her payroll.

Ellis, Shenny, Kelly, Willian, and me, Ed.

Even if she successfully toppled Elte, she'd have to silence these five permanently.

Ellis was the sort of person who prioritized profit. She might be a traitor now, but she could be trusted to stay quiet if the price was right. Her betrayal was likely due to a difference in financial compensation.

If Elte were to be overthrown, Ellis would have no choice but to align with Lortel. As long as his predicament was evident, he could be exploited to the fullest.

Shenny and Kelly were maids who would obey Ellis' directives. If Ellis was on board, the two would undoubtedly stay silent.

Willian, a representative of the less privileged students, had been in Lortel's pocket from the start. Originally a voice for the less fortunate, he was likely the easiest to manipulate with a little cash.

The only unpredictable factor left was Ed Rosetail.

Initially, she thought my loyalty could be purchased, but now she was less certain.

There was always the risk of another surprise attack if she tried to anticipate my next move.

We were in a remote corner of the northern forest.

During the confusion surrounding the Ophelis Hall incident, it was far from prying eyes.

The opponent was battered and bruised, barely on her feet.

In her hand was, oddly enough, a sharp dagger.

She was a girl who seized even the smallest opportunity, embodying avarice.

No one knew better than me that she wouldn't let such a chance slip by.

Stay cool-headed.

I can handle this.

Just as I am drained, she's also running on fumes, and since she hasn't fully penetrated the forest's depths yet, if I can fend her off once, I might be able to make it to the faculty building.

Additionally, there were quite a few spirits in this forest who were in my corner. With their aid, I could at least throw a wrench in Lortel's actions once.

Okay, time to face the music. I'd been somewhat neglectful.

I had failed to anticipate the ripple effects while trying to tackle a barrage of unforeseen variables hurled my way.

Regardless of the circumstances, I should never have lost sight of the true character of Lortel Keherun.

The battle for the 'Sage's Scripture' in Act 2, Chapter 10, precipitated by the Ophelis Hall takeover in Act 2, Chapter 3.

Had I already wiped from memory the image of Lortel that I saw at that critical juncture?

No matter how anyone spins it, Lortel Keherun is a devious woman who uses and discards people at will.

She stabbed her step-father in the back, toyed with the actions of Taylee and his crew, and finally bolted, holding all the aces.

The remnants of that scene where she stood in front of the school, smirking mischievously with the 'Sage's Scripture' in hand, bowing her head and smiling as she listened to Elte's anguished cries, was still etched in my mind.

I didn't have time for reminiscing. I had to strategize.

I tried to stir my uncooperative body.

Just as I was about to piece together a plausible escape plan.

-Huuk.

Using a dagger, Lortel tore her costly robe.

And with an unsteady gait, she stepped closer and said,

"Did you really have to get this banged up..."

She was dressing my wounds with the shredded cloth.

The look in her eyes then... was close to tears.

"I'll prop you up. I started a bonfire since the rain had stopped. Let's warm ourselves up first."

-Crackling, crackling.

"So, did everything go according to plan?"

"You're quite something, Ed."

The moon and stars took their usual places in the sky. The post-rain atmosphere felt unusually warm.

Seated across the crackling bonfire, cradling a mug and sporting a faint smile, she seemed to have snapped back to her foxy self.

"I made a solid promise to the horseman. He said he'd create a diversion and buy us some time, even if it cost him his life."

"He's that devoted? What did you do?"

"Do you want to know?"

Judging from her radiant smile, I could tell her methods weren't exactly kosher, so I decided not to probe further. She surely couldn't have taken his family hostage.

...Could she?

"Well, things didn't pan out exactly as planned... but, regardless, I owe you a lot, Ed. Thank you."

"Yeah."

"Ed, did you know? If this plan pulls through, I'll be one of the real power brokers in the Elte Merchant Guild."

Another elder merchant will hold the chairman's position, but she'll be the true power behind the throne, being the one who facilitated the current chairman's ascension.

"This is quite a big deal, isn't it? Making me owe you like this? Don't you feel like you've hit a jackpot? Aren't you a little proud of me?"

"..."

"Aw, couldn't you muster a better reaction?"

Despite her playful tone, her usual grin hiding her dark intentions was as reassuring as ever.

Lortel chuckled softly, took a sip of her herbal tea from the mug... then deliberately softened her voice.

"Thank you, Ed. I'll never forget."

"Make sure you pay the agreed 20 gold coins on time."

"Hahaha, well... that goes without saying."

She held a constant smile, no matter her mood. As she fixed her gaze on me, I felt unnervingly under it.

"There's something else I've been meaning to ask you, Ed."

"What? More issues for you to sort out? Is it about Ellis?"

"No, not that. I'll handle Ellis... I'm referring to Yenika."

Effortlessly changing the subject is a skill as second nature to a merchant as breathing.

"You and Yenika are pretty tight, aren't you, Ed?"

At her question, I tilted my head slightly, then responded.

"Yeah, we're close. She's a good kid."

"She's certainly kind and a remarkable senior, I respect her. She's always looking out for others, truly a heart of gold."

"Yeah. So what?"

On that note, Lortel's gaze shifted from her tea to the sky. The view from the northern forest bank was, as always, expansive and clear.

The rain had ceased. As if she was glad for it, or as if she wanted someone to acknowledge it.

"I'm not as kind as she is."

She muttered, cradling her mug, and gradually closed her eyes.

* * *

-Kwaah!

The first floor of Ophelis Hall was more than half destroyed, it was totally in ruins.

Ziggs Ebelstein had wrapped up the battle. Elte's hired mercenaries were far from impressive.

Right from the get-go, they didn't seem to be directly under Elte's payroll. If a troop of mercenaries of that caliber showed up, even Ziggs would struggle. Quantity does have a quality of its own.

However, the mercenaries' training was so deficient that Ziggs and Yenika alone could aptly defend Ophelis Hall.

'Were these guys drafted in haste? Either the situation was desperate, or he didn't want to raise any eyebrows with his absence.'

As Ziggs mused on this, he took a seat on a nearby pile of rubble.

'Somehow... I have a hunch I'll have to fight again. I'm a bit uneasy about the maid. There's definitely something up.'

Although he didn't feel particularly rejuvenated, considering the situation, he didn't have much of a choice.

"Phew, you've done well, Yenika."

Ed's abrupt call for help left him clueless about the situation, but it seemed like the job itself was handled appropriately.

Elte suddenly received a message from his aide and darted off in a flash. He appeared to have lost all interest in Ophelis Hall.

Could it be that things fell right into Ed Rosetail's lap? He'll need a full rundown next time.

Harboring these thoughts, Ziggs shifted his gaze to Yenika.

"..."

There was a girl among the Mid-Rank Spirits. At first, she looked concerned, but as the battle waged on, the spirits' morale surged impressively.

Concerned that this might put him into harm's way, Ziggs found himself constantly cautioning Yenika to pull in the reins.

"Yenika?"

From Ziggs' perspective, all he could see was Yenika's back. There was a playful glint to her, which made Ziggs swallow hard for a moment.

"...Yenika, what's up? You seem pissed?"

"No."

The girl responded with a weak smile.

"I'm not pissed."

However, due to the cross-shaped streak of blood that was on her face, Ziggs felt uneasy about continuing the dialogue.

CHAPTER 40

Clara, a sophomore in the Magic Department and one of Yenika's close pals, had been hanging around the half-wrecked Ophelis Hall since dawn. She had someone she wanted to meet up with.

It'd been a day since the Ophelis Hall takeover had wreaked some serious havoc. While the specifics were still being sorted out, gossip was floating around among the students that the maids might've had a hand in it.

Clara figured the rumor might not be completely baseless. The truth, however, would be left up to the school's investigative team.

"Wow."

The scene of disaster recovery at the demolished Ophelis Hall.

Only forty-eight hours had passed so they hadn't really started the rebuilding efforts, but school personnel and maids were hustling about, sizing up the damages.

Stumbling upon Bell Meiya, who was busy scribbling notes at the entrance to the rose garden, Clara stifled a gasp.

Bell Meiya was decked out in a fiery red maid's uniform decked with extravagant trims. The blue rose-shaped brooch at her chest and the blue frills along her skirt's hem were unmistakably... reserved only for the Chief Maid.

"You must be Yenika's good friend. What brings you to Ophelis Hall?"

"Hey, Miss Bell. Did you, by chance, get a promotion?"

"Miss Ellis had to step down from her Chief Maid duties, so as the senior maid, I've temporarily stepped in."

Public sentiment around Ophelis Hall made it clear she'd eventually drop the temporary part and fully take on the Chief Maid title, but Bell wasn't particularly keen on the idea.

"Ah, I see. You seemed to have moved up the ranks..."

"Don't be put off. Our primary duty is to serve. So, if you need anything, just give me a shout."

"No, it's just... I wanted to talk about something personal... You seem super busy, though."

"Hmm... you're not wrong."

Bell glanced at her to-do list, snuck a peek at the trashed Ophelis Hall, and then shook her head.

"I've pretty much wrapped up the bulk of my tasks, and I don't need to dish out more instructions, so I was actually about to take a breather."

"Really?"

"What did you want to talk about?"

"Well... brace yourself. This is hush-hush. You absolutely can't let it slip, and you can't act shocked."

Clara put on a stern face, then sidled up to Bell and began to speak in earnest.

Bell lent her ear, curious about what bombshell Clara was about to drop that needed such caution.

"I think... Yenika has a thing for Ed... Yeah, that Ed Rosetail."

Bell pondered whether she should feign surprise at a fact that was glaringly obvious.

"I just can't wrap my head around why Yenika would fall so hard for that jerk... As her friend, it really throws me for a loop."

The scene had shifted to a bench in the Rose Garden. Clara, who couldn't help but glance around frequently to make sure no one was nearby, finally spilled her longstanding worry to Bell.

"I mulled it over for three days straight, and, well... I admit Ed's standing has been on

the upswing lately, and I figured Yenika must have her reasons, so I resolved to back her. It's insanely nerve-racking, though."

As Clara went on with her detailed vent, Bell simply let it wash over her, thinking how fortunate Yenika was to have such a devoted friend. It was rare to find someone who fretted so much over a friend's personal affairs.

Meddling like that could easily go south if not carefully balanced, but Clara managed to strike that balance while genuinely caring about Yenika's love life.

"If Yenika sees it that way... I genuinely hope things pan out between her and Ed, as her friend."

"I understand. Miss Clara must have wrestled with a lot of worries."

"But... that's not the real issue here!"

As Bell furrowed her brow in confusion, Clara threw out the name of another girl.

"Lortel Keherun! That name rings a bell, doesn't it? You were a senior maid at Ophelis Hall!"

"...Yes, certainly."

"Of late, Yenika keeps dropping that name. She's a freshman, and supposedly, they've interacted quite a bit since the joint combat training. But something's off."

Clara shot another look around, then whispered confidentially to Bell.

"So, I did a bit of digging, and, well, they both blew off the opening ceremony, and they both skipped the first class yesterday. Given Yenika's response... I think Yenika's in a tight spot."

Indeed, the emergence of a rival can feel like a catastrophe to a girl... but Bell's initial reaction was that this might be a misinterpretation.

"Yenika's spoken highly of you to me, Miss Bell. She's said she leans on you a lot and you always dispense sage advice... You have a keen understanding of things."

"That's blowing it out of proportion."

"Plus, Bell, you not only know Yenika but also that Lortel girl... So, I came to get your take on things."

"Miss Lortel is a pretty well-known figure, Miss Clara, don't you know her too?"

Gossip about Lortel, the Golden Daughter, must have circulated among the student body.

"I know. But based on the snippets I've seen... I don't see a chance for Yenika..."

"I think Miss Yenika is quite appealing in her own right."

"Of course, I think so too. But that Lortel girl..."

Clara's voice trailed off, but Bell nodded in understanding.

True, Lortel Keherun was a crafty girl. Always playing the rebellious card, acting sophisticated, but never missing a beat to showcase her true, darker side. Clara had seen it firsthand.

Not having led a sheltered life as a merchant, she must've mastered the art of managing relationships and winning over people.

"I don't exactly have a ton of experience with romance... But when you boil it down, relationships between men and women are all about give and take..."

At Clara's lament, all Bell could do was nod in agreement.

Yenika Faelover, with her spirited and vivacious demeanor, was all about giving, but didn't know when to take.

On the flip side, what about Lortel? If she hadn't learned to set a pace in her relationships, she wouldn't have made it as a merchant.

Despite Yenika's inherent allure, she appeared lost when faced with Lortel's sly maneuvers, constantly giving without any return...

Clara balled her hands into fists.

"We can't stand by and let this happen! So... I think Yenika also needs to grasp the

concept of give and take!"

"..."

"I really want to drill this idea into Yenika. It's bad enough that her youthful charm is being eclipsed by someone a year younger, but to have her potential beau snatched away, too. If Ed were a lousy guy and she ended up heartbroken, at least that'd be a life lesson... but losing a chance at love only leaves wounds!"

Clara was letting out her pent-up frustrations. Bell wanted to cheer her on, but she stopped herself from giving an undue reaction. It was touching to see her friend worry so much over someone else's life.

"What do you think, Bell?! I've heard you're always sensible!"

Those fiery eyes were now trained on Bell. Truth be told, Bell was in a bit of a bind.

"Well, I'm not sure..."

After all, she was quite familiar with Ed, Yenika, and Lortel. In comparison to Clara's somewhat skewed perspective, she could look at the situation more impartially.

"I believe... we shouldn't pressure Yenika to act out of character."

"...You think so?"

"Also, your assumptions might be prejudiced, Clara. Yenika could be tougher than you give her credit for, and Lortel might not be as smooth in handling relationships as you think."

"...Hmm... that's tough to swallow..."

Butting in their romantic affairs wouldn't do any good. That was Bell's takeaway, and she had no plans to add fuel to Clara's already abundant worries.

"From the get-go, I can't figure that guy Ed out! He's either an impregnable fortress or a cunning, scheming wolf!"

In the end, Clara's ire was squarely aimed at Ed Rosetail.

"It's maddening that he doesn't acknowledge Yenika, even when she's making her feelings so blatantly obvious!"

"...Hmm. As for Sir Ed... rather than being a fortress or a wolf... I think he might just have a tough time being drawn into romance..."

Ed Rosetail led a solitary existence, setting up his homestead in the northern forest, and taking care of his everyday needs by himself.

Bell would occasionally share some food, herbs, and medicinal materials with him... but fundamentally, he was a self-sufficient man.

Juggling all the coursework at the academy, he had to break his day down into hours just to scrape by.

If he let his focus slip toward a woman for even a few days, he'd be left starving, his provisions dwindling to nothing. Plus, autumn was rolling in, and winter wouldn't be far behind. He had a laundry list of preparations to make.

"No way. His popularity might be down to sheer luck... but I'm willing to bet if we take a peek behind the curtain, he's probably drowning in it. Just the thought gives me the shivers!"

"..."

Bell didn't really chime in, but just let Clara vent, her fist shaking as she rattled off complaints. Sometimes, a good rant can feel like a problem solved.

Bell narrowed her eyes slightly and considered Ed's circumstances. The guy seemed too caught up in survival to bask in his popularity. If anything, he seemed to prefer flying under the radar.

When she pictured the women crowding around the boy, all she could see were felines.

Lortel Keherun struck her as a shifty alley cat eyeing a seafood market.

Yenika Faelover was like a naive kitten trembling before a tiger.

And Lucy... she was just your average housecat.

Regardless, Bell could see the tight spot Ed was in amidst this motley crew, and she sent silent words of support his way, despite knowing they wouldn't reach him.

She figured she ought to carve out some time to drop by Ed's camp soon.

Seeing Clara so wound up, she wanted to get a firsthand look... and there was also a message from Chief Maid Eliss she needed to deliver.

Not exactly a morale booster, though.

* * *

The day was a beauty for once. I splashed some stream water on my face beside the camp and resolved to review my life skills.

[Life Ability Details]

Rank: Intermediate Craftsman

Specialty: Carpentry

Hand Skill Lv 13

Design Lv 8

Gathering Ability Lv 11

Carpentry Lv 12

Hunting Lv 8

Fishing Lv 6

Cooking Lv 6

Sewing Lv 5

< Advanced Production Skill Slot: Empty >

< Advanced Production Skill Slot: Empty >

Now that I've unlocked the advanced production skill slot, nabbing skills in this area is my prime objective.

I've already set my sights on the skills I want to acquire.

I intend to learn Spirit Infusion, which pairs nicely with Spirit Magic, and Magical Engineering, which is handy for crafting convenience and battle items.

Spirit Infusion is automatically gained once you create a product imbued with Spirit Magic via a spirit contract, and Magical Engineering is unlocked when you successfully deconstruct and reconstruct a product of a certain caliber.

Their unlocking process is more straightforward compared to combat and magic skills, meaning I can learn them swiftly. This is the perk of production skills.

I don't want to squander my spirit slots needlessly, but if I want to get a jump on Spirit Infusion training, maybe I should contract with a lesser spirit...

"In that case, spirits with elements I can't control, like earth or water, might be ideal."

Once I start engaging with spirits seriously, my spirit sense skill proficiency should start to climb, and with solid magical stats to back it up, I might get to contract with higher ranked spirits sooner than I thought.

I should probably seek Yenika's guidance on this matter.

I'm not feeling too hot. My head's spinning, and I've been avoiding any heavy lifting. The Ophelis Hall fiasco really did a number on my vitality.

What can I say... it was a necessary sacrifice.

Still, I managed to keep Lortel, a pivotal figure in this whole scenario, from losing, and considering there hasn't been any significant reaction from the Elte camp, it seems our strategy has made an impact.

The rest of the battle needs to be fought at the Elte Merchant Guild, so all we can do is sit tight and wait for a messenger bird bearing good news to come our way.

"Hey, Ed! It's got a bit nippy since the rain let up!"

"Hey there, Yenika."

Yenika still dropped by the camp daily, hauling a variety of foodstuffs.

"Is Lortel holding up?"

"Yeah. She's getting some rest in the cabin."

I'd filled Yenika in on the whole story.

After I laid out Lortel's situation and her need to lay low for a while, Yenika, with a grave look on her face, gave a nod and started checking in every day to see how Lortel was doing.

However, the academic year had kicked off, and the second-year syllabus was underway.

Lortel won't join the classes until her safety is guaranteed, and I've been stuck adjusting the size of Ziggs' uniform to fit me since mine's gone. It was quite the ordeal to make it to class before the adjustments were done.

Both Lortel and I couldn't attend class until things started to look up. But even without those issues, Yenika spent the whole day at the camp poring over magic books.

"Yenika, aren't you hitting the books?"

"Hmm? My head's pounding, and I can barely muster any strength. I'm planning to unwind with a little fresh air in the northern forest. I gave my professor a heads-up, and he told me to prioritize my health."

"Really? You're not feeling under the weather because you've been helping me, are you?"

"Nope, not in the slightest. Ed, you focus on your thing. I'm gonna soak in the forest vibes and head back when it's time."

Yenika, all talk and no action, didn't show any signs of illness.

She spent the day perched on a log by the campfire with her nose in a book, from

time to time shooting a glance towards the cabin as if she was keeping tabs on it, almost like a watchful sentinel.

It looks like Yenika's not entirely sold on trusting Lortel. Can't blame her, considering Lortel's colorful past.

"I understand, Senior Ed. Shame you can't spill all the beans... but I'm relieved the debt seems to have been squared away."

As dusk settled in, Ziggs, who'd come to check up on the previous night's happenings, assisted me in chopping some firewood off to the side. I gave him a concise rundown of the events when he asked.

"Well, seems like the mess we made in Ophelis Hall has been swept under the carpet. The building was already halfway to ruin, so our little bout of destruction likely didn't make a noticeable difference."

"And the student punishments?"

"That upperclassman, Williann, seems to have shouldered most of the blame, but a decent number of students copped minor disciplinary actions too. The Chief Maid is still being grilled, but she's not giving anything up."

Given there was no mention of Lortel, it seemed the Chief Maid, Ellis, was still keeping her lips sealed. If she was trying to back the winning horse between Elte and Lortel, she wouldn't be singing like a canary just yet.

I had to reach out to her as soon as it was safe to do so.

"Right. In any case, I owe you one for this."

"No sweat. Just give me a holler if you need anything else. Catch you later."

I watched Ziggs wave as he left the forest, then tossed my axe nearby and let out a heavy sigh.

The ideal scenario was for Lortel, who was holed up in the cabin, to stay put indoors as much as possible.

Just divvy up some grub and kill time until the news of victory comes in, then resume

regular life.

Nothing should go sideways until then.

Craving tranquility, I settled into the forest where hints of autumn were beginning to waft in the air, and took a breather.

Most of my wounds had healed up and weren't bothering me much.

* * *

The cabin's quiet interior was soothing.

Propped against the coarse wall, Lortel sat in silence, waiting for time to trickle by.

The Ophelis Hall takeover incident was behind us, but Lortel still had a laundry list of tasks to tackle.

First up was trying to win over the former Chief Maid, Ellis, once again.

Rumor had it, Ellis was keeping mum in front of her interrogators. Caught in a toss-up between Elte and Lortel, she planned to hold her tongue until the winner was clear.

Secondly, she had to lay the groundwork for negotiating the acquisition of the 'Sage's Scripture'.

Elte's tumble from grace happened earlier than expected, but the chance to acquire the 'Sage's Scripture' had presented itself, and this opportunity couldn't be passed up. If the plan panned out, Lortel's standing in the Elte Merchant Guild would be unassailable, even by the Merchant Guild's head.

Although it was hectic at the moment, a response had to come from the Elte Merchant Guild headquarters before any moves could be made. As things stood, laying low in the northern forest, only once safety was guaranteed could one resume their role as a Sylvanian Academy student.

For roughly three days, no matter how swamped she was, Lortel had to put her merchant life on pause and spend her time in this cabin. It was somewhat frustrating, but thanks to Ed, who was ensuring everything was taken care of and

checking for any hiccups, it at least felt somewhat comforting.

Despite being thrust into a rustic cabin life after a lifestyle of luxury, she wasn't feeling particularly sour... She reckoned the companionship of the boy with her had a lot to do with that.

Being by Ed Rosetail's side set her heart aflutter.

His unreserved warmth and trust was as comforting as sinking into a plush bed.

For Lortel, who was raised on the cold, unyielding streets, this sentiment was worth more than gold.

Understandably, it wasn't something she wanted to share.

Especially not with Yenika Faelover.

Yenika's life was akin to the protagonist in a storybook, where relationships founded on unwavering warmth and trust were commonplace.

Whether it was family or friends, she had them in spades. The sort of warm connection where simply being together assured that there would never be betrayal. This privilege was as common to her as pebbles on a path.

With so much of it around, surely she could afford to let go of just one, right?

However you spin it, there's no comprehending that logic.

What follows is nothing short of a dirty, no-holds-barred brawl. Fortunately, that was Lortel's wheelhouse.

And to top it off, three days of living under the same roof? What a staggeringly perfect upper hand.

"Hmm..."

But how exactly does a relationship between a man and a woman develop?

She had orchestrated countless interpersonal relations, but there was no assurance that the same tactics would work for a delicate relationship between a man and a

woman.

Indeed. She had survived the cutthroat world of business, sizing up people based on their worth alone. As a result, she was clueless about how a man and woman in a romantic relationship might progress.

Taking a step back to assess herself, she mused at the irony of her predicament... Yet, true to Lortel's nature, she didn't let it deter her.

"I'll do it my own way."

She whispered, plotting her own strategy.

After all, the quickest route to gain human favor was through wealth.

If she flooded this humble shack with gold coins, wouldn't he regard her with starry eyes?

"I'm strapped for cash..."

She had already invested heavily in various ventures, which impacted Lortel's personal coffers. That said, offloading a few villas in the Minae region or land titles in the suburbs might give her the resources for a similar display.

But picturing Ed Rosetail with avaricious eyes was a stretch, and she soon dismissed the idea.

A relationship founded on wealth could never foster tenderness. Merely envisioning Ed gazing at her with such eyes, grinning out of pure greed, was heartrending.

Yet, doing nothing didn't seem like the right move either.

Judging by a day in Ed's life, it was clear he lived a grueling existence. Each moment, he battled tooth and nail for survival.

Before her selfish yearning for affection and love... a gentle desire to lend a hand without expecting anything in return sprouted.

But she was apprehensive that it could be mistaken for pity, and wary that the relationship might end up being centered solely on money... Lortel stumbled in her

indecision.

"Ha... What about helping with tuition?"

Wouldn't it be acceptable if she offered that much cash without it seeming like unnecessary pity?

As a girl who'd never made such a proposition before, she struggled with what she'd say as she handed over the money. If she had to muster an example of a line that crossed her mind...

'Don't, don't misunderstand. It's not like I'm doing this just for you, senior!'

Lortel felt like she was going to implode with embarrassment and repeatedly thumped the wall of the simple cabin. It wasn't just humiliation. For some reason, the line felt incredibly dated.

Hadn't she spent her entire life masking her cunning intentions behind a crafty grin? She was ill-prepared to live a life laid bare for such a trivial cause, unable to show her face anywhere.

She composed herself with a deep breath. The persona of a cool, calculating mogul who saw through other people's weaknesses with a teasing, playful attitude emerged once more.

"..."

If she wasn't certain about how to navigate a relationship between a man and a woman, she should just dive in headfirst.

After all, Ed didn't view Lortel as a woman to begin with. The evolution of a relationship hinged on a shift in perception, so she had to change that perception first.

Lortel conceived of a 'plan' and, seeming to have made her decision, nodded.

She was oblivious to just how radical this 'plan' would turn out to be at this stage.

As stated earlier, Lortel was adept at manipulating the human psyche, but when it came to sincere, tender relations between men and women, even Yenika would be

put to shame by her awkwardness.

"So... specifically..."

However, she needed some time to devise a concrete plan. But being cooped up in the cabin for three days gave her plenty of time to ponder.

With a meticulously drafted plan, she was confident she could quickly outdo Yenika.

With a sly grin, Lortel hugged her knees.

"...Can you move? That's my spot."

However, there was an unforeseen factor, the presence of a new girl.

"...Huh?"

"Yawn..."

The oversized witch hat, the school uniform with too-long sleeves, and the white pigtail locks that cascaded past her waist were unmistakable. She was one of the trio from Class A, whom Lortel often bumped into in Professor Glast's class.

Whether the girl slipped in through the shack's roof, or used some form of teleportation magic, her entrance surprised her.

"...Lucy...? What are you doing here..."

"This spot gets the best sunlight."

With that, Lucy nudged Lortel aside, flung a few deer skins, and settled down. She curled up and promptly fell asleep.

"..."

Lortel rubbed her face in bewilderment.

"...What's the deal with her...?"

CHAPTER 41

Even for Lortel, who had encountered a myriad of unique personalities, the girl named Lucy Mayril was an absolute enigma.

Often seen meandering through the campus, she'd occasionally be caught napping in sunlit patches. One could dismiss her as just quirky.

But then there were the instances of her tussling with high-ranking spirits on a mountain peak in the northwest of the island, or taking down a sea beast the size of a house with a mere gesture in the eastern sea...

Her extraordinary prowess was routinely showcased, and tales of her exploits frequently made their way to Lortel's attention.

However, during the Glaskan fiasco or the Ophelis Hall incident, she didn't even bother to intervene, choosing to nap in some corner instead. There were limits to going with the flow, after all.

Right from the start, Lortel had been unable to dig up any background information on Lucy Mayril.

Her origins were a mystery, as was her life before joining Sylvanian Academy.

What was more puzzling was why someone who could potentially level a city single-handedly was even attending the academy.

She was a notorious slacker who showed up for class mostly to sleep, and her instructor, Professor Glast, never intervened.

There was no sign that he had any intention of teaching her. Ziggs once reported Lucy's behavior to Professor Glast, who responded, 'That student is beyond my capacity to teach. If she needs any insight, she's the type to figure it out on her own'.

How could a professor, whose job it was to guide students, utter something like that? Eventually, Ziggs and Lortel had no choice but to let Lucy's idiosyncrasies slide.

Honestly, it was slightly annoying, but Lucy never caused any problems for Lortel. In fact, they hardly ever interacted.

She was like a feral cat, aimlessly roaming the campus with a vacant gaze, eating when she was hungry and sleeping when tired.

Once, she contemplated forming a connection with her, intrigued by her tremendous power. But the more she observed, the more she realized she was beyond her control, and she'd abandoned that idea a long time ago.

Reflecting on this, she was fairly certain she had grown accustomed to this girl named Lucy.

"Ughhhhh!"

-Whoosh

Ed scooped up Lucy's body, tossed it over his shoulder, and dumped her into a wooden lean-to outside. Then he swung the door open and reentered.

"Ah, sorry. You're awake, Lortel. Lucy sneaked into the cabin. I've handled it now, so you can relax."

Ed, casually mopping the sweat off his brow, had the look of someone who'd just completed a long-overdue cleaning task.

The second morning of Lortel's life in the cabin had dawned.

The first day had passed in a whirl.

For the first time in her life, she'd bathed in a creek, sat awkwardly in a corner of the cabin wrapped in a threadbare blanket while her wet clothes dried, savored the unexpected warmth of a fish meal thoughtfully prepared by Ed, and reveled in the romanticism of gazing up at a star-studded sky... It was hard to encapsulate all the thrilling and novel experiences in a single sentence.

Living as a fugitive meant she couldn't step out much. She mostly hunkered down in her shack, but even within these confines, there was a peculiar sense of contentment. The bare wooden floor was comfortable enough for a restful sleep, a luxury she seldom experienced these days.

Still, this life in seclusion wasn't entirely idyllic. Yes, being on the run added to the complications, but dealing with her natural adversaries was the real nuisance.

"Yenika is supposed to swing by in the morning. She'll probably curl up by the fire with a book before getting into some spirit training. If you need something, just ask her."

Yenika had stubbornly hung around until just before last night's roll call at Dex Hall.

Seeing her head back to the northern forest early this morning, it appeared she planned to stay at the camp for the full three days of my visit.

Whenever their paths crossed outside, she'd flash her the most radiant and heartwarming smile. In return, she'd muster up a genuine smile of her own, forging a silent bond between them.

Throughout these three days when she took a respite from her merchant life, Yenika was her lone adversary.

...Or so she'd thought.

"Does Lucy frequent the camp, senior?"

"Just think of her as a natural calamity."

"..."

An instinct, unique to her, hinted that something was amiss.

Reflecting on Lucy's recent antics, it seemed like she was spending an inordinate amount of time at the camp.

Whenever opportunity knocked, she would hover around Ed, swipe a few pieces of dried meat from the rack, then doze off on the roof of the shack or ramble about inconsequential matters while lounging on a rock near where Ed was splitting firewood.

Lucy, by all accounts, was hardly a rational person. But that was just the lay of the land.

Even Ed seemed to accept her ubiquitous presence at the camp as part of the daily routine. He'd find her at his elbow, forever griping. Wasn't this quite perilous?

A shift in perception often drives the evolution of a relationship between a man and a woman. If Lucy were to change her tune, or display jealousy or possessiveness towards Ed... This could morph into a catastrophe far different than Yenika. In fact, it might be even more draining.

One of the numerous lessons from her life in the merchant world was this: when you identify a potential calamity, it's prudent to nip it in the bud.

However, the means to do so posed a conundrum. If asked, "How?" she'd be at a loss for words.

"It might get a bit noisy, but please bear with me. I've got my hands full too."

With that, Ed commenced stacking bricks he'd procured from God knows where.

Lortel nodded stiffly, her gaze wandering towards the wooden shelter visible through the open door.

Clothes were scattered everywhere, in utter disarray.

Catching sight of Lucy, sound asleep with a half-chewed piece of jerky hanging from her lips, didn't exactly portray an image of jealousy or possessiveness.

Lortel found herself questioning if she had been a bit too reactive, as it was evident that Lucy had always steered clear of such sentiments.

Regardless, given Lucy's whimsical nature, it was challenging for Lortel to make sense of her through the lens of normal human behavior.

Sure, a degree of caution wouldn't go amiss, but there was no cause to overdo it and wear herself out.

The dynamics of Ed and Lucy's relationship were squarely their affair, and Lortel didn't need to insert herself into the mix. Besides, trying to regulate someone in a relationship that was yet to take a romantic turn would only lead to exhaustion.

After a bout of self-reflection, Lortel nodded and reclined against the cabin wall.

Perhaps her unfamiliar twinge of jealousy had led her to over-sensitize the situation. Her out-of-character conduct now appeared almost comical, and she inadvertently cracked a smile.

Hugging her knees and resting her chin atop them, she covertly observed Ed, engrossed in scrutinizing the brick in his hand.

A chuckle escaped her, but she quickly lowered her head, unwilling to compromise her reputation as a savvy, sharp-witted merchant by revealing this side of herself.

At this juncture, that image was Lortel's most potent weapon.

In any case, there was no point getting worked up over Ed's interpersonal relationships.

She had all the time in the world.

* * *

[New Completed Product]

A handmade brick, crafted by filling a mold with clay, letting it thoroughly dry, then baking it with Ignition magic.

Production Difficulty: ●●○○○ [Production completed. Your proficiency has increased.]

[You have learned the Stonecraft skill. Your proficiency gain will be amplified due to your Dexterity stat.]

[New Completed Product]

Brick Fireplace: A fireplace constructed with handmade bricks. Although it lacks sturdiness due to the joints being bound with clay, it appears functional enough. An indoor installation would necessitate the addition of a flue. (TL Note: A Flue is a duct for smoke and waste gases produced by a fire, a gas heater, a power station, or other fuel-burning installation.)

Production Difficulty: ●●●○○ [Production completed. Your proficiency has increased.]

- Crackle, crackle.

I had devoted my entire morning to this task, but time hadn't allowed for the construction of the chimney. I'd need to reserve the afternoon or evening for that.

Regardless, the end product was quite pleasing, boosting my spirit for the first time in a while. The day I could move into the cabin was fast approaching.

A stable living environment. That was a truly dreamy concept.

"My, what a unique aroma. Did you throw in some basil?"

"Bell handed me some the other day. But you picked up on that just by sniffing?"

"I take great pride in my nose, you know."

As Lortel hummed away, Yenika squinted, and then there was me. The three of us huddled around the fire, getting lunch ready.

We carved the fish, its freshness teetering on the edge, into fillets, roasted them on a stone slab, and flavored them with an assortment of spices. Quite the feast indeed.

My culinary skill proficiency was on a consistent upswing, with access to a variety of ingredients significantly enhancing my diet.

While I was still surviving on wild food... the flavor seemed to improve with each passing day, which was a real boon. Once the cabin was ready, it struck me as a good plan to try my hand at cultivating a few seasonal veggies.

As I forked a piece of meat into my mouth, the succulent taste made my taste buds sing.

"Given the absence of any significant activity from them until now, I believe our plan is proceeding without a hitch."

Lortel commented, artfully speaking around her measured bites. Yenika remained silent, her mouth firmly shut as if nursing a sour mood.

"All that remains is to await the declaration of victory."

"Precisely. It's positive news, yet we mustn't slacken our vigilance."

"Understood. Senior Ed."

Flashing a wide smile, Lortel voiced these words in an unusually upbeat tone.

"However, we've still got a heap of chores to tackle. There's the clean-up job, and we need to sort out your remuneration, Senior Ed."

"Aren't twenty gold coins a trifling sum for your purse?"

"I ensure complete settlement of my dues, no matter how minuscule. After all, I am a merchant. Would you rather have something other than cash, Senior? Something from what's left in our branch warehouse, perhaps?"

"Hmm. I'd hate to end up with useless stuff if I opt for goods, so no."

"Don't say that."

Lortel twirled a lock of her hair and let out a hearty laugh.

"I assured you I wouldn't trick you, Senior. Why so paranoid?"

"Hmm... Off the top of my head, the only things I could use are... construction materials or... yes, surplus magic engineering supplies?"

"Magic engineering supplies?"

I had already pinpointed the high-level skills I wished to hone in the production sector: Magic engineering and spirit infusion.

Especially, hands-on experience with an array of magic engineering supplies could vastly boost my skill proficiency in that area. Having someone supply them would undoubtedly streamline things.

"Forget their practical use, just the cheap leftovers."

"Hmm..."

Lortel rested her hand on her chin, appearing lost in contemplation.

"Take a look at your inventory later and let me know."

"No, I'll mull it over now. I've practically got it all memorized."

"You've committed it all to memory?"

"Being privy to the stock movement report every day, the items that remain constant end up etched in my mind."

Well, it wasn't a pressing matter that required immediate attention, so there wasn't a need to ruminate too hard on it, but Lortel surprisingly took my request quite seriously.

"But why did you specifically ask for less popular and inexpensive items?"

"Well, I don't intend to use them for anything particularly useful, and it would be absurd to request pricey items and end up indebted or burdened."

"Ah, well, if that's the case... let me mull it over..."

Lortel responded with a soft smile, requested a brief pause, and then slipped into deep thought. I waited patiently for a minute or two...

But as her pondering stretched on, I reached for the food once again.

"On another note, Yenika. Something just crossed my mind, a question I'd like to ask."

"Wh-what?!"

Yenika, who had been quietly eating fish, jolted. Noticing that she seemed to have choked in surprise, I quickly handed her some water.

"Hehehe!"

"..."

"A favor?"

I spent a moment deciding how best to bring up the subject, then concluded that there was no need for unnecessary beating around the bush and stated the matter

plainly.

"Of late, I've been practicing spirit magic and am considering forming a pact with a minor spirit. So, I wondered if you might be able to assist with that."

"You wants to make a pact with a spirit?"

"Correct."

Yenika toyed with her braided hair as she pondered over my request. Soon after, an "Aha!" escaped her lips as she nodded in comprehension.

"I remember Tarkan mentioning you quite often. He claimed his throat still ached thanks to Ed."

"..."

"No need to look so mortified, Ed. Despite Tarkan's tendency to hold a grudge, I ensured the matter was clarified. You had your reasons, so I firmly told him not to harbor any resentment!"

Witnessing Yenika's angry reaction - foot-stomping and cheek-puffing - was less intimidating and more endearing.

Starting a dispute with a High-Rank spirit wouldn't be a good idea...

But I didn't think it would escalate to a full-blown altercation.

"Tarkan hasn't fully regained his strength yet. But he recognizes that you stopped him from going berserk... Although he grumbles, I don't believe he truly resents you. It seems you've developed a decent 'Spirit Sense', Ed."

"That's true."

As a result of my intervention, not just Tarkan, but a range of spirits under Yenika's command were affected.

In truth, Yenika must be fully cognizant that I was left with no other option at the time.

Yenika, who still carried a noticeable sense of guilt about the incident, appeared reluctant to delve further into the subject.

"So... Can you see...?"

Unexpectedly, Yenika stretched out her arms and posed this question.

"...What?"

"Hmm... Your ability to perceive unmanifested spirits appears rather weak... What if you were to hold my hand, Ed?"

"Hand? Why would you want me to hold your hand all of a sudden?"

"...No, it's not like that! I want to show you something!"

With that, I accepted Yenika's hand without any hesitation.

"Wow, your hand is larger than I imagined, Ed."

"Your hand is just petite."

After making that observation, I closed my eyes for a moment. When I opened them, I was profoundly astounded.

"Fifty... fewer than usual though..."

Rabbits, eagles, deer, tigers, eagles, puppies, sparrows... An array of animals populated the space around us. Each creature differed in size and was composed of unique elements. It was an extraordinary sight.

A wind-formed sparrow perched on Yenika's shoulder, a charming baby boa constrictor made from liquid wrapped itself around her right arm, a dirt-shedding puppy cuddled at her feet, and a fiery deer nestled against Yenika's cheek.

"...Is this a typical occurrence?"

"Usually, they scatter around, but whenever I visit the Northern Forest, they tend to gather like this. Now, this snake here. You can see it clearly, can't you? It's a spirit that recently transitioned from a lesser spirit to a minor spirit."

"How many spirits are you in contract with anyway?"

"Huh? Well... Not all the spirits congregating here are contracted... hmm... One is a high-ranking spirit, six are mid-ranking spirits, and as for the minor spirits... I don't tally them individually. But I'm pretty confident it's a three-figure number."

The spirit slot granted upon reaching the minimum prerequisites in spirit sensing and understanding skills holds only two slots.

Truly fitting for a girl born with a nature beloved by spirits.

The spirits visible to the naked eye alone surpassed a dozen, and factoring in those I couldn't yet detect, what would that number be?

"Anyway, if you're interested in studying spirits, I could offer some guidance. However, I feel that my strength lies more in sensory perception rather than theoretical understanding... For pure magical theory, Ayla would be far more versed than me... But honing your sensory skills is far more vital for practical spirit magic..."

Taylee's companion Ayla may be vague in terms of total power but possesses a deep understanding of magic.

Given that the academic and sensory domains differ, Yenika is a spirit mage with highly honed senses.

When attempting to learn the complex field of spirit studies, assistance from a fellow spirit mage is invaluable.

No one in the sphere of spirit studies has sensory skills as finely tuned as Yenika's, at least not within Sylvanian.

"Anyway, given that you're contemplating your first contract, it seems your 'Spirit Sense' skills have advanced. You were an absolute beginner when we first met, but your progress has been impressive. Ed, you do seem to possess some talent."

Yenika must also be aware of why such rapid advancement was possible... Primarily, slaying Tarkan had a profound impact.

"Apart from that, I'm seeking your assistance with the sensory aspect. There are certain limitations to strictly academic spirit study classes."

"Sure thing! Don't sweat it!"

Yenika Faelover is a connection that's tough to establish deliberately. Having such a dependable classmate, I should capitalize on the opportunity.

Where else could I get personal tutoring from a spirit mage of this caliber? If I can leverage this opportunity... well, that's perhaps not the best phrasing.

In any case, Yenika is offering her help purely out of kindness.

"Then, consider me your mentor!"

Yenika declared, clearing her throat with a giggle.

Trying to appear authoritative, she planted her hands on her hips and puffed out her chest, yet her demeanor was more endearing than imposing.

I found myself getting swept up in Yenika's infectious enthusiasm, applauding lightly with a drawn-out, "Wow".

"Don't sweat it! I'll make sure to boost your spirit magic skills, Ed! I'll have you signing contracts with mid-tier spirits before you know it!"

Her hearty laughter and self-assured 'ahem!' made me feel appreciative, and I responded with an affirming nod.

"So, you're still finding it tough to communicate directly with spirits?"

"I believe my voice reaches the lower-tier spirits I occasionally encounter, but I struggle to understand their responses."

"Really? Hmm... Given your current level of magical proficiency, that seems odd. You've considerably improved your Spirit Sense and Mana Sense, haven't you?"

"...Yes, that's accurate."

"Could it be... the spirits aren't responding to you? Even if it's faint, you should be able to hear the whispers of the spirits..."

Yenika reached out her index finger to a sparrow resting on her shoulder.

The adorable little bird immediately hopped onto her extended finger.

"Kariss! Would you mind trying to converse with Ed?"

[Miss Yenika! I can't under... stand him...!]

Oh...! I could barely hear that...!

As I focused more on my magical sense, the voice began to resonate more clearly.

[To comprehend us, he needs to enhance his sensitivity a bit more!]

"Is that so? But Ed's progressing faster than anticipated."

[Think about his timetable! How much spare time does he have for magic practice! You're aware of it too, Miss Yenika! According to the last briefing during our weekly gathering via the Dex Hall 203 window, his food reserves are dwindling, and he's so engrossed in building the hut that he can't devote time to anythi... aaaaack!]

When Yenika interrupted the magic flow by placing her hand on the sparrow's head, the bird-shaped spirit was abruptly unsummoned and vanished.

".....Did you hear any of that?"

"Just bits and pieces?"

A moment of silence passed.

"...But, what's this about a weekly report meeting?"

"Well, the Northern Forest attracts a lot of spirits. So, they inform me about external changes, you see? And if something's bothering them? While there are some reports concerning you, Ed, you're not really the main subject. It's like they casually insert updates about you, sort of like a side note...? It feels like they're nonchalantly updating me about the neighbor they bumped into on their way...?"

".....I see."

Despite her somewhat meandering explanation being a tad distracting, the priority at the moment was figuring out the training approach for spirit-based magic.

"Anyway, I'll periodically gauge something like your 'Spirit Sense', Ed. Likely, I'm the most attuned in this sensory domain within the Academy. Few people have developed such a keen spirit sense to begin with."

"Sounds good to me, I'd appreciate that."

Having the assistance of a proficient spirit magician like Yenika could mean my spirit magic could truly skyrocket. It was great to have friends who were helpful in such ways.

Still, the part that nagged at me was the magical engineering...

"Oh, are you two done chatting?"

Lortel, still sporting a grin, broke into our conversation.

"Yes."

"So, to conclude our discussion about magical engineering supplies. We've got more excess inventory than anticipated, so we should be able to supply plenty."

This was, in its own way, good news.

"Furthermore, most of them are considered dead weight since they've either been used for a while or haven't been sold for a certain period."

"Oh, could you then sell them to me as cheaply as possible? Try to cover as much of the agreed 20 gold coins as you can."

"Sell it cheap? That's a disheartening thing to hear, senior. They're not a significant amount, and they're practically dead weight, so they're free..."

Lortel halted at this point, seeming to hesitate as she glanced between Yenika and me.

Staring back at Lortel with a puzzled expression, she quickly switched back to her cunning smile.

"Free... Even for me, a merchant, that might be a bit challenging?"

"I understand your stance too."

"But I'll sell them to you as cheaply as possible. I'll keep doing so whenever we get bad inventory. However, since we're dealing with money, we need to put together a contract... And, it would be good if we could issue a sales certificate every time we make a sale."

"Is all of that typical for a simple purchase contract?"

"Well, our deal has a unique agreement, right? I'm selling it cheap, hahaha. However..."

Lortel chimed in, grinning ear to ear, evidently satisfied.

"Since we need to renew the contract each time, you should make regular visits to the Elte Merchant Guild branch in the residential area. While you're there, why not have a cup of tea and a bit of chitchat? Considering the fluctuations in the merchandise, it would be better to renew the contract frequently, so how about once a week... or every three days?"

"If that's the case with the contract, a bit of inconvenience is inevitable. Just don't think about pulling a fast one."

"Oh my, as I've mentioned before... the secret to Elte Merchant Guild's success is honesty."

Securing a stable supply of magical engineering supplies is quite crucial.

As for the specifics, they could be sorted out when the time comes. I wasn't entirely clueless about magical engineering supplies anyway.

"But... wouldn't it be okay to just give that much away for free...?"

Suddenly, Yenika charged into the conversation.

"Ed's been a big help to you this time around. If the price doesn't make a noticeable dent in your profits, you shouldn't be so hung up on formalities and contracts."

Yenika's unusually stern tone was met with an equally stiff retort from Lortel.

"Remember, I am a merchant at the end of the day. Even if he's been a benefactor, I can't just hand over my goods for nothing. It's a matter of professional integrity."

"Lies! You're just making excuses!"

"Excuses? What do you mean?"

Looking at Yenika with her innocent, wide eyes, Lortel seemed like a naïve girl oblivious to worldly affairs.

Of course, Lortel being that naïve was highly improbable.

Indeed, there was room for negotiation when it came to the pricing.

If I leveraged the Ophelis Hall siege incident against Lortel, it was highly likely that I could secure a more favorable contract.

Yenika had made a keen observation. It would be a mistake to underestimate Lortel, who would stretch herself thin to scrape up an extra gold at every chance.

As I mulled over how to wrap up our discussion, a voice broke the silence.

"Well, I wasn't expecting to find Miss Lortel here too."

At those words, all heads turned toward the source of the voice. There, emerging from the bushes, was a familiar face.

"...Bell?"

"Uh..."

"...What's up?"

Taking in the sight of me, Lortel, and Yenika circled around the campfire, Bell suddenly rubbed her temples and squinted her eyes.

"No, I apologize. Just the sight of this group is giving me a headache."

"...What?"

"The situation doesn't seem calm. I'm sorry for the intrusion."

The first one to cool her gaze was Lortel.

She wasn't exactly keen on encountering staff from Ophelis Hall. She probably didn't want her whereabouts to be known in the first place.

Actually, by this point, Lortel's victory was all but guaranteed. The deadline to halt the sale of the War Drums had long passed. If Elte had wanted to quash Lortel, he should have shown up at this cabin last night. Despite the risk, she decided to keep her guard up, yet she felt relaxed enough to enjoy the fire outside the cabin. It was as though she was awaiting the victory party.

However, Bell's attire seemed to unnerve Lortel.

It was far more ostentatious than the standard senior maid uniform.

It was the garb of the Chief Maid.

The fact that Bell had inherited the role of Chief Maid from Ellis indicated that the Ophelis Hall incident was nearing a satisfactory resolution.

Bell, as usual, carried herself with an elegant poise as she carefully seated herself across from us.

"I hate to be the bearer of bad news..."

Then, with her eyes slightly shut, she continued the conversation in a measured tone.

I had a strong inkling about what Bell was going to say, so I quietly lowered my gaze.

Watching the flames crackle in the campfire, I tossed in a few more logs.

CHAPTER 42

Assistant Professor Claire Elfin was quietly laying her head on the desk in her private study.

Her golden curls spilled onto the desk, looking like a river of gold, while her glasses, temporarily discarded, sat folded neatly next to her head.

Most fresh-faced assistant professors, who had just earned their elemental science degrees, usually spent their first month enveloped in a haze of optimistic romanticism for their new careers.

However, when the harsh reality of the demanding life of a professor began to hit, they often found themselves longing for the simpler days of their degree programs where their focus was solely on their studies.

Assistant Professor Claire Elfin, now in her second semester, was no exception.

"I want to die..."

Her smooth, youthful skin, piercing eyes, and a unique youthful allure that triggered protective instincts in those around her, were Claire's pride.

Yet, when she lifted her head and glanced towards the small mirror at eye level, it appeared as though a living corpse was looking back at her.

Despite religious skincare routines, the under-eye bags seemed to grow with each passing day, threatening to overtake her face entirely.

"I want to die....!!!"

She murmured this cry into the empty room, unheard by anyone.

The course material was strenuous to prepare, even at the basic level.

And that was not even considering the constant attention she needed to give to her students' progress.

Throughout the semester, she submitted over half a dozen research proposals to various magical platforms, only to have each one rejected.

While it would have been helpful to receive feedback, most rejections seemed rooted in distrust towards a newly appointed assistant professor.

Struggling to stay ahead in her research, suitable sources for her papers were limited.

With her research progress lagging, pressure from the academy was inevitable.

And amidst all this, her students were causing numerous accidents, the responsibility for which mainly fell on Claire, being the youngest professor.

"..."

A shiver ran down her spine at the thought that by the time she earned her full professorship, she might have aged dramatically.

Claire, who was once celebrated as a prodigy, had attended this academy. She completed all her advanced degree courses in her twenties, and even earned her own study as a professor.

Excluding honorary professors, she was probably the youngest person to have achieved so much within the academy. But now, look at her state.

She had believed the prime of her life had just started, never anticipating the trials awaiting her would be so severe.

-Knock, Knock.

Just as she was wallowing in her misery, there was a knock at the door of her study. It was likely her assistant who had finished reviewing the materials for the elemental science class.

-Bang

Before Claire could muster the energy to invite them in, the door swung open.

"...were you resting?"

In the doorway stood Professor Glast, Claire's mentor since her degree course and a rather notorious character known as the 'skull-faced bastard', the senior professor in charge of the first year.

Having endured under the stern Professor Glast for over five years, Claire didn't find it necessary to feel embarrassed about her current dispirited state.

Nonetheless, his presence cast a foreboding shadow on her.

"Oh, oh my. Professor Glast. What brings you to my private study? Can I offer you a cup of coffee?"

"No, that's not necessary, Claire. I'll just deliver the message and be on my way."

A chill ran down Claire's spine, but she kept her smile intact.

"What...?"

"Did you get the report about the incident at Ophelis Hall?"

"...Yes."

"The inspection department has completed their investigation. They've scheduled a disciplinary hearing for the main culprit, but we're lacking representation from the academy. If things continue this way, only the dean will end up being present."

"Ah, that's... what about Professor Olbeig, the senior professor of the third year..."

"He's at the tower for a conference."

"And Professor Kelbreim..."

"He's occupied advising the Kroel royal family. We can't bother him while he's engaged in royal affairs."

"Oh! That's right, Professor Delfina has returned from vacation!"

"She claims she's hurt her back."

She didn't dare to ask why Professor Glast himself couldn't attend. It was evident he

would give her some absurd excuse before returning to his own rune studies.

"You can assign the tasks of receiving the incident report, making a judgement, writing an opinion paper, and other clerical work to your assistant. However, you'll need to make the significant decisions yourself."

"Professor Glast, I apologize but it's the beginning of the semester and sadly I've taken on the basic course... I'm quite swamped... I also have three research proposals to draft, and if I don't start working on the elemental science paper this semester, my situation will be quite dire..."

"I understand. In that case, you'll have to reduce your sleeping hours."

Agreeing with her plight, Professor Glast dropped a stack of pertinent documents on her desk and hastily left her office.

"..."

Without altering her expression, Claire spread out the documents. Skimming through them, she found a brief overview of the incident at Ophelis Hall.

The 'lone act' of Ellis, the Chief Maid of Ophelis Hall.

She tried to voice her discontent by persuading Shenny and Kelly, negotiating with Willian, and taking the facilities of Ophelis Hall hostage.

Her primary motivation was her growing resentment towards the academy, which insisted she continue her duties despite her deteriorating health.

The fallout was substantial since nobody had anticipated such an incident due to her typically diligent attitude and good character.

Elsewhere, Taylee, Ayla, and Elvira were noted for awarding of points, while Ed, Yenika, and Ziggs were flagged for further investigation...

However, if the situation was clear-cut, they were contemplating eliminating the need for additional investigators.

Claire found no reason to question why Lortel's name was not mentioned anywhere.

After taking a quick look at the pile of work in front of her, Claire got a ballpark figure of the workload.

"That's not that much."

With a click, she took off her high-prescription glasses.

"Reviewing the investigation, gathering scholarly opinions and filing reports, setting out student disciplinary measures, deciding whether further investigations are needed, attending committee meetings, proofreading meeting minutes, reporting to the academic administration and the dean's office, and also showing Professor Glast that the work's been done right, tagging the tasks and submitting the compiled documents to the records room...!"

On top of all that, she had her original academic work and research to deal with!

Claire folded her glasses and put them back on her desk, opened the window behind her, and let out a scream.

"I'm only human...!! Please, save me...!!!!!"

"Oh, one more thing. We're short on funds this semester, so several research proposals got the boot. Take a look at them, and gather up anything that can be sold to cover the budget gap. Let the assistants handle this."

When she spun around, there was Professor Glast back in the lab.

Claire let out a hiccup, but the still stern-faced professor stood there as if he didn't care one way or another...

"My apologies."

"Don't sweat it. Just get your job done."

"...Yes."

Claire sat down and dropped her head. She had the look of a woman who'd given up on life.

* * *

The following night, a dispatch arrived.

- 'War Drum sale proposal greenlit. Regent's dismissal proposal under review. Elte's actual authority significantly limited. Dismissal is a sure thing, the tide is turning. Report on personal safety.'

A tiny scrap of parchment, packed full of intel.

"If things have progressed this far, my dad must be making his last stand at headquarters. It's a lost cause, but... anyway, they probably won't have time to worry about Sylvanian."

"What's the odds that Elte has another trick up his sleeve?"

"He's as crafty as I am... so it's not zero. But I've got no choice but to trust Slog, who's got his eyes on being the next president of the Merchant Guild. I'm too far from the action, so there's nothing else I can do."

The flickering campfire kept the night's darkness at bay. Yenika had headed off a while ago since it was getting late.

Late summer, or early fall.

It's the northern woods, changing seasons on that thin line. Some of the deciduous trees around the edge have already started to turn.

The soothing chorus of insects has diminished quite a bit since midsummer, making the forest even quieter at night.

Speaking of changes, not only the forest, but I was also going through a bit of a change.

"That uniform seem a little outdated for being freshly patched up, don't they?"

"At least it's wearable."

"Hmm... Well..."

I knew I couldn't afford to be absent any longer, so I resolved to return to school the following day. I even tried on my school uniform as a test run, and it looked pretty

sharp.

"I'm in a safer place now... so I can afford to take it easy a bit."

Lortel chuckled, grabbed the hem of her robe, and settled down.

"There's a ton to sort out immediately. Finding somewhere to live is also an issue..."

"No matter how hard they push, it'll take a semester to rebuild Ophelis Hall."

"Yeah, you're right. I need to see if there are any vacancies in temporary housing... Plus, there's the aftermath of the incident to deal with... Although it seems most of that's been taken care of."

I had heard talk of hastily converting an unused faculty office or a dilapidated building in the southern part of the island into temporary lodgings.

Even though it had been arranged rather neatly, the makeshift dormitory wasn't up to the standards of the Ophelis Hall students. But given the situation, they had to make do.

"The most worrying part was about Miss Ellis, but it seems to have reached a 'resolution' for the time being..."

"..."

I tossed a few more logs onto the campfire.

"Ellis didn't out you as the brains behind all this, did she?"

"Well, she didn't have much of a choice. This is... a 'prepaid' situation."

"Prepaid?"

"Consider this, senior. Chief Maid Ellis would have wanted to back the winner between Elte and me."

Lortel pulled a small piece of parchment from her pocket.

It was information Bell Meiya, who had visited Ellis right after the incident, had

shared with her.

The parchment listed various orphanages that Ellis had supported her whole life, the annual upkeep cost, and how the support was provided.

"Now that it seems I'm on the winning side, she just wanted to rejoin my camp. However... rebuilding lost trust isn't easy."

Ellis had already betrayed Lortel once.

Would Lortel trust her again, even if it was necessary?

Even if she begrudgingly granted her trust again out of necessity, the chance of being cast aside once she had served her purpose was high.

No one keeps someone on payroll who has betrayed them before.

"Miss Ellis... She must have known I wouldn't trust her. I guess she stayed silent as a precaution, to instill confidence in me. Well, from my perspective, I didn't want it known that I was the mastermind behind the siege, so I had to play along."

Ellis was a tough cookie.

Her health was fading, and her martial arts training never let up, but the academy looked the other way.

When she couldn't work anymore, and couldn't take responsibility for the orphanages she had been supporting... she staked her life on it.

She was always stoic and unreadable, so no one could tell, but she had been backed into a corner. Actually, saying 'no one could tell'...might be incorrect.

The back door of Ophelis Hall on a rainy day.

I still remember the face of Shenny, lying beneath me, looking up at me with bloodshot eyes.

At least those loyal to Ellis had some understanding of her situation and state of mind.

"Do you harbor no resentment toward Ellis? Even after her betrayal?"

"Naturally I'm pretty ticked off. If I run into her, wouldn't it be only fair to give her a good smack?"

"You seem pretty composed, all things considered."

"Well, I'm all right. At least now."

I couldn't figure out what was so amusing, but she sat on a log, chin in hands, looking at me with a grin that reminded me of a sly fox.

"I've never been saintly enough to walk around with my nose in the air. If need be, I'll make use of the person who stabbed me in the back. In this line of work, there are no everlasting enemies or allies."

"Just make sure you don't turn on me."

"Of course. Senior."

Lortel, who had been chortling, rose from her seat and brushed down her skirt.

Anyway, once a certain level of safety was guaranteed, it was time for her to get moving.

Even if Elte's downfall was confirmed, a go-getter like Lortel wouldn't abandon her pursuit of the 'Sage's Scripture'. If she had stirred up such a commotion, she was definitely aiming to secure that scripture.

It was time to return to the trade route and resume a merchant's life.

Spending days at camp doing nothing, idly staring at the log, lying still and counting stars in the night sky through the forest canopy...

Such a carefree life was merely a temporary detour.

"I'm going to start moving now. You're dropping by the Merchant Guild branch to draft a contract next week, right?"

"Yes."

I set down the bow I was fine-tuning, picked up a stick from the bonfire, and imbued it with an ignition spell.

For now, it would serve as a torch while maintaining a certain amount of mana. The forest is quite dark during the night, and unless you're familiar with the terrain, you'll need this degree of light.

When I approached Lortel to hand over the torch as she prepared to leave, she started to contemplate something with her half-moon eyes and a thoughtful hum.

"What are you pondering so intensely?"

"No, senior. You're taller than I realized."

"What's that about?"

"Well... I think it's a bit of a sudden thought. Regardless, I'm thinking that if one wants to overtake another, one has to take some risks..."

As she began to mutter something undecipherable, I reached out to her, encouraging her to take the torch and go.

But Lortel ignored the torch I was extending and abruptly started discussing something entirely different.

"Did you know, senior? The essence of human relationships is all about give and take."

"What?"

"Like that tie of yours. Look, it's askew."

With a cheeky grin, Lortel stepped closer and grabbed the back of my tie knot.

"See, you have to pull the back of the knot and push the front to tie it correctly."

"Does my outfit really bother you so much when there's no one around to see?"

"Well, there's nothing wrong with maintaining a neat appearance at all times. After all, we are students of Sylvanian Academy."

With that, before I could even react, Lortel clenched her hand around her tie and gave it a sharp tug.

Caught off guard by her sudden move, my head jolted forward, and Lortel quickly seized the chance to lift her foot--

"...The raspberry dessert we had was mighty tasty, right? It's nice to remember it."

"..."

"My, you seem awfully rattled."

"Respect personal boundaries."

"You're hurting my feelings..."

Finally, Lortel grabbed the torch and stepped back a few paces.

Despite her claims of feeling upset, she concealed a quiet giggle behind her hand. If she had a tail, she would've surely looked like a fox.

"If you only receive, you won't win any popularity contests. Maybe next time you should take the initiative and give a little?"

She spun around, yet her eyes stayed locked on me as she chuckled and added.

"I should work on receiving too."

And with that, Lortel vanished into the shadowy forest. The glow of the torch grew dimmer and occasionally flickered or dropped to the ground, but she wouldn't get lost.

Frozen in place where I had bid Lortel goodbye, I ran a hand over my face.

I felt like I'd been smacked on the back of the head with a hammer, but first, I needed to calm myself and gather my thoughts.

I had been cautious to avoid getting more involved with main storyline characters than absolutely necessary, but life, as usual, didn't follow the plan.

Most importantly, Elte's termination had been significantly accelerated due to the Ophelis Hall siege incident.

One of the primary plot points in the upcoming second act, tenth chapter, 'The Seizure of the 'Sage's Scripture' was precisely Elte's dismissal.

In essence, the storyline had been fast-tracked, resulting in a substantial gap in the plot.

However, either Elte or Lortel had to exit the scene, and in the end, I had to spare Lortel, who had a bigger role in the upcoming events...

My options were limited.

After all, Elte's termination was inevitable, so I assumed the sequence change wouldn't significantly impact the plot... but my worry continued to grow.

I've experienced many times how minor deviations can alter the overall course of the story.

In theory, I believe if things progress smoothly, the general trend should remain similar... but now, I'm not so certain.

I gazed at the sky. The stars in the forest's canopy are still stunning, and the moon is luminous.

The insects' chirping and the bonfire's crackling remain the same... but it feels as though the plot line I'm enmeshed in continues to warp.

My strategy of observing the plot unfold from the story's periphery, handling only what's necessary, remained unchanged.

Nevertheless... Despite my intention, I couldn't help but feel I'm being drawn into the heart of the story, leading me to rub my face again.

I harbored no grand aspirations. All I wanted is to graduate and improve my specs.

That seemingly simple strategy... realizing how daring and difficult it truly was, isn't far in the future.

As summer fades, autumn arrives.

The second semester is now upon us.

CHAPTER 43

[That minx kissed young master Ed.]

Over a week had passed since the second semester kicked off, and classes were gradually getting into full swing.

Given the straight-A student that Yenika was, missing a few sessions due to illness wasn't a big deal.

However, she couldn't afford to slack on subjects like Magic History or Mana Theory, which relied heavily on paperwork and could quickly damage her grade point average. Plus, regularly interacting with spirits was like a spirit user's day job and had to be taken seriously. It was undoubtedly a hectic time.

Stepping out of Dex Hall, a dormitory nestled against the incline of Mount Oron, Yenika leaned against a tree. As usual, spirits congregated around her.

The number of spirits flocking around the tree was especially large today. Even the Wind Mid-Rank Spirit, Pesha, and the Fire High Spirit, Tarkan, were present, creating the atmosphere of a meeting.

"...What?"

[Miss Yenika, we cannot sit idly by.]

It was common for the spirits to relay trivial news about the Northern Forest's events. However, recently, she noticed that Ed's involvement in these updates was increasing.

While Yenika wasn't thrilled with these tales, she found herself reluctantly tuned in.

Yet today's headline from the spirits' gossip was nothing short of shocking.

[This minx could make a move anytime. We need to act...]

[And what exactly are you going to do?]

The low-ranking Wind Spirit, Charis, in the shape of a sparrow, flapped its wings in exasperation, but Pesha, in the form of a lion, calmly managed the situation.

[It's up to Miss Yenika to decide, not us.]

"Hold on, what are you saying? Kissed?"

Not able to keep up with the conversation's pace, Yenika asked again, and this time, Tarkan, lounging his massive body around the tree, replied.

[I witnessed it too. Quite a scene, to be sure. Ah, youth...]

"..."

[That minx knows how to play with a man's emotions. By pushing and pulling, she seems to be stirring his feelings. If it weren't for the stubborn Ed, he would've fallen for her.]

"What are you talking about!"

Yenika jumped to her feet and whacked Tarkan's huge neck.

"What does that mean!"

[Do you want me to repeat what I've already stated, Yenika? It appears the minx has overstepped her bounds.]

"And Ed's reaction?!"

[Ah, that's indeed the key question. From what I saw, she hit a wall. He showed no reaction even after being kissed... it was quite commendable.]

As if trying to console the stunned Yenika, Tarkan continued with his deep voice.

[The way he rejected her so coldly, it even gave me the shivers. She went to such lengths, and his response was so tepid. It can mean only one of two things. Either that fallen noble is impotent, or he doesn't see her as a woman at all.]

"That... that's... a good thing..."

Yenika tried to exhale a sigh of relief but ended up taking in a hollow breath. Good thing, she pondered. What's good about this? Was this the moment to feel relieved?

[Tarkan, you're pretty direct, aren't you?]

[Why should I beat around the bush now, Peshi? It's worse to sugarcoat things. But you shouldn't be at ease, Yenika. That fallen noble guy rejecting that minx moves isn't a positive thing.]

"...What?"

Tarkan was a high-ranking spirit who had lived for an unimaginable span of human years. His countless experiences observing diverse human scenarios were invaluable.

[From what I've seen, humans like that minx become more determined and passionate when they're rejected. They may appear selfish, but if they've set their sights on you, they won't hold back. If you don't make a move, Yenika, you'll be completely usurped.]

"But... still... Ed didn't react positively..."

[Males usually excel at the offense but falter in defense. Even if he's a stubborn guy, if she relentlessly showers him with affection, there's no such thing as an impregnable fortress.]

Tarkan shifted, seemingly uncomfortable in his posture. The lesser spirits in the vicinity bowed as he reclined. His large size alone commanded respect from the surrounding spirits, even with minor changes in his position.

[Do you think sitting quietly like a princess in a fairy tale, hoping he'll notice you someday, will work? Reality isn't so kind. You'll need to engage in fierce and messy battles to win.]

[Tarkan, your manner of speech is quite old-school.]

[Did I say something inaccurate?]

[It's not that you're incorrect... but, why can't you be a bit more subtle?]

[Why would I unnecessarily obfuscate things? It's exasperating.]

Tarkan, twitching his tail, directed his distinctive reptilian gaze at Yenika.

Yenika had already paled at Peshi and Tarkan's words.

[In any case, Yenika. Don't just stand there, make a move. I heard you agreed to teach him some spirit magic, right? That means you'll get some alone time with him. Are you going to miss this opportunity?]

"But... even so... what should I do..."

[What do you mean, what should you do? The next time you meet him, you should start with a kiss. Show some resentment for being left in the dust.]

At that, Yenika, as if picturing something, gasped and sat back down against the tree. No one was pressuring her, but she backed up as if pushed against the tree and stammered.

"Stop... stop saying such mortifying things...!"

[Are you sure it's okay when that minx shamelessly started with a kiss? Are you still planning to keep smiling sweetly now that things have come to this?]

[Tarkan... isn't that a bit too much to ask of innocent Yenika?]

[Well, it could turn out okay if things go smoothly. I'm not a fan of that fallen noble, but... well, as a man, he has some admirable qualities. His choice to slit my throat in my frenzy, and his natural calm demeanor... He seems to balance well with the somewhat emotional Yenika.]

[Seriously... You sound like you're sizing up a prospective husband for your granddaughter, can you not? You're acting like an old fogey.]

[What's wrong with that, seeing that I am indeed old."]

She was lost in the flow of the conversation. Yenika was deep in thought, trying to make sense of it all.

'Do... Do I actually need to do something? But what should I do...?'

Even a simple hand-holding would make Yenika's mind foggy for a moment. To her, a kiss was something from an unreachable realm in the vast cosmos.

Considering anything beyond that... She would have to face the terror of an indescribable colossal entity... that is, she would be venturing into the realm of cosmic horror.

Witnessing Yenika's pitiful state, as she was sweating bullets, the Mid-Rank Spirit Pesha eventually chimed in.

[Now, there's no need to be so tense, Miss Yenika. I'm not sure about blunt speakers like Mr. Tarkan... But I did sense a peculiar comfort in Lord Ed's demeanor towards you, Miss Yenika. It's unlike his encounters with that vixen.]

"...Really?"

[Yes. I'm not just saying this. If you carefully observe with a keen eye, it's evident... Lord Ed seems relaxed when he's with you, Miss Yenika. He seems to set some mental boundary when dealing with other freshmen, but it doesn't seem to apply with you.]

Pesha, with her acute senses, had instinctively noticed this difference, but she couldn't exactly identify what that comforting emotion was.

The casual and laid-back manner in which Ed treated Yenika was a result of her position, which was outside of the normal scheme of things.

Regrettably, nobody recognized the considerable advantage that provided. There was no way they could have.

[So, there's no need to rush things. You, Miss Yenika, are most captivating when you're just being yourself.]

".....Really? Honestly? That... Even if Lortel becomes more aggressive, Ed won't care...?"

[...]

"Why! Why won't you respond! Why!"

She couldn't give any more assurances, not knowing what the outcome might be if she prematurely jumped to a conclusion.

Regrettably, this only heightened Yenika's anxiety.

"Ah, it's unbearable."

In her indecision about what to do, Yenika was messing with her hair, and Pesha, appearing confused, was scratching the tree's bark.

Why not just admit her feelings bluntly? Although it's an uncouth approach, it's the most certain one.

With such fleeting thoughts, Tarkan kept his mouth shut. It was an attitude of 'why bother speaking further'.

[Come to think of it, I noticed some strange magical currents on the outskirts of the northern forest. You should inspect it when you get a chance.]

On reflection, these regular meetings to review reports were primarily to ensure there were no irregularities or disturbances in the spirits' behavior.

Recently, the whole emphasis had been diverted due to a certain fallen noble, but Tarkan stayed on task, expressing what needed to be said, as it was important to handle the essentials.

"...What?"

[Considering its heightened activity particularly at night, it appears to be a magic circle related to celestial magic. Merilda will pinpoint the exact location. As it hasn't been spotted recently, it seems to be concentrating on that area.]

"Does it seem dangerous?"

[Well... it doesn't seem dangerous, but it's worth noting.]

Even though Yenika, who's just a student, had no specific duty to maintain the academy's safety, the anomaly in the Northern Forest wasn't an issue she could ignore as a spirit user.

She'd have to stay at this school for another two years, at least until her fourth year, so she couldn't disregard the Northern Forest, practically the spirits' home during that period.

[Alright, the details will be discussed later. For now, consider something more concrete, like whether you'll kiss or trip up that fallen noble next time you see him.]

At that, Yenika turned as red as a beetroot and gave Tarkan's shell a kick, but such reactions due to embarrassment couldn't even mark Tarkan's shell.

Yenika was aware of this, but she kicked anyway out of sheer frustration, as if taking it out on a wall.

[What should we do, Tarkan? If that vixen has already advanced this much, it seems there's little we can do. It's too late to instigate a kiss now. We'll just be playing catch-up.]

[Ah, that's a good point, Pesha. I did mention tripping or something, but there's no need to outdo that vixen's actions. Instead, maintaining an innocent or fresh vibe might not be so bad. In any case, we need to act swiftly...]

[Huh...]

For Tarkan, who was set in his ways, that was a rather insightful point. Pesha agreed too.

A person's charm is more crucial than the degree of action.

[So, Yenika... think it over. How do you envision... such a fluttering and fresh scenario or scene...?]

Despite knowing that it would be difficult for Yenika, who was already overwhelmed, to provide a sensible response, they had to ask.

What shape does Yenika's romance take? Verifying that aspect before proceeding is very important. Exposing one's own intimate fantasies could be mortifying and demand bravery, but it was undeniably a topic that needed to be addressed.

As Yenika, who had been pushed to her limits and was pressing her body hard against the trunk of a tree, struggled to answer.

"Like... feeding each other..."

[.....]

[.....]

This was the type of person their master had always been.

Recognizing this fact once again, Tarkan and Pesha could only let out a deep sigh.

* * *

"Open... uh-huh. Ah."

"Ah - "

I cooled the soup with a gentle puff of breath, then delivered it to Lucy's mouth. Her petite mouth looked like it would fill up with just a spoonful.

Like a hatchling getting its feed, Lucy held the soup in her mouth, then... soon gulped it down and poked out her tongue.

"Ugh - it's bland."

"True, without a mix of spices, it's tough to extract the taste. Maybe I should hold off on enhancing my cooking skills until I have a broader range of ingredients."

"Don't treat me like a guinea pig for taste-testing."

Even as Lucy jabbed at my waist with her foot, I didn't take notice and poured the remaining soup back into the pot.

Despite her nonchalant facade, Lucy had a discerning palate. But, being subjected to all sorts of health diets, she's prone to falling for stimulating foods that are spicy, salty, and sweet.

Yet, if I wish to genuinely improve my cooking skills, I need to routinely cook regular meals, not just prepare preserved foods that pique the palate.

However, my taste has significantly regressed after surviving in the wild for an

extended period. I eat any food I find, so when it comes to gourmet cooking, I have to depend on humans who still have their taste buds functional.

Given the influence that cooking skill proficiency bears on my Dexterity stat, I can't afford to overlook it... But regardless of how much I diversify the types of ingredients, it never feels sufficient.

* * *

[Life Ability Details]

Rank: Intermediate Craftsman

Specialty: Carpentry

Hand Skill Lv 14

Design Lv 9

Gathering Ability Lv 12

Carpentry Lv 13

Hunting Lv 10

Fishing Lv 7

Cooking Lv 6

Repair Lv 5

<Advanced Craftsmanship Slot: Empty>

<Advanced Craftsmanship Slot: Empty>

"Hmm..."

After wrapping up the day's wood chopping, I checked my living skill while drenched in sweat.

I frequently review the crafting skills, which are crucial to my growth. The problem that has arisen lately is the proficiency gap between skills.

As I mentioned, the higher the proficiency a skill gains, the slower its progression. The crucial Dexterity stat is significantly influenced by the total proficiency of life skills. Therefore, the growth rate of the Dexterity stat naturally slows down.

Hence, it's crucial to enhance the proficiency of skills that are still relatively low. This is because the growth efficiency is still decent compared to other skills. I feel the need to unlock and practice basic crafting skills that haven't been unlocked yet, and trailing skills like cooking and repair...

The issue is that survival takes up most of my time.

I contemplate splurging on food and necessities once I receive the promised gold coins from Lortel...

But I'm hesitant to spend money on consumables when the cabin's construction isn't even complete yet.

"Indeed... there's just not enough time..."

Adding to the woes, school has commenced. In a day, I can only devote about six hours to survival activities. That's even after I cut down on sleep.

The time had arrived when I needed to consider the efficiency of my survival activities more thoroughly.

"Is the scenario... still on track?"

The most significant curveball had been Elte's early dismissal. I was still in the dark about the reasons, but somehow, I'd managed to smooth things over.

I couldn't predict how this twist might affect the future, but so far, there were no apparent changes.

I kept a vigilant eye on the main characters in the scenario whenever possible. Up to this point, everything seemed fine.

The pivotal characters in this situation were the protagonist Taylee and the four lead

heroines.

As for Taylee... since he was in the combat department, I didn't often see him, but according to the grapevine, he'd shed the label of an underachiever quite some time ago. Given his talent and trajectory, he might even join class B by his third school year.

'Companion Ayla' seemed to still be fulfilling her role as Taylee's sidekick. From the snippets of conversation I overheard, she was almost always by Taylee's side, fretting over him or lending him support.

'The Princess of Mercy, Penia' also seemed to be fairing well without any complications, but it was about time for her to butt heads with Lortel, so I had to keep an eye on her.

'The Golden Daughter, Lortel' was in the most precarious situation. With Elte's early exit, I couldn't foresee how her actions might alter.

Regardless of Elte, her plan to buy the 'Sage's Scripture' appeared to be on track. She had to step into the shoes of a mid-boss in chapter 10 of Act 2, so all I could do was hope nothing out of the ordinary would occur.

Clarice... she wouldn't be enrolling until the following year, so there was no need to fret over her right now.

For a while, all I could do was carefully observe the situation, like treading on thin ice.

Above all, the final boss of Act 2, Glast, had numerous patterns that could only be countered by Taylee's Sword Saint form. The saint-level magic itself had a unique structure, making it challenging to quell with magic alone.

Taylee's group's movements were an issue, but the activities of the academic professors were equally significant.

"I need to do some recon. But... let's be cautious not to get more involved than necessary."

For now, my immediate task was to inspect the traps and process the meat. I shrugged my shoulders and ventured into the forest.

The cabin's chimney was complete, so if I could just wrap up the wallpaper and flooring, I could move in.

Life was about to stabilize. Let's keep spirits high...

* * *

"I've assembled the listening records here. Assistant Professor Claire."

"Thank you, Anise."

One of the most taxing things for a first-year assistant professor is securing an assistant who will work under them.

Since there are hardly any students who wish to have a new professor as their mentor, they often face manpower shortages compared to seasoned professors.

For Claire, Anise was a blessing. She was patient, efficient, and a model student who respected her professor without judging her by her brief tenure.

"Did you receive anything else from the Academic Inspection Department?"

"No. If there's anything else you need, don't hesitate to call me."

With a warm smile, Anise bid goodbye and exited. Claire waved back at her. After all, as an assistant professor, Claire had to maintain a modicum of decorum.

In truth, Claire was more seen as an amiable older sister than a respected professor, but that didn't mean they could become close.

"Hmm..."

Claire's brow furrowed once more amidst the mountain of paperwork before her. There were more documents than she'd anticipated from the time of the Ophelis Hall occupation. She had meticulously reviewed each one, but an unsettling feeling persisted.

From the viewpoint of the youngest professor saddled with all sorts of tasks, she occasionally felt the urge to just get the job done quickly... But a nagging doubt deep in her heart haunted Claire.

Something about the resolution of the situation didn't sit well with her.

She went through Ellis' records, organized the incidents chronologically, and cross-referenced the witness statements.

The essence of the story matched up, but why did it feel like there were missing puzzle pieces?

"Why am I fretting over a case that's already been more or less resolved...? I feel like I'm going to keel over from exhaustion..."

This was just a task that Professor Glast had delegated, so she could just handle it swiftly and report back to Professor Glast that it was successfully completed, right?

Such thoughts kept plaguing her, but Claire was the sort who couldn't help but be thorough in her work.

"Hmm... uhh..."

She continued to scrutinize the file, pondering the source of her unease. Claiming that she sensed an undisclosed puppet master...

Would that be overly suspicious? Perhaps she'd been reading too many conspiracy theory novels.

Nevertheless... if something felt off, it was best to get to the bottom of it.

Claire thought it would be wise to meet with the 'additional investigation subjects' listed in the file and hear their side of the story.

Ed, Yenika, Ziggs.

While she thought the event was concluded and doubted the existence of some villain...

It wouldn't hurt to look before she leaped.

"I recognize Yenika and Ziggs since they are well-known... but Ed... Ed... why does that name sound so familiar..."

Then at last, his full name, sprang to mind. Ed Rosetail.

He was a disgraced noble who had created a stir as a descendant of the Rosetail Family.

" ..."

Claire quietly looked down at the file, her fingers stroking her chin. She had a hunch... something unseen... the tip of the iceberg was still there.

CHAPTER 44

"Oh dear, my sincerest apologies, Ed."

The next morning, on the rare luxury of a weekend, I made my way to the residential district.

I'd walked the entire distance to the bustling southwestern residential area, crossing it to reach Mekses Bridge, one of the two bridges that linked Aken Island to the mainland. It felt like a two-hour trek.

Crossing the bridge and entering the Sylvanian branch of the Elte Merchant Guild, the most prominent building around, the staff ushered me to a reception room as if they had been expecting me.

The staff's excessive respectfulness made me a tad uneasy.

Quietly seated in the reception room and awaiting me was Lortel, who had forgotten to arrange the agreed contract and was now extending an apology.

"I'm aware you've taken the trouble to come all this way, especially since we planned this in advance, but I've been incredibly swamped recently."

"Really?"

"Yes, I'm deeply sorry. You'll probably have to come back next week. By way of an apology, I've arranged some tea and snacks. I've also set aside some magical engineering supplies that were missed in the inventory, so please pick them up from the counter when you leave."

Lortel appeared very different from when she was at the teachers' dormitory.

Instead of her usual academic uniform covered by a robe, she was attired in a flowing skirt paired with a crisp white blouse, all topped off with a stylish beret, complete with a gold frame.

It was a refreshing sight, the last times I'd seen her she was either drenched in the

rain or in a worn-out robe.

Her attire seemed too extravagant for casual wear, so I inquired if she had plans.

"I dressed up a bit because I have an important appointment today. How do I look?"

She then asked, grinning widely.

"An important appointment?"

"Yes, I do have such commitments."

Seemingly reluctant to elaborate, she replaced her words with a smile, to which I reciprocated with a nod.

From a plush chair across her in the reception room, I introduced the main topic to Lortel.

"I wanted to discuss something, do you also sell furniture?"

"Absolutely."

"I'm looking for some affordable and decent furniture, but everything available at the branch is too high-end. Can't you find just a plain old desk, chair, or cabinet that gets the job done?"

"Oh, I suppose your cabin is nearly complete?"

"It's just about there. Just a few minor finishing touches left."

"Hmm... as you know, here in Sylvenia, we have a high demand for noble-style products, so practical and competitively priced finished goods aren't often supplied. I can source them myself, but it will take some time."

Lortel rested her hand on her chin, deep in thought for a moment, then hummed and smiled.

"It's a bit awkward to give you the items for free. As I've mentioned before, giving away sale items for free contradicts a merchant's business ethics, and might be viewed as a cheap move by other merchants."

"That's unavoidable."

"Well, there's a more direct approach."

With that, Lortel rose from the reception room's couch and briskly walked over to her business desk, where she began to gather magic in her hand.

With that finished, she used her magic to shatter the leg of a conspicuously lavish wooden chair.

-Crash!

"..."

"You're adept at woodworking, aren't you? Just fix the broken leg, and it should be good as new. Since it's now worthless junk, I'll get rid of it tomorrow."

The chair was elegantly detailed with a deer motif in relief, encased by a flashy golden frame.

"How much does that chair cost?"

"That's a secret."

Was she quick-tempered or just bursting with energy? Either way, she exuded a compelling leadership aura.

Lortel's eyes began to roam from the chair to the display case, the glass window, and so on. I couldn't possibly take everything with me, so I had to restrain her.

"Well, I'll send the remaining 'trash' later."

"...Alright."

"There are a few matters I'd like to discuss, from my standpoint."

Lortel returned to the couch in the reception room and took a sip of her tea. She was attempting to exude elegance, but her casual demolition of the chair only amplified the incongruity.

"Do you know Assistant Professor Claire Elfin, the professor responsible for First-Year Elementology?"

"Hmm? Yeah, I know her."

"Her behavior is a bit odd... I've been keeping an eye on her. But she's fairly inexperienced, so I'm not overly concerned..."

Claire Elfin.

A unique personality, she was a young woman who had been appointed as professor for the first time that year. She was also a student of Professor Glast, having weathered nearly ten years under his tutelage.

From what I recall, she appears as a dual-phase boss in the final chapter of Act 2, the Glast Subjugation Battle... It was about time for her to enter the narrative.

"Why?"

"Just... her intuition is unusually sharp, and she's been chosen as the academic representative for this Ophelis Hall occupation incident. I'll handle it, so there's no need for you to worry... but I thought you should be aware."

"Alright. I'll bear that in mind."

After replying to her, I took a sip of my tea. Lortel's gaze, fixed on me, was probing.

Looking at me as if I had something to say, Lortel cleared her throat and rose from her seat again, striding toward me.

Then, she plunked down on the reception table, leaning towards me.

"How do you maintain such a calm expression, Ed? I'm actually quite embarrassed here."

As she grumbled with a face full of displeasure, I instantly grasped her meaning.

She was referring to the incident that occurred before she received the torch when we said our goodbyes last time.

"After all, you don't see me as a woman, do you, Ed?"

Lortel swung her legs back and forth and jabbed the innocent table with her finger.

"Well, why should I mince words? I see you as a member of the opposite sex, Ed. Just as you might think. All these requests I make, they're due to my ulterior motives."

"...I don't think I can give you the response you're hoping for..."

"Well now, I wasn't hoping for a response. As you're aware, I typically sidestep battles where the odds of victory are zero."

Lortel, giving a hefty sigh, placed her hand against my chest as if trying to drive home her point.

"If I push for an answer right now, I'm fully aware of what might slip out. I don't throw down a challenge unless I'm sure of my victory."

"..."

"Merchants like me only take on battles we're certain to win. You've been perpetually brooding so far... well, let's see."

Lortel declared boldly, her smile wide and inviting.

"Am I the only one who can't help but feel antsy in a situation like this?"

Upon closer examination, I noticed a slight tremor in the tips of Lortel's fingers.

That mesmerizing smile remained consistent, whether she was assured of victory or painted into a corner.

A merchant's trait of never letting their true emotions show was something she hadn't managed to shake off.

* * *

[You have acquired the advanced manufacturing skill 'Magical Engineering'. An advanced manufacturing skill slot has been used.]

The magical engineering device, made up of a glass sphere about the size of my palm and a mount, was simpler than expected, and I managed to analyze it quickly.

A strange sense of accomplishment welled up in my chest, making me feel like I had finally acquired a truly advanced skill.

Believing it was best to sort out the remaining magical engineering tools back in the cabin, I stuffed my bag to the brim and returned to the camp.

As the sun began to set, the air grew crisp. Autumn had indeed arrived.

When I first took up residence in the forest, it was the beginning of spring. Back then, my main concern was securing enough food, so I put preparing for the cold on the back burner.

But now, as the leaves started their annual color shift, the chill creeping up from the earth couldn't be ignored any longer.

"Hmm..."

It had truly reached a point where sleeping outside was out of the question.

In addition, as winter drew near and snow started to accumulate, hunting forest animals for food would become more difficult. The dwindling number of edible plants would also pose a challenge to my food supply.

Preparing for winter became a pressing necessity.

The warm ambience of gently falling snowflakes... the romantic image I often associated with winter was only beautiful because it was underpinned by a sturdy house and a fridge stocked with food.

Yet, the situation wasn't entirely grim. I had a fallback plan.

"Eighteen... nineteen... twenty."

I opened up the leather purse Lortel had given me. Inside, 20 gold coins were neatly stacked.

If pushed to the brink, I could use this money. But wasteful spending was not an

option. The aim was to minimize expenditure on single-use items.

I could survive this semester with the scholarship provided by the Gloct Foundation, but the next semester was a mystery. To cover the tuition fees each semester, my spending had to be efficient.

It was evident that Lortel held a certain fondness for me. However, banking on that affection was far too risky. Even if I chose to exploit it, it would only be after the scenario had played out in its entirety. Until then, it was simply too much of a gamble.

I'm not trying to sound preachy or spout lines like "one should never take advantage of another person's favor for personal gain", like something straight from a morality textbook...

Getting too close to the main player in the scenario was against my beliefs, and even if I decided to break those... Well, the human heart is a fickle thing. There's no telling when it might change its tune.

Self-reliance is the key to survival. Willingly handing over the reins of your life to someone's temporary favor is a perilous move. No matter what others may say, the responsibility of my life falls squarely on me.

However, I was open to investing a substantial sum on necessities like reinforcing the cabin or acquiring quality woodworking tools.

These were items I would need to use consistently in the future, and they would immediately boost my proficiency in life skills.

That being said, I couldn't justify overspending on basic necessities like food or firewood. Perhaps I would consider investing in spices or oil because they could improve my cooking skills, but I would never spend money on items I could gather from the forest myself.

"Ignition."

I summoned the Ignition spell, which had become as second nature to me as breathing, into the fireplace.

-Whoosh

Flames took hold in the well-crafted fireplace, and smoke rose perfectly through the chimney I had painstakingly built over two full days.

The fireplace ended up being larger than I initially planned, occupying nearly two-thirds of one wall.

I had built it larger than my original design to make a larger fire...

In other words, to generate more heat. At this stage, it more closely resembled a furnace than a fireplace.

Since I could steadily supply firewood, I decided to focus on heat generation for the time being...

But consequently, the size of the chimney to expel smoke also had to increase, which turned out to be a real hassle.

-Crackling, crackling.

The sound of the logs burning softly resonated within the hut.

Though it was still early evening and the inside of the hut remained rather dim, the warm light radiating from the fire seemed to brighten the space, uplifting my mood.

I gazed at the dancing flames for about five minutes before slumping against the wall of the hut and settling down.

"Phew..."

A heavy sigh escaped my lips as I leaned back against the wall, but it was swiftly followed by a content smile stretching across my face.

In my previous outdoor camping experiences, the concept of 'heating the air' was virtually impossible.

The warmth wasn't something that naturally engulfed me as I lay down, it was something I had to actively seek, approaching the fire to absorb it.

But now, I had a roof overhead and walls around me.

I had sealed the walls and roof with mud, and had spread animal skins on the floor to serve as a makeshift carpet.

These materials were excellent at retaining heat. Once they warmed up, they didn't cool down easily. When the air is heated, the sensation of warmth permeates the entire house.

The issue at hand was that the fuel efficiency wasn't as great as I had initially anticipated... It seemed my only option was to dedicate more time to collecting firewood. If time was against me, I'd have to resort to magic to fell the trees. The act of starting a fire itself wouldn't pose much trouble as I could employ ignition magic.

Indeed... It became apparent that increasing mana efficiency was a necessity.

For the time being, I would need to be more conservative with the firewood, but at last, I had officially moved in. Once I had arranged the furniture, a stable living environment was established.

Warm heat gently kissed one side of my face.

Strangely enough, the fact itself felt quite comforting, and it seemed as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders.

"...Wow, time flies. I better start by checking the traps."

Recently, I had begun not only setting up snares for smaller game but also laying traps for considerably larger creatures.

Here's hoping for a good haul.

* * *

- 'If you think it's possible, then it might be.'

Assistant Professor Claire Elfin suggested that there might still be some hidden aspects to the Ophelis Hall occupation incident.

At her suggestion, Professor Glast neither confirmed nor denied it. He didn't appear particularly intrigued.

-Assistant Professor Claire. You have a peculiar talent for intuition, and occasionally present rather credible hypotheses... However, there are times when you overstep at crucial moments. Please refrain from overconfidence in your judgement during critical times.'

"You didn't need to say that last part! But that is the case? Isn't it?!"

"..."

Trix Hall's student counseling room.

With just a single desk separating them, Assistant Professor Claire and Ziggs Ebelstein were engaged in a face-off.

"I, I understand."

"Listen, Ziggs. You would know since you attend Professor Glast's class, but why is he always like that. I've been his disciple for nearly a decade, and it's tough enough handling work, let alone getting any encouragement. Is it too much to ask for a bit of feedback?"

Ziggs responded in a lukewarm manner while beads of sweat formed on his forehead.

Claire Elfin, who had been assigned the responsibility of the Ophelis Hall incident, sensed an unusual discomfort while going through the case file and decided to conduct an additional independent investigation.

She planned to interview Ed, Ziggs, and Yenika, who had not yet been targeted for investigation by the academic inspection department.

Ziggs was the first to be called into Trix Hall, but the conversation that ensued seemed more like a venting session than an interview or investigation.

The dialogue started off formally, but at some point, she began to casually air her grievances and let out heavy sighs.

If Assistant Anise or other students in charge were present, they would undoubtedly let out deep sighs and shake their heads.

"Whew, now is not the time. Ziggs, you exude such reliability that I can't help but vent."

"That's, that's too kind."

"So, I had this uncanny hunch. Despite the current vibe implying it was all a big misunderstanding, there've been a couple of witness reports sighting Gold King Elte at the scene... And Ellis' motivation seems to be lacking somehow. But, since Ellis confessed to everything, there doesn't seem to be any room for further investigation..."

Ziggs swallowed his dry throat.

Assistant Professor Claire appeared somewhat eccentric at first glance. One might question if a faculty member could actually behave so oddly.

The extent of her scholarly knowledge and her personal composure are two distinct entities - a fact that's glaringly apparent.

Her published works and research outcomes are undeniably noteworthy... Yet, on a personal level, it feels like she's a few cards short of a full deck.

However, her peculiar intuition often managed to cut through the complexities of a matter with uncanny precision.

"Do you think there might be some unseen puppet master?"

"Like... For example?"

"Well... Consider this... why, when we mention Gold King Elte... His daughter is at Ophelis Hall, right? I mean, Lortel."

Upon hearing these words, Ziggs gulped.

"Taylee claimed to have seen Lortel apprehended by Ellis, right? After that, she fled from Ophelis Hall and we've yet to locate her."

"That... That's..."

"But, Lortel can't be all that awful. Hmm! She's academically successful and she's

genuinely kind! When I was burning the midnight oil, she even brought me a basket of tarts to lift my spirits."

"..."

With that, Assistant Professor Claire flashed an innocent smile. Then she lowered her voice and resumed her speech.

"I have my suspicions about Ed Rosetail. He's the one currently under the magnifying glass."

She whispered softly, anxious that someone might overhear her. She remained as whimsical as ever. After all, the only individuals present were Ziggs and Claire.

The unexpected mention of the name left Ziggs looking rather grave.

"You're referring to senior Ed?"

"Yes. It may sound like a wild conspiracy theory, but hear me out, Ziggs."

In the beginning, Ziggs was merely here to answer questions. Why should he be subjected to this?

Despite her actions lacking any semblance of dignity, Ziggs couldn't find it within himself to object.

"Everyone else who was present at the scene were either Ophelis Hall students or related parties. Folks who wouldn't seem out of place being involved in the Ophelis Hall incident. But Taylee and Ed, these two got tangled up in this mess even though they had no association with Ophelis Hall. At least Taylee was explicitly dragged into this by Elvira, and he was the one who actually resolved the incident so he should be off the suspect list. That leaves Ed. Why was Ed at Ophelis Hall at that time?"

"..."

"It's because Ed is the brain behind all this! The criminal always returns to the scene of the crime!"

She made an overly dramatic gesture with her mouth and grinned as if she'd made a groundbreaking revelation. She was undoubtedly a naive soul.

"But... there's usually a reason behind actions, right? What would senior Ed stand to gain from instigating such an event? We gotta unravel that as we move forward! By investigating Ed himself! First we pin the blame on him and then uncover the motive or means..."

"Wait! Isn't it the other way around?"

"Probing in reverse can also be a tactic, Ziggs!"

Claire's knack for acting on a whim wasn't a recent development. Ziggs, concerned that Ed might get entangled in needless trouble, fell into deep thought.

"Well, you don't strike me as suspicious, and you seems clueless about the whole situation, so I'll let off."

"Then, are you planning to summon senior Ed to Trix Hall for an inquiry?"

"No. If there's a chance to concoct an alibi for something like this, he'll slip away slicker than an eel. I need to be one step ahead."

This indicated that Ziggs' scheme to warn Ed beforehand had wouldn't work.

"I'm not sure where he's been shacking up since he got kicked out of the dorm... but apparently, he's often spotted on the outskirts of the northern forest. I need to confront him directly."

* * *

If you've resolved to act, you must charge forward. This was Claire's motto.

Even though she was swamped with responsibilities like drafting research proposals, prepping materials for next week's classes, and reviewing students' suggestions, she couldn't half-ass the task at hand because she had already committed to it.

She planned to swiftly scour the northern forest before sunset, but since there were more duties than she anticipated, the forest was already veiled in twilight.

-'Um... I should've postponed this until tomorrow. But unless it's the weekend, there's hardly any time... '

The ambiance of the forest steadily darkening into the night was somewhat menacing. Given the limited field of vision, the search didn't seem too efficient.

-Initially, Ed didn't seem to be lurking around the forest in this obscurity. Unless he's living off the land in this northern forest, why would he prowl around the forest in the dead of night? Let's just come back when it's light out.'

As Claire was about to pivot on her heel with this thought.

-Rustle

At the sound of the grass rustling beyond the isolated path, Claire caught her breath and swiftly took cover behind a nearby tree.

Wondering if it might be a wild animal roaming the forest, she took a peek, and out emerged the notorious disgraced noble, Ed.

Under his arm, he was clutching the body of a fawn, from which blood was copiously oozing.

And over his other shoulder... he was carrying the unconscious form of a human being.

-What... what on earth...!'

Huff, huff.

Ed's labored breathing was akin to a beast's. In the darkness, his eyes seemed to briefly flicker.

Claire held her breath in alarm.

The boy was unmistakably carrying on his shoulder... Lucy Mayril, the prodigious magician to whom even Professor Glast respected.

Observing her hanging limply in the boy's grasp without any attempt to resist, she appeared entirely compliant. She looked utterly submissive.

-Lucy... it has to be Lucy...!'

There wasn't a soul among the academy's faculty who didn't know that name.

The formidable Archmage Gloct or the esteemed Sage Sylvenia could be equated with the greatness of the academy's Principal, Obel.

But even he might have to pull out all the stops to keep up with Lucy.

The girl who was blessed with such preposterous talent was none other than Lucy Mayril.

Yet, she was effortlessly subdued and carted off into the forest... She could only stand there, stupefied at the sight.

Claire found herself rooted to the spot.

She needed to delve into this. Her instincts never misled her.

'I... I might have been born with a natural gift for detective work...!'

Even Professor Glast would be staggered to hear the sensational revelation she might be able to unveil.

With a gleam in her eyes, Claire began tailing Ed.

CHAPTER 45

In the late hours, the northern forest's darkness was hardly welcoming to intruders.

While the forest's wildlife and Ed might consider this area as homely as their own backyard, it was all too alien to Claire.

She occasionally tripped over her own feet and started at the sounds of rustling grass, but Claire stubbornly trailed Ed.

Her pursuit ultimately led her to Ed's camp.

No, it was beyond a mere camp. At this stage, it was appropriate to label it a hideout.

"What... what is all this...!"

Smoke rose from the chimney of a surprisingly well-constructed cabin.

The cabin's front yard was a vast campfire area, with smoke swirling around, drying racks, workstations, lined-up toolboxes, and a robust wooden shelter tucked into one corner.

A hammock woven from netting hung from a tree to the cabin's right side, and a hefty stack of firewood sat in a makeshift storage unit fastened into plywood. Prepared lumber, sorted by type, leaned against the cabin wall.

It was a hideout, but it was imbued with the essence of everyday life. Claire hid behind a tree, her eyes wide in astonishment.

Ed dropped the fawn's carcass near the campfire and nonchalantly tossed Lucy into the wooden shelter. He straightened his rolled-up shirt, tossed a leather pouch containing a few pieces of jerky nearby, and settled onto a log to begin working on the wood.

"Did she pass out...? Even if Lucy is notorious for her lethargy, there's no way she'd be asleep in a situation like this...!"

Claire was oblivious to Lucy's true talent of sleeping in any circumstance.

At first glance, it appeared that he had rendered Lucy unconscious and abducted her to his hideout.

"Did he overpower that Lucy...?"

Lucy, fully unconscious, was motionless, tucked into a corner of the shelter.

"...Ah, I just remembered, I've got an early appointment tomorrow."

Suddenly, Ed's soft murmur echoed through the clearing.

"...I have a lot on my plate, but I should get some shut-eye early tonight for the sake of maintaining my energy. Hmm....."

After mumbling to himself, Ed quickly wrapped up his work and put out the campfire.

In the cabin's front yard, dimly lit by the remaining embers.

Ed collected a few pieces of fabric to use as a blanket, and retired inside the cabin.

Gentle light filtered through the window, which was still devoid of glass. It wasn't hard to envision Ed settling down near the stove inside the cabin.

"I have to rescue Lucy...!"

She was clueless about the exact situation. But she couldn't abandon Lucy, who had been hauled all this way.

Despite appearances, Claire was a faculty member. Even though her specialty wasn't practical combat magic, she was certainly more capable than a student.

But this wasn't the time to lower her guard. At a glance, it seemed impossible for the physically weaker Claire to overpower Ed. And if he could subdue Lucy, who could guess what hidden measures he might have at his disposal.

The plan was simple: approach the camp as stealthily as possible, retrieve the unconscious Lucy, and get out of there.

Lucy was as light as she looked. Claire believed she could manage to carry her away without drawing too much attention to her mana use.

With dry saliva sticking in her throat, Claire began her slow, crouched approach to the camp.

The air was thick with tension. Any moment, the cabin door could fly open and Ed could come rushing out.

She honed all her senses on detecting mana, prepared to act at the first sign of trouble.

Silently and slowly, she crept towards the wooden shelter, where Lucy lay, her breath soft and regular like an infant's.

- 'Quietly... as silently as possible...!'

She was just about to reach out for Lucy when...

- Whiiiiik!

- Thud!

It all happened in a heartbeat.

Lucy's eyes shot open and she swung her mana, knocking Claire's reaching hand away.

"What?!"

Claire let out a short, surprised cry.

Lucy, apparently as shocked as Claire, quickly grabbed her witch's hat, jammed it on her head, and sprang backwards, putting some distance between them.

She eyed Claire with a cold, hardened stare, keeping her body low.

The sight was far from friendly.

"Lu... Lucy...?"

"Who?"

Lucy's independence and aloofness were reminiscent of a feral cat, as was her instinctive reaction to an unexpected touch.

However, not recognizing Claire, her assistant professor for the entire year, was a bit extreme. But, then again, that was typical Lucy, always marching to the beat of her own drum.

"I... um... Lucy, it's me...!"

Before Claire could finish, Lucy, ever agile, swooped up her pouch of jerky from the wooden shelter and was gone.

She moved so quickly that by the time Claire recovered, all that remained of Lucy was a few fluttering leaves where she had been standing.

"..."

Silence descended on the now empty camp.

-'...I should head back.'

It didn't appear that Ed had noticed Claire's presence. Although she wasn't certain of what was going on, it was clear that Ed was up to something suspicious. That in itself was a significant revelation.

She had a lead now. Any further action against Ed would have to wait until she had more solid evidence.

Until then, she would need to approach this matter slowly and cautiously.

Claire nodded to herself, reaffirming her decision.

-'After all... Besides Lucy, no one else knows I was in this forest! And no one else will find out for a while!'

* * *

"Ed, did you happen to see Assistant Professor Claire yesterday? She was in the

northern forest."

"Huh? Really? Can't say I saw her, no."

"...Really?"

The following morning found Yenika and me gathered unusually early at the student square.

The wooden benches encircling the vibrant fountain were all vacant. The air was still cool, the lingering mist indicating how early it truly was.

It was a time when most students would be in bed, postponing the start of their day for as long as they could.

"Why was she in the Northern Forest? Yenika, why haven't I heard anything about this?"

"Um... Well... It's just something I heard..."

The mention of Claire left me feeling somewhat unsettled.

She wasn't exactly pivotal, but she was a character in the scenario, known for her ceaseless curiosity and habit of popping up unexpectedly.

Her presence during the second phase of the Glast Subjugation was...

Well, it was nothing short of ludicrous. The boss's level of difficulty was so low it was basically a free pass.

However, what caught my attention was her active participation in Professor Glast's scheme to steal the Sage's Staff.

Assistant Professor Claire wasn't exactly the epitome of moral rectitude, but Professor Glast was irritating enough to drive anyone to madness.

That Claire willingly got involved in Glast's plan, not out of coercion or deception, was a bit of a surprise.

In the main story, she merely followed her supervising professor's instructions... but

it did seem to lack a solid rationale.

"She probably had some academic matters to handle, don't you think? She might have been concerned that I would turn the forest into my personal playground. After all, the forest is so wild the academy pretty much leaves it be... As long as I don't do anything too overt, I won't draw unnecessary attention."

"Yeah, Ed, that makes sense."

Yenika grinned and nodded in agreement.

"Sorry for dragging you out so early, Ed. Clara and Anise kept complaining that I was missing the roll call time at Dex Hall. They weren't happy."

"Yeah... The camp and Dex Hall are pretty far apart. It must've been tough for you, considering how often you visit the Northern Forest."

"Um, speaking of which, Ed..."

Suddenly, Yenika became shy, tucking her head down and brushing her hair forward as she spoke.

"Could you... keep it a secret... that I'm at the camp every day..."

"Huh? Why would you want that?"

"Well... it's kind of embarrassing to admit... but I have a lot of friends."

A painfully honest statement.

Yenika was the top student and the pride of our sophomore year. Simply responding to every kid who greeted her as she walked through the school grounds was exhausting enough.

"You consider the camp like your home, Ed. If it became crowded because of me, I'd feel really guilty. Hehe."

"Is that so?"

"Let's keep this between us, okay? There's no need for more people coming and

going from the camp."

Considering it, the scrutiny from all those eyes must have been quite a burden for Yenika, who was naturally diligent.

Despite her apology to me, she probably longed for a private refuge of her own.

"I mean, my reputation around the academy isn't exactly stellar... so I don't think you have to worry about overcrowding the camp."

"Even so, those rumors seem to have simmered down lately. You've been quietly doing your own thing, Ed, and there have been plenty of other distractions both inside and outside the academy."

Caught in her thoughts, Yenika was absently tugging at her shawl when she suddenly snapped back to the present.

"Right, back to business! We arranged this meeting for a reason!"

"Oh, right."

Yenika rested her oak staff against the bench and opened her hand wide.

A whirl of magical energy twirled around her, and then a spark ignited from her hand.

The spark flickered, transforming until it took on the form of a bat.

It perched on Yenika's shoulder, folding its wings as it settled into an upright position.

"This is a Low-Rank Fire Spirit, Mug. Can you try tuning into it with mana sense?"

"Sure."

I squinted and focused on the fire bat. Soon, its voice resonated in my ears.

[Pleasure to meet you, Lord Ed! I'm the Low-Rank Fire Spirit, Mug! I ascended from a Lesser Spirit just four years ago! Since then, I've had the privilege to contract with Lord Roden of the Snen family, Master Kuru from the Samal region, and most notably,

Miss Yenika!]

"..."

[Per last week's regular report meeting agenda for Lord Ed's contract spirit selection, I successfully passed the initial support proposal, aced the second and third interviews, and got through the spirit meeting proposal. The qualification verification process is all done! I boast the highest score in a magic efficiency exercise in the Northern Forest, and I'm proud to state that among low-rank spirits of my level, I'm the best communicator!]

It delivered this speech without flinching, its head cocked 45 degrees upward, eyes brightly fixed on me.

Why was it so darn formal...?

"Yenika... um..."

"Yes? What's up?"

Facing a cheerfully grinning Yenika, I blurted out.

"Is this spirit always this... intense?"

Yenika, who had dealt with an absurd number of spirits, had been asked by me to recommend a contract spirit. I wasn't in a place to complain...

"When you asked me to suggest a good spirit, I picked one of my contract spirits that has good efficiency for its magical capacity. There were a few, very minor, hardly worth mentioning selection procedures, but Tarkan handled all that."

"..."

"Well, according to Tarkan... he said he 'fine-tuned it'..."

[I'm honored to form a contract with you, Lord Ed! With a heart ablaze! Even though I'm already on fire, I promise to stoke my spirit's flame in service to you!]

Recalling my second or third time around as the 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', I remember honing my spirit skills.

Back then, I had spirits like Cleo, the water sprite, and Pesi, the wind sprite, under contract.

It didn't feel like this, did it...?

We shared jokes and laughter, boosting each other's morale in battle, and during downtime, I'd lean on their fur or ride them around... It was definitely more about camaraderie.

[Just give the word!]

...

Well, it's a low-rank spirit but elite in its own right, so I can't really complain.

[Magic Ability Details]

Rank: Skilled Magician

Specialty: Elemental

Common Magic: Quick Casting Lv 8; Mana Sensing Lv 8

Fire Elemental Magic: Ignition Lv 14

Wind Elemental Magic: Wind Blade Lv 13

< Intermediate magic is now available! >

Spirit Magic: Spirit Sense Lv 12; Spirit Comprehension Lv 12; Spirit Manifestation Lv 1; Sense Sharing Lv 1

< Spirit Slot: Low-Rank Fire Spirit, Mug >

Response Level: 2

Spirit Efficiency: Good

Inherent Skill: Favor of Fire Blessing (Grants Temporary Immunity to Fire), Lesser Explosion (Lower-level explosion magic)

Fire Magic Ability Increase

< Spirit Slot: Empty >

".....Huh? It's warm?"

"Do you feel the warmth? Once you begin syncing with your contracted spirit, you can sense its physical and magical power, even without it manifesting. If you sync too strongly, it can get hot, so adjust accordingly on regular days."

The contract with Mug was a quick affair. Apparently, contracting with a low-rank spirit can be done with a simple magic circle.

When Mug hopped onto my shoulder, I was surprised by the mild heat.

"So... if I adjust the sense level... the 'heat' varies...?"

"Calling it 'heat' feels a bit off. Makes it sound like a machine..."

"This is... this is...!"

Only then did I scoop up Mug with a beaming face.

[Hahaha, I'm feeling bashful, Mr. Ed.]

A mobile heater...!

A survival tool that's incredibly handy throughout the long winter, radiating warmth whether I'm indoors or outdoors...!

And it doesn't even need firewood...!

Of course, it feeds on my magical energy, but the mana efficiency of a spirit I'm interacting with through spirit sensing skill and the Ignition magic that I directly cast using my magical energy are on different levels.

In a nutshell, spirit sensitivity is about the efficiency of magical energy used in interaction with or manifestation of a spirit.

The higher the spirit sense, the more potent and numerous spirits can be managed

with less magical energy. Hence, even with a smaller innate mana pool, a high spirit sense can manage a broader range of spirits.

In this context, mana efficiency greatly diverges from general magic. That's the biggest edge spirit users have.

Certainly, it wasn't like it didn't drain mana, so I couldn't have it running all day as a furnace would, but it could prove handy when out in the frosty winter or in a cabin where the air was yet to warm up.

When firewood supplies were dwindling, I could switch to this flame bat, using mana instead of firewood... A flexible solution, adjusting between the remaining firewood and mana.

".....Thank you, Yenika! I'm overjoyed! I look forward to working with you, my... no, Mug!"

[Hahaha, I'm ecstatic you're this happy!]

In my excitement, I scooped up Mug and twirled it around.

I made it flutter in the air and modulated the sense level to test the heat intensity. When I cranked the sense level to its peak, it was as scorching as a bonfire. True, the mana efficiency dipped accordingly, but it would improve as my proficiency with spirit system skills advanced.

Experiencing the spirit contract firsthand, a concept I'd only known from game settings, it was a whole different beast. I never knew that this level of sensory sharing was possible with a spirit I had a contract with.

Half in awe, half in exhilaration, I experimented with Mug in various ways.

"It's great seeing you so cheerful. You always seemed so exhausted and burdened. It makes me happy, hehe."

Yenika watched for a bit before giggling shyly.

"Let me know if you need anything else, Ed. Before today's first lesson, I'll introduce you to spirit sense and perception itself. You'll learn faster with me. And if you want to accelerate reaching the stage where a Mid-Rank Spirit contract is feasible, you

should also practice spirit combat... I'll carve out some time and book a combat training room! And... um... there are many accessories that enhance reaction efficiency... they're all in my room... next time we meet... ugh!"

Yenika, caught up in her excitement, suddenly inhaled sharply, as if recalling something.

Quickly covering her mouth, she exhaled, then stole a peek at me from the corner of her eye.

"Um, Ed..."

"Hm?"

"Actually... I'm busy too! I'm swamped!"

Yenika straightened her posture, narrowed her eyes a tad, and awkwardly coughed a few times.

"I'm the top of my class, right? And I have people queued up, asking me to tutor them, right? So... it's really hard for me to spare time! Yes!"

"Understood. That makes sense."

"So, isn't it a bit much to expect me to teach spirit magic just like that...? Hm?"

Her smile was broad, but her lips quivered slightly.

Was this... some sort of push-pull strategy? Was she attempting a Lortel imitation that wasn't her style...? However, I soon realized Yenika was speaking truthfully.

While it was easy to forget, given her daily presence at the camp, ordinarily, one-on-one instruction from a spirit user like Yenika would cost a pretty penny.

What good were connections if you couldn't leverage them, I had reasoned, trying to benefit from them. But I conceded, I might have overstepped.

"I didn't anticipate Yenika being so staunch in this respect... But it's only right. I apologize, Yenika. I took your kindness for granted."

"Huh? I wasn't expecting an apology... Clara just... Advised me to assert myself once in a while... No, that's not it..."

"So... What should we do... Offering some payment as a courtesy would be fitting, wouldn't it? I can't give you a significant sum, but..."

Still, could I negotiate a discounted rate, a friend's price? Yenika was aware of my situation.

The only solution was to crunch the numbers to figure out what I could afford that wouldn't jeopardize my survival.

"What? Money?"

But Yenika was startled by my suggestion.

"What money are you referring to, Ed! You're fighting for survival! You can't squander money, you need to conserve! Absolutely not! Don't even contemplate giving me money, not a chance! I'll be furious!"

"...?"

"And to exchange money for teaching... That's too impersonal! You're better than that! Why this sudden change, it's hurtful!"

"But weren't you the one who initially requested payment...?"

At my comment, Yenika caught her breath again, and went silent, acknowledging the truth of my statement.

I was at a loss to comprehend what tune she wanted me to march to.

"...Why this sudden shift?"

It was then that Yenika came clean.

"Well, Clara gave me some guidance... My character tends to be overly generous, so instead of push-and-pull... no! Uh... hm... I should assert my value...! Like negotiation? Being slightly aloof? Knowing when to say no... It's about being a bit detached."

"That's not inaccurate. You make me worry that you might get swindled somewhere. Clara is a good friend."

"You knew it...? But... I'm not like that with everyone....."

She fidgeted with her fingers and sneaked a glance at me, then was startled when our eyes met.

"Regardless! I'll provide a thorough explanation next time! Let's rendezvous at the combat training field! I'll book it and inform you! I'll bring a suitable accessory! If you need a Spirit Sense practice manual, let me know! I have morning classes soon...! Bye! Catch you later, Ed!"

And with that, she dashed off, knocking the bench over in her haste.

I was caught off guard and could only watch Yenika's retreating figure.

* * *

Word around the school was that it was facing a financial crunch.

Professor Glast sat in his lab, calmly perusing scholarly books. Resources on divine magic were scarce, stunting progress.

Research on divine magic, a field that defied logic and challenged the accepted truths...

Had seen minimal advancement since the explorations of the Great Sage Sylvenia.

The progress of academic research often proceeds in small, ineffective increments until a brilliant mind emerges, catalyzing a significant leap forward. This recurrent pattern has traditionally characterized scholarly investigation.

As a scholar studying the Sage's Scripture, this reality was somewhat disheartening.

If scholarly research were indeed the realm of a rare few prodigies, then academics like him could do nothing more than to retain and categorize the wisdom of those before them, passing it on to the future generations.

Engrossed in these introspective musings, which to others may have appeared

fruitless, Professor Glast chuckled grimly. He questioned when he had become so secure as to entertain such profound reflections.

Nevertheless, the role of Professor Glast crystallized.

In a world abundant with the mediocre, his mission was to discover raw prodigies, ones with the potential to steer the trajectory of global history.

Regardless of the discipline, any bright talent could propel the world's advancement.

-Bang!

The lab's tranquility was disrupted by his student and recently-appointed aide, Assistant Professor Claire Elfin.

"Professor Glast!"

"Ever consider knocking?"

"I'm sorry, it was an emergency!"

Claire shut the door, walked out, and rapped on it resoundingly. Professor Glast emitted a deep sigh.

"Alright, come in."

"Yes!"

Clutching a binder and a crystal sphere, Claire strode in and dumped them onto Professor Glast's desk.

"I have news! Professor Glast! This is major! Brace yourself for a shock!"

"..."

"Do you know Ed Rosetail? The student they dub 'Ed', due to some scandal?!"

"I don't generally remember the names of mediocre students."

"Don't be so callous! Just hear me out!"

Claire slammed her hand on Professor Glast's desk, creating a ruckus.

"Do you know our student Lucy?! Lucy! Your prized student Lucy Mayril!"

"..."

"Lucy was outclassed by this Ed student, she couldn't put up a fight! No, that's not all... I was probing into the Ophelis Hall takeover incident because something didn't add up and I saw... But, before that, I should tell you why I was in the northern forest..."

"You're not making any sense, Assistant Professor Claire."

Claire was enthusiastic to share her findings, but her exhilaration was so overpowering that her words became a confusing jumble. Considering this assistant professor had to lecture students, Professor Glast felt another profound sigh brewing.

"So, what I mean is... after a series of events, I utilized the 'Retrospective Record Magic' on the first floor of Ophelis Hall, alright?!"

"Retrospective Record Magic? Did you obtain academic approval?"

"Absolutely not! I hoodwinked the department and took the retrospective magic artifact! Ah, the perks of being a professor! You can pull off such things without raising any suspicion! I could have never imagined doing this before earning my degree!"

"..."

'Retrospective Record Magic' was a sort of playback magic, enabling one to re-experience certain past events that had occurred at a specific location.

Without leveraging the theories of the not-yet-explored divine magic, time-manipulating magic required a colossal amount of magical power.

Most of this was executed using magical engineering artifacts constructed by Grand Mages, and such devices often carried a price tag equal to a building.

These artifacts were expensive and complex to operate, thus official usage required

academic authorization. However, Claire wielded her professorial power to use the machinery as she pleased.

Though it wasn't an object that deteriorated with use, it was a blatant misuse of authority.

"Be ready to pen a report."

"I foresaw that and drafted one beforehand!"

"Is that a point of pride?"

"Regardless, it's worth reviewing! Take a look at this!"

Claire thrust forward the crystal ball containing the 'Retrospective Record Magic'.

"The academic investigators didn't employ 'Retrospective Record Magic' during the investigation process! They claimed that Chief Maid Ellis had confessed unequivocally, and the statements on the scene were all consistent... moreover, the scope of 'Retrospective Record Magic' is quite limited, isn't it?"

As she infused the crystal ball with magic, Claire continued unabated.

"It's inefficient to capture all locations within Ophelis Hall with an intricate procedure and the complex activation of a magical engineering artifact, so they didn't extend the investigation process there! There was no need to! It'd be the tail wagging the dog!"

"And?"

"Just on the off chance... I performed 'Retrospective Record Magic' on only the first floor's central hall based on Taylee's testimony about encountering and battling Ed on the first floor! The procedure was so complex that I did it haphazardly!"

Even insiders of the academy had their limits. Assistant Professor Claire's propensity to act headstrong when her instincts were triggered was downright exasperating.

If Professor Glast had taken exception to it, it could have been brought before the disciplinary committee... but Glast wasn't that sort of person. The academy was already understaffed.

"And?"

"Look at this! Ed is in the footage! I brought it quickly because the preservation period is brief!"

The scene captured a moment when Ed sat alone in the central hall on the first floor, greeting Taylee. At first glance, it looked like a static photograph, but it was clearly a moving image, as evidenced by the raindrops hitting the window.

"Look at this! Doesn't he seem like a thorough villain?"

"..."

"You can see him posing as if to proclaim, 'I'm the villain...!', right?"

"..."

Professor Glast massaged his face once and stared directly at Assistant Professor Claire.

"...Is that it?"

"Huh?"

"You stormed in here with such conviction for this?"

"Well, I just touched on it, but the sight of Ed carrying the unconscious student Lucy..."

"Lucy Mayril is known for her lethargic nature, often dozing off at a moment's notice, and once asleep, she doesn't wake up easily. Wasn't he merely moving Lucy Mayril, who was simply asleep?"

Sadly, that was the right answer.

"But when I approached her, she noticeably overreacted...!"

"That's not just you. It's a typical reaction when Lucy Mayril is disturbed. Paradoxically, it confirms that she was indeed asleep."

“...Ah! Not only that, student Ed has a secret shelter in the northern forest for survival training...”

"How does that tie into the incident at Ophelis Hall...?"

"Uh... That... I..."

Professor Glast released a heavy sigh.

“...Assistant Professor Claire. I've told you before, you often impulsively chase your instincts.”

There was no counter to that.

Certainly, Ed was a student with many questionable actions, but there was no concrete evidence.

Ed had already given his statement regarding the incident at Ophelis Hall. Although the records were somewhat lacking, the general situation could be comprehended.

Ed was at Ophelis Hall because he had a private appointment with Yenika. They had planned to meet at the front rose garden, a fact Yenika had confirmed.

Observing something unusual at Ophelis Hall, he went into the building to investigate, realizing the situation was dangerous.

That's why he tried to dissuade Taylee and his group from entering the building forcefully. Of course, his efforts to discourage them failed.

His attempt to prevent his underclassmen from entering a dangerous area portrayed him as a commendable senior. At least, that's the picture painted by the testimonies.

Even disregarding Ed's usual behavior, there was nothing in the testimony itself to critique. There were a multitude of suspicions, but that was an entirely separate matter.

"Differentiate between suspicions and proof, Assistant Professor Claire."

"Ugh... I apologize..."

Finally, unable to find the right words, Claire lowered her head.

"Bring the summary."

"Yes..."

Watching the deflated Claire exit the research room, Professor Glast exhaled a profound sigh.

Professor Glast sat back down and began to organize all the documents.

And as he prepared to shut off the crystal ball that Professor Claire had brought, he noticed Ed in the image was rising, ready for combat.

The former Ed Rosetail, who now just went by Ed.

Given the fact that he didn't make a significant impression in Professor Glast's memory, he wasn't a human born with any noteworthy talent.

At first sight, both his total magical power and the level of magic he wields don't appear high.

An ordinary human, one devoid of talent.

Stepping in front of Taylee, Elvira, and Ayla with such qualifications was more reckless than brave.

The documents said it all. Ed tried to stop Taylee's group but was quickly overwhelmed.

That's just the way of the world. Nothing is resolved by sheer determination alone.

Professor Glast was a professor in the magic department. However, he had glanced at the students of the combat and alchemy departments once.

Even though he didn't have direct evaluation authority, he had recognized a few individuals born with talent.

Taylee, destined to follow the swordsman's path, and Elvira, born with an innate knack for alchemy.

Could such an ordinary human stand up against these two?

Pondering this, Glast gazed into the crystal ball.

To reassess the talents of Taylee and Elvira.

Professor Glast was a man who was dedicated to identifying talent as brilliant as a jewel and evaluating its value.

"Hmm..."

So, Professor Glast observed the battle between Ed and Taylee's group for quite some time.

"....."

After a while, Professor Glast propped his chin and fell deep into thought.

Engrossed in deep thought, he stood there for a long time.

CHAPTER 46

Those tranquil days of the past felt akin to the passing of the spring and autumn seasons. It wasn't until the harsh winter season arrived that I truly appreciated the serenity and simplicity of those bygone days.

Honestly, I couldn't precisely define my everyday life as smooth. It often felt like a grueling trek. Still, compared to the outset of my survival journey, conditions had significantly improved.

I had a cabin for shelter, a decent stockpile of meat, vegetables, and spices, and a sizeable pile of firewood. I had effectively escaped the state of homelessness and hunger.

The disturbance in this somewhat stable life... began with three letters, each from a different correspondent.

* * *

I was gradually getting up to speed with the academic curriculum.

Despite my lack of exceptional magical talent, my grades were steadily rising above average. Particularly in written subjects, I began to excel, and it appeared as though my name was starting to make the rounds among the assistant professors.

Simple memorization and basic theory could be mastered with sufficient time and effort.

If I cut back on sleep, utilized my free time, and practiced repeatedly, I could jam the information into my head—even if it was by brute force. This issue was entirely separate from magical talent.

My physical training also showed substantial progress.

My stamina had increased significantly, to the point where it could match that of an average adult male. In contrast to my frail, skinny self in the spring, it was a noteworthy improvement.

On the flip side, my combat skills still had a long way to go...

But, I had an abundance of tools to aid me.

[New Finished Product]

Ceremonial Dagger: A ceremonial dagger inscribed with explosive magic using the spirit formula.

It can activate the inscribed magic within a certain range. The activation speed is quite swift due to pre-inscription, and the magic efficiency is exceptional.

Injected Spirit Formula: Spirit Magic - Lesser Explosion (Subordinate Fire Spirit Mug)

Mana Accumulation Capacity: Medium. Sensing Distance: Narrow. Manufacturing Difficulty: ●●○○○

[Manufacturing is completed. Manufacturing proficiency has increased.]

A pattern resembling a blazing flame spread across the surface of the dagger, emitting a soft glow.

This ceremonial dagger had been with me for a considerable time since the beginning of my survival journey. As I sharpened its affectionately maintained blade and inscribed various symbols on it, a sense of pride welled within me.

[The spirit formula has integrated quite nicely. It's common for equipment used by the caster to have improved efficiency, and it's clearly noticeable because it's a dagger that's been with you for a long time, Master Ed!]

Mug, perched on my shoulder, conveyed this in a resolute tone, as if to make sure it sank in.

[This is another milestone, Master Ed! It's a joyous occasion! A celebration! This fire spirit, Mug, will express my delight by singing a song! A shepherd's song handed down orally from the Pulan region... Eeek!]

I swiftly nabbed Mug's wings and placed him on a neighboring tree branch. As I stared at him, he squirmed uncomfortably.

["Ah, Master Ed! I've erred! I wish to make amends for my misbehavior! I'm deeply ashamed! What's even more shameful is that I'm in the dark about my own wrongdoing! Please, if you enlighten me about my mistakes, I vow to sincerely reflect and make changes..."]

"Enough, stop talking."

[...Yes?]

Without question, among Yenika's spirits, Mug was the best of the best, astoundingly proficient for a low-ranking spirit.

His mana sensitivity was so adept that he would laud his master while deftly inscribing spirit formulas. He was versatile in thought and nimble in action, proving beneficial during hunts.

His function as a heat source was undisputed, and he was even sociable – earning a perfect score.

But, if there was one fatal flaw, it was his excessive subservience.

"Cease the chatter. It's grating, even to my ears, honestly."

[No, no! That can't be!]

"Why?"

The bond between a spirit mage and their spirits was less of a power dynamic and more of a straightforward contract.

Therefore, the low-ranking spirits serving Yenika were remarkably submissive, given Yenika's exceptional power as a spirit mage.

Spirits, once they had ascended from the lesser spirits' realm into the low-ranking spirits' tier, bolstered their status by forming contracts with spirit mages and receiving mana.

If they could enter a contract with a competent and receptive spirit mage... it was more customary for the spirits themselves to display gratitude and respect. Thus, to establish an equal bond with a spirit mage as receptive as Yenika, one would have to

be a high-ranking spirit at least.

Yenika's constant companionship of numerous spirits wasn't solely due to her natural affinity for attracting spirits but fundamentally because her inherent sensitivity was irresistibly appealing to the spirits.

Particularly for low-ranking spirits, the mere act of forming a contract with Yenika was a stroke of immense luck... they had no choice but to express their profound gratitude.

However, as a novice spirit mage, I didn't require such overbearing deference. There was a high likelihood that creating unnecessary dominance could only impair our rapport.

"Just call me Ed, alright? It's merely two syllables."

[Master Ed! This really isn't right!]

"Doesn't it feel a bit odd from the get-go? There's no need for such respect, and there's no need to make a big deal out of our contract."

[Uh... um...]

Appearing to have hit a nerve, Mug flapped his wings and faltered in his sentence.

"Did you make any specific promises?"

[Well, that...]

"Let's lay it all bare. We're not mere passing acquaintances, are we?"

After saying that, I gazed down at Mug.

Mug quivered slightly, then unexpectedly burst into loud wails.

[Oh, Master Ed! Why would I conceal anything! If I contract with Master Ed and my abilities are acknowledged, I would receive almost half more of Miss Yenika's refined mana compared to other low-ranking spirits... It's essentially to hasten my path to success...!]

"..."

Just as I thought.

[True! My unwavering respect and loyalty for Master Ed is not purely out of reverence, but springs from my ambitions carved into this humble fire spirit's essence! I'm well aware of the shame in it!]

"So... You're candid about it. Anything else you'd like to confess?"

[On top of that... after picking up some conversations at the Academy, I understood you have a firm authoritarian demeanor... I desired to stay on your good side...]

"Just as I expected."

I held the dagger, beautifully etched with a spirit formula. I rotated it, flexed it, even gave it a light swing or two, but it felt no different than usual.

Typically, if the spirit formula is not properly infused, it influences the tool itself, causing an inconvenient shift in weight. However, the spirit formula infusion executed by Mug didn't exhibit any significant effects, it was flawlessly executed.

With that, I threw the dagger and lodged it into a nearby tree trunk.

-Bang!

When I injected a slight amount of magic into the activated spirit formula, a minor explosion ensued. With such an explosion at this level of magic, if I deliberately funneled more, it could act as a small explosive.

As the thin veil of smoke dissipated, the embedded dagger revealed itself again. Pristine. The flame resistance was well-applied, seemingly unaffected by the explosion. The finish was impeccable too.

"Well, appreciate your honesty. Why are you so apologetic, begging like that?"

Isn't it said that unadulterated relationships only last until grade school? Once we age, there's inevitably some self-interest, minor or major, when engaging with someone.

Antiquated thinking, expecting absolute sincerity in human interactions, is a thing of the past. Ultimately, what counts are skills and demeanor.

The spirit formula was also engraved tidily and proficiently.

Checking out my reputation before entering into a contract with me could appear cunning, but from another angle, it testifies to comprehensive preparation and sincerity.

By acquainting himself with me beforehand and spending time and effort to align with me...

It indicates his painstaking meticulousness.

Even though it's somewhat self-serving, if not over the top, it often serves as an advantage.

"It's alright, you can stop."

[But, but...]

"Didn't I say I comprehend? You can let go, right? Your situation is pretty clear, isn't it?"

[Master Ed...!]

Mug, seemingly moved and perhaps burdened with a surge of emotions, responded in a choked voice.

[Honestly, it was too much! Sob! The fact that being a high-ranking spirit implies superior status... Why do they get to act so superior just because they came into existence a bit earlier...! Uhuhu!]

"..."

[But, I still can't give up. This is more comfortable for me!]

I stopped mid-sentence.

I'd once heard that advising newcomers or rookies to unwind could add to their

anxiety rather than alleviate it.

In this world, there are situations where unease is anticipated. Insisting on relaxation can sometimes only magnify that unease. A circumstance where discomfort was more comforting...

It was quite the paradox.

Regardless, he would figure it out. His social skills seemed to be top-notch, so he appeared to be capable of navigating the situation.

I retrieved my dagger once more, slid it into its leather sheath, and strapped it to my thigh. Standing erect, I could easily reach the dagger at a moment's notice. It seemed to be a functional arrangement.

"[By the way, what do you plan on doing with those letters? If you don't intend to go through them now, should I take them to the cabin?]

Mug fluttered across the campfire, perched on a tree branch, and rustled the trio of letters clenched in his beak.

One was tucked inside a crisp, formal envelope, delivered without any seal and crudely folded. Assistant Anise from the academy had personally given it to me.

Another was secured with a tidy wax seal and framed by a decent gold trim, suggesting a formal and proper correspondence. It was delivered by a middle-aged representative of the Elte Merchant Guild.

The last was impressive and grandiose, scripted on extravagant paper with shimmering ink. It was personally handed over by Cler, the captain of Princess Penia's guard.

"I'll go through them now."

The contents of each were distinct, but the final letter was likely the most startling.

* * *

The royal family's domicile in Sylvania was quite a spectacular estate, but in comparison to Ophelis Hall, it was significantly smaller.

However, despite its smaller size, it had a similar construction cost, so one could only envision its splendor unless they had seen it firsthand.

A man with a ponytail and light armor strolled into the princess's chamber. (TL Note: I had previously said Cler was a woman, but here it explicitly says that Cler is man, so it will be so.)

"I've returned from the Northern Forest. I have delivered the letter as you instructed."

"Thank you for your efforts, Cler."

Cler, the Knight Captain of Princess Penia Elias Kroel, the third princess's guard, had mixed feelings recently. His loyalty was exclusively to Penia, and the current situation was far from enjoyable for him.

When his princess initially arrived in Sylvania for her studies, he felt quite pleased.

Although Princess Penia's palace life appeared glamorous at first glance, anyone aware of her situation wouldn't possibly envy her.

Ever since Landon, Emperor Kroel's sole son, announced his decision to abdicate the throne, the tension among the princesses was palpable.

Princess Serena of Frost and Princess Priscilla of Wisdom. Their gaze towards Princess Penia had been filled with suspicion for some time now.

No matter how much she asserted her lack of interest in the throne, Princess Penia's standing, backed by the people, was such that she could potentially ascend to the throne at any moment.

There may have been a need for some political maneuvering, but there was no shortage of influential individuals ready to throw their support behind Princess Penia. The succession order could always be 'rearranged'. One way or another.

Obviously, Penia was unlikely to involve herself in such scheming. But that didn't exempt her from suspicion.

Enrolling at the Sylvanian Academy was an ingenious move to demonstrate Princess Penia's sincerity.

Making the decision to leave the royal court for education during such a pivotal time was a move only someone devoid of ambitions for the throne would make. After all, she would have to commit at least four years to this institution.

What was the Sylvanian Academy?

First and foremost, it upheld the virtue of education; was it not a scholarly haven?

She had hoped that leaving the commanding atmosphere of the distant Kroel royal court and spending a few years making memories and developing her persona would be a good idea... but things in life rarely went according to plan.

"...You don't seem yourself, Princess. Forgive my presumption, but are you burdened with something?"

"...Well."

Princess Penia gathered her platinum hair and sighed deeply as she sank into the plush sofa.

She chose to acknowledge the truth.

Her decision to flee from the Kroel royal court was partially to refine her education in this scholastic sanctuary...

But it was also heavily swayed by the urge to escape.

She had fled from the burdens of royalty, which demanded participation in political schemes at every turn, establishment of authority, and proof of her ruling qualifications, or risk being left behind.

Having lived that way her entire life, she wondered if a few years of respite wouldn't be acceptable.

She had hoped that by then, the exhausting succession dispute would have resolved itself.

But even after journeying all the way to Sylvanian, things remained unchanged. A person can't escape their nature, whether they intend to or not.

"I suppose... my destiny is to spend my whole life amidst intrigue."

"Princess."

"There's no need for comfort, Cler."

The words Principal Obel spoke to her the night before resonated in her mind.

The Sylvanian Academy was in a dire financial state. They required funds substantial enough to at least cover this quarter's impending payments.

Despite the desperate approach to Princess Penia, she was powerless to help at this point.

With Princess Penia's influence, they might raise some funds, but there was no assurance they would arrive before the payment deadline, and most importantly, there was no valid justification for it.

Despite considerable support from the royal court, the Sylvanian Academy was, at its core, a private institution established by the esteemed prophet Sylvenia. To inject additional royal funding into such an establishment, a fitting reason was necessary.

As a third princess, she couldn't access the royal treasury, especially since she was physically detached from the royal court at the moment.

Ultimately, she had to indirectly deny Obel's request. She couldn't manage the fiscal matters of an educational institution as vast as Sylvanian based on empathy alone, not with such a significant sum of money on the line.

The issue should have concluded there.

"The intention to auction off the 'Sage's Scripture' will eventually materialize."

"Indeed. Naturally, there will be considerable resistance from the students and faculty... So rather than an outright sale, it's likely to take the shape of collateral or a mortgage."

"Crafty indeed. Maintaining the right of possession while initially buying the ownership rights, then gradually claiming the goods. It's characteristic of the Elte Merchant Guild."

The notions of possession and ownership were distinctly different.

If word got out that the 'Sage's Scripture', the symbol of the Sylvanian Academy, was being traded for money, the uproar from the academy would be enormous. Thus, they consented to recognize the act of possession...

The act of storing the goods.

As time elapsed, and everyone's interest slowly waned, the Seal showcased in Trix Hall would be temporarily relocated to a warehouse under some pretext. The guise of studying the Scripture would be most fitting.

The day the Scripture would be displayed again was likely never to come.

"Princess Penia. Your complexion... it's off."

"Thank you for your concern, Cler. I'm okay, go get some rest."

Princess Penia massaged her temples and eased her shoulders.

Penia had spent a lifetime in a world of political maneuvering. With the documents Obel brought and the unfolding circumstances, she could discern the traces of a hidden puppeteer.

Her intuition led her to the young de facto authority of the Elte Merchant Guild, Lortel Keherun.

The girl, with her auburn hair braided and a cunning smile on her face, flipping coins between her fingers, never unveiled her true intent.

Through Penia's keen eye, Lortel was an adept swindler who naturally deceived and swindled others as naturally as breathing.

Even as Glaskan's summoning ceremony enveloped the sky and the academy's buildings were crumbling, the image of her sitting serenely with a faint smile remained etched in Penia's mind, refusing to fade. It was a level of composure beyond human comprehension.

She had the sensation that even the plan to acquire the 'Sage's Scripture' was being manipulated by Lortel.

She chose to acknowledge it candidly.

She was frightened. Truly petrified.

In Penia's view, Lortel was a devil flipping coins. She might even be capable of deceiving a deity if she desired.

She would undoubtedly ascend to the pinnacle of the Elte Merchant Guild. It was inconceivable that someone like Lortel would be subservient to anyone else.

Could there be a person in this world who could control such a girl...

"There's no need for initial hostility..."

Princess Penia slumped into the sofa and quietly trailed off.

At any rate, the negotiations between the academy and the merchants regarding the 'Sage's Scripture' were an internal affair. It wasn't a matter that Princess Penia needed to interfere with.

Nevertheless, Princess Penia had no choice but to pick up her quill and draft a letter.

A third party had interjected themselves into this negotiation.

She couldn't afford to ignore the maneuvers of this new entrant.

* * *

"Ed! Ed!"

The sounds felt distant, like voices reaching me from the surface while I was underwater. I sensed someone calling me, but at that moment, my ability to pay attention was strained to the limit.

My mind was in a bit of disarray due to the letters I'd received.

The first two letters were manageable.

They held nothing particularly striking, just information that was good to know.

However, the third letter required a moment of clarity and focus.

I couldn't afford to be shaken now, given the unfolding events were veering off from what I had predicted.

That was clear as day. The narrative had strayed substantially from its origin, but it was a predicament that could be handled by keeping tabs on the situation and nudging it back on course.

Nevertheless, if Taylee could streamline the narrative by resolving all issues...

Then my intervention wouldn't be necessary.

The only task left in this second act was to master the second skill of the Sword Saint form and acquire resistance to divine magic.

Yet, letting my guard down was not an option. The course of the narrative had already veered considerably.

The proof was right in my hand.

"Ed."

If I were to identify the root of the disturbance, it was Elte's untimely downfall.

Gold King Elte was predestined to lose to Lortel in the 'Sage's Scripture' competition and consequently fall from grace.

However, for some unknown reason, this narrative course was disrupted, and he was unseated earlier during the Ophelis Hall siege incident.

What kind of ripple effect could this trigger?

Elte's intention behind purchasing the 'Sage's Scripture' was to resell it at a profit.

That is, someone had requested him to secure the 'Sage's Scripture'.

The identity of that individual... regrettably, a name I'd heard so often it had started to grate.

I immediately grasped why the princess had penned me a letter. In some ways, I was an insider. She was likely testing the waters to see if I had any intel on his actions.

"Ed!"

Suddenly, I was yanked back to reality.

Yenika was leaning in, her face a mere breath away from mine with an almost teary-eyed look. She seemed to have been jostling my shoulder.

"Ah."

"Snap out of it! What's gotten into you!"

"I apologize, Yenika. I was deep in thought."

Realizing when she had shown up, Yenika, who had rested a mug on my shoulder, let out a sigh of relief. Then, perhaps conscious of our faces being uncomfortably close, she quickly stepped back.

"You have to take care of yourself! Working hard is important... but health comes first!"

Nodding to Yenika, who was admonishing me with her hands on her hips, I dipped my head once more.

As I mentioned earlier, the one who commissioned Elte Keherun to purchase the 'Sage's Scripture' — was Krepin Rosetail, the patriarch of the Rosetail Family.

For Krepin, who was exploring the magic of immortality, the 'Sage's Scripture', steeped in divine magic, had significant research value.

However, with Elte's downfall... the buyer himself had no other option but to step in.

"Ed, you don't seem to be yourself right now."

Yenika commented, a look of concern etched across her face. And rightfully so.

The personal letter from the princess suggested she had several questions about the leader of the Rosetail Family, which I was once a part of, and invited me to the royal

quarters. The letter also raised suspicions about Krepin's actions.

Previously, the negotiation for the 'Sage's Scripture' was a two-way battle between the academy and the Elte Merchant Guild.

However, it had now morphed into a triangular struggle involving the academy, the Elte Merchant Guild, and the Rosetail family.

Krepin Rosetail, the family patriarch, was a villain who made his appearance in the fourth act of 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman'.

He was a late-stage antagonist, whose misdeeds were exposed by Princess Penia, who wielded the power of both the academy and the royal court. The magnitude of the challenge he presented was self-explanatory.

At this juncture, it was safe to state that there was no means to restrain him.

The silver lining was that his goal was merely to acquire the 'Sage's Scripture'. If he succeeded in procuring the Scripture, he would likely retreat without a fuss.

However, what he would do after obtaining the Scripture was a mystery. It was venturing into uncharted territory.

It wasn't a question of having a foresight advantage. The real issue was whether overcoming this challenge was even feasible.

The showdown between Princess Penia and Krepin Rosetail was a plotline that wasn't supposed to be unveiled so soon.

Krepin Rosetail. If he truly aimed to interfere with these Scripture negotiations, he had to be sidelined by any means possible.

He shouldn't be stepping into the limelight of the narrative this early. The latter half of the story's characters must save their parts for the latter half.

"I apologize, Yenika. I didn't mean to worry you."

I eased my expression and tossed a few more logs into the fire.

I bowed my head in silent contemplation, sorting through my thoughts.

Yenika, who was seated opposite me by the campfire, suddenly switched to a stubborn demeanor and fixed her gaze on me.

"I won't budge until you share what's bothering him."

Her obstinacy was out of character, and I nearly burst into laughter.

CHAPTER 47

"Ed Rosetail is valuable."

Every meal was a banquet.

Princess Penia, a light eater, left half her food untouched. But royal decorum demanded an overflowing table, regardless.

The extravagance was frustrating, but her status prohibited anything less. It was a paradox.

After her meal, Princess Penia walked to the student council building in the faculty district and found a comfortable bench. A wooden bench with a table near the plaza. It was a perfect spot for soaking in the sun.

No sooner had she taken a seat than her attendants scurried to provide shade with a parasol. With a quick flick of a magic spell, they heated water for tea from a set they always carried, delivering a hot cup in no time.

"He might have insights on the inner workings of the Rosetail Family. He's playing dumb for now, but with the right pressure, we might get him to spill. If we can maneuver him further, he might even serve as a spy for us in the Rosetail camp."

Leaning back casually, Cler proposed this to Princess Penia, who was sipping her tea. Their discussion that began over lunch had yet to find a resolution.

"..."

The afternoon classes were still some time away.

Princess Penia, her platinum hair unbound, swept it aside with delicate fingers and looked up at the clear autumn sky.

Her intuition raised alarms about Krepin Rosetail.

Despite his polished, noble facade, her instincts hinted at a deep, dark obsession

lurking beneath.

Without substantial evidence, she was powerless to act. But one thing was clear: the Sage's Scripture must not fall into his grasp.

"We've received word that the Rosetail Family's negotiation team will reach Aken Island next week."

"That's peculiar. Selling the Sage's Scripture would be extremely disgraceful, they'd want to keep it under wraps as much as possible. How did Krepin, an outsider, get wind of it and dispatch a negotiation team?"

"That young man... Ed might have leaked it. Living within the academy, he could have picked up on the rumors."

"Why would he? He's been cast out by the Rosetail Family, there's no obligation to stay faithful to them."

"If I were in that boy's place, I'd do anything to regain the family's acceptance."

Cler affirmed with a nod.

Indeed, the forest boy might desire the prestige of the Rosetail Family. From what she understood, he was struggling daily to get by... He might long for his former carefree days.

'It appeared he had adapted to his reduced circumstances after being ousted, but perhaps the contrast in lifestyle was too severe to bear.'

Feeling a pang of irony, Princess Penia half-closed her eyes.

"I don't believe that's the case."

The response came from an unexpected source. As Cler and Princess Penia turned, a girl with a familiar face approached and took a seat across from them.

Her eyes sparkled with mischief, and her lips twisted in a playful smirk, the portrait of a prankster.

Her auburn hair, usually gathered on one side and cascading over her shoulder, was

dramatically fanned out. The hat she typically wore low to shadow her face was absentmindedly discarded.

A headband, boasting a blue rose, complemented her auburn hair and introduced a calming element to her appearance.

At first glance, she seemed like a decoratively adorned young woman rather than an elusive power player.

But those who knew better understood: underestimate her, and at your most vulnerable, she'd strike.

"May this humble one share a cup of tea with the Princess?"

A sly smile danced on her lips.

"..."

As Princess Penia shot her a look, she filled another teacup and placed it opposite her.

The tantalizing aroma of premium herbs wafted through the air, yet neither reached for their cups.

Lortel Keherun, a leading figure in Elte Merchant Guild, was set to ascend to the presidency of the company when the time was right.

Her unanticipated conversation made Princess Penia a touch anxious.

"I felt obliged to inform you that the rumors suggesting that Senior Ed has sided with the Rosetail Family aren't true. I hope this doesn't offend."

"That's unexpected, Lortel."

Princess Penia's eyes narrowed, mirroring Lortel who nonchalantly pushed her robe aside to take a delicate sip of tea.

Choosing to be frank, Princess Penia spoke.

"I was under the impression you disliked me."

"Goodness, Princess Penia, that's rather unjust. If I bore any ill will, why would I share such valuable information with you?"

If craftiness were an art form, Lortel was an accomplished artist.

"I believe Krepin Rosetail's involvement in the Scripture negotiations is due to my father's efforts, not senior Ed."

"What did you say?"

Rumors about Elte's impending disgrace and loss of influence had also reached Princess Penia.

She found it strange to see Lortel, the heir apparent, so unruffled with her father cornered.

"From what I gather, Elte Merchant Guild's intent to purchase the Sage's Scripture was to resell them at a profit to Krepin. There seems to have been some agreement between my father, Elte Keherun, and Krepin Rosetail. I was none the wiser."

"So you're saying..."

"Despite my father's downfall, the plan to buy the Sage's Scripture remains. We at Elte Merchant Guild have invested a lot into this."

Princess Penia remained silent, absorbing Lortel's revelation. She had grown quieter.

"The time seems right to change the custodian of the Sage's Scripture. We're gearing up for the purchase negotiations. We're going to be swamped at Elte Merchant Guild. If we're not on top of things, the Rosetail Family might get their hands on the Scripture."

"It's a strange scenario. Elte Merchant Guild aims to purchase the Sage's Scripture, only to flip it to the Rosetail Family, right? On the surface, both parties seem to be on the same page. So, why does it appear that the Elte Merchant Guild and the Rosetail Family are competing for the Scripture?"

"Well... that's because I have no plans of selling the Scripture to the Rosetail Family. I find myself in an unusual situation and think it best to distance myself from businesses tied to my father."

With those words, Princess Penia found herself speechless.

"The agreement to sell the Scripture to the Rosetail Family was made by my father, not me. Given the secrecy around the deal, appealing to the Elte Merchant Guild at this point would be fruitless. That's why Krepin Rosetail is directly engaged in the Scripture negotiations."

"But why share these internal matters..."

"Because the enemy of my enemy is my friend."

Lortel offered this explanation with a serene smile and eyes gently closed.

The academy's financial crisis and the proposal to sell the Sage's Scripture was privileged information known only to a select few. Princess Penia didn't expect to uncover the Elte Merchant Guild's plans or the Rosetail Family's stance.

"If it seems like Princess Penia wants to keep the Rosetail Family in check, it's a win-win for us, isn't it? If the Rosetail Family is out of the picture, I can acquire the Scripture, which works in my favor."

"..."

"We're rather close, aren't we? Ahaha. We share many classes and are classmates."

Her smile was as sharp as a needle. Reaching out to use her could easily result in a prick.

Princess Penia was already painfully aware of this.

Lortel Keherun and Penia Elias Kroel... They were like two sides of a mirror, destined never to understand or accept each other.

"Well, I do feel a bit concerned for poor Senior Ed, so I thought I'd express my worries as a junior."

"You were... worried about him?"

"He's already separated from his family and started a new life. It seems unfair if he's misperceived as being tied to the Rosetail Family, don't you think?"

Once again, Princess Penia narrowed her eyes.

Lortel wasn't one to extend a helping hand out of sheer kindness, so there had to be an ulterior motive behind defending Ed.

"Yet, that young man... he certainly could be useful."

If anyone had a hazy understanding of the Rosetail Family's internal affairs, it would be Ed.

Having been a part of the Rosetail Family for a while, even if he was seen as nothing more than an arrogant incompetent, he likely held some valuable information.

But treating someone solely based on their utility, manipulating them like an expendable resource... that was not Princess Penia's way.

"Pleading with him as one person to another, pulling rank to issue orders... and if he still keeps his lips sealed..."

"If he won't talk...?"

"Then... I'm left with no choice but to 'utilize' them."

Though Princess Penia was known as the 'Princess of Mercy' for her dignified treatment of everyone, she didn't allow her ideals to blind her to reality.

Sometimes, she had to steel her heart. She was well aware of this.

At Princess Penia's response, Lortel momentarily tensed, then suddenly threw her hand up, causing her hat to twirl around.

With her face hidden in shadow and head bowed, she began to tremble intermittently.

"Lortel Keherun?"

What was she doing? Was she deep in thought?

Ignoring the confused Princess Penia, Lortel remained bowed for a while.

Before long, a handsome pigeon flew in, settling quickly on Lortel's shoulder. Even so, Lortel kept her head down for a time before reaching out to the bird.

"Oh, a message from the... headquarters..."

As Lortel labored to speak, lifting her head, Princess Penia reeled, and Cler, her guard, appeared ready to explode.

Lortel had been desperately suppressing her outburst.

"To manipulate and use..."

No longer able to hold back, Lortel pressed on.

"Who? Who are you talking about?"

"You! The audacity.....! Daring to act so insolently in front of the princess, assuming we're safe here...!"

"Princess Penia."

Cler was seething, but Lortel interrupted him.

Lortel Keherun had already come to terms with a man named Ed Rosetail.

Despite being somewhat on the back foot, she didn't believe that Princess Penia, who had lived her life in a sheltered greenhouse, could exploit him.

Normally, she would be smirking at Penia's futile efforts from behind.

"Princess Penia. We're allies in this, aren't we? We need to kick the common enemy, the Rosetail family, off Aken Island first. So, allow me to give you a piece of sincere advice."

"..."

"Don't try to use him half-heartedly. You might find yourself being used instead."

With that, Lortel rose from her seat, clutching the pigeon-delivered message.

"Forgive the blunt honesty. It's advice born out of my deep loyalty to you."

"Where are you off to, Lortel?"

"I have a meeting to attend. I made an effort to dress up, but this hat has ruined my hair. Ah, it would be impolite to disturb your rest any further, princess. I'll take my leave now."

Lortel bowed respectfully.

"May you find peace."

"I won't let that insolence slide, Princess Penia."

"It's fine, Cler."

She wasn't a fan of political maneuvering, but the disrespect was clear. Princess Penia was far from pleased, but she had other, more pressing concerns.

Most importantly, she'd noticed a distinct change in Lortel's approach to Ed.

Lortel usually displayed appropriate deference towards her superiors, at least outwardly. But behind the facade, she was always assessing the other person's potential.

Particularly when it came to the enigma that was Ed Rosetail, and how he was perceived.

Despite his scandalous past, he'd adapted remarkably well to life at the academy, racking up impressive grades in various subjects, and earning a reputation for reliability.

Now, even that sly fox from the Elte Merchant Guild, Lortel, was paying attention to him. It made her wonder if she'd misjudged him.

"..."

If she had, a nagging feeling was beginning to creep in.

Ed Rosetail.

She was the one who'd triggered his scandal. Regardless of his intentions, that fact remained.

Ultimately, the emotion welling up in her was guilt, but it was just a pinprick.

Their social statuses were worlds apart, and they didn't have a particularly intimate relationship.

If she let every minor misstep and its ensuing guilt sway her, she wouldn't be able to lead effectively.

A ruler must learn to disregard such insignificant guilt.

"Cler. I've sent a letter, but make sure it's received. We need to ensure Ed arrives at the royal residence on time for his visit."

Still, she had to keep an eye on Lortel Keherun. That woman was the real threat.

Could she ever see Lortel lose her cool or be at a loss?

It seemed a distant dream, and Princess Penia let out a heavy sigh.

The path of leadership was long and fraught with challenges.

* * *

"...What?"

Lortel was seated on the parlor sofa, her face registering surprise. She was utterly taken aback.

"That's the situation."

"Hello, Lortel. It's been a while, how are you?"

Yenika greeted her with a beaming smile, bright enough to scatter flower petals in the air.

The opulent parlor of the Elte Merchant Guild's Sylvenia branch was rarely used, despite its pristine condition.

Aken Island was an insular place, with hardly any dignitaries visiting the local branch of the guild. If the parlor was used a few times a year, that was considered a lot. It was a shame to see such an elegant space so underused.

Across from each other, Lortel and Yenika shared a hearty laugh, exchanging pleasantries with the warmest smiles.

"I apologize. I wasn't expecting you, Senior Yenika, so I only prepared two cups of Phelan Mountain Rosemary tea. Can I get you some cold water instead?"

"No problem! I heard there's a ton in the guild's storage, but I guess you can't serve it to guests since it's for sale?"

"Right, I should have prepared better if I'd known you were visiting. I just thinking about having dinner with Ed, so it didn't cross my mind."

"I'll take the water. Yenika, you can have the tea."

Yenika responded to this with a wide grin and an enthusiastic "Sure thing!" as she took the teacup. Lortel, looking a bit miffed, let out a heavy sigh, her eyes half-closed.

"Alright, I've gone through the letter. It's about Elte, isn't it?"

"Exactly. The Elte Merchant Guild has completed the dismissal proceedings, but they're taking it in stride, which makes me think they might have something up their sleeve."

The climax of the second act, the shift from the struggle over the 'Sage's Scripture' to the downfall of Professor Glast, was following the original plan.

However, Elte's early dismissal and Krepin's involvement were unanticipated twists that demanded attention.

Krepin Rosetail, under the sway of the evil deity Mebula, couldn't be defeated at this juncture.

To gear up for the latter half of the story, when Taylee and I have powered up, we needed to 'delay' the plotline.

Princess Penia, currently at the epicenter of Krepin's opposition and his subsequent

control, was too weak at this point.

Her influence on the royal power was curtailed by the first and second princesses, and her voice within academic matters was muted, as she hadn't yet assumed the role of student council president.

"I'm concerned that this might land you in some sort of trouble. So I've called you over to make sure your safety isn't compromised."

"Understandable. We can't predict what a cornered Elte might do, so we need to be on our toes."

"Even then, the impact of the weakened forces will be limited. By the way, are you interested in some magic engineering equipment?"

With that, Lortel opened a storage cabinet, pulling out several crystal balls, magic books, engraving pens, ink, and the like.

"These items haven't been sold in a while, so feel free to take them."

"Lortel. These items clearly look brand-new, not a speck of dust on them. I heard that giving out merchandise for free is against business ethics and invites criticism."

"Oh dear, Yenika. You seem to lack an eye for goods. Look closer, all these items are flawed."

At this, Yenika went over to the display cabinet and inspected the items one by one. There were crystal balls with tiny cracks, a broken engraving pen tip, and magic ink packaging that was slightly open, leaking ink.

"It's clear these defects were intentionally made! There's no way for such pristine new items to have these defects!"

"Well, it's not for me to say. In the end, what matters is whether the items can be sold, right?"

"..."

"Well, I guess whether these items are beneficial from Ed's perspective is also important."

Lortel's words left Yenika momentarily silent.

"Thanks, but... I haven't paid for the last batch of magic engineering supplies yet."

"Don't worry about it. I've rolled that into the next contract. It's easier to pay everything in one go, right? And, the later you pay, the better it works out, right? Keep pushing the payment back."

"But haven't we delayed the payment four times already?"

"As long as the contract keeps getting renewed, it's not a problem. The total amount isn't a big deal for us."

Upon seeing Lortel's crafty smile, Yenika puffed her cheeks out in frustration.

"Why not just wrap up the payment and end the contract? Ed needs to keep track of his funds to budget properly."

"That's a discussion for 'us' to have, right?"

"Ugh- seriously-!"

Regardless of Yenika's foot-stomping and Lortel's smooth talk, I settled back onto the couch once more.

- 'Yet, Ed... '

- 'Senior has his reasons... '

I found myself sinking into a familiar sensation once more.

It felt like I was floating in water. This sensation had been visiting me more frequently of late.

The sounds around me seemed distant, and I gave in to the zero-gravity sensation, momentarily suspending my consciousness.

Despite that, there was still plenty left for me to do after stopping by Elte's place.

I needed to gather the dried meat from the camp before Lucy got to it.

I had to clean the cabin again. It was crucial to finish tidying up before moving in the chair, desk, and bed frame.

I had to prepare a mattress for the bed. Although making a modern spring mattress might be out of the question, I could stuff some fabric with feathers or scrap cloth to give it some softness.

The deer I'd caught two days ago needed to be dealt with. Skinning and gutting it, then smoking the different parts, would take a good deal of time.

I still had homework left for Elemental Science and Intermediate Magic Theory. There was also a magic history assignment, and I needed to prep for next week's herbology practical.

I was out of arrows. I needed to check if my running gear for tomorrow's school jog was dry. The cabin window still needed finishing. I needed to collect more firewood before winter. I had to find a way to store food for the winter months. I had to sort out adequate winter clothes.

- 'Ed, Ed!'

- 'Senior?'

As I slowly sorted through my to-do list, the feeling of being in a trance washed over me once more.

Engulfed in the sensation of floating in water, I felt myself sinking deeper into the couch.

.....

.....

[You are falling into an abnormal state!]

* * *

That guy, he had really pulled himself together recently.

He just quietly attended his classes, completed his assignments, and then headed

back to his dorm. That had become his daily routine.

Considering he was expelled from the dorms, she couldn't help but wonder where he was staying. Finding a decent place on this remote island, especially without money, must have been a challenge.

Surprisingly, he had turned out to be quite studious. He seemed to put in the effort.

Although she had been hesitant to get close to him, remembering his unlucky streak, she couldn't deny that he had been consistent and hardworking.

Now that she thought about it, was he really that bad? Had her perception of him mellowed because time had passed?

Sometimes, she saw him in the lecture hall, silent. He was a guy who really focused on his studies. That was a rare sight.

"Maybe he was always more diligent than we gave him credit for."

Even if he had tried to reinvent himself and act like a changed person, it would usually last a month, tops.

Typically, people reverted to their true selves after about a month. But he had maintained this remarkable lifestyle at the camp for over half a year now.

"..."

In the royal family's private bedroom.

Princess Penia let out a deep sigh, seated alone at her moderately-sized personal desk.

Did she need to acknowledge this?

His persistence at the camp while fishing, his composed responses during the Glaskan subjugation exam, the students who vouched for his dedication to his studies, and Lortel's caution against underestimating him.

Various hunches and minor hints kept nudging Princess Penia.

Maybe, her initial impression was incorrect.

If so, was her decision to cast out a healthy and determined boy from the family, leaving him penniless and fending for himself in the forest... mistaken?

In any case, she had dispatched a letter to Ed, instructing him through Cler to visit the royal quarters.

Given a royal decree, Ed would certainly make his way to the royal quarters.

There, she would assess him in person.

And, if her judgement was flawed... it would be time to acknowledge it.

"Your Highness."

"Cler."

Engrossed in her thoughts, Princess Penia was interrupted by Cler, the chief of her personal guard, who knocked before entering the room. She was likely there to deliver some news.

"Is tomorrow's schedule finalized? What time is Ed Rosetail..."

"Your Highness, I'm afraid he won't be able to visit for some time."

"Why? It's a royal decree... Shouldn't he need a justified reason to decline?"

She didn't want to exert her authority, but an invitation from Princess Penia, even in the form of a personal letter, constituted a royal decree. If he declined, he must have a valid reason.

"...He's collapsed from overwork."

He always seemed so strong and resilient.

Upon hearing this, she was taken aback, questioning her own ears.

"Apparently, he's been overdoing it, trying to balance survival activities and studying. He's currently unconscious."

However, even the most diligent have their limits.

CHAPTER 48

- [Status Abnormality : Exhaustion]

Symptoms include high fever from overwork, indigestion, chronic fatigue, migraines, intermittent comatose states, difficulty breathing, decreased vision, magical ineptitude, and muscle relaxation.

Adequate rest is necessary to recover from this abnormal condition!

* * *

I was no stranger to the limits of human endurance.

While intense training was essential for survival until graduation, I understood the futility of it all if my health deteriorated.

I regularly monitored my physical condition, strived to maintain a consistent lifestyle, and made an effort to intake a diverse range of nutrients. Yet, the sheer volume of labor was relentless.

Although symptoms of overwork can widely differ among individuals, I hadn't anticipated fatigue to crash upon me like a tsunami. I apparently passed out before I could even steady my thoughts, making resistance impossible.

I'm all too familiar with fevers so high that they're unbearable.

Even laying there, moaning does little to ease the struggle to breathe despite doing nothing.

As I attempt to regain my cloudy mind, I'm once again swept away by the sensation of floating in space.

I repeatedly lose and regain consciousness.

Occasionally, my vision clears up just enough for me to catch glimpses of Yenika and Lortel. Their faces are set in stern expressions as they exchange words while I gaze

at the surroundings through my blurry eyes.

But as I lose consciousness once more, and descend into a foggy realm, past memories surface.

Memories of when I used to play 'Sylvanian's Failed Swordsman', the 'Sage's Scripture' capture battle, and Glast's subjugation battle in Act 2, Chapter 10.

The final chapter of the second act commences with Professor Glast kidnapping Taylee's companion, Ayla.

In my faint consciousness, the story of that final chapter that I once watched absentmindedly on screen is now being vividly recalled.

The renowned scholar who was born with unparalleled academic talent and contributed magical advancements countless times over, his name was Great Sage Sylvenia.

I remember the story of Glast, who researched the power of a divine magic that defied the laws of the world and sought to resurrect Sylvenia.

His plan was to initiate a new era of progress by instilling the spirit of Sylvenia into Ayla, who was naturally gifted as a scholar...

A narrative befitting of a madman.

His life ended with a fall from the top of the magic tower he himself had built, his dream unfulfilled.

What good is academic advancement or progress if it compromises research ethics and one's own career? Even players at the time found Glast's actions puzzling.

Well, if his actions were easily understandable, it wouldn't have been considered a madman's narrative.

Above all, his last words before falling from the magic tower, after all his plans had been foiled, were quite unexpected.

The final utterances of a man who devoted his life solely to academic advancement and the progress of the era, dedicated to identifying talented individuals.

Standing atop the magic tower, engineered with imperial magic, his arms outstretched, gazing upon the world, the final words he uttered before his demise... What... were they...

"Zzzz....."

Suddenly, my eyelids sprang open. As if operating separately from my command, they signaled that it was time to wake up.

My body felt like a slab of lead, and an unusual heat radiated from my lower abdomen. As I struggled to sit up to discern what was covering my midsection, I discovered a girl with a witch's hat as wide as my head pulled down over her face, sprawled across me.

"..."

"Umm... Too salty... Less salt..."

How could someone's sleep talking be this annoying?

I was about to lift her up and dispose of her as usual, but to my surprise, I couldn't raise Lucy.

Lucy, as she appears, is incredibly lightweight. So much so, you'd question her human status... The type you could easily toss with a flick of a wrist.

Since Lucy seemed to be in her normal state, it was apparent my current physical condition was preventing me from lifting her.

I was in a state of severe exhaustion. With a mountain of tasks at hand, my body had been pushed to its extreme. I sighed heavily and laid back down.

The surroundings were familiar. It was my cabin, and judging by this new blanket... it must be a product from the Elte Merchant Guild. I wasn't entirely sure what had transpired, but I had a rough idea.

The flustered figures of Yenika and Lortel were easily imagined.

"Umm..."

Stirred by my movement, Lucy slowly opened her drowsy eyes.

After rubbing her sleepy eyes several times, she sat up, still situated on my lower abdomen, and locked eyes with me.

Then she stared blankly into space before finally speaking.

"...I'm hungry."

"Is there anything else you do besides eating and sleeping?"

"Congratulations. You're finally awake."

Then, with a flick of her hand, as though rolling up an invisible sleeve, she began to press firmly onto my waist with her index finger.

She continued to speak in a low whisper.

"Your magic was all jumbled. You overdid it with the magic training, learned spirit magic, never rested, and kept this up for months. That's what landed you in this state."

"..."

"Magic flow slightly diminishes during sleep, and during that time, it re-establishes itself so it can efficiently flow through your body again. Didn't they teach you this in your magic class? You trained yourself to the point of exhaustion, then barely slept. That's why you're in this state."

"For someone who constantly slept in class, you surprisingly recall all the course content."

"I just don't listen because I already know it."

Centered on Lucy's finger, which was pressing onto my waist, the flow of magic began to swirl.

Lucy sat there with an unbothered expression as if it was no big deal, but soon her clothes and the brim of her hat started to flutter.

"I was applying pressure to prevent the magic flow from becoming more chaotic. It seems to be untangling now."

"Have you been doing this the entire time I was out?"

"It wasn't difficult, but it was so dull that I dozed off a few times."

The feeling of rejuvenation spread from Lucy Mayril's fingertips once again. While I was unconscious, I had occasionally sensed a restoration of energy in my body. It seemed this was Lucy's doing.

"I also kept watch."

"Watch?"

"Um... There are people who become weird when they're close to you. It's annoying, so I had them leave. They couldn't object because it was necessary."

Again, a soothing sensation seeped into my body, significantly improving my condition. As I inhaled deeply and slowly, I felt a hint of strength returning to my body.

"Rest is the only remedy for the direct physical exhaustion, but the magical aspect should be somewhat resolved."

"Hey."

I called Lucy casually, and she quietly looked down at me with an unchanged expression.

Her gray eyes resembled a clear mirror, devoid of any agitation. Rather, such a serene sensation made me feel even more at ease.

"...Thanks."

"Don't get injured. It's tough when you're hurt. Some people even die from pain."

If you were familiar with Lucy Mayril's past, you couldn't dismiss her words.

Grand Mage Gloct, who had transferred the blessing of the stars to her.

A rainy night.

Lucy had watched as Gloct, a figure much akin to a grandfather, laid in bed, passing away.

I wasn't certain how long I had been unconscious, but it was apparent it wasn't a brief period.

Considering she had been restraining my chaotic magic during that entire duration...

Seeing someone else in pain was probably something she couldn't overlook easily.

No matter how much of a troublemaker she was, snatching jerky, trespassing into homes whenever she got the opportunity, behaving like a stray cat...

And despite her unvarying expression, making it impossible to discern her intentions...

I was left with no choice but to acknowledge what was within her.

As a result, I had to express my gratitude for now.

-Squeak.

"Oh, senior. You're awake. I wasn't certain if I could use the cabin's stove, so I just kindled a fire outside..."

Just then, the cabin door swung open and an unexpected visitor strolled in.

Ziggs Ebelstein, his hair falling to his neck, paused momentarily as he entered with an exuberant greeting.

Lucy, who had been pressing on my lower abdomen, swiftly swiveled her head to gaze at Ziggs.

With no alteration in her neutral expression, she swiftly vanished after adjusting her hat. Only the lingering traces of wind indicated that the languid genius had been present just moments ago.

"..."

Ziggs brushed back his fringe once, then with a look of disbelief, he strode in and perched on a wooden chair, legs splayed wide.

"Senior, what's the tally of women now?... Ah, well. It's pretty common for a powerful man to attract a crowd of women."

"..."

"Is this... the liberty of civilization... Maybe I've been viewing civilization too narrowly..."

Left unchecked, Ziggs would have Elka frothing at the mouth by interacting with several women.

I had to dispel the confusion first.

* * *

"Senior Yenika had already accumulated a pile of sick days at the start of the term, so skipping more classes was risky. Hence, we sent her off to the academy first. Lortel put off her tasks time and again until she couldn't delay any longer and had to retreat to the living hall."

"I see. But how did you end up nursing me in this cabin?"

"Lortel requested my help. But I'm a little clumsy for delicate tasks like nursing. It's natural for women to have a better touch and precision than men. So I suggested enlisting a woman like Elka or Senior Anise, or Senior Clara, but it ended up being me because they'd rather risk getting in trouble than do having them do it..."

Ziggs ladled out the roughly cooked soup from the pot and handed it to me.

I had regained enough strength to lift the bowl and spoon, so I took a sip. It wasn't exactly a gourmet dish.

It tasted like he tossed in various ingredients and prepared it with his unrefined skills.

"From the start, you've had a unique way of navigating academy life, senior. There aren't many people who know and socialize with you, so the job fell to me when they

were seeking someone to assist."

"I see. Thanks, it must've been an inconvenience."

"It's nothing. I would've just lounged in the room and practiced anyway. All I did was shift my location to this campsite. Take care of yourself, senior. When I first saw Senior Yenika's face, I thought I was attending a funeral."

Ziggs heaved a deep sigh, then stoked the fire with a stick.

"Well, it's not like you're suffering from a chronic illness. It's just exhaustion. No need for everyone to fuss. A few days of rest and you'll be right as rain. You'll feel weak for a while, so take this opportunity to skip a few classes."

"That's fair. I was negligent about my health. It seems like I'm causing undue worry for the people around me. I feel guilty."

"Well, it's all in the name of care, so don't stress. Just focus on recuperating."

Honestly, the soup was incredibly bland, but as Ziggs said, I needed to get some nourishment into my body, so I kept spooning it down reluctantly.

In the meantime, I needed to confirm a few things.

"Speaking of which... I heard that the Alchemy Department students caused a mishap while mass-producing 'Godalas' behind the academy."

"Oh, that troublemaker Elvira... In the end, Taylee and Clevius nipped the problem in the bud before it escalated. It didn't reach as far as the academy."

Act 2, Chapter 5, 'Unveiling the Alchemy Department', seemed to have wrapped up neatly.

"I heard rumors that a beast from the Telos Sect had slipped into the academy's subterranean waterways."

"That was managed by Taylee and me. Ayla inadvertently lost her pendant in the waterway, so we ventured in to recover it and bumped into the beast. But were such rumors swirling around?"

Act 2, Chapter 7, 'The Menace of the Underground Waterway', appeared to have transpired without too much trouble as well.

I could gather from the whispers I overheard back then and shifts in external scenarios that these incidents were resolved... Still, it was comforting to hear it straight from the horse's mouth.

That left the competition for the Sage's Scripture as the only major event pending.

As I mulled over this, I abruptly realized I hadn't yet ascertained something I should have confirmed first.

"By the way, how long was I out?"

I posed the question nonchalantly, assuming it couldn't have been more than a day or two, but Ziggs responded in a tone that had me doubting my ears.

"It's been ten days as of today. Everyone will be glad to see you're awake."

"What?"

"You probably won't encounter anyone today though. Yenika should be at the academy around this time, and Lortel... She took off early, mentioned something about an essential negotiation for tomorrow."

The negotiation for acquiring the Sage's Scripture.

That was due to take place the very next day.

I stifled a sigh.

I hadn't entirely got my head around the situation yet.

I was clueless about how things had progressed during my time unconscious.

"Hey, Ziggs. Could you relay a message to Lortel?"

"Is it urgent?"

"Yes... It might come off a bit odd..."

If there was ample time, I would ponder all alternatives and strategize the most secure approach. However, if the situation was urgent, I had no choice but to resort to any viable method.

"Um... I... I need something. If I can get it... I feel like I can fulfill any request... Honestly anything..."

"Just like that?"

A meeting between the parties.

A banquet.

A review the status of the Sage's Scripture.

Verifying the purchase methodology.

Everyone's bid penned on parchment, collected, with the highest bid earning the purchase rights.

Transfer the 'Scripture'.

Then, disperse.

Upon concluding the reading of the report detailing the proceedings for the Sage's Scripture purchase negotiation, the document in Princess Penia's grasp combusted and vanished.

At least for the time being, they probably didn't want to disclose the fact that the Sage's Scripture was up for grabs.

"..."

Princess Penia had requested permission from the academy to be present at the negotiation site as an observer.

There was no real necessity for a princess to participate in a procurement negotiation between parties unrelated to the royal family, but given it was a royal request, the academy conceded. After all, where there's a will, there's a way.

Negotiations of such astronomical sums typically involved the participation of a reputable figure, especially when it concerned matters of royalty, where their credibility held as much weight as their lineage.

The number of players in the bid to acquire the Sage's Scripture was minimal. Initially, few groups could afford to splurge on such an exorbitant item.

Having eliminated the competition, the only players remaining on the field were the Elte Merchant Guild and the Rosetail Family.

A fiery negotiation was expected between the two, but it appeared that a decision might be reached swiftly.

The Principal Obel Forsius, devised an astute plan. He decided to auction it to the highest bidder.

Yet, the fair buying price remained undisclosed.

The Elte Merchant Guild and the Rosetail Family. The two contenders would jot down their bid on paper and submit it. The Scripture would go to the one with the higher bid.

"This... This is likely to be won by Krepin."

That's what had Princess Penia biting her nails in anxiety.

At its core, the Elte Merchant Guild approached this negotiation with the intent of purchasing the 'product' for future profit.

However, it seemed the Rosetail Family had grander plans for the Sage's Scripture. If profit wasn't their sole objective, they might propose an astounding sum of money.

Even if they lost the current negotiation, they were prepared to negotiate again with the Elte Merchant Guild, the new owners of the Scripture.

Naturally, without any knowledge of the fair price, neither party could blindly jot down an exorbitant figure. The nerve-wracking battle of outbidding one another was imminent.

"He revealed this method just a day before. Both the Elte Merchant Guild and the

Rosetail Family must be in a tight spot right now."

"Of course, Cler. Had he disclosed this sooner, they could've strategized their bidding."

For the academy to profit, both the company and the family needed to feel like they were dueling an 'invisible adversary'.

The tension of not knowing the other's bid. They must be uncertain about how much to hike their bid to secure the Scripture.

"Principal Obel has really outdone himself. It's better to conclude the auction quickly in multiple ways instead of prolonging negotiations and sparking wild rumors. The potential for loss is also less. However... if we consider this approach, Krepin will likely land the Scripture."

The Elte Merchant Guild wouldn't assign an exorbitant value to the Sage's Scripture.

"I'm quite distressed about it..."

What could Krepin, the potential owner of the Sage's Scripture, be plotting?

The scarcity of information about Krepin was downright unnerving. If only we had an inkling of what the enigmatic family head was scheming... The picture would be much clearer.

Regrettably, Ed, who might hold a key to this mystery, had been unconscious for nearly ten days, leaving them wandering aimlessly in a thick fog.

If I can't consult Ed directly, should I try to glean some information from those close to him? Such a notion had crossed her mind.

Close associates of Ed might have picked up bits and pieces about his personal life and background.

Yet, rumor had it that Ed kept a low profile during his academic days, focused exclusively on lectures and practical sessions, keeping his social circle fairly limited. His days were packed, exuding an air of constant preoccupation.

Princess Penia found herself nestled in a corner of the academic bench, heaving a

sigh.

"The only person who could be considered close to Ed Rosetail at the academy is Yenika Faelover, the top spirit master in the second year,"

This came from Cler, who had been silently observing from the sidelines.

"We could ask her to come, but I'm not sure if we would glean any valuable information."

"There's no need. I already bumped into her once while roaming around the academy."

In Sylvanian, if you didn't know Yenika Faelover, the top spirit mage, you were an outsider.

Penia had once assisted Yenika during a disciplinary hearing following the Glaskan incident.

The pink-haired girl, who had expressed her heartfelt gratitude in a letter and visited the royal lodge to thank Penia in person, had left a lasting impression.

Seeing the girl who was adored by all and loved everyone in return... Penia couldn't help but feel a twinge of envy.

Yenika seemed to light up every room she entered. Everyone's face lit up when they interacted with her.

Everyone lived happily ever after.

She was akin to a character out of a fairytale ending with that exact phrase.

"About a week ago, during a combined elemental studies class, I asked her about Ed Rosetail."

However, after Ed collapsed,

Yenika, who Penia had run into at the academy, fixed her with a cold, hardened gaze.

She was at a loss about what had sparked this shift in attitude.

Yenika carried on as her vibrant, lively self, navigating the academy, yet she seemed to have cooled off towards Penia. She made an effort to hide it, but it was plain as day to Penia.

The reason... was self-evident. It was the same as with Lortel.

Even that innocent girl who was adored by everyone at the academy, was, ultimately, not an ally of Penia's.

At that realization, Princess Penia felt her breath hitch.

* * *

The autumn sky overhead was vast and clear.

"Any news at all?"

She was swamped. She longed to visit Ed in his cabin at least once, but the mountain of tasks awaiting her at the merchant guild weighed heavily on Lortel's shoulders.

Lortel, her sighs deep and one side of her hair neatly tied down, served a cup of tea to an unanticipated guest.

"I can't believe Ed would say something so dangerous."

"That's exactly my point, Lortel. He's well aware of your temperament."

Ziggs, nursing his tea on the guest sofa, echoed his sentiment with a deep sigh.

Lortel, already burdened by rigorous training, squared her shoulders, her impish grin wider than ever.

"Anything, huh? Offering 'anything' to a merchant... That's a rookie mistake, Senior Ed."

In the reception room, as dusk gently cloaked the surroundings, Lortel fought back a cunning smile itching to surface on her lips.

Who could fathom what was running through the Grand Chamberlain's mind... Her barely stifled chuckle leaked out like bargain-basement wine, causing Ziggs, who was

observing, a bout of discomfort. Particularly as her face betrayed a distinct concern for Ed, who had just stirred from his sickbed.

- 'Good thing Elka's a straight shooter.'

The realm of civilization was as inscrutable as it was daunting.

The hour of negotiation was nearing.

Unbeknownst to all, at this juncture, the one clutching all the cards was a boy tucked away in a modest cabin.

CHAPTER 49

Finding a spot without ostentatious ornaments would likely have been a faster endeavor.

A cape emblazoned with a soaring eagle, a jacket richly adorned with golden accents, loose reddish-brown trousers paired with a frilly shirt. The clothing was bedecked with a multitude of jewels.

An abundance of jewels and adornments typically symbolized the wearer's vanity.

The most straightforward way to flaunt one's wealth and status was to make one's attire luxurious.

However, it was peculiar that despite such radiant attire, Krepin Rosetail exuded a serious and sagacious air.

A chiseled jawline and piercing eyes seemed too intense for his age. His movements were efficient, embodying grace while maintaining a quiet dignity—an unusual figure that radiated a unique elegance.

It was instinctively clear he was no common man.

Krepin Rosetail, the patriarch of the Rosetail family and one of the actual powers within the Kroel Empire, possessed an aura so formidable it could make anyone stumble just by being in his presence.

"It's regrettable that Principal Obel couldn't join us personally. I'm deeply troubled by the news of his declining health. I hope for his swift recovery."

"Thank you. I'll ensure to convey your concern and greetings to the Principal."

Elegantly sipping his soup, Krepin conveyed his regret to Vice Principal Rachel, who attended in the Principal's stead.

It was a serious breach of etiquette that the principal hadn't personally attended despite Krepin's direct visit. Yet the reason he only expressed regret was that

someone with a higher status than Krepin at this gathering remained silent.

"It's truly a relief to see you in good health. His Majesty has expressed significant concern for the Princess studying abroad."

"Thank you, Krepin. Please reassure my grandfather that I'm adjusting well and diligently studying."

"As you wish. And, although it's been a while... I haven't formally apologized yet. I've heard that you've been distressed due to the reckless actions of a young member of our family. Even though we've handled the repercussions as you directed some time ago, it's been bothering me that we haven't formally apologized for the mishap."

"It's fine, Krepin. Don't stress about it."

Princess Penia dismissed Krepin's apology with a somewhat tense expression.

Throughout this, Lortel remained mute at the banquet, observing them.

Krepin didn't seem to acknowledge Lortel's presence.

The Vice Principal of Sylvanian, the Princess of a country, and the patriarch of a ducal house.

A gathering of nobles, whose names alone could command anyone to kneel, no matter where they might be.

For Lortel, an individual originating from a humble neighborhood, to be seated here was practically an affront to their nobility. Therefore, it was only natural for her not to speak recklessly.

Even though the position of the supreme power holder of the Elte Merchant Guild wasn't a formal title, it was not to be taken lightly.

Since Elte's downfall was almost a foregone conclusion, and the successor was expected to align completely with Lortel, the weight of the power Lortel was about to assume was something they couldn't ignore.

However, until now, this had been entirely an internal matter for the Elte Merchant Guild. With no official announcement, the way they were treated was only natural.

Thus, all Lortel could do was offer a radiant smile, lower her head, and carefully observe Krepin with eyes as sharp as the blade she held.

This man was a blood relative of that Ed Rosetail.

He was a noble, dignified, and wise family patriarch whose name was well known, a truly benevolent figure.

His reputation was no mistake... The genuineness in the demeanor of Krepin's entourage was unmistakable.

Each of their actions was a reflection of their respect for Krepin.

"Are you... the representative of the Elte Merchant Guild?"

"My name is Lortel Keherun. It's a profound honor to be here, unworthy as I am."

"You're the only daughter of Elte Keherun, the Gold King. I've heard of his wisdom and his spirit of enterprise."

Krepin offered polite compliments, which Lortel accepted with a professional smile.

Both were surely aware of the predicament Elte faced within the company, yet they maintained their smiles.

"I hadn't realized you were interested in the Sage's Scripture. It's true that good merchandise draws traders of discernment."

Krepin's insightful comment prompted a modest smile from Lortel.

"We tend to follow the scent of money. If there's a product that promises a good return, we'll go anywhere."

After the banquet, the actual Sage's Scripture would be transferred to the main conference room in Trix Hall.

Time was allotted for the magical scholars from both the Elte Merchant Guild and the Rosetail family to confirm the Scripture's authenticity.

Additional time was spent reporting on the Scripture's condition, the amount of

magical power it contained, and the status of those who responded to it. After that, the conversation shifted to the main topic.

"I won't go into too much detail."

From Sylvenia's perspective, the current situation—having to sell the Sage's Scripture—was a substantial dishonor.

They didn't wish to make a spectacle of it, but they also couldn't sell it cheaply to those without the buying power.

"We don't want to drag out the negotiations and stir up unnecessary rumors. Therefore, as we reported last night, if you write down the amount you're willing to pay and submit it... We'll agree to sell to the highest bidder."

A single sheet of parchment was presented to both Lortel and Krepin, who were seated at a safe distance from the meeting table.

The carefully unrolled parchment was imbued with various preservation spells.

This was to prevent any deceitful alteration of the writing using magical ink.

Krepin stroked his chin, deep in thought.

Lortel, too, gently closed her eyes.

The Sage's Scripture was a singular item, but history had seen its fair share of similar monumental trades.

Lortel had a grasp on every major book trade that had transpired. Her understanding of these market trends was as straightforward as elementary math. She could recite them at will.

The 'Order's Magic Scroll', imbued with countless enchantments by the master alchemist, Kali, had been sold for a final sum of 8100 Gold coins.

'The Book of Obsession', a unique study of creature duplication magic, found in the royal library, went for 6730 Gold coins.

The record of magic witnessed while exploring the uncharted southern continent,

penned by Archmage Gloct, fetched a final bid of 7020 Gold coins.

The inherent magic's value, the potential for academic research, and the prestige of owning such a luxury item had to be comprehensively weighed.

Hence, the potential for profit was the essential factor.

As Princess Penia watched the two poring over the parchment, she, present as the official witness, cautiously lowered her gaze.

"We have received the final bids. We thank you both for your valued insights."

A staff member gave a polite nod, after which Vice Principal Rachel unfolded the two parchments.

The results were the exact inverse of Princess Penia's predictions.

Bidder - Krepin Rosetail (Representing the Rosetail Family)

Bid amount: 8900 Gold coins.

Bidder - Lortel Keherun (Representing Elte Merchant Guild)

Bid amount: 9400 Gold coins.

* * *

"Just hike the bid without a second thought. Shout it out, snag the Sage's Scripture, and there's absolutely no downside."

"Really? But isn't that something you don't know?"

Ziggs, settled by the fire, handed me another bowl of soup.

By the second day, I began feeling a resurgence in my strength. After dispelling the warped magic inside me, my body seemed to bounce back swiftly.

"Elte Merchant Guild isn't running a charity. If they can't sell for more than their purchase price, they're in the hole. I didn't expect Lortel to jump on your suggestion that readily."

"Regardless of how high the bid goes, the Rosetail family will buy it back. So there's no danger of a deficit."

"So the Rosetail family values the Scripture that highly? Enough to repurchase it, no matter the cost?"

I nodded in response to Ziggs.

But I was bluffing.

I had no idea how much the Rosetail family was prepared to spend on the Sage's Scripture.

If Lortel decided to purchase the Scripture at an astronomical price, the Rosetail family might just let it go.

After all, the Sage's Scripture, with its divine magic connection, was merely a supplemental resource for Krepin's immortal magic research. Its absence wouldn't bring the research to a halt.

Lortel, being an outsider, would likely be unaware of these intricacies. Nonetheless, she fell for my bluff.

Two factors contributed to this outcome.

Firstly, Lortel liked me, not merely as a student, but as an individual.

Secondly, she was betting on the unique situation of my Rosetail family affiliation, assuming I might have some privileged intel.

Hearing this, one might be quick to label me a bastard.

In the bidding war for the Sage's Scripture, my goal was to bankrupt Krepin by having Lortel shell out an exorbitant sum.

Sure, a sizable chunk of the money could be recouped by selling the scripture, so it wasn't a devastating loss...

But it was far from a trivial amount.

But to my defense, Lortel was indifferent to the amount she bid.

She didn't have to cough up the money herself.

Eventually, the Sage's Scripture was seized by Professor Glast before the sale could be finalized, rendering the transaction null.

My sole objective was to somehow sideline Krepin, who had interjected himself into the conversation.

* * *

Suddenly, rustling echoed from a corner of the grassy expanse. Ziggs and I swiveled our heads to find a familiar face striding towards our camp. From her labored breathing, it was evident she'd run quite a distance.

"Damn, Yenika, it's not even noon. Did you race here from the professors' building?"

"Yes! I've finished all my morning classes! I've got no classes left, and I'll do my homework tonight!"

"But, it would've been fine if you had lunch before you came..."

"I'm not hungry!"

Yenika chuckled, shook off her clothes, swiftly untangled her pinkish locks, and then approached the campfire with brisk strides.

"Ed! You're back to normal!"

"Ah, Yenika. I apologize for worrying you. Ziggs filled me in. I've apparently stirred up quite a bit of trouble..."

"Huh? No, no!"

Yenika animatedly waved her arms and shook her head, studying my complexion.

"I really wasn't worried at all! Don't feel guilty for making me worried! Really! Not at all! I didn't care in the slightest!"

"No, Yenika. Word around the academy was you were seen running about in tears, even rumors that you were heartbroken surfaced. Then you even burst into the academic council room..."

"Ahhh! Ahhhhhh! What a fascinating tale, Ziggs! But today! It's quite chilly!! We should be careful!! Not to catch a cold!!!!"

Panting from her sprint through the woods, she seemed regretful for making me feel remorseful.

She's truly a girl bursting with warmth. Despite her worries, she didn't want to hear my apology for causing them.

As Yenika frantically surveyed the surroundings...

She took several deep breaths and took a seat opposite me.

No sooner had she settled, a flaming bat materialized from behind her.

[Please, Lord Ed! End my suffering! I, the unworthy Mug, had no idea the extent of your trials!]

"What, what's happening, Mug. Were you there?"

[I wanted to show myself right away and apologize, but I was concerned that my unworthy presence might disrupt your magic, especially after being influenced by Miss Yenika's magic!]

At this, Yenika nodded and turned her gaze toward me.

Quick as a flash, Mug swooped in and perched on the edge of my knee, his eyes welling up with tears as he started his apology.

"Why's he making such a scene?"

"Considering what could have happened while you were out cold, Ed, his reaction isn't too far off."

Ziggs' words made my face turn white. If I had been mistaken for a corpse, it would have been beyond humiliating.

"Well... it's not unreasonable to react this way after you've been unconscious for ten days..."

Ten days.

"Hold on... ten days...?!"

I sprang up hastily. I hadn't fully regained my strength, so with a sluggish movement, I checked the Cabin that I'd been using for meat preservation.

The meat I had painstakingly smoked... was now decaying, an awful smell assaulting my nostrils.

"Ugh, gross!"

I wrinkled my nose and quickly covered it.

Generally, smoked meat could be stored safely for about five days, and I had a system in place to consume it gradually according to its shelf life... but having been unconscious for ten days, everything had spoiled.

Looking further along the river, I noticed that the fishing net I had been using for trapping was torn due to neglect. The fish I had been cultivating had all returned to the wild.

"I've lost all the food."

I sighed deeply and returned to the Cabin. Well, it was my own fault for neglecting my health, so I couldn't really complain.

It looks like I'll have to dip into my savings for immediate sustenance. While it's not a massive loss, it's a painful mistake in the grand scheme of things.

With winter on the horizon, there's still a lot of work to be done. Given this setback, all I can do is sigh deeply.

"Thinking of pushing yourself too hard again, Ed."

Yenika chimed in, as if reading my mind.

"It's okay, Ed. I'll help you out."

"I've got free time until the next exams, too. I can lend a hand with some basic hunting or woodworking, Ed."

Ziggs offered, as nonchalantly as if he were whistling a tune.

"The thing about tasks is that they always get done if you just tackle them head-on."

His light-hearted chuckle seemed fitting for someone who'd experienced survival in the wilderness armed only with his bare hands.

Indeed, everything does somehow get managed if you just tackle it as it comes.

As I sat in the Cabin, I looked up to see Yenika and Ziggs engrossed in discussion about the immediate priorities. The scene brought me back to the spring semester of the previous year.

There was a time when I was flat broke, huddled under a ramshackle shelter in the forest, wrapping my arms around myself for warmth as I slept.

The days when I was alone in the inky darkness, a meal for bugs as I slept, didn't seem as distant as I'd like.

Yeah, there were plenty of rough patches, but I've managed to tackle problem after problem while making it this far.

Though my journey had taken some unexpected detours, I had steadfastly navigated the major hurdles, so there's no need for undue regret.

With the support of my two companions, I was on the mend, and as for how the story was unfolding... if Krepin lost the auction, there wouldn't be any substantial issues.

But life is unpredictable, so it's best to stay vigilant.

* * *

The auction to secure the 'Sage's Scripture' had concluded.

Krepin Rosetail looked stunned for a moment, but quickly regained his composure

and gave Lortel a gentle smile.

Lortel returned the gesture.

There had hardly ever been a document transaction involving such a hefty sum.

Naturally, the Rosetail family must have predicted the price range.

The record price for magic tome transactions stood at around 8000 Gold.

Therefore, if the Elte Merchant Guild's main goal was 'profit-making', they wouldn't ask for a price beyond that.

That's why Krepin set the minimum bid at 8900 Gold, leaving a bit of wiggle room above the highest price of 8000 Gold.

And Lortel, seeing through his plan, outbid Krepin with a slightly higher price.

From the get-go, it was a battle Krepin was destined to lose.

Because they had concluded that the Elte Merchant Guild's goal was 'profit-making'.

'The goal wasn't profit...?'

Princess Penia sat in the observer's seat, with a surprised expression on her face.

Merchants are driven by profit. Lortel's bid of 9400 Gold was puzzling, considering the breakeven point.

Given the historical pricing of magic tome transactions, the odds of selling it for a higher price were slim.

Lortel was not one to gamble on such long odds.

She must have a motive beyond profit-making.

However, Princess Penia's gaze was piercing. Lortel, the individual, was known for her lust for gold.

If her aim isn't profit, then what is that crafty girl up to?

The 'Sage's Scripture' isn't of much use unless one is a proper resonator, and even if one is a resonator, it's worthless without a solid grasp of advanced magic.

She can't harness the magical power of the scripture, nor does she value its scholarly significance, and it doesn't offer a financial advantage.

What then, could be Lortel's reason to bid for the scripture, despite all these conditions?

If all those factors are disregarded, how does her bidding for the scripture change the game?

"Hmm....."

Krepin was not one for expressive displays.

With a troubled look on his face, he extended his courtesies to the group, then exited the conference room. His spirits seemed low.

In that moment, Princess Penia felt an electrifying surge at the back of her head as if she had been hit by a bolt of lightning.

The seemingly pointless acquisition of that 'Sage's Scripture' held some significance: it was a power play, a move to counter Krepin Rosetail's plans and keep things from progressing as he wished.

This was the aspect that troubled Princess Penia the most.

- 'Princess Penia, we're in this together. Our first order of business is to drive out the common enemy, the Rosetail family, from Aken Island.'

Lortel's words once again stirred something within Princess Penia.

But something didn't add up.

Lortel's check against Krepin was supposed to involve getting the scripture at a steal.

But if she bought the scripture at such an exorbitant price, didn't that contradict the purpose of blocking Krepin?

Unless she was indifferent to the purchase price of the scripture...?

Was she merely trying to prevent the scripture from falling into his hands?

There was no other plausible explanation. Lortel, a woman driven by profit, would never buy the scripture at that price.

This led to a new question.

Why was Lortel blocking Krepin, to begin with?

Princess Penia knew the truth. Despite Krepin's public image as a noble and benevolent duke, he was a malevolent man, concealing dark intentions.

However, even with her royal authority and power, she had failed to uncover the evidence needed to expose his true nature.

Krepin was sly enough to cover his tracks.

Even with considerable power, she couldn't expose Krepin's dark side, and it was unlikely a mere merchant, no matter how influential, could do so.

And if she could expose him, Lortel wouldn't have any reason to put herself on the line to thwart Krepin's schemes.

After all, there was no reason to oppose such a formidable figure.

It would require a moral imperative against injustice or a sense of duty to punish the wrongdoer.

Such motivations... were far removed from Lortel's character. In other words, Lortel was not seeking to obstruct Krepin.

"But..."

Penia's voice trailed off, lost in her tumult of thoughts.

If that were the case, wouldn't it suggest that there was someone else pulling the strings, manipulating even Lortel?

Who could toy with the Golden Daughter, a prodigy in trade, as though they were moving a chess piece?

Lortel, above all, was a force to be reckoned with, not one to be swayed by others. She had always been viewed as a wild wolf-like girl who refused to be reined in by anyone.

"Princess Penia, you seem troubled. Are you not feeling well?"

In a corner of the conference room, Penia sat, her head bowed. She didn't acknowledge Cler's words.

Someone had sought to prevent Krepin Rosetail from obtaining the 'Sage's Scripture'.

For this notion to hold water, there was a fundamental requirement.

Only those privy to Krepin Rosetail's dark secrets would have taken such action.

If such a person existed in Sylvanian...

"Princess Penia?"

- 'I hate to overstep, but I felt it important to point out that you're merely speculating that Ed is in league with the Rosetail Family.'

Lortel's words, a defense of Ed, struck Princess Penia like a physical blow.

Even after being cast out from the family, forced to survive in the wilderness, and worn down by grueling work, if there was someone still determined to resist the Rosetail Family's darkness...

That person was none other than Ed Rosetail himself, who had been cast into the abyss.

* * *

Sales Contract Certificate

Buyer: Lortel Keherun (Representing Elte Merchant Guild)

Seller: Obel Forsius (Representing Sylvanian)

Transaction amount: 9400 Gold coins

Contract date: The 'Sage's Scripture' will be transferred 7 days after the signing of this certificate.

The contract details follow...

.
. .
.

After rolling up the sales contract and tucking it safely away, Lortel broke into a wide grin.

According to Ed's forecast, no matter the price, the Rosetail Family would ultimately reclaim it. Trusting his word, she had driven a hard bargain.

Half of it was a decision to place her faith in Ed. He, after all, was a Rosetail Family insider.

And the other half... well, given Lortel's expertise, even if things didn't go as per Ed's prediction, she could still fetch at least 8500 coins for it.

A loss of 900 coins was insignificant, considering she viewed it as her ticket to Ed's inner circle.

"Anything... anything..."

Lortel, for a change, was letting her hair down and experimenting with various hair accessories.

Her enigmatic fox-like demeanor during the negotiation was nowhere to be seen.

Instead, she was simply adjusting a blue rose-shaped headband in front of the mirror.

"...anything? Really?"

Then she found herself blushing for no apparent reason.

While she could put on an icy, devilish facade at the negotiating table, in a battle of the sexes, she became an unsuspecting girl...

This divergence was making her lose her bearings, as she just held her newly acquired accessory against her hair.

For the princess, it would have been a sight to behold — one that might have left her speechless.

CHAPTER 50

[He looks downright beat.]

The wind was swirling. The earthy breeze always had a way of livening the forest, but the gust that grazed Yenika's cheeks was not of this world.

It was Merilda, the High-Spirit of Wind.

Her fawn-colored fur appeared so light as it danced in the air, yet her size was far from insignificant.

Resting against the Guardian Tree of Merilda, Yenika murmured.

[Yenika, you know firsthand how grueling academic work can be, right? Even you, the top of the class, are always swamped, and he's also handling camp life, so it's no wonder he's at his breaking point.]

"So even Merilda thinks that way."

She was a far cry from the persona she'd present around Tarkan.

Yenika, hugging her knees and hanging on every word from Merilda, swallowed her parched saliva, fully attentive to her best friend's counsel.

[But, this is your window, Yenika. That fox is tied up with negotiations and such, and can't visit the camp often. You have to capitalize on this moment.]

"That's true."

[People tend to be more vulnerable when they're stretched thin. Don't feel bad about leveraging this predicament. Act a tad cunning and materialistic to sweep him off his feet in one fell swoop. Some theatrics may be in order.]

"Can you elaborate?"

[Hmm...]

Despite her imposing appearance, Merilda was surprisingly careful and deliberate in her speech and actions. That didn't mean her thinking had to follow the same mold.

[Like it or not, to snag a guy, you need a dose of cunning, Yenika. In that regard, that fox-like girl has the game figured out. You need to pick up what she's putting down.]

Sitting cross-legged and stroking her throat, Yenika hummed, musing on her advice.

[For instance, your outfit.]

Merilda's relationship wisdom was unparalleled. Yenika was taken aback.

She'd brought a pile of nearly expired food from the school cafeteria, hoping to try out different recipes around the campfire. Normally this wouldn't fly, but Bell empathized with her plight, enabling her to go ahead.

Since she planned on cooking, her attire was plain. She wore a frequently washed and worn blouse with sleeves rolled up, coupled with a sky-blue skirt from her farm back home, a tightly cinched belt, and a shawl draped over her shoulders.

She recalled the exquisite frilly dress Lortel had once sported. The sight of her auburn hair falling freely, decorated with a large blue rose hairband and an amber accessory...

Even for Yenika, a woman herself, it was a sight to behold.

And then she glanced at herself...

Yenika felt more akin to a spirited country girl than a refined lady. It was a stark contrast from the tidy and cute uniforms she usually donned.

[Spot on, Yenika. You're quite the fox.]

"Excuse me?"

But Merilda, the self-proclaimed love guru (with zero dating track record), lauded her with high praise.

"Don't I look like a complete wreck right now?"

[Yenika, you've got your own allure. Guys dig a gal who's usually vibrant and full of life, but flashes a bit of guile... Your attempts to play innocent while being sly are strangely enticing.]

"Y-you think so...?"

[If you're going to commit, roll up your sleeves further, tie your hair up. There's something irresistible about a reliable partner who's got your back through tough times.]

"Right, I-I need to dial up my craftiness to that level!"

Seeing Yenika roll up her sleeves with an air of preparedness, Merilda inwardly let out a sigh. Yenika seemed to believe she was pulling off the cunning act flawlessly.

A bit more guile to get under Lortel's skin would be more beneficial. Yet only now did the girl start adjusting her demeanor and flashing a smile. She was as open a book as they come.

How was she going to navigate the seas of love?

At this pace, she risked becoming the sobbing woman, discarded after use in a dime-a-dozen romance novel.

Merilda had a keen interest in the myriad artifacts humans crafted.

She had an eye for the aesthetic value of art that left most humans puzzled, and occasionally she'd adopt a human form using an underdeveloped polymorph spell to borrow books from the library.

Merilda recalled the second-rate romance novels she'd occasionally stumble upon. Yenika seemed to epitomize the jilted women she'd read about.

Images of a woman wailing the name of a former lover while clutching a handkerchief kept coming to mind, making her feel like she'd been left on the shelf.

She didn't anticipate a sophisticated and high-brow push and pull, like that merchant could manage.

But to capture a man's heart, at least she should know how to stir his desire.

[You're seeing him today, aren't you? If you waste such a prime opportunity, even if the heavens spare you, I won't. So, step up today and make some headway. Understand?]

"P-progress you mean..."

[No. Clarify now. Yenika. What was your game plan while helping him at camp today? How were you going to bridge the gap with him?]

"Uh... That..."

Avoiding eye contact, Yenika replied hesitantly.

"W-well. I didn't really have a plan."

[Aaaaargh!]

Merilda swallowed her mounting rage and interrogated Yenika further.

[You can't be serious! With the stars aligned like this, a golden opportunity like this! Do you reckon you'll get another shot when that stoic guy is this vulnerable? Look at how rapidly he's advancing! It's an insane pace! Do you believe another moment like this will just fall into your lap? Nothing's more potent than being the one who was there in the hour of need! Capitalize on being the one who bolstered him when he was down! Even if it appears a tad opportunistic! Even if it seems slightly immoral!]

"But, um... So... I planned on not doing anything special..."

[What on earth are you talking about!]

"No, it's just... this is... my idea..."

Yenika's ensuing explanation left Merilda so flabbergasted she found herself at a loss for words.

However, upon reflection...

She had to concede that it was unmistakably Yenika.

In fact, she began to see this aspect as a potential angle for attack, and she found

herself nodding in agreement.

[Yes, that's very Yenika of you.]

Hearing this, Yenika bashfully ducked her head.

* * *

"'The Golden Daughter' will soon be an echo from the past. Once Elte's downfall is confirmed."

Krepin Rosetail making his way to the reception room of Elte Merchant Guild was an unforeseen move.

Even for Lortel, his actions were unpredictable, forcing her to hastily finalize the reception arrangements and take her seat.

"Who would have thought you'd grace the abode of a mere merchant who does nothing but hoard coin in avarice, I am both flattered and anxious. I trust there were no breaches of conduct from my staff."

"Nothing of note."

Krepin seated himself across from the reception desk, sipping at his tea.

Even though the finest goods handled by the consortium had been arranged, to Krepin they must have tasted as mundane as water.

Lortel kept her gaze demurely lowered while seated across from Krepin.

She controlled even her breaths. She caught her breath, as if concerned she might swallow a dry gulp.

Krepin Rosetail was no ordinary adversary.

Yet, there was no need for excessive apprehension, his motives were somewhat foreseeable.

"I'd like to purchase the Sage's Scripture that the Elte Merchant Guild acquired."

His tone suggested a presumption that the Elte Merchant Guild would assuredly sell the seal.

"State your desired profit, I'll add it as a bonus. This was your plan all along, wasn't it?"

The reason the Elte Merchant Guild inflated the price when procuring the Sage's Scripture was their certainty that Krepin Rosetail would buy it regardless.

It seemed even Krepin was aware of this.

"But... it's peculiar."

Krepin lowered his gaze and continued in a soft voice.

"Did you foresee I'd go to such lengths to secure the Sage's Scripture? The Elte Merchant Guild I know doesn't usually gamble with such risky ventures."

"Indeed."

"It appears as though someone tipped you off about my intentions."

Lortel wouldn't commit an imprudent error like a dry swallow or a stammer.

Nonetheless, the thrust of Krepin's words was striking a nerve.

"Do you have a mole well versed in our family's internal affairs?"

"Yes. I suppose so."

A careless falsehood could ignite new suspicions in the opposition.

Ed Rosetail stood on a precarious ledge here. Any hasty move could result in severe repercussions.

For a merchant, deploying informants to boost profits was pretty standard. Given Krepin's temperament, he wouldn't trip over such tactics, nor would he butt heads with the Elte Merchant Guild. Yet, he wouldn't stand by and let an inside traitor walk free either.

Despite his image as a magnanimous duke, Krepin would not ignore the harm done by Ed, who despite causing a ruckus, still peddled intel on his own family's affairs.

"However, due to the great distance, keeping in touch is a hassle, and given his high position, his demands are hefty. Hence, I'd like to at least recoup my investment... It's just good business sense."

A lie mixed with a hint of truth can be more effective in duping others.

Rather than mindlessly repeating "No, I don't know" it's more effective to gently steer the conversation away from the truth.

Judging the veracity of a statement is simple. Yet, discerning the line where truth ends and falsehood begins is a tricky task, even for those with sharp instincts.

Lortel was a seasoned negotiator who knew how to leverage this effectively.

"How much are we talking?"

"12,000 Gold Coins."

"Sounds good. Once you get the paperwork from the academy, I'll purchase it immediately."

He didn't bother with unnecessary negotiations. It was a seemingly cut and dried deal.

Since the Elte Merchant Guild was the official winner of the academy auction, they'd first need to transfer the document to her. Only then would she have the right to sell. Until then, she'd have to bide her time.

"Oh, there's something else I should mention. Just in case things get tangled, I thought I'd give you a heads-up."

"Oh? Do tell."

"It's about your stepfather, Elte Keherun. Since he's been ousted, he's not my problem anymore, but I prefer not to have unexpected roadblocks in my operations, so I thought you should know."

Krepin set down his teacup and continued softly.

"After his deposition was confirmed, he seemed to have rounded up his few personal assets and hired a team of mercenaries. I got a report day before yesterday saying they were crossing my territory, heading for Sylvenia."

"Excuse me?"

Lortel was aware of Elte's suspicious moves, but she hadn't anticipated him already putting his plan into action.

"Well, he won't dare cause a ruckus in the Sylvenian Academy, under the protection of the empire... but he seems to have a scheme up his sleeve. I don't want external complications interfering with our deal, so bear that in mind."

With that, Krepin rallied his men and exited the reception room of the Elte Merchant Guild.

Left alone in the reception room after seeing off Krepin, Lortel took a sip of the remaining tea. She needed to gather her thoughts.

In any case, the resale timeline for the 'Sage's Scripture' seemed to be set in stone.

From the get-go, Ed only asked me to secure the authentic 'Sage's Scripture'...and she did just that.

Ed was fully aware of her intent to flip the 'Sage's Scripture'. In fulfilling Ed's request so effectively, she was now positioned to ask 'anything' from him once the book's purchase was completed.

What an enticing prospect. It wouldn't be long now.

At the very mention of 'anything', Lortel's mind began to whirl with all sorts of girlish fantasies.

Oh, if only she could actually do this... or that...

But as these thoughts blossomed... her focus shifted, and Lortel quickly snapped back to reality.

One piece of information stood out to her.

Elte Keherun was on his way.

Truth be told, it wasn't particularly frightening. This was nothing more than a desperate final act before the plunge into oblivion.

To assume he could intimidate Lortel by rallying a band of mercenaries was a severe miscalculation.

In the first place, there was no way Sylvanian Academy would allow a specific number of troops inside, and Lortel herself was no pushover.

- 'If he has another scheme in mind... could he be thinking about taking hostages?'

Suddenly, something clicked.

- 'You think I'm gonna give you preferential treatment 'cause you kept your promise with the kid? Or did you fall for her good looks?'

Elte seemed to believe that Ed held a deep affection for Lortel.

The truth was far from it, but regardless, they stood by each other in a time of extreme crisis. It could be interpreted as a mutual trust.

Lortel, always under the watchful eyes of the Merchant Guild's escorts and by no means weak... if he sets her sights on Ed, that changes the game.

If he's plotting to kidnap Ed to use him as a bargaining chip...

"He's crossed a line."

In a shadowy corner of the reception room, Lortel adjusted her robe.

* * *

"Voila! Doesn't it look tasty?"

I'd been lazing around all day.

I attempted to do something, but kept feeling light-headed, so I thought maybe I should rest a bit longer.

I was genuinely grateful for Yenika's assistance.

Two days into recuperating from my exhaustion, Yenika, having somehow sourced a load of ingredients, had skillfully cooked up various meals.

Night had fallen. It was the eve of the weekend, yet despite the late hour, Yenika showed no inclination to return to her dorm.

The comforting darkness was reluctantly replaced by the glow of the campfire.

The chorus of night-time insects had waned somewhat with the arrival of fall, supplanted by the hoot of an owl and the rustle of leaves in the wind.

The stew Yenika prepared was indeed rich, a noticeable departure from what Ziggs used to whip up.

I pondered the necessity of picking up some cooking skills for proficiency's sake, but right now, recovery took precedence over personal growth. So, I opted to delay my culinary education.

"I used to whip up stew every day back at the ranch in my hometown. Did you know that, Ed? When I was just a kid, I always..."

Yenika, seated by the bonfire and chuckling, spun her tale. I quietly shut my eyes. My strength was gradually returning, but I hadn't fully bounced back yet.

"You look worn out, Ed."

"Yeah, seems like it."

"Perhaps we should call it a night."

"I feel bad, only showing you my tired side after all the help you've given me, Yenika."

"Huh? No need. I haven't done anything out of the ordinary."

To Yenika, cooking and cleaning didn't seem to count as work.

When I asked her about her expertise in nursing and caregiving, she explained that her father, who worked on the ranch, often got injured and she had always been there to lend a hand.

Feeling a bit feverish again, I put a hand to my forehead, which felt noticeably warm. An impending headache and the mild fever were making a comeback, and I couldn't help but sigh.

As I settled down on the makeshift bed in the cabin, Yenika followed me in, finding a quiet corner to sit and giggle.

"...What are you up to?"

"I'm not up to anything."

"You're not doing anything?"

"I'll just be here with you."

I shot her a disbelieving look, and she elaborated.

"Ed, I understand what you're dealing with right now. A weary body leads to a weary mind - it's true for anyone. I know you're working harder than anyone else, putting in the effort every day. So, there's no need to pretend you're okay."

She cleared her throat, then laughed, puffing out her chest as if expecting a pat on the back.

"And how does you doing nothing and sitting here factor into this?"

"Don't you know how reassuring it can be to simply have someone by your side, even if they're not doing anything? Ed, you wouldn't understand because you haven't experienced it!"

She then lowered her gaze and whispered.

"I've had my share of tough times, too. I've received a lot of comfort and support, but... In the end, what bolstered me the most wasn't someone rushing to do something or offering empty words of comfort... It was simply someone maintaining their silent presence by my side. Since it helped me, I'm sure it will help you, too."

Give it a shot!"

With that, Yenika moved closer to the bed where I was laying... and quietly sat down, her back against the bed frame. I worried the floor might be cold, but it seemed it wasn't chilly enough yet since it wasn't winter.

Though it felt inappropriate for me to be sprawled on the bed while Yenika sat on the floor, she didn't seem to mind.

"You've been through a lot, haven't you? You've done well."

She simply closed her eyes and flashed me a radiant smile.

"No, you don't have to go to such lengths..."

"Just let me do this!"

Her tantrum was less fearsome and more endearing, almost begging for a good-natured chuckle.

"You've been through the wringer! Acknowledge that, then you can truly rest! Admit it! Ed, you're tired!"

"..."

Resting against the backrest, I deliberately softened my voice.

Perhaps I had yet to accept the truth that I'd been overlooking.

"Yeah... It's been tough."

A strange sensation washed over me.

For the past three semesters, I'd been living life by the hour, hard-pressed to remember a single day devoid of fatigue.

"It's been hellishly hard. Unbearably so."

Feeling like I could finally get some decent shuteye, I gradually succumbed to the encroaching sleepiness.

Only after a solid 10 hours of rest did I feel fully recharged.

Waking up feeling emotionally rejuvenated as well made for a refreshingly good morning, the likes of which I hadn't experienced in quite some time.

Rousing from sleep, the first sight to greet me was Yenika, sound asleep with her head resting on my knee.

Catching sight of her blank-faced and drooling in her slumber coaxed a spontaneous chuckle from me.

What an unexpected surprise.

* * *

- 'Decision to sell the Sage's Scripture. The representative at Trix Hall will finalize the transfer and submit the necessary documents.'

Professor Glast was responsible for the transfer procedures of the school's magical texts.

In reality, he delegated most of the work to the librarians, only holding a nominal position.

However, for a transfer of this magnitude, the representative needed to step in and take control.

"Professor Glast! The staff in charge of the scripture are looking for you!"

Assistant Professor Claire Elfin stormed into Professor Glast's office.

The sight that met Claire was Professor Glast, serenely seated at his desk, staring out the large window.

On Professor Glast's desk, a mountain of paperwork related to the scripture sale had already amassed.

"What, you've already received the report? You need to process those documents and submit them to the school..."

Suddenly, Claire realized that there was no response from Professor Glast, and she called his name again, noticeably louder.

Yet there sat Professor Glast, silently gazing out the window, without uttering a single word.



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