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# My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer

# **MY DAUGHTER LEFT THE NEST AND RETURNED AN S-RANK ADVENTURER**

Boukensha ni Naritai to Miyako ni Deteitta Musume ga  
S-Rank ni Natteta

**- VOLUME 2 -**

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[ J-NOVEL CLUB ]

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# CHARACTERS

## Belgrieve

A former adventurer whose dreams were shattered long ago. An injury forced him to return to his hometown, but part of him could never give up on adventuring. This inspired his daughter to follow his path, and even now, he continues to train. He is quite bothered by the moniker "Red Ogre" his daughter gave him.

## Angeline

An S-Rank adventurer renowned as the "Black-Haired Valkyrie." Abandoned in the forest as a baby, she was picked up and raised as Belgrieve's daughter. She loves her father.

## Miriam

A member of Angeline's party who specializes in magic. An AAA-Rank adventurer.

## Anessa

The mediator, negotiator, and archer of Angeline's party. She and Miriam hail from the same orphanage. An AAA-Rank adventurer.

## The Three Bordeaux Sisters

### Helvetica

Countess of the Bordeaux region, and the eldest of the sisters. Though gifted in her own right, she tends to lose herself when talented people are around.

### Sasha

The middle sister, who is terrible at acting like a noble. An adventurer despite her status, she has reached AA-Rank.

### Seren

The youngest sister who, despite her lingering youthful innocence, supports her older sisters with the aptitude she has shown for governance.

# STORY

Belgrieve, a former adventurer who returned home from his unfortunate journey when he lost his leg, discovers an abandoned baby while foraging in the mountains.

Taking the child under his wing, he names her Angeline and decides to raise her as his own. Soon, the influences of a former adventurer rub off on his daughter, and she grows up wanting to be an adventurer herself.

The years go by, and Angeline leaves the village to become an adventurer, climbing all the way up to the highest S-Rank. At the peak of her adventuring career, the girl wishes for nothing more than to see her beloved father again after so long. However, the supposed revival of a demon causes an increase in fiend activity, and she and her party members are sent out to hunt them day in and day out.

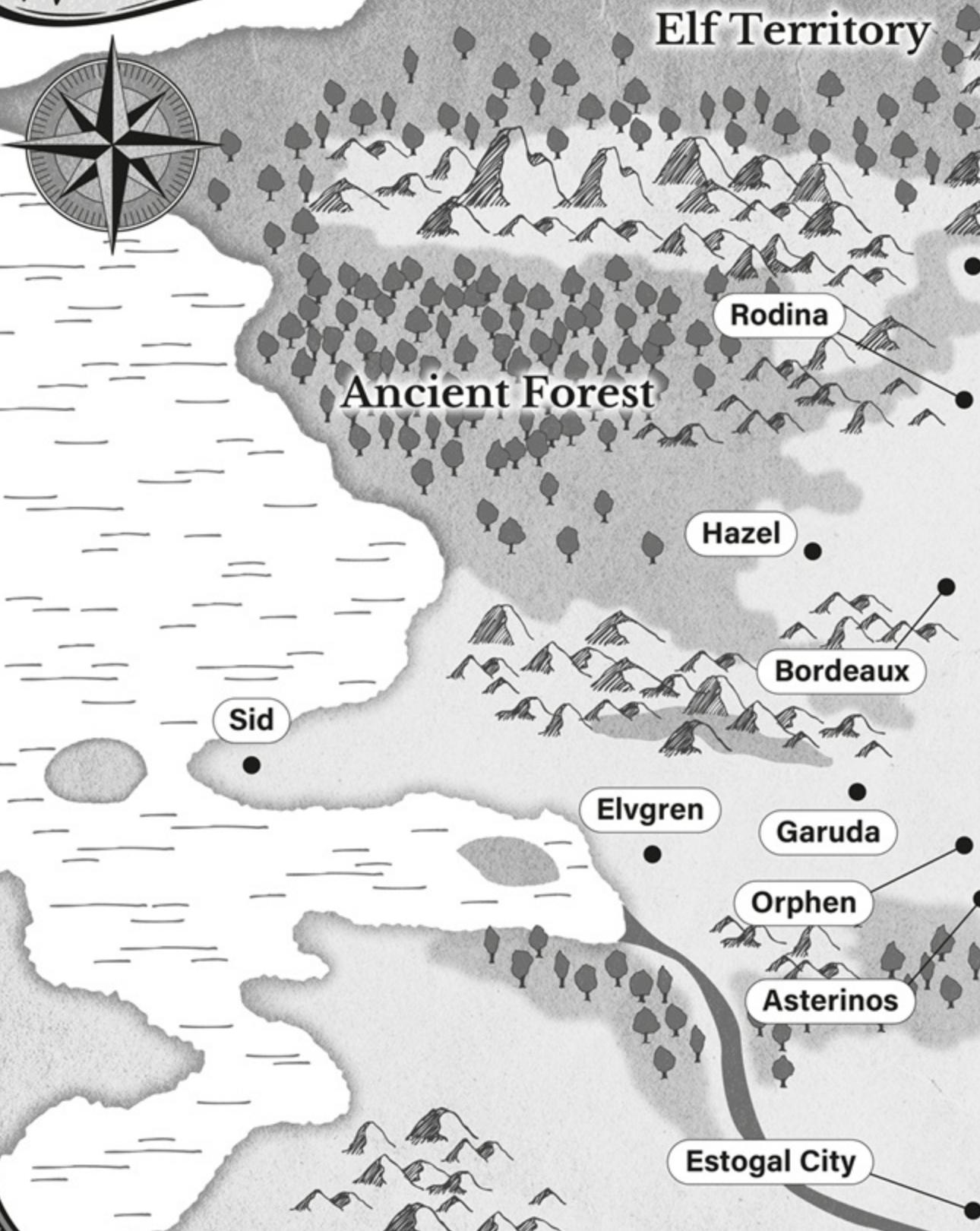
**“When will I ever get to see dad...”**

This unprecedented emergency prompts the guild to put together a large-scale demon subjugation force, and Angeline, her skills doing no shame to her name as the Black-Haired Valkyrie, manages to slay the demon. Finally able to take a vacation, she ventures off to see her beloved father once more.



# WORLD MAP

MY DAUGHTER LEFT THE NEST AND RETURNED AN S-RANK ADVENTURER



Tumera

Haril Checkpoint

Northern Trade Route

Erin

Tyldes

Eastern Trade Route

Benares

Yobem Checkpoint

# CHAPTER 13

## THE CANDLE FAINTLY CRACKLED

The candle faintly crackled as it burned with a blue flame—a clear indication of its magical nature. Its sconce adorned the stone walls of a hut so small that it would have felt cramped if even four people crowded into it. The room, which had no windows and just one thick wooden door which was firmly shut, had the oppressive, gloomy atmosphere of a sinner's prison cell.

There were hardly any furnishings in the room—only a wooden table in the center and a wooden chair facing it. A man wearing white robes sat in the chair before a crystal ball placed on the table. A figure was projected onto the crystal, though it was merely a faceless shadow without discernible expressions.

While letter writing was the main form of correspondence, it was also possible to send messages through certain crystals which were refined into spherical shapes. By pouring mana into them, it became possible to synchronize one with other, far-off crystals. Unfortunately, they were quite difficult to produce, and it took a massive amount of mana to send even a brief message. Crystal communication usually cost a gold coin every dozen or so seconds, and yet the robed man had been speaking to the shadow for quite some time now.

"This was a failure on my end," he said reluctantly. "But that also means your prediction missed the mark."

"We should have spread a few more decoys," the shadow replied. "However, I'm a bit surprised that someone managed to defeat Ba'al. I didn't care if anyone found him, as I figured none could best him and that we were safe as long as Graham stayed holed up in elven territory."

"Hmph... Whatever happens to him, it's impossible to annihilate him completely. Ba'al has lost his strength, but once he recovers, we still have our uses for him. Did you get the key?"

"No, I did not. We must have been fed false information."

"Tsk... It just never goes our way. I won't fall into the same pitfalls as he did."

"Be careful. We've got the Vienna cult sniffing around for us now—"

"Wait. I have visitors."

Just as the man stood, someone busted down the door. A glimmering silver blade flew at the man in the robe. He deftly stuffed the magic crystal into his bag as he leaped to avoid it.

There were five assailants in total. They all wore the same clothes and covered their faces with masks. Two had entered the room while the rest guarded the entrance. In an instant, it looked as though he had been cornered.

"You're really pulling out the stops to catch one guy..." He snapped his fingers, and suddenly the candles went out. This abrupt spell of darkness caused his assailants to freeze for a moment. The man's white robe flickered in the dark. A pale light poured out from it, and the closest attacker fell with a spurt of blood.

However, his other foes were not deterred by this. In the blink of an eye, they had reorganized their formation. The gap in their ranks was filled and the man was on the defensive once more. He nimbly pulled his body back to dodge another sword.

"I don't have time to waste on the likes of you...!"

The man began to chant swiftly. His hands emanated a pale blue light.

The next instant, one of his assailants unleashed his sword. It was so sudden that the robed man was frantic to dodge—the blade grazed his robe and tore through. Out from this rift tumbled a black crystal.

"Blast...! So that was your aim!"

He thrust his hands forward to unleash his magic. But his attackers were one step ahead of him. A sword smashed through the gemstone, kicking up a cloud of black smoke that swallowed the room whole. Whatever escaped through the door coalesced into a single mass and took flight.

But still, the man fired his magic. The pale light from his hands raced around the room like a blade, and by the time it was finished, only the man in the robe was left. The

candle flickered to light. It was dreadfully quiet.

The cold stillness of death was all that remained of the clamor.

“They got one up on me...”

The man irritably kicked one of the corpses at his feet. He lifted his hand and began chanting under his breath. Little by little, the smoke remaining in the room gathered before him, once again forming a black gemstone. The man pinched it out of the air and stared at it closely. It seemed to have dulled somewhat.

“Looks like some of it got away... I never thought they would be this well informed. I’ll need to rethink our strategy.”

Stuffing the gemstone into his pocket, the man left the room with his robes fluttering in his wake.

○

The children flocked around the wagon loaded with gifts, and marveled at the sweets they couldn’t come across in Turnera. Not far away, Angeline fished through her belongings, presenting them one by one to Belgrieve.

“This here... this is the mulled wine I like best! You put these spices and honey in it, then drink it... It’s delicious.”

“I see... You’re old enough to drink now, Ange.”

“Yeah!”

Seeing his daughter so grown up, Belgrieve offered a happy yet lonesome smile. The girl proudly showing off everything she brought was definitely Ange: she had been waist-high when she left, but now she stood around chest level; her short hair had grown out; and while she still had a bit of childish innocence, her features had matured.

He stared at the back of the gold plate she’d given him. It was about the size of his palm and proved she was an S-Rank adventurer.

“I guess this is the hard part of being a parent...”

“What’s wrong, dad...?”

“Just talking to myself.”

While Belgrieve sunk into his thoughts, Angeline pouted with puffed-up cheeks. All of a sudden, she pounced at his chest, pushing her face in and nuzzling.

“The smell of firewood and hay... You really do smell nice, dad...”

“Ha ha, the things my daughter says... I guess you’re still a spoiled girl no matter how much you’ve grown.”

“I’ll always be your daughter...”

“Good grief...”

Belgrieve patted her head with a troubled smile. While not perfectly straight, her hair was glossy and beautiful, completely unlike his own red mane—though this was natural since they were not blood relatives.

He turned to look at Anessa and Miriam, who were standing back in a daze.

“Thank you for coming with her. It must have been a long and tiring journey.”

Snapping to their senses, they both waved their hands in refutation.

“O-Oh, not at all,” Anessa stammered. “It’s nice to have a laid-back trip, once in a while.”

“It’s the first time I’ve seen Ange like that... She really must love her father,” Miriam said.

Belgrieve scratched his cheek. “It didn’t used to be this serious... but it’s been a long time.”

“Five years! Five whole years! No... almost six years even! I’m surprised I held out so long! I deserve some applause...”

Angeline circled around him and jumped onto his back. She placed her chin atop his head, grinding it against his hair. She was acting like a child, no more and no less. Was this really Angeline? Anessa had a forced smile on her face while Miriam grinned.

*She did that whenever I carried her on my back*, Belgrieve recalled, and for a while he let her do as she pleased. Ultimately, though, he wrapped his arms behind his back and prodded her head away. She gleefully cried out as he did.

“Ange, these souvenirs are good and all, but make sure you get your own luggage into the house.”

“Oh, that’s right... Okay. Anne, Merry, get your things in the house...”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Goooot it.”

And so the three girls hoisted up their travel bags that were still in the wagon.

*I wasn’t really expecting them, so the place is a mess*, Belgrieve thought to himself. But there was little he could do about it.

The children left once they had been given sugar candy. That would have to be it for today’s sword training. Belgrieve looked at the mountainous heap of presents, wondering what he would do about it. That night, there would be a village conference to discuss the road maintenance, so perhaps he could distribute them there.

Compared against Angeline’s excitement, Belgrieve looked relatively calm, but his mind was a mess. *She’s here after so long, I want to treat her to a nice dinner. No, there’s the conference tonight. Will I have time to cook? We don’t have a bath, but she’s been on a long journey, so I’ll need to warm enough water for her to wipe herself down. I didn’t think she would come with friends. I need to find someplace for them to sleep. Right, I can get some straw from the shed and... I don’t have any spare blankets, so I’ll need to borrow some from Kerry.*

In the midst of these thoughts, Kerry and Barnes sprinted over. They were both short of breath, Kerry’s stomach swaying as he ran.

“Hey, Bell! Is it true that Ange’s back?!”

“Yeah... it’s true. She came with her adventurer friends from the capital.”

“Ha ha ha, well ain’t that swell! This calls for a celebration!”

Kerry rejoiced as if it were his own daughter who returned. *He's a good friend*, Belgrieve mused with a laugh.

Angeline returned from the house. “Dad, Anne and Merry are... Oh, Mr. Kerry!”

Kerry’s eyes opened wide upon seeing how Angeline had grown.

“Oh... Ange! Now look who’s all grown up now! Are you doing well for yourself?”

“Yeah... I’m always doing great! Did you put on some weight?”

“Wah ha ha ha! More or less! It’s a sign of happiness!” Kerry said, jovially patting his potbelly. Barnes opened and closed his mouth as he looked at Ange from head to toe. He seemed to be in complete disbelief.

“A-Are you really that runt Ange...?”

“Huh? Who the hell are you?” Angeline tilted her head.

Barnes scowled. “You don’t even remember me?! I’m Barnes, Kerry’s son!”

Seeing him fly into a rage, Angeline mischievously giggled. “Kidding... I remember. Good old Barnes, the boy who always lost to me in swordplay even though he was older... *pfft*.”

“Y-You little... Yep, that’s definitely Ange.”

Despite his furrowed brow, Barnes gave a resigned laugh.

Belgrieve called over to Angeline, “So what’s this about Anne and Merry?”

“Oh, right, right... Do we have any place for them to sleep? Think we have enough straw?”

“Hmm, right. I was thinking about that too. Hey, Kerry, do you have a few spare blankets lying around? If you do, I’d like to borrow enough for three...”

“Sure, I don’t mind. I have more blankets than I know what to do with. Barnes, go fetch a few. Fetch enough that the girls don’t even have to think about getting cold.”

Barnes nodded and ran off.

Angeline held out a paper sack. "Mr. Kerry, this is for you..."

"Oh, thank you Ange!"

"Heh heh heh, it's a rare spice... Oh, and here are some vegetable seeds, and this is sugar candy."

She picked out one item after another, proudly handing them to Kerry with a story accompanying each of them. Kerry heard them all out, humoring each tale with an exaggerated reaction.

Belgrieve, meanwhile, retrieved straw from the shed and brought it inside. The house was not particularly large, nor did it have any separate interior rooms: there was only one large chamber divided by shelves and dressers. In the back was a large fireplace where the smoke still rose from the embers. Near the fireplace was a pile of straw, which would become a bed once a blanket was spread over it.

Anessa and Miriam stood there, looking around curiously. The girls had been born and raised in Orphen, so these village houses were an oddity.

"I'm sorry it's such a mess. I didn't think I'd have any visitors."

They turned towards him. "Not at all... We're the ones who barged in. Honestly, even though there are a lot of things here, it's tidier than our place. On the contrary, I'm ashamed, or... how should I put it..."

"Right? It's because our Anne here just strips off her clothes and leaves them lying around."

"Bah! That would be you, Merry!"

"Wrong, I would never do that."

Seeing the two of them bicker, Belgrieve smiled and began laying the straw flat in an open space.

"You two get along well," he observed.

Anessa suddenly turned red. “I-I’m sorry for such an unsightly display...”

“Not at all... Heh heh, you really are a diligent one.”

“Huh?!”

“It was in Ange’s letters. She also said Merry was a little out of it, but fun to talk to.”

“Eh? That’s not true at all. Ange’s pretty airheaded herself.”

“Ha ha, that may be true... Thank you for being her friends. It’s because of you two that she didn’t have to be lonely in Orphen. You have my gratitude,” Belgrieve said with a grin. He said it so earnestly that both Anessa and Miriam were left fidgeting awkwardly.

There was a rattling as Belgrieve pulled out some chairs. He lived alone but had four chairs for what it was worth—he had the occasional visitor, after all—and was glad he kept them around.

He motioned the two of them to sit down. Angeline’s conversation with Kerry was growing even more animated, and he didn’t want to rain on her parade. “Here, have a seat. I’ll brew some tea.”

“I—I’ll help out!”

“No need. You must be tired, just take it easy for today.”

“Oh, okay...”

“Then I’ll just kick back and relax.”

They sat, watching Belgrieve’s back as he brewed tea by the fireplace. His movements were slow but skillful. The houses of active and retired adventurers generally did not feel lived in, because they usually dined out and had little in the way of personal belongings. Anessa and Miriam could handle most housework thanks to their upbringing in the orphanage, but Belgrieve moved so naturally in his home that it was hard to believe he was once in the same trade. Though there was a tapping sound on the floor whenever he was walking.

Anessa spoke up. “Umm... You used to be an adventurer, right?”

"Technically, yes. But this happened to me quite early on," Belgrieve said, showing his right leg. It had been replaced with a simple prosthetic from the knee down. It was a sturdy peg carved from oak wood. Oiled and polished, it had a glossy finish; though there were scratches here and there from the years, it was clear he treated it well. Even though a glance was enough to tell the leg was fake, Belgrieve's movements were hardly any different than someone with foot intact—so much so, it was as if the peg leg was an illusion.

He returned with teacups on a tray and sat across from them.

"I was an adventurer for two years... three years at most. I was E-Rank when I retired. That would make you both my superiors in the business..." He awkwardly laughed as he offered the tea. "This was made from the lent leaves that grow around these parts. I hope it's to your liking..."

A pleasant aroma wafted off of the wooden cups in a puff of steam. The girls blew on them carefully before taking a sip—hot, but not too bitter, with a faint sweetness underlying it. It was as if the young leaves had been dissolved straight into their cups.

"Ah, not too shabby..."

"I've never had it before. Bitter, but a little sweet too."

"Glad to hear it. Given the season, I don't have much to serve with it, but..."

"Ah, please don't mind us..."

"But you really are kind, mister. I expected someone a lot more frightening when I heard the name 'Red Ogre.'"

"*Red Ogre*" again... Belgrieve frowned. He was hearing it a lot more frequently these days, but he himself had no idea what it meant. Even Sasha and Helvetica were calling him that, and the villagers were teasing him with the name too.

"Umm... Where did you hear that 'Red Ogre' thing from?"

"Hm? Ange said it..."

"Huh?"

That was when Angeline entered the house.

"Hey, you two... No flirting with dad without my permission!"

"Ange... A moment, please."

Belgrieve beckoned for her. She rushed over like an excited puppy, taking a seat right beside him.

"What is it, dad?"

"What is this... 'Red Ogre' thing about...?"

Angeline triumphantly smiled. "It's the moniker I thought up for you, dad! Isn't it cool?"

"Uh... No, I mean, Ange... you've been spreading that?" Belgrieve looked to Anessa and Miriam, shocked.

Anessa gave a wry smile and nodded. "Ange tells everyone she meets... You're her father, and you didn't know about it?"

Belgrieve gaped, lost for words.

Miriam giggled. "There isn't anyone in Orphen's guild who hasn't heard of the father of the Black-Haired Valkyrie—an incredibly strong former adventurer named Belgrieve the Red Ogre. Right, Anne?"

"Yes... The reinstated S-Ranks and even the guild master have their eyes on you."

A moment passed. "Ange?"

"Yeah!"

Perhaps thinking he would praise her, Angeline looked straight at him with a full smile on her face.

"What should I do..." Belgrieve groaned, holding his head.



# CHAPTER 14

## OF COURSE, BELGRIEVE WAS AN ADVENTURER

Of course, Belgrieve was an adventurer, and it wasn't as if he was completely against having his name known among the high-ranking heroes. His younger days were spent taking on any job, no matter how small, to put food on the table—but a part of him did aspire. *Someday, maybe even I could be someone*, he would tell himself.

He was forty-two now, but the feeling hadn't completely disappeared. Though he had given up and returned to Turnera at the loss of his right leg, he still trained every day as an adventurer would. He had gone far beyond what would be considered rehabilitation to ensure his artificial leg didn't impede him, and he was proud of the effort he put in.

Thanks to this, he could move around freely, and after retiring at E-Rank, he could take on monsters of C- and B-Rank on his own. Perhaps he had never given up on himself as an adventurer; apart from his pure desire to protect the village, perhaps something inside him was still kicking and screaming, yearning to compete with his old party members who had continued on as adventurers.

Thus, he didn't hate receiving recognition. It could bolster his confidence and get him back on his feet after he failed to find any worth in himself.

"But this just ain't it..."

"Hmm...? What's wrong, dad? Do you have a headache...?"

Angeline frantically stroked his head. Her hands were gentle and caring; it was clear she was concerned about him. Angeline did not have any ill intent, surely, but that only made it all the more troublesome for him.

He did resent having unknowingly been evaluated far beyond what he was capable of. However, that came about from Angeline's good intentions. He got the feeling it would be wrong to holler at her without first hearing what she had to say. Though he was soft on his daughter to begin with and couldn't have brought himself to raise his voice to her in any case.

Kerry popped his head through the doorway. “Oi, Bell. You don’t have to come to the conference.”

Belgrieve lifted his head from his hands. “Huh? Why?”

“I mean Ange’s just come back, so I don’t think you’d be up for sitting down to a calm, levelheaded discussion.”

“Ugh...”

Kerry had a point. Even if Belgrieve did join in, his mind was in such turmoil that he would be completely tuned out. He was happy Angeline had returned, of course, but now there was a separate problem entirely.

Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his head. “Sorry ‘bout that, Kerry.”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. We can’t rely on you for everything! Wa ha ha ha! Hey, Barnes! Quit loitering around and get in here!”

Dragged along by his father, Barnes entered sullenly with blankets in hand.

“Where do you want them, Mr. Bell?”

“Could you lay them over the straw... What’s wrong?”

Barnes had been staring transfixed at Anessa and Miriam until Belgrieve’s question snapped him out of it. And so he brought the blankets over. In answer to the perplexed look he saw on Belgrieve’s face, he whispered, “I guess girls from the capital are as beautiful as they say...”

“Hey now—Rita would cry if she heard that...”

“Stu—Why are you bringing up Rita’s name! What’s she got to do with this!?” Barnes hastily draped the blankets over the straw before running out of the house, red to the ears.

Kerry looked at him and sighed. “Pathetic, that boy... What a sight he makes compared to Ange.”

“Ha ha, I don’t see the problem. You were like that too, once upon a time.”

"The apple doesn't fall far from the tree, eh? You got me there... Not that it matters, I guess. Take it easy with your daughter, Red Ogre Belgrieve," Kerry teasingly said, and left in high spirits. Belgrieve was left scratching his head once again.

Monikers were the sort of thing that stuck after being arbitrarily proposed by god only knows who. The fact that Angeline made it up out of nothing did not make it any less valid. But was it not strange to stick such a moniker to a middle-aged farmer who was neither an adventurer nor a soldier? Perhaps it would be fine if he had accomplished anything to merit it, but Belgrieve couldn't recall doing anything of the sort. He was definitely failing to live up to his name—or rather, his fame—and that gave him an itchy feeling.

"Umm... Did I do something wrong?" Angeline asked timidly when she noticed the inscrutable look on his face. "Dad, did I do something you didn't like...?" She looked like she was on the verge of tears. How could he possibly get angry at that face?

Belgrieve wryly shrugged. "No, well... How should I put it? I know you were thinking for my sake, Ange, but your dad hasn't done anything to earn everyone's praise..."

The only achievements he was aware of involved beating fiends that were B-Rank at best. Perhaps they could make a big deal out of him as the one who raised Angeline, but her achievements as an adventurer were all her own doing. He was proud of her, but did not see himself claiming any part of her glory.

Watching Belgrieve's reactions, Anessa and Miriam cocked their heads to the side.

"Umm... So he's not as amazing as Ange makes him out to be?"

"Ange was just letting her imagination run wild?"

"That's not it at all!" Angeline rose in a rage. The two girls inadvertently flinched, shivering. "My dad is incredible... I told you, didn't I? I've never managed to strike him in a duel."

"That was five years ago, Ange—"

"It doesn't matter if it's five years or ten—it doesn't!" Angeline cut Belgrieve off.

*No, five years does matter quite a bit*, Belgrieve thought. Meanwhile, Angeline tapped on the table with a sullen look on her face.

“If you’re not convinced... let me show you! Dad!”

“Yes?”

“I request a sparring match!”

“Oh, sure... huh? Wait, Ange, shouldn’t you rest? You were never good with long journeys...”

“I’m fine... Just come with me!” Angeline said, leaving the house with her sword.

“Wow,” exclaimed Miriam. “I can finally see his rumored swordsmanship. I can’t wait.”

Anessa nodded. “Both Ange and Sasha spoke highly of him. This will be a good learning experience.”

And with that, the girls were out the door.

Not quite knowing what was going on, Belgrieve grabbed the sword leaning against the wall and cocked his head. “What exactly has been going on since I’ve last seen her?”

○

“Dad—come at me seriously!”

The sky that had been so clear moments before was now mottled with white clouds. It was neither dark enough for rain, nor bright enough for the sun to cast strong shadows. The ground was a little damp from the snowmelt. One careless moment would send someone tumbling.

Father and daughter stood opposed in the yard. Belgrieve still seemed somewhat bewildered, while Ange was clearly seething about something.

Her anger was not directed at Belgrieve, per se—though she was a little irritated to see the man she had always known as a pillar of reliability smiling so uncertainly. She wanted her beloved father to remain the man she believed him to be, even if a part of her understood just how unreasonable and selfish that was.

On the other hand, Belgrieve, while confused, found himself surprisingly calm the moment he stood there holding a sword. *It must be all the years catching up to me.* He

smiled bitterly, though he felt those years were saving him now. He was weak— incomparable to an active S-Rank like Angeline. In the first place, he wasn't even an adventurer.

Perhaps this would be a farce; perhaps he would disappoint Angeline. Once that happened, maybe she wouldn't idolize him anymore. However, children were quick to surpass their parents. Many of the children who grew up in the village would carry on the farmwork as well as, if not better than, their predecessors.

"Is this a path every parent has to tread?" he muttered to himself. Meanwhile, Angeline took a stance with her sheathed sword. He couldn't help but sigh in admiration of the fluidity of her stance. She had grown into a splendid warrior.

Angeline had shown glimpses of her talent from a young age, and by the time she was ten, she had nearly landed a blow on him several times. When this happened, Belgrieve would train himself even harder than before. That was probably his youthful stubbornness at work—the part of him which refused to lose to a little girl. It was perhaps for that reason that the sword skills he had once nearly given up on had been polished further than he ever thought possible for him.

But this was different. Angeline had faced off against many adventurers and fiends while in Orphen. Her skills were presumably greater than he could possibly imagine.

There would be no regrets if he lost. But he wasn't going down without a fight.

Belgrieve took his stance. He stood square to her, and at a glance, it seemed as if he was completely unguarded. However, his sword arm vigilantly reacted to every slight movement from his daughter, swishing back and forth ever so slightly. It was as if he was inviting her to charge.

Angeline was delighted to see this. He hadn't dulled in the slightest—he really was the same father she had so admired.

A strange sense of tension hung over the yard. They trembled as if the threads holding them up were being pulled to the snapping point. Even Anessa and Miriam, who were merely on the sidelines, found themselves watching with bated breath. They too were powerful fighters who could understand a clash between the strong.

Belgrieve could hear his heart beating detestably loud and slow. It felt as if mere seconds were lasting a lifetime.

A drop of melted snow fell from the roof. Belgrieve jerked, his eyes shifted ever so slightly. And Angeline took that chance to move. She was fast. He thought she had only stepped with her right leg, yet in that brief instant, she had already kicked off several times and closed the distance in the blink of an eye. From her low stance, she swung her sword upwards with fearsome momentum.

“...Hmm?”

However, Belgrieve casually avoided her charge, a disappointed look on his face as he struck her on the head.

“Eep!” she yelped, hunkering down.

Belgrieve looked over her, perplexed. “Ange... I keep telling you not to go for obvious feints, and you haven’t fixed that at all. Then, there’s your starting move—stepping in with your right foot, and slicing up—it’s a bad habit of yours...”

“Urgh... You seriously hit me...”

“Huh? Well, I mean, you told me to take this seriously...”

She pursed her lips and held out her arms. “Carry me.”

“You’re already seventeen, aren’t you...?”

“Carry me!”

While her brow was furrowed, her eyes looked as if they would burst into tears at any moment. Belgrieve shook his head, stooped down, wrapped an arm around her waist, and lifted her up high enough to sit on his shoulder.

He couldn’t help it—he was soft on his daughter. For some reason, he felt as though they had had this exact same exchange before.

For a silent moment, Angeline hugged Belgrieve’s head and buried her face in his hair. Eventually, she leaped down to the ground.

“One more time! We’ll spar again!”

“I don’t mind...” he replied with a quizzical gesture of his head. He realized he wasn’t

so nervous anymore.

They stood at a distance again and faced one another. This time, Angeline moved immediately. While surprise crossed Belgrieve's face, he parried the first blow, pivoted on his peg leg, and parried. Angeline immediately backed off, but Belgrieve kicked off with his left leg, closing the distance. Reacting swiftly, Angeline was about to leap right, and yet—

"Stop letting your eyes give away where you're going to move!"

Belgrieve once again whacked her before she could react. He swung knowing exactly which way she would go next, and she had no means of avoiding it. "Nyah!" she cried out, crouching down again.

Belgrieve scratched his cheek and sighed. "Ange... you haven't fixed a single thing I told you to correct."

"Urgh..."

There were tears in Angeline's eyes, yet for some reason, she seemed delighted.

"Hee hee... See? My dad really is strong!"

"Uh... No, I mean, you're..."

Belgrieve felt a little let down. Her movements were faster, sharper, and far more polished compared to when she left home. However, no matter how fast and sharp they were, they were still the exact same movements he knew.

This was strange. It wasn't supposed to be like this. His eyes wandered as he thought over the matter.

Angeline was a ball of talent, but her genius was intuitive, not analytical. She could do almost anything without any understanding of the logic behind it, and she could do it frightfully well. And so, while Belgrieve had laid the groundwork for her swordsmanship to some degree, her actual style, honed in real combat, should have been entirely self-taught.

To some degree, Belgrieve had been a shackle to her, and once she'd escaped that binding, she had earnestly devoted herself to expanding upon a sword style that

incorporated all of her bad habits. Her sword was fast and fierce, making all who witnessed or confronted it cower in shock and awe, and ultimately planting her opponents in the dirt.

Meanwhile, Belgrieve, who had been attempting to correct her bad habits, was well aware of how she moved. From her footwork and line of sight, he knew whatever she would do beforehand. Of course, that wasn't something that just any foe could figure out in the midst of battle; this was something only her father, who had observed and crossed blades with her so many times, could understand.

Having seen her fearsome talent up close, he had trained himself even more than before in the hope that he wouldn't fall behind. What's more, as Angeline was the only one in Turnera who could put up a decent fight, he had unconsciously grasped all her movements, and trained specifically to counteract them.

This was added to the fact that Angeline's intuitive movements increased in severity the more she despised her foe. She was stronger against fiends and people she hated, but her abilities similarly declined against those to whom she was positively disposed —all the more so against her father, who she loved most in the world. She couldn't possibly clad herself in wrath, dodging about like a vengeful spirit as she would against bandits and fiends.

This was a malady brought about specifically by her genius. If she had access to all her abilities, Belgrieve would have been cut down before they had even locked blades.

In short, it was unknown how Belgrieve would fare against other high-ranking adventurers, but it was impossible for him to lose to Angeline as she was now. He was the greatest anti-Angeline weapon there was.

Not that either of them understood this. Angeline was certain she was going all-out, only increasing her admiration towards her father; for his part, Belgrieve only grew even more confused.

And then, there were her party members, who silently watched over the ordeal.

“No way... Ange was no match...”

“I can't believe it...”

These two had seen Angeline carving her way through atrocious fiends on the front

lines. As her party members, they thought they knew her strength better than anyone. The Black-Haired Valkyrie was the strongest in Orphen, and hardly anyone could challenge her in the entirety of Estogal.

That very same Angeline had been easily sidestepped, unable to land a single blow. Despite how long it had felt to Belgrieve and Angeline, it was over in an instant—so quickly, it took a moment for her friends to understand what had taken place.

*Could this really be happening?* Anessa held her head while Miriam pinched her cheek. It did seem Belgrieve's skills were worthy of the reputation of "the Red Ogre."

Looking rather satisfied, Angeline clambered up onto Belgrieve's back again and smiled. Belgrieve himself was still mulling it over, his face conflicted.

"How was that, Anne?" Angeline proudly proclaimed. "Dad's the strongest, isn't he?"

"Y-Yeah... I'm amazed, shocked even—you weren't holding back, were you Ange?"

"I would never... Did I look like I was...?" Ange asked, and Miriam shook her head.

"No, that was the usual Ange. I didn't feel much spirit in your attacks, but your movements weren't any slower than usual. Right, Anne?"

"I... think so. It didn't feel like her movements had dulled at all... Your dad's incredible."

"Isn't he...? Mwa ha ha, he's my dad, after all." Angeline happily rubbed her mouth against his hair.

"Ange..." Belgrieve said with a frown.

"What is it, dad?"

"Yes... I know you love daddy, but... please stop spreading rumors about me being strong and whatnot..."

"Eh...? But you really are strong. Stronger than me."

"No, that's just because... Anyways, please give it a rest. You won't make me happy by doing that."

Angeline seemed unconvinced, but then it suddenly struck her, and she clapped her hands together. With a cheerful face, she said, “I see! The skilled hawk hides its claws! I got it! I’ll keep it a secret... An unknown master... That’s cool too.”

“That’s not what I meant... That’s not it at all... *Sigh...*”

Belgrieve chewed his words a bit, but ultimately kept his peace. It seemed he’d given up.

# CHAPTER 15

## THE SUN WAS ALREADY SETTING

The sun was already setting by the time the thin veil of clouds cleared. Twilight gradually descended, and a cold wind swept across the land. The mountain to the west meant the sun always set early in Turnera, and the nights were still cold. The snow had nearly melted, but it was still winter as far as the calendar was concerned, and a bit of winter's chill still lingered about.

Belgrieve had used dried meat and beans alongside his stockpile of potatoes and greens to quickly throw together a stew. When he was alone, he would be more sparing with the salt and ingredients, but today was special. He loaded the pot up and added ample seasonings, including the spices Angeline brought back.

Angeline loomed around him, insisting she wanted to help out, but Belgrieve told her she needed to bring her souvenirs in before the frost set in on them. Thus, she reluctantly assisted Anessa and Miriam on the herculean task. As she stared at the mountain of gifts, she grew irritated—*who in their right mind thought it was a good idea to bring this much?* And then she frowned, remembering it had been her.

Once Belgrieve had set the stew to simmer, he kneaded some bread dough and placed it by the hearth. Then he took a large pot from the shed and used it to heat water.

"There aren't any baths in Turnera. The closest thing is dipping a cloth in hot water, and giving yourself a good wipe-down," he said, adding a bit of cold water from a pail to regulate the temperature. He wrung out a towel, lit a candle, and placed the two items beside the pot. "It may not warm you up all the way, but take your time sponging the grime off. I'll be making my rounds outside."

As Belgrieve draped his coat over his shoulders and picked up his sword, Angeline latched onto him.

"Dad, I'll wash your back... so wash my back too."

"Hey now, a girl your age shouldn't be saying that."

"We're father and daughter, so it's not a problem... You're not a pervert who lusts after his own daughter, are you?"

"Oh, you've got a tongue on you now. Those cheap provocations don't work on me." Belgrieve smiled wryly and gently prodded her on the forehead. He walked out and shut the door behind him.

Angeline stuck out her lips. "We used to wipe each other down all the time."

"C'mon, that's pushing it a bit... Don't trouble your dad too much." Anessa tiredly chuckled as she stripped off her coat. The fireplace was blazing red, and the house was warmer than she had expected. Once she was down to her undergarments, she hesitantly asked, "Would it be better if... I took it all off?"

"Hmm? Did you say something?" Miriam had already doffed her hat and heavy robe and taken off her underwear, leaving her pale skin bare. The soft mounds adorning her chest swayed freely as she used the wrung-out hand towel to wipe her body. Her tail gleefully wagged while her ears twitched to and fro.

"Ah, that hits the spot. Look at how dirty it got from wiping." The towel was sullied with grime in no time.

Anessa sighed. "Look here, you're a maiden for what it's worth. Don't show your skin that easily..."

"Don't worry about it..."

"Eep!"

Before Anessa knew it, Angeline had snuck around and pilfered her undergarments from behind. As she let out an instinctive shriek, Angeline and Miriam giggled.

"Eep,' she says... hee hee."

"So puuure."

"Sh-Shut it! Stupid!" Anessa shouted, hiding her chest as she turned bright red. The other two laughed even harder.

In any case, the matter of whether to sponge off while buck naked was settled, and the

three girls began cleaning themselves and each other. They gradually let their guards down and were joking around and tickling one another before long.

“Hey, don’t push! What would you do if I fell here!”

“Heh heh, your skin is so smooooth, Anne.”

“Meanwhile... Merry is squishy... How sumptuous.”

“Ah, now you’ve said it! I was worried about that!”

“You reckon you’re eating too many sweets? You weren’t this round before.”

“Shuuut up! You’re one to talk, Anne! Just look at how fat your legs have gotten! Look at those childbearing hips!”

“Gah... Th-This is the result of my training! It’s important to have a sturdy lower body!”

“Meanwhile, I’m not growing... anywhere. What a mystery...”

“Hmm... In your case, Ange, maybe it’s because you’re always moving around a lot?”

“Right. You’re the one racing around the most, so it makes sense you’d be slimmed down, or maybe ‘firmed up’ is the way to put it?”

“That’s right! I’m jealous of how slender you are!”

“Says the boob monster... You pickin’ a fight?”

A sudden draft blew over them. The outside temperature was gradually making its way in, and the room that had been so warm was not nearly as cozy now. The girls shivered and hurriedly produced clean clothes from their bags. It was now dark, the sun having already set outside.

Anessa put on a coat, while Miriam pulled her sleeping cap over her eyes. The two of them had been born and raised in Orphen, so they were not accustomed to the piercing cold.

“Phew... It gets pretty cold when the sun sets.”

"Yes, Turnera nights are harsh... You'll have a cold the next day if you aren't careful," Angeline said, lighting a lamp. She hung it on a rope dangling from the ceiling. The room, which had been barely discernible from the candle's glow, was now enveloped in soft lamplight. She scowled at the fireplace that was now little more than embers.

"I'll need to add wood..." she said, picking up a few pieces from the pile beside it, and placing them over the glowing embers. Once she had blown on it, the flames rose up as if she had breathed life back into them.

"That should do it..."

"Ahh, nice and warm now."

They huddled together by the fire. Angeline reached out and grabbed a blanket to wrap around them. The girls laughed—for some reason, it felt as if they were children again.

"Remember how we used to get under the covers like this to tell scary stories?"

"Like the one about the ghost in the graveyard. The sister was furious when she found out."

"Oh yeah, because we made the little kids cry! She rushed in when we were trying to get them to quiet down..."

"That takes me back... hee hee." Miriam drew closer to Angeline, who was sandwiched in the center. "Did you used to do this with your father, Ange?"

"I used to sit on his lap... He would drape a blanket over his shoulders, and I would crawl under it..."

As the three of them sank into various memories, there was a soft knocking at the door.

"Are you done yet?"

Angeline shot off towards the entrance before anyone could answer. She threw open the door and latched onto Belgrieve, wrapping her arms around his neck, and hanging from him.

"Welcome back dad! Are you going to wash up too?"

“Maybe later. For now, let’s have some dinner.”

Belgrieve walked in while exhaling white breaths, with Angeline still dangling from him. He brought with him a headless elaenia bird, which he must have only just killed as it hadn’t yet gone stiff.

Placing the bird on the butcher’s block, he lowered Angeline and said, “Ange, do you remember how to do the bread?”

“Yeah! In the skillet, right?”

“Right.”

Happy as could be to receive a request from Belgrieve, she tore off chunks of the risen dough, rolled them into balls, and lined them up in the pan. Anessa and Miriam came over and watched, curiously.

“Hmm, I didn’t know you could do it like that...”

“Interesting. I guess not every bread needs an oven.”

“It doesn’t really fluff up, but it’s pretty good in its own way... Want to try?”

“W-Well, I guess, why not.”

“All right, the Great Merry’s going to show what she’s got.”

With no small amount of chatter, the three girls rolled bread until the skillet was filled. Belgrieve watched, satisfied, as he soaked the bird in hot water, plucked its feathers, gutted it, then used the fire to remove whatever down remained.

“I’m glad I got one just in time.”

He managed to take it out with a throwing stone while he was walking through the fields. The sunset had been his ally, as it slowed the reactions of the bird, which would have otherwise moved more shrewdly. It wasn’t especially meaty, given the season, but it had quite a bit of fat on it—more than enough to add some variety to the dinner table.

He skewered it whole, allowing the grease to drip as he spit-roasted it. The liver, heart,

and other edible organs were similarly skewered. Each time a drop of fat fell, the embers would pop and let off fumes, as if he were smoking it. The aroma was divine.

Soon the bread was cooked, the elenia was roasted, and the plates were set out with steaming cups of the mulled wine Angeline had brought from the capital.

"I doubt it can match what you'll find in Orphen, but enjoy yourselves."

"A dinner five years too late! This is a feast!" Angeline rejoiced with childlike glee as she took in the scent of the stewpot. Rather than Orphen's polished, extravagant cuisine, she much preferred the taste of her hometown.

"Heh heh, the scent of jarberries... Dad likes them, and so do I!"

"I guess you won't find many of them in Orphen. I hope it's to your tastes..."

Belgrieve poured a ladle of stew into every bowl. A peculiar, though not unpleasant, scent rose with the steam.

"All right... Let's eat!" Ange said, quickly putting her hands together in giving thanks.

Belgrieve was not irreligious, per se, but he was not particularly pious either. He did not habitually offer prayers to Almighty Vienna for his meals, but he knew the troubles that came with hunting and cooking each day. He instead offered his gratitude to the vast expanse of nature that had blessed him with this bounty. Angeline had grown up watching and imitating him. Meanwhile, Anessa and Miriam offered brief, but more sacral, prayers before reaching for their wooden tableware. Their religious habits had been formed from their upbringing in the church's orphanage.

After warming so long by the fireplace, the root vegetables in the stew had practically melted, mellowing out the stew's flavor. The broth made from the dried meats and spices paired wonderfully too. Angeline stuffed her mouth with a smile spread across her face, while Anessa and Miriam seemed pleasantly surprised.

"It's really good. I've never tasted this before. Is this prickling at the back of my nose the jarberry?" Miriam asked.

"Yes, that's right," Belgrieve replied. "It might be an acquired taste."

"Yes, but I do like it... It's great, Mr. Belgrieve."

“I like it too.”

“I see, that’s good...” Belgrieve smiled in relief, and took a mouthful of mulled wine. It had a nostalgic flavor to it, churning up memories from his time as an adventurer. As he mused over the fact that Angeline was now drinking it herself, he couldn’t help but feel the flow of time.

“Have you already gone to get glowgrass, dad?”

“No, not yet. Shall we go together?”

“Yeah! Let’s go!”

Anessa cocked her head. “Glowgrass?” she parroted.

“It’s a round, lamp-like flower. It glows red if you pour spirits over it... We send them floating down the river,” Ange explained.

“It was a Turnera custom. Paper’s cheap now so everyone uses lanterns, but it all used to be glowgrass, once upon a time,” Belgrieve added.

“Hmm... Sounds interesting.”

“They’re beautiful, especially at night... Hey, dad. Can we take Anne and Merry too?”

“Of course.” Belgrieve smiled and sipped his wine.

After they’d eaten through an ample amount of meat, there was plenty of fat left pooled on their plates. This made a perfect garnish for the bread.

“Tear off some bread... pinch it from the top so the fat doesn’t drip on your hand, bring your mouth close to the plate...”

Angeline showed the two of them how to dip their bread.

“Hmm, so you just have to...” As Miriam brought her face closer to the table, her hat brushed against the elenia roast, soaking its brim in grease.

Belgrieve stroked his beard. “Merry, isn’t it hard to eat with your hat on? Why don’t you...”

"Ah! Um... err..."

She had been so lively only a moment ago, yet all of a sudden, Miriam was cringing timidly. Anessa looked between Belgrieve and Miriam knowingly.

"Merry," said Angeline. She had a serious look on her face. "My dad is not that sort of person."

"I know, but..." Miriam hung her head.

While Belgrieve was a bit confused, he understood he had said what he shouldn't have. "Sorry. I didn't mean anything by it. You don't have to take it off if you don't want to."

Miriam kept her head down a while, then suddenly, in one sweeping motion, she lifted her face and snatched the hat off. Her feline ears gently swayed. Belgrieve watched this with his mouth half-open.

Miriam was a beast-man. Her kind was never very numerous, and they were once seen as beneath pure-blooded humans. Many beast-men could trace their roots back to slaves. While slavery had already been abolished in the Rhodesian Empire, and blatant discrimination was outlawed, it was human nature to punch downward whenever they found someone on a lower rung of the social ladder. This urge grew stronger the greater the difference in standing.

Miriam had spent her infancy as an orphan in the slums and had faced such discrimination up to the moment the orphanage took her in. Even now that she was an AAA-Rank adventurer, she had grown to dread all those curious glances at her ears. Though she feared scorn and alienation, she was just as loath to endure unasked-for sympathy. It made her feel as if she was being looked down on, like her very existence was something lesser somehow. "I don't remember doing anything to earn your sympathy," she wanted to tell them.

She trusted Angeline, and Anessa was essentially a sister to her, so she didn't feel anything when they looked at her ears. She could even take it playfully when they teased her over them. However, exposing her ears to someone she had only just met was terrifying, even if that person was Angeline's father.

Belgrieve kept silent a moment, until he eventually, awkwardly scratched his head.

"I see... So that's what's going on."

Miriam cast her eyes down in sorrow. It was just as she feared—those seeing her ears for the first time would pity her. Even Angeline's father.

However, Belgrieve's next words took her for a loop. "Your ears were cold... Turnera is quite a bit colder than Orphen, after all..."

As she watched in a daze, Belgrieve stood up and looked around restlessly, then tossed several logs into the fire and blew on them. The flames fiercely flared up.

"All right... give me a minute. I should have a wool-knit cap around here... The brim shouldn't get in your way, and your ears will be warm... Right, I must have put it..." he mumbled, searching every corner for the hat.

Angeline grinned. "See? My dad's not like that."

"Your ears are cold... he says... *Pfft!*" Anessa shook, holding back her laughter.

Assailed by this strange bit of ridiculousness, Miriam inadvertently burst into laughter. She held her stomach. She had been pitied countless times for being a beast-man, but no one had ever stopped to consider if her ears were cold. And of course, they weren't, not in the slightest—they were covered in a layer of pleasantly warm fur.

"Aha ha ha ha ha! Ah... I should've guessed. Ange's dad is Ange's dad, after all! Heh heh... Bwah ha ha ha ha! Ah, what's wrong with me!"

Once he had found his wool hat and returned, Belgrieve was taken aback to see Miriam holding her stomach and laughing. "What's going on?"

"Ah ha... It's nothing! Hee hee, thank you Mr. Bell!"

"Hmm? Oh, here, have this..."

"It's fine, no worries. Now sit down, dad... Heh heh."

"But, umm... Merry, your ears..."

"Mr. Bell, Mr. Bell—how about some stories from when Ange was a kid?"

"Oh, sure..."

While Belgrieve still seemed confused, the girls happily stuffed their faces with stew. He tilted his head in confusion, but picked up his wooden spoon nevertheless.

# CHAPTER 16

## WHILE IT WASN'T YET DAYBREAK

While it wasn't yet daybreak, the sky was beginning to faintly light up, dividing the earth and heavens into distinct black and white hues. The air was cold and clear, and prickly on the skin.

Belgrieve took care not to disturb Angeline—who had been clinging to him when he woke—as he got out of bed. He excavated the embers buried in the ash, then piled splints and firewood over them. With a puff of his breath, the flames came back to life. Even so, the house was terribly cold, and each exhalation came out white.

Anessa and Miriam were resting near the fire. They were sound asleep, clinging to one another for warmth under layers of covers. *I'm glad they got some proper sleep*, Belgrieve thought with a sigh.

As he rummaged around, preparing for his morning walk and patrol, Angeline rose, rubbing her eyes. “Dad... I want to go too.”

“Did I wake you...? You can sleep some more.”

“I’m fine... I want to go with you more than I want to sleep.” She deftly donned her travel clothes and a jacket over them.

Father and daughter ventured out. It had been cold inside the house, but even more so outside of it. Angeline sucked in a deep breath of Turnera’s frosty morning air for the first time in a long while. Her long exhalation streamed out behind her.

“I can feel it in my lungs...”

“Ha ha, too cold for a city girl?”

“Nah... It feels nice.”

The distant horizon grew steadily lighter, but there were still stars dotting the sky overhead, and the brighter it became above, the thicker the darkness seemed on earth.

There was no wind; it was as if the air had fallen stagnant. A rooster cried out in the distance.

There were ice needles of all sizes dotting the ground. They would crunch noisily each time they were tread upon. Angeline would purposely raise her feet higher and stomp so she could enjoy their texture. She had done this ever since she was a child.

The two of them walked slowly around the village. What little snow remained in the corners of each yard and the sides of the path was frozen solid by the wintry nights. There was ice sticking to the banks of the creeks.

Angeline jumped ahead of Belgrieve, enjoying the feeling of crushing the ice needles. She had grown bigger, but she was still his daughter. Belgrieve felt a strange sense of relief.

“How nostalgic... I used to do this all the time.”

“That’s right... Even when it was cold, you did your best to wake up every morning.”

“Heh heh...” Angeline returned with a skip in her step, latching onto him. She rubbed her cheek against his beard.

“Nice and coarse...”

“There you go again.” Belgrieve smiled and patted her on the head.

They reached a small hill from which they could overlook the village. The ground was littered with stones, big and small, and covered with withered grass that had held strong through the winter. New sprouts had already begun emerging between the stalks.

Turnera was quiet. However, a number of households were already awake, their chimneys emitting smoke from cooking breakfast. The air was punctuated by the bleating of sheep and goats, and the barking of sheepdogs.

Jumping two steps, then three, Angeline turned to face him.

“I like it here. You can see everything...”

“Right... Watch your step, Ange.”

Morning would soon be upon them. The eastern horizon was already ablaze with a blinding light, and the moment that ball of light poked its head out, what had previously been dark, featureless scenery immediately began forming shadows, giving it all a sense of depth and form. Birds erupted into song. The world was rapidly opening its eyes. The frost that had descended on the rocks now glistened under the sun.

They stood side by side, watching the heavenly body's slow ascent.

*"Sigh... How beautiful."* Angeline's breath lingered a moment, twisting into all manner of shapes, before ascending and fading. She sniffled, bringing her hands to her exposed ears, and rubbed them to warm up.

"Turnera hasn't changed one bit..."

"It's not gonna change... It probably hasn't changed since before your dad was born."

"Good... That's a relief. It's lively in Orphen, but it's always so hectic."

"Hmm... It's not fun there?"

"Yeah, but that's not what I meant. I just like Turnera."

"Ha ha, I see... But now, the roads are going to be redone. I don't know what will happen after that..."

"The roads?"

"The countess said she wanted the road to Turnera properly serviced. When that happens, it might be a little easier for you to come home."

"Seren and Sasha's house, huh..."

"Oh, that's right. I got a hundred gold coins from Sasha as thanks for saving Seren."

"I see..."

"Take it with you when you return to Orphen."

"No... You keep it, dad. I'm not wanting for money."

"Hmm... I see. Then I'll hold onto it for now. Reach out to me if you ever need it."

"I will... Hey, dad."

"What is it?"

"Did you make Sasha your apprentice?"

Belgrieve scratched his cheek. "I didn't intend to, but... Well, we've sparred only twice. She decided to call me her master on her own whim."

"I see..." Angeline grabbed Belgrieve's arm and hugged it tightly, looking somewhat happy. "Is she... strong?"

"Hmm?"

"Sasha."

"Yeah, she's strong. I'm thinking I'll lose the next match."

"You can't lose... Don't lose to anyone until I beat you."

"Be reasonable. And Ange, you need to fix some of your bad sword fighting habits. If you're losing to your old man here, I'll be worried whenever I hear about you fighting S-Ranks and demons..."

Angeline sullenly stuck out her lips. "That demon wasn't as strong as you..."

"Oh c'mon, that can't be true..." Belgrieve gave a bitter smile and stroked his beard. "What sort of fiend was the demon?"

"It was, well... like this sort of black, shadowy thing."

Belgrieve's hand stopped. He narrowed his eyes dubiously and looked at Angeline.

"A shadow... What was it shaped like?"

"Hmm... it was kinda human-ish, for what it's worth. But it was small, only about up to my waist."

Belgrieve grimaced at the aching pains running down his absent leg as he thought, *That sounds familiar*. But while that one had been a shadow too, it was more like a four-legged beast.

“It can’t be... If that was a demon, we’d have all been killed...”

“Huh...? What’s wrong, dad?”

“No, it’s nothing. I’m fine.”

Angeline was looking up at his face with worry, so he laughed and patted her on the head. The pains were gone before he knew it. Now that the sun was up, he could see that his daughter’s cheeks had turned rosy from the cold. He placed his palms against them.

“You’re freezing... Let’s go home, okay?”

“All right... *hup*.” Angeline leaped onto Belgrieve’s back. She happily buried her mouth in his hair. Her breath was ticklish.

“Were you lonely without me, dad...?”

“Of course I was. I’m happy you’re home.”

“Hee hee hee... I’m glad to be back...” She ruffled up his hair, satisfied.

“Good grief... Some things never change...” Belgrieve smiled wryly as he began the slow journey down with his daughter on his back.

○

As the sun rose above the forest, the birds strutted around, pecking at the insects and worms that had revealed themselves over the soil. Spring was when various forms of life awakened, and even the trees sprouted soft and supple sprigs.

A black lump loomed in the shadow of a fallen tree, small enough to fit in the palm of one’s hand. It shivered, perhaps from the cold.

A lone bird peeked under the shadows of the trees and rocks for its meal, poking its beak at the ground. When it spotted the lump, it tested it with a peck. Suddenly, the

black substance was stuck to its beak. The bird began flapping in shock, but the mass coiled around it until it was completely enveloped. The whole mass collapsed as if the bird inside had been completely dissolved. The mass increased by about the size of that bird now, fluidly changing its form as it shook. It seemed to be alive, but it had no limbs and the boundary between its head and torso was uncertain—it was merely a round *thing*.

The black mass wormed as far into the depths of its crevice as it could—it seemed to detest the light of the sun. While it had no discernible mouth, it seemed to be muttering something.

“Where...? Why am... I... here? Who... am I? Master... mas... ter...? Who was... my master...” It flickered and shook like a mirage.

Before long, a wild rabbit hopped over and peered into the shadows. The black thing shot forth and stuck to it. While the rabbit thrashed in shock, the mass sealed the rabbit’s mouth, eyes, and then before long, its entire body.

It had grown larger once again. For a while, it simply trembled, but eventually, parts of it swelled and took shape. They looked almost like a pair of wings.

“Am I... bird...? No...”

Its wing-like appendages slowly changed form. Soon, they were arms with distinct hands.

“Am I... human...? What am I...”

Eventually, it had taken on a humanoid form, with a head, hands, and legs. However, it was only the size of a baby. It seemed unaccustomed to walking, as it struggled with every step. It crawled on all fours into the furthest corner, where it quietly cowered in the shadows of the fallen tree.

“Lone... ly...”

○

“Straw, and fire and... what else? Maybe wool? Dried beans?”

“Yeah, I don’t know. There are plenty of unfamiliar smells here... but it’s kinda

calming.”

Miriam and Anessa sat, huddled up by the fireplace with the blanket over their shoulders. The sun was up now, and the light streaming in through the gaps in the closed door and shuttered windows made the room bright enough. There was an occasional creaking as the roof and walls that had frozen in the night warmed up.

The father and daughter weren’t back yet, not that the girls particularly minded being left behind. They simply didn’t know how they would pass the time, and they didn’t want to leave the fireplace.

A country home was filled with various smells. They had both been raised in Orphen, yet something about it felt strangely nostalgic. Were these ancestral memories that had been imbued into the very blood flowing through their veins?

Miriam’s ears were lowered, and she wormed closer to Anessa, who smiled mischievously.

“Heh heh, are your ears cold? Need a hat?”

“Oh, sure! You’re going to make me laugh again!” she said, and she was already giggling.

They both took to Belgrieve’s straightforward, yet somewhat oblivious personality quite favorably. His eyes, which filled with fatherly kindness when they fell upon Angeline, came off as heartwarming. They could understand why Angeline yearned to reunite with him so badly.

Miriam grinned as she peered into Anessa’s face. “Having a dad is pretty nice. I’m growing jealous of Ange.”

“You may... be right... Yep, you have a point.”

A sister from the church had played the part of their mother. The sister was harsh but showered the children with as much love as a real mother would. Both Anessa and Miriam were grateful and loved the sister even now. However, her relation to them was distinctly motherly—neither girl had ever felt what it was like to have a father. They still couldn’t quite grasp what it was like to have a man as a parent.

At times, philanthropists would drop by to adopt one of the orphans. The two of them had never felt any fondness towards any of the rich men who stopped by. It felt more

like they were looking for pets to cherish rather than children to raise—though of course, the sister did not accept any adoption offers that seemed even remotely suspicious.

And yet, while they had only known Belgrieve for less than a day, they could feel a great deal of paternal love. As a single father, he had developed a bit of a motherly side to him, of course, but he was still a man. It showed especially in how he dueled with Ange, scolding her for her mistakes, and rejoicing in her growth—he was truly a father. This was a different sort of warmth from a mother's affection.

Anessa and Miriam were somewhat bewildered by this sensation they had never known before, but they did not find it unpleasant. Rather, it spurred them to imagine what it would be like if they had a father of their own.

"Aah, if only Mr. Bell was our dad too... I'd like to be spoiled rotten like Ange."

"What are you saying..."

"Hmm, aren't you thinking the same, Anne? I can tell."

"O-Of course not! Who said I wanted to be given a ride on his shoulders..." she stopped mid-sentence and turned away, mortified. Miriam was grinning smugly.

"What did I tell you?"

"Sh-Shut up!"

Anessa's bright red cheeks puffed up into a pout, and she smacked her palm against Miriam's head. That was when the door opened, and Angeline burst in with firewood in her hands.

"I'm back... You're up already?"

Angeline's breath came out in an icy fog as she made her way to the fireplace. Her cheeks were red, and her youthful face looked even younger than usual.

"More or less. You were up even earlier though."

"It's routine... I went on patrol with dad every morning when I was still in Turnera."

"What about Mr. Bell?"

"He's practicing swings. That's also routine..." Angeline placed a few logs in the fire, then pulled her coat off and picked up her sword. "Want to come with?" she said, looking at them.

They exchanged a look but were quickly on their feet.

The yard sparkled with frost. The morning mist rising off the ground reflected the sunlight, making it impossible to see far. Belgrieve was there, swinging his sword. He had taken off his coat and his shirt, uncovering countless old scars across his body. He stood with his left leg a bit back, holding his sword in both hands, and swinging down from a high stance. He seemed so relaxed when in his stance that there was a frightening intensity the moment his blade fell. This was a powerful strike making full use not only of his hands, but his hips and back as well.

He would enter his stance, swing, and return to his stance again. Each swing was performed methodically as though he were testing something anew. However, the speed which he had fostered for over twenty years had reached the realm of mastery, and to any normal person, it would look as if he was swinging again and again in one continuous motion.

Angeline jogged over, lined up beside him, and began performing the same swings. Her movements were identical; in terms of speed, perhaps she held the upper hand, but there could be no doubt whatsoever that Belgrieve had been her master.

Anessa and Miriam watched with bated breath. This was where Angeline's fast and fierce swordplay originated.

"But Mr. Bell has a fake leg, right?" Miriam whispered to Anessa. "This is incredible..."

"Yeah, it is. If he hadn't retired early, he might have reached S-Rank... A bit of a waste, if you ask me."

When his practice finally ended, Belgrieve let out a deep breath. He had worked up a sweat, and there was steam rising off his body. When he noticed the two of them, he jovially raised a hand.

"Hey, morning."

“Good morning.”

“Gooood morning, Mr. Bell.”

Belgrieve walked up, wiping his forehead with a hand towel.

“It was cold, wasn’t it? Did you sleep well?”

“Yeah, it was warmer than I expected...”

“But pretty cold by morning. We really are up north.”

“Ha ha, I thought so. But I’m glad to hear you got some sleep... Merry, are you sure you aren’t cold without your hat?”

“*Pfft...* Heh, heh heh, I’m fine!”

He was so earnest about it that both Miriam and Anessa had to contain their laughter.

Belgrieve looked at them quizzically as he put his shirt on, then lifted the board to the compartment where he stored his vegetables and began rummaging. Angeline had also finished, so he called out to her. “Ange, I’m going to steam some potatoes, could you get a pot boiling...? Also, add some barley to yesterday’s stew and set it over the fire.”

“Gooot it!” Angeline entered the house with her sword over her shoulder. Belgrieve picked out a few potatoes, placing them in a basket he had set to the side.

“Umm, Mr. Belgrieve, have you ever thought about becoming an adventurer again?”

“Me? Well, let’s see... Back when I first returned to Turnera, a part of me was still thinking about it, but I gave that up the moment I got Ange. I had my hands full raising her.”

“What about now? You’re incredibly strong, Mr. Bell! I’m sure you’d reach a high rank if you came back.”

At Miriam’s proclamation, Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his cheek. “I wouldn’t be so sure; I’ve still got a long way to go... and I’ve already gotten used to life out here. I don’t think I could get back to living day by day as an adventurer. Sure, it was fun—I had

comrades and dreams... just like you three," Belgrieve acknowledged with a jovial shrug. "You might not believe it, but I used to be a teenager."

The girls laughed.

Belgrieve stood with his basket of potatoes and was about to enter the house when a thought struck Miriam.

"Umm... Mr. Bell."

"Hmm? What's up, Merry?"

"Yes, well, you know. Could you try patting my head for a second?"

"Oh... I don't see why not."

Looking quite perplexed, Belgrieve reached out his free hand and placed it on Miriam's head and gently stroked it. His palm was rough and calloused, but it was warm and large enough to envelop her. Miriam let out a deep sigh, and she could feel her tail coiling beneath her clothes.

"Wow... this is..."

"Was that meaningful to you somehow?"

"Yes! Thank you! Heh heh... So this is a father..."

Belgrieve continued patting Miriam as he looked quizzically at Anessa.

Anessa gave a bitter smile and said, "She can be a bit strange at times..."

This caused Miriam to sullenly narrow her eyes. This immediately changed to a mischievous face, and she turned to Belgrieve.

"Mr. Bell, Mr. Bell, can I put in another request?"

"If you want..."

"Heh heh, well, you see, please lift Anne up on your shoulders!"

“You want me... to carry Anne?”

Belgrieve looked at Anessa, no less befuddled than before. Anessa looked back blankly until her cheeks suddenly turned red and she waved her hands.

“No, no, no, no! I’m fine! You don’t have to! I’m perfectly fine!”

“She told me no,” he relayed to Merry after a pause.

“She’s just embarrassed. C’mon now, up on his shoulders, just like that!”

“Umm... What do you want me to do?” he asked Anessa.

“I’m fine! Honest-to-goodness fine!”

While Belgrieve was standing there, looking confused, Angeline appeared from the house without a sound. She appeared behind Anessa and grabbed her by the shoulder.

“What are you getting up to when I’m not watching?”

“Wha—W-Wait! It’s not me, it’s Merry!”

“What are you talking about? You were the one who said you wanted to ride his shoulders, Anne.”

“Wrong! It was just a passing thought.”

“If you wish to ride my father’s shoulders, you must first defeat me...”

“I’m telling you, that ain’t it!”

Seeing the girls break into lively banter, Belgrieve scratched his head, perplexed.

“I don’t understand what goes through the young’uns’ heads these days.”

# CHAPTER 17

## DOWNTOWN WAS GENERALLY CROWDED

Downtown was generally crowded and always filled with some sort of commotion. Buildings rose to dizzying heights with new floors haphazardly built atop the last, and the alleys sandwiched between them were lined with stalls that all seemed on the verge of collapsing. These were selling suspicious items and dubious foods that looked like a stomachache waiting to happen.

Orphen was large, and that meant there were places out of sight of the public eye: hovels of the poor, dens of thieves, packs of street children and homeless beggars... These had all naturally agglomerated into the city slums.

Lionel walked through this hustle and bustle with Cheborg by his side. Cheborg was large and intimidating enough that the thugs who bumped into him and threw a glare his way would suddenly retreat without another word. Lionel, meanwhile, was just as gaunt and haggard as ever. The central guild hardly gave him any funds anymore, and he had to go around begging for funding from the nobles living in Orphen. Not a single one of them was easy to deal with, and he was never very charismatic to begin with. In fact, his negotiation earlier that day only went well because old Cheborg's glare had been effective.

Although Lionel's anxieties continued piling up, his management of the guild was going rather decently: adventurers were coming back, fiends were being hunted, and materials were being collected. The adventurers were even dungeon-diving as they had before.

Currently, in a desperate bid to secure more funding, the guild was coordinating more closely with the merchants, acting as a middleman for the materials. Thanks to the work of Lionel's former party and the old hands who returned, things stayed on track somehow or another.

There were still many problems to tackle. They had picked a fight with a management system that—while now a shell of its former self—boasted a history that spanned over a hundred years. Many adventurers were enjoying themselves, but Lionel had to shoulder all the responsibility, and his stomach pains were unending. He rubbed his

belly, grimacing.

"I never thought it would come to this. I should've just retired as a middle manager... This stress is unbearable..."

"Eh? What's that? You say something, Lionel?"

"Just talking to myself, Mr. Cheborg... Also, you're being loud."

"Aha ha ha ha! Don't be so down! They promised some money, didn't they? Pep up, why don't you?"

"The real trouble comes after we accept those funds..." Lionel sighed. He accepted their money, so the nobles would undoubtedly begin sticking their noses into guild policy. He would have to use his silver tongue along with the achievements of his adventurers to continue evading their unreasonable demands. The mere thought made him depressed.

*"Sigh...* Well, we should have enough of a track record once Ms. Ange comes back... Do you think she met up with her father?"

"No way she dropped dead along the way! I'm sure she's having a blast with him right now!"

"I hope so. Still, to think the father whose skills she praised so highly is holed up in a remote village... If only she'd bring him back while she's at it..."

"Aha ha ha ha ha! I'm all for it! I can't imagine what sort of guy he is if Ange can't land a single strike on him! Belgrieve the Red Ogre! We'll need to have a match someday!"

"If you want to fight, please keep it outside of town, okay? But you know, I've never heard of the Red Ogre, nor have I heard the name Belgrieve before... You think he's famous in another country?"

Lionel scratched his head as he scanned the shops for an adequate late lunch. He noticed a ruckus brewing in the plaza a little further down where someone was giving a speech, and the audience was being conspicuously loud. The two exchanged curious glances and went to see what was happening.

In the center of the crowd, a young girl in black clerical robes stood atop an upside-

down crate. She looked to be ten, if not a little bit older. Contrasting with her black uniform, her silky long hair was pure white. She wore a matching black fur cap and had rather fine features. However, her albinism made her skin sickly pale, and her eyes an unhealthy red.

Beside her, a boy in a mantle, whose hood was pulled down to cover his face, held up a flag. It was hard to tell with most of his features concealed, but he was probably around fifteen to sixteen. He had a bit of a gloomy atmosphere lingering about him.

The girl used exaggerated gestures, prattling on in a loud voice. Despite her small body, her voice was clear and carried well.



"Hear me! Look how many of you are poor and suffering! Will you ever receive the aid you deserve? The priests of Vienna preach it thus: that the great goddess's compassion encompasses the heavens and penetrates the earth! But then, why is there no benevolence for those suffering in poverty in the slums?!"

"Hear, hear!" the crowd loudly chimed in. The girl continued triumphantly.

"The days of Vienna are over! As are the days of the Rhodesian Empire who have converted to their faith! It is not up to the gods to offer salvation to humankind! That is for we humans to decide! The teachings of Master Solomon, a mere mortal who managed to reach their heavenly realm, are the only path to salvation! We must pray for his return! The noble man who bent demons and even fiends to his will! If Master Solomon were to lead us, we would have no need to fear the fiends anymore! Those who unjustly snatch wealth and wield unjust power in god's name must fall, and only then will we have salvation!"

The crowd cheered in reply.

With a satisfied laugh, the girl produced stacks of peculiar paper from the bag on her shoulder, each depicting the seal of the heretic sorcerer Solomon. It was the same icon emblazoned on the flag the boy carried, a magic circle that took on the shape of an eye. She held them high and proclaimed, "Behold! These are the talismans of Master Solomon! As long as you have these, you need not fear annihilation when he makes his return! These would usually never be allowed outside the temple! You couldn't buy them no matter how much money you had, but I want to save everyone! I'll give you a special deal: twenty copper coins apiece! Buy now! Buy today!"

Onlookers timidly reached out, and the talismans sold like hotcakes.

*So this is the rumored cult.* Lionel sighed. It all sounded so foolish. A madman who disappeared into the furthest reaches of time and space after conquering the continent couldn't possibly be a good leader. And above all else, he didn't feel any mana from those pieces of paper, so they couldn't possibly have any effect. This was a scam, pure and simple.

Still, such speeches resonated with those who were greatly frustrated with the current state of things, and misery fell upon Lionel as a result.

Cheborg grinned from ear to ear. "The world's getting pretty chaotic, eh? *Someone*

needs to get their act together!"

"I don't want any more trouble..."

It was then that a platoon of soldiers rushed in, blowing shrill whistles.

Their captain yelled, "What do you think you're doing?! You're leading the ignorant masses astray with your shady performances!"

The girl who gave the speech scoffed. "I simply told the truth! Did you hear that, everyone? 'Ignorant,' he said! That is how the country regards you! Those in power know the populace must be kept ignorant, or they will have no standing! Is this really how things should be?"

The crowd, swayed by her words, began protesting to the soldiers, with some even hurling things at them. The soldiers were momentarily taken aback, but the captain drew his saber.

"Silence!" he proclaimed. "You outlaws are disrupting the peace! Arrest them!"

The soldiers each took weapons in hand and rushed at the girl. The crowd recoiled with screams, but the girl, despite being so young, retained her composure.

She shook her head. "There is no medicine to cure a fool."

She lifted her hand, chanting something under her breath, and suddenly, the soldiers came to a halt. They struggled, but failed to move an inch closer. Before the dumbfounded onlookers' eyes, the armed men floated into the air, writhing. They seemed to be in incredible pain, perhaps unable to breathe.

The girl looked at them coldly. "Fools who defy the teachings of Solomon—repent."

Lionel immediately reached towards his hip, but he had only gone out to meet a noble, and he hadn't brought his weapon. Furrowing his brow, he glanced at Cheborg.

"Let's stop them."

"Aha ha ha ha! What sloppy soldiers!"

They leaped over the crowd and landed in front of the girl. Cheborg reached out,

grabbed her hand, and forcefully lowered it. All at once, the soldiers fell to the ground gasping for breath.

The girl's eyes widened. "Eek...! Wh-Who?!"

"You're taking your pranks a little too far, eh? It's time for the kids to go home!" Cheborg raised his free hand, aiming to knock her out.

The girl's face stiffened in fear, and she glanced at the boy beside her and screamed, "Byaku! Help me!"

In the next instant, Cheborg's hand was thrown back by an unseen force. He furrowed his brow, shocked. The boy was pointing his finger at him, and he could hear the sound of fierce impacts as projectiles struck his whole body. It felt as though small, invisible masses of mana were being hammered into him one after another, exploding into his skin.

"Whooooo!"

This unforeseen assault was enough for Cheborg to unhand the girl. He drew back, taking a defensive stance with both arms crossed in front of him. Seeing this, the boy drew back like a coiled snake ready to strike, then thrust both hands forward. An even larger unseen mass of mana sent Cheborg flying off his feet.

As he flew through the air, the old man laughed. "Bwah?! Ha ha ha! Not bad!"

"Magic... bullets?" Lionel narrowed his eyes, doubtfully.

Magic bullet was a spell that fired colorful mana projectiles, but these ones were completely transparent. This seemed distinct from Cheborg's technique, where he used the tattoos on his arm to amplify the blast waves whenever he would swing his fists. He had never heard of magic like this before.

Even as he pondered this, Lionel swiftly circled behind the boy. He pounced, attempting to pin him down. However, before his hands could reach him, they collided with a flickering, semi-translucent geometric symbol.

"An autonomous defensive barrier?!" he gasped.

Now that Lionel had stopped, the boy thrust forth the heel of his palm. The mass of

mana that came with this motion blasted Lionel back. It was surprising, but its output wasn't particularly strong. He hardly took any damage, and after spinning a few times in the air to correct his posture, he managed to touch down relatively gracefully.

This had, however, created distance. Lionel immediately kicked off to close it, and Cheborg began running too.

The boy approached the girl crouching on the floor and muttered, "Hey... you all right, Your Holiness?"

"Stupid! Idiot! Byaku! What are you here for?! Don't let them get close to me!"

"Hmph... Anyways, we're withdrawing. I'm not dealing with two former S-Ranks..." Sounding rather fed up, the boy picked up the wailing girl, swiftly chanted something and waved his hand. In an instant, the two figures flickered like a mirage and disappeared as if they had never been there, a mere moment before Lionel would have been upon them.

"T-Teleportation magic? That's superior magic only a handful of magicians in the empire can use... On top of invisible magic bullets, and an autonomous barrier... Wh- Who were they...?"

"Aha ha ha ha! Those brats were a riot! Looks like I'm getting sloppy, letting them get away! I won't go easy next time!" Cheborg gave a grand laugh.

Lionel could feel that trouble was brewing once more, and his stomach was hurting more than ever.

○

The fields were revitalized and seeds were being planted all around. Once the wheat was sufficiently prepared, it would be time for the spring festival.

Unlike the fall festival, the spring festival did not bring in many outside visitors. Thanks were offered to the goddess Vienna for allowing the villagers to survive a harsh winter. The ghosts of ancestors that visited during the fall would be sent off with lanterns. Additionally, the arrival of the warm season would be welcomed with food and drink. Food was not so abundant after winter, but still, the cider casks were cracked open, and meat, wheat porridge, and mountain vegetables were served up.

On the warm day that preceded the spring festival, Angeline was holding her head, crouching in the yard. She had once again suffered a blow from Belgrieve.

Belgrieve frowned and sighed. "Ange... how many times do I have to tell you? Don't glance before you move. You should be more than capable of that."

"Urgh... you're the only one who's ever managed to evade me, dad..."

"But can you be so sure you'll never meet a person or fiend who can do that in the future? What will you do then? Your opponent won't sympathize with your excuses. You mustn't get conceited. Staying alive is the fundamental baseline for being an adventurer."

"I mean..." Angeline pouted with puffed-up cheeks and averted her eyes. She was practically a spoiled child.

It had been just over two weeks since she had returned, and as the cheer of spring grew in Turnera day by day, she strolled around the forests and mountains, helping out with the fieldwork and household chores, training with Belgrieve every day. It was as if she had returned to childhood, and rather than wanting to improve her skills, she seemed to enjoy the training itself. She couldn't manage to land a strike, but as Angeline managed to witness her father's skill first-hand, she did not mind all that much. In fact, it seemed she was growing accustomed to loss and was hardly even trying to win at this point.

Meanwhile, Belgrieve trained with a bitter face. Angeline was laughing, but this did not sit right with him as a father. *Sure, Ange is strong, and she defeated a demon. But if she can't even win against the likes of me, she'll undoubtedly meet someone she can't beat one of these days.*

No matter how many times he said that though, Angeline didn't seem to take it seriously. She had the baseless confidence that came with being seventeen, as well as the pride which came from her actual achievements as an adventurer.

Belgrieve closed his eyes and stroked his beard. He felt he was at least partially to blame for spoiling her too much and couldn't come out too harshly against her. However, if he did not work out her bad habits as a parent, or as a teacher, he would be too anxious to allow her to return to adventuring—a trade that toed the line between life and death. Perhaps this was his own self-conceit, but a parent would always worry for his

child.

"The food is ready, both of you," Miriam called, popping her face out of the house. Anessa peeked out as well.

"Rabbit meat and wheat porridge. Does that work for you?"

"Hmm, oh, thank you. Sorry you had to take care of it..."

"Oh no, I'm doing this because I enjoy it..."

The girls had begun enjoying the country life in Turnera. Now they joined in the fieldwork and housework, the morning walks, and even the training. They were preparing meals increasingly often as well, and with her skill with the bow, Anessa was a far more competent hunter than Belgrieve.

Thinking this would be the day he fixed Angeline's movements, Belgrieve had entrusted the house to them, but he had yet to achieve the results he wanted. He awkwardly scratched his head and urged Angeline to stand.

She sprung up, forgetting all her displeasure, and lightly made for the front door. Turning, she smiled mischievously.

"Dad, food!"

"Ange..."

"What?"

"Do you... plan to stick it out as an adventurer?"

"Yeah! I mean, it's fun... I'm sure it's what's best for me..." she said, innocently.

Belgrieve placed a hand on his brow and heaved a deep sigh. It was no good. He needed to do something.

The table was already set. The rabbit meat and porridge were steaming, with dried goat cheese as a garnish. Anessa and Miriam could cook for themselves thanks to their experience at the orphanage, and the food they prepared was quite delicious. The porridge contained spices brought from Orphen, and the scent was distinctive and

fresh.

Belgrieve munched on the meat and sipped at the porridge. The girls seemed to be enjoying it as well.

It was a peaceful scene. The night before, they had entered the mountains and harvested glowgrass to send down the river during the spring festival. The flowers covered the ground, emitting a soft, pale-blue glow, and the girls traversed the field back and forth, never tiring of it.

If she wanted to continue living like that, he did not mind if she never fixed her bladework. However, Angeline wanted to continue as an adventurer and to continue wielding her strength. There were some who said that adventuring was a lifelong trade; she couldn't stop even if she wanted to.

In that case, she needed as few weaknesses as possible. One single mistake could determine life or death. That was precisely what led to the loss of his right leg, and he was lucky that's all he lost. It would all be over once she lost her life: after that, she could no longer sit around the table with family and friends; no longer have a pleasant chat or feel the summer heat and winter cold; no longer feel sorrow or joy.

No parent in the world would rejoice at their daughter being killed by a fiend. What would be the point of spoiling her here? Now that it had come to this, he had no choice but to become a real ogre.

Belgrieve took in a deep breath. Angeline noticed the grim look persist on his face as she deftly served him meat and went to brew tea, and even she began to grow anxious.

"Dad... what's wrong? Are you... angry?" she timidly asked.

Belgrieve silently stood and, picking up his sword, gestured towards the door with his head.

Angeline tensely rose to her feet, picking up her own blade to follow after him. Anessa and Miriam exchanged anxious looks before tagging along themselves.

Once in the backyard, Belgrieve tapped his artificial leg against the ground before turning to face Angeline. His usual kind air had vanished—she couldn't read anything from his expression, though his eyes were cold.

“Ange.”

“Y-Yes, dad...?”

“If you want to continue as an adventurer, then beat me in this match.”

“Huh...? B-But...”

“I can’t let you continue with half-baked skills and resolve. If you can’t defeat your father, and you still want to persist...” Belgrieve glared at her. “I won’t think of you as my daughter anymore.”

Angeline froze, her sword falling from her grasp. Her face looked as if the world had come to an end, leaving her in a daze with tears overflowing from her eyes.

“You’re joking... right, dad? There’s no way... you would say that... right?”

Belgrieve could feel a biting pain in his chest. However, Angeline would never grow unless he did this—children had to leave the nest someday. He forcefully held down his urge to take it all back and hug her, and instead steeled his gaze.

“Take your stance.”

She stood there silent for a moment. “No.” Angeline gripped at her sleeves, staring at him with teary eyes. “No, no, no! I don’t want this...”

“Will a fiend listen if you tell them that?! Quit being so spoiled!”

His tone was growing harsh, in part to belie his own emotions. Angeline’s body twitched, scooping her sword up with hollow eyes. However, she took nothing even resembling a stance. She quivered, muttering under her breath.

“It’s all wrong... This isn’t... My dad would never say that...” It was as if her heart wasn’t in it.

Belgrieve opened his eyes wide and yelled, “Angeline!” eliciting a soft gasping “Ah!” from her. At the same time, he closed in at speeds unthinkable on a peg leg. Up to that point, Belgrieve had always waited to counterattack, and as he took the initiative with a preemptive strike, Angeline was forced to react.

She caught the low-angled blow. His sword was more menacing than it had ever been, and while it was sheathed, she felt as if she would be torn to shreds if it touched her. She had never seen Belgrieve like this—no, she had, but just once. She had seen *this* version of Belgrieve when she was young, in the winter snow. The blade that had protected her then was now turned on her.

*Why? How?* Angeline knew she had to do something about the torrent of blows raining down upon her. *Did I make dad angry? Did I do something to make him hate me? No...*

Belgrieve's sword was vicious but also sorrowful.

*Dad isn't angry, he's sad... because I'm so pathetic.*

A forceful blow sent Angeline reeling back. Having launched so many powerful swings, Belgrieve had to pause for a brief moment. Those were not movements he was accustomed to, and he had worked up a sweat. He let out a long sigh, slowed his breathing, and retook his stance.

Angeline slowly raised her face, her arms falling like the power had drained from her body.

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes. At a glance, she seemed full of openings, and yet she emanated a fighting spirit that seemed to indicate he would be immediately cut down if he took a single step towards her. He was trembling, though it was hard to say whether it was from fear or fervor.

However, the moment he began to shake, Angeline made her move. Her footwork like a vengeful specter, she practically slid across the ground towards him. He couldn't read her at all.

Still, Belgrieve took a strong swing, a mighty strike fully utilizing the momentum of a powerful step. Angeline evaded it with no difficulty at all—or rather, it was as if he had swung where she never was in the first place.

*She's got me,* he thought. He was now full of openings; he could be attacked from any angle—and now she was right inside his guard. He hadn't known she could move like this, but this only filled him with relief. *What more could a teacher ask for?*

He had expected a powerful strike, his body stiffening in preparation for the blow, only for something soft to leap at his chest. It was so unexpected that Belgrieve toppled

right over.

“Ange?”

She had thrown her sword aside, burying her face in his chest, silently shaking. Seeing her like that, Belgrieve could feel the tension drain from his body. He hadn’t been struck, but he had lost.

He placed a hand on Angeline’s head and gently stroked it.

“Well done... As expected of my daughter.”

However, when she raised her face, she was in a ruddy rage, glaring at him through teary eyes. “Apologize,” she demanded after a quiet moment.

“Huh?”

“Apologize for saying such terrible things! Don’t say I’m not your daughter! Never, ever! No matter what happens! I will always, always be my dad’s daughter!”

She babbled on as she pressed her head into his chest and sobbed. Belgrieve frantically patted her.

“Sorry, sorry. I thought I could finally get you to fight seriously...”

“No! I haven’t forgiven you! If you want to be forgiven, then hold me! Hug me!”

Still angry, Angeline wrapped her hands around Belgrieve’s back and squeezed. *Did I just worsen that condition of hers?* Belgrieve wondered, but her movements had been truly splendid. If she was capable of *that*, perhaps he could spoil her a bit. He hugged her back and stroked her head. He was a doting parent, after all.

Seeing Belgrieve hold and soothe Angeline, Anessa and Miriam looked relieved.

“That’s good... I was worried for a minute there...”

“Right? But it’s best when those two get along.”

Miriam giggled and Anessa nodded. But then they recalled his fierce intensity. Neither would dispute that he was indeed the Red Ogre after that.

# CHAPTER 18

## IT WAS THE SPRING FESTIVAL, AND YET

It was the spring festival, and yet Belgrieve was grimacing from the pain all over his body. He had moved in ways he usually did not and forced out more power than he could ordinarily muster. It was as if his body was being jarred each time he tried shifting around. He had both muscle and joint pain, it seemed.

However, he was still glad he had done it. He had learned that Angeline was far more agile than he had known. Belgrieve didn't consider himself particularly strong, and her being able to beat him did not necessarily mean she was safe, but at the very least, she wasn't just using obvious maneuvers that even he could see through.

With that said, his suggestion to break family ties had backfired immensely. Angeline had been stuck fast to him since the sparring match, her face locked in a pout, and she seemed in a terrible mood even as she held tight to him. When he finally tried to peel her off, she growled at him like a beast.

"Ange?" he said, somewhat hesitantly.

"What?"

"Umm... it was all my fault. I admit it. Could you get off of me now?"

"No... I don't forgive you yet."

Ultimately, he headed out to the spring festival with Angeline stuck to his back, and the villagers laughed when they saw the two of them.

Kerry jovially poked him in the shoulder. "Bwa ha ha ha! Hey Bell! That's a big baby you have there."

"Ha ha, this and that happened... They're laughing at us, Ange. Why don't you come down now?"

"No!"

She exerted even more strength, and Belgrieve gave a resigned laugh.

Unlike the fall festival, this was a meager celebration limited to the villagers. Everyone gathered at the church, where Father Maurice offered his prayers. The villagers closed their eyes and put their hands together.

Those who knew the cruelty of nature tended to be rather devout. The people of Turnera were no exception, but unlike in the capital, the local animist worship of nature seemed to have gotten syncretized into the doctrines of the Church of Vienna, and this was the faith most of them adhered to. They revered Almighty Vienna but also offered their thanks to the spirits of nature. Belgrieve was like this as well.

Once the service was over, they left for the town square, where they drank and sang and made merry. Their tunes weren't as good as those of the wandering minstrels, but anybody who could play brought out their instruments and put on a performance as the young village girls danced. Stew and porridge simmered in large pots, sweetbreads kneaded with dried grapes and cowberries were served alongside meats and fish that were roasted over open fires, and barrels of cider were cracked open.

This was the perfect opportunity to disseminate all the gifts Angeline had brought from Orphen. The villagers rejoiced at the sugary sweets and spirits that were hard to come by in Turnera, and Belgrieve was relieved that his house was finally decluttered.

Belgrieve sat in a corner of the square, sipping on cider as he gazed at the musical performances. Angeline had stopped clinging to his back by then, though now she was just huddled up beside him, drinking the same cider. Anessa and Miriam were giggling—they seemed to find something funny about the sight.

"What?" Angeline looked at them doubtfully.

"Nothing... I was just thinking the two of you really are parent and child. Right, Merry?"

"Yep. You're so close."

"Precisely... heh heh," Angeline smugly laughed and leaned her weight against Belgrieve. This exacerbated his pains, and he grimaced.

"Ange... it hurts if you put all your weight on me."

"No. You have to bear with it."

"Ugh..." he gave up, stroking his beard with an ambiguous look on his face.

There were pleasant conversations flying around, and cheerful disharmonies being sung. The young village men fidgeted as they served food to Anessa and Miriam, additionally offering them flowers, and receiving stern pokes from the village girls.

Angeline's party would return to Orphen soon; they were needed there. The thought did make Belgrieve feel a little lonely, but he was happy to know his daughter was regarded so highly as to be relied upon. He had to send her off with a smile.

As these thoughts occupied his mind, he unwittingly went through several cups of cider. He was beginning to feel nice and a bit floaty. His senses were dulling, and the pain wasn't so bad anymore.

Angeline's pouty expression had softened as well, her spaced-out eyes gazing off into nowhere in particular.

That was where Hoffman came up to them in high spirits. "Oh, Bell! You drinking?"

"Yes, I've had my share. Great weather for a festival."

"Ha ha, it's the blessings of the spirits and Vienna!" Hoffman said, taking a heavy seat beside Belgrieve.

"So, about maintaining the roads."

"Hmm... how's it looking?" Belgrieve leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. Ever since Angeline arrived, he had only been briefly poking his head into the town meetings. There was always some sort of uproar whenever he stopped by, and perhaps it wasn't looking too favorable.

Hoffman gave a broad smile, taking a sip of cider. "The elders were against it, but we finally got everyone on board yesterday. We can give a unanimous reply to Countess Bordeaux."

"Glad to hear it. Turnera won't be cut off from the world anymore."

Hoffman laughed and produced a letter from the folds of his coat. "So anyway, Bell. I want this reply delivered to the Bordeaux Estate... Can I leave it to you?"

"Me?" Belgrieve let his next sip of cider linger in his mouth a bit.

"It's an important letter," Hoffman nodded. "I want to leave it with someone reliable. You've got the skills, and the countess trusts you. I want you to deliver the letters and hear out any discussion about the project."

"That sounds like a chief's job." Belgrieve mischievously smiled.

Hoffman frowned. "I'm asking you because you told me I'm too humble."

"Quit sulking, I get it already."

They laughed over their cups, and Angeline, who had heard everything, leaned in.

"When are you going...?"

"Huh? Oh... When do you need it delivered by?"

"Let's see. The sooner the better..."

Hearing that, Angeline clung to Belgrieve's arm with gleaming eyes. "Then... you can accompany us partway back to Orphen, dad!"

"Hmm... you're right. Didn't think of that."

Sure enough, Angeline would be headed back to Orphen before long. He would be able to cut down on the travel time a bit if he hitched a ride on her carriage. More importantly, that meant more time together. As far as Angeline was concerned, traveling with Belgrieve would be the best experience of all.

Belgrieve downed his cup and nodded.

"Let's go with that. I'll have the girls guard me there."

"Hooray! When do you want to go?!"

"If faster is better, I can be ready tomorrow... but Ange, don't you want to stay in Turnera a little longer?"

"No, I'm fine if I can travel with you, dad... Tomorrow!"

Angeline happily stood, calling out to Anessa and Miriam, who were among the village youth.

“We’re returning to Orphen tomorrow! With dad!”

“Eh?! With Mr. Bell?”

“Yay! Mr. Bell is making a comeback!”

They both rushed over excitedly.

Belgrieve waved his hand, flustered. “Wrong, wrong, I’ve got business to attend to. I’m only going as far as Bordeaux.”

“Oh... I see. A shame...”

“Hmph, I thought I could go on an adventure with you.”

Anessa scratched her cheek, looking let down, while Miriam pouted. Belgrieve didn’t know they felt that attached to him, and he stroked his beard with a wry smile. It was awkward, but he did not particularly mind the feeling.

In any case, with that decided, he would have to prepare. As the spring festival heated up, he returned to his house and got his baggage in order. He wanted to prepare quickly and be back in time to watch the lanterns set adrift.

A round trip to Bordeaux territory would mean he would be away from home for a week—he would need to clean too in that case. He didn’t want rats to get into anything while he was away, so he stuffed everything valuable into sturdy boxes.

Still, the pain made his movements duller than usual, and his preparations took longer than he expected. By the time he had painstakingly finished his preparations, the sun had set, and it had grown terribly dark. He reached the square just as the villagers had returned from their homes with paper lanterns.

“Oh, you’re here!” Kerry welcomed him with a laugh. “Just in time. We were about to send them downstream.”

“Ha ha, that’s great.”

He joined the crowd as they headed to the river. The flickering light of the bonfire cast irregular shadows, stretching and shrinking. The sun had just set, and the faint light lingering in the western sky embellished the distinct ridge of the mountain. However, the sky overhead was dark and dotted with stars.

The snowmelt had raised the river's level, and it now gave off a rushing sound, flowing with vigor. There was still ice clinging to the banks, and he could slip if he wasn't careful.

The priest chanted a ritual prayer, and the lanterns were set atop the flow. The numerous vermillion lights rode the current until they were eventually swallowed by the water, where they vanished. After that, only the luminescence of the glowgrass faintly persisted a while in the river's depths.



Anessa breathed out a frosty sigh of amazement. "What a strange feeling."

"What about it?" Miriam asked her.

"It's quiet. The festivals in Orphen are so boisterous, right? I've never been to such a solemn one before... How should I put it..."

"Ah, I think I get it. It's not like a mass at church either."

Belgrieve chuckled. "We'll be feasting again when we're back in the square. We calmly send the ancestral ghosts along the current, and get rowdy after that."

"Hmm, interesting. Turnera's a nice place."

"Ha ha, I'm glad to hear that. Well, we've got to leave tomorrow, so we should call it a day. Let's go, Ange."

"Hmm?" Ange turned, startled. She had been staring at the stream.

The four of them returned to the house and raised a fire from the embers buried in the ash. Belgrieve left to confirm some matters with Hoffman, and as the thought of traveling with him had put her in a good mood, Angeline did not insist on going with him. After the three girls had washed up, they sat vacantly in front of the fireplace. They had lazied around at the noon banquet, eating all sorts of things, so they weren't the least bit hungry.

"*Sigh...* It went by so fast..." Miriam muttered.

"Yeah. We were supposed to be here for two weeks, but it went by just like that," Anessa said, resting her chin on her knees. "What should we do... I took it so easy here, I'm worried I can't return to my normal life..."

"Whoa, you're right. Will our instincts come back...? We did tag along with Ange and Mr. Bell's training, though."

"We're not frontliners... but we'll be fine. Probably."

"Right, right, we should power up for as much as we kicked back. Ange got a wake-up call, so she should be stronger when she gets back."

Angeline was sprawled out supine on the bed, and Miriam prodded her in the thigh.

"Ugh," Angeline grunted and curled up. "I never relaxed my guard to begin with. Dad is just special."

"Hey, you'll make Mr. Bell mad if you say that."

"Hee hee, he might cut you off for real. Then he'll be *my* father after that."

"What! I can't let that one slide, Merry!"

"Wah!"

Angeline jumped onto Miriam and tickled her. They horsed around for a bit while laughing. They were so close to the fireplace that Anessa watched anxiously, not quite knowing if she should stop them.

The time they spent slaying fiends in Orphen was different from the few days they had lived in Turnera. Here, their S-Rank party had completely cut loose. By comparison, days off in Orphen were dizzyingly stimulating, and while that could be fun, it didn't feel as though they had rested afterward. These past two weeks had gone by without incident, consisting of unhurried work each day, walking around the peaceful mountains, and talking by the fire at night. Once this comfort had taken root, it was unsettling when the time came to leave it behind.

That was when Belgrieve returned and tapped on the door. Angeline, who was still wrestling with Miriam, rushed to the door in the blink of an eye and threw it open. The open air rushed in, causing the fireplace, the lamp, and the candle to flicker.

Belgrieve took off his coat and hung it on the wall, grimacing at his aching body, and cracking his neck that had gone stiff from the cold.

"Good grief, the nights are still chilly... Does anyone else feel cold?"

"I'm good."

"It's gotten quite a bit warmer than when we first came. Perhaps I've just gotten used to it though."

"That's good. A bit of a waste to leave just as you've grown accustomed to it though,"

Belgrieve said, laughing. He tossed another log onto the fire.

Angeline latched onto his back. "Dad... when are we going tomorrow?"

"After we've cleaned up the beds and eaten breakfast... We'll have to leave before noon. Otherwise, we'll have to camp out."

"Okay! Got it!"

Angeline smiled as she buried her mouth in his hair. She was so happy she didn't know what to do with herself.

He removed his shoes, sitting down on the bed's blanket. He carefully removed his right leg, thoroughly wiping it off with an old cloth before setting it aside.

All of a sudden, there was silence but for the ambient noises of the outside wind rattling the shutters and the flickering fire creeping onto the new log. These sounds came off that much louder when there was nothing else to hear. Miriam swayed ever so slightly, her gaze drifting all around; Angeline's eyes were half-closed even as she clung to Belgrieve's back.

With a snap, the log burst, and a bit of burning wood rolled outside of the fire. Belgrieve nonchalantly picked it up and tossed it back in.

"I-Isn't that hot?" Anessa looked at him, surprised.

"Hmm? Oh, the wood? I've been swinging a sword and a spade for so long, the skin on my hand's thickened up. Sure, it would be hot if I kept holding it, but it's fine for just a moment," Belgrieve said and showed his hand. It was certainly hard and bumpy with calluses. Anessa inadvertently found herself reaching out to touch it and snapped to her senses.

"Umm... can I touch it?"

"Sure, go ahead."

She touched his hand gently. It was quite a peculiar texture. There were a few places that had hardened after a blister was crushed, and other parts where dirt and grime had filled in the crevices. However, it didn't feel bad—it was as if this hand was a testament to the life Belgrieve had lived. That line of thought made her feel like a

meager youngling, and for some reason, Anessa felt embarrassed for herself.

"Amazing... You worked hard enough for it to get like this."

"No, I'm just clumsy. There was nothing else I was capable of."

Belgrieve chuckled. He reached out for the kettle hanging over the fire and poured a cup of hot water.

"Now then, it's been a while since I left Turnera... You'll make sure this old man gets where he's going safely—won't you, adventurer?" he said in jest, sipping the water.

Anessa chuckled. Angeline opened her drowsy eyes, renewing her grip on Belgrieve.

"I'm sleepy."

"Yeah, we have an early morning. Let's go to bed... Looks like Merry's asleep already."

"Oh, you're right..."

Anessa hadn't realized it, but Miriam was already snoring, face up on her bed. Belgrieve tucked Angeline in, then stood and snuffed out the lamp and candle. The only light left came from the fireplace. The corners of the ceiling and walls were wrapped in the dusk.

He lay down, pulling the blanket over himself. Though Anessa had been awake until then, she was as sleepy as the rest of them, and it wasn't long before he heard her breathing calm and slow to regular intervals.

Belgrieve closed his eyes and stilled himself. He heard Angeline breathing beside him, and the occasional snapping of the fireplace. He hadn't expected he would be leaving Turnera like this, but it would be an interesting trip in its own right—better yet, with his daughter along for the ride. Though there had been some rough patches, he was sad to see Angeline leave Turnera, and it wasn't a bad thing to stay with her a little while more.

However, if he left, he didn't know how Turnera would deal with fiends. He had brought it up with Hoffman, but was laughed off. According to Hoffman, the children Belgrieve had taught to use a sword had grown into decently skilled young men and women, and there was nothing to worry about.

And yet, if they could manage without him, did that mean he was not needed in Turnera? Perhaps that was the case. Perhaps he had grown too conceited, and that was a little embarrassing to consider.

For now, he had to sleep. However, he was growing excited even at his age, and couldn't quite find the right mindset. When he lay still, the pain also began to annoy him. For it to continue this long, he must have pushed himself considerably.

He considered counting sheep when Angeline, who was supposed to be asleep, whispered: "Dad... are you awake?"

"Hmm... I'm awake," he answered softly without opening his eyes.

"Hee hee... I can't sleep," she said. "Even though I was so sleepy."

"Right... I'm in the same boat."

"So, you know... Have you thought about going all the way to Orphen? I'm making a lot of money... I could rent a home big enough for the two of us together..."

For a while, Belgrieve kept his eyes and mouth shut. Eventually, he slowly reached out and patted Angeline's head.

"That sounds like a wonderful idea."

"Then—"

But Belgrieve went on before Angeline could take that as affirmation.

"But you know... if I did that, I wouldn't come back to Turnera anymore."

"Umm... that's... But..."

"Your father, you see... He considers this place his home. It's where your father came from, and where you came from too, Ange... Of course, I'm glad you feel that way. But I think I'm going to protect this as a place for you to return to. You like Turnera, don't you, Ange?"

"Yeah... I love it." Angeline squirmed under the cover, locking Belgrieve in an embrace. "I get it... but we're together until Bordeaux!"

“Yeah, that’s right... So go to sleep.”

“Yeah... Goodnight, dad.”

“Goodnight, Ange.”

The night slowly drew on.

# CHAPTER 19

## THEY WOKE BEFORE DAYBREAK

They woke before daybreak and walked around the village once again. Angeline, in high spirits, climbed to the top of her favorite hill and watched the sun rise over the village, declaring that it would be the last time for a while. It was still cold and white around, but the sights she could see from there had grown distinctly green.

After returning to the house for a light breakfast, they beat out their bedding and carried the straw to the shed. The floor was swept clean, and they ensured there were no remaining embers in the fire. The fireplace burned practically every hour of the day, and it had been a long time since it was completely extinguished.

Then, the wagon was loaded. It was far emptier than it had been on the way here, as there weren't many gifts from Turnera that would be sought after in the capital. Once the preparations were complete, Belgrieve took one last look around to ensure he hadn't forgotten anything. He seemed to be in the clear.

"When was the last time I left the house empty for more than a few days?" Belgrieve ran his hand down one of the support pillars. "I'll be out for a bit. You'll hold down the fort, won't you?"

The small house creaked in response. Belgrieve grinned, gave the pillar a pat, and walked out.

There were thin wisps of clouds that hadn't been there in the morning, and it seemed even heavier ones loomed from the north. A somewhat cold wind was blowing, and it was becoming apparent that the spell of jolly spring weather would not hold for long.

There were people there to see him off in the backyard, and they talked about all sorts of things. The young men seemed sad that the city girls were leaving, prattling on with despairing faces. Anessa scratched her head with a wry smile while Miriam chuckled. Neither intended to take them too seriously.

It was very well known in the village how clingy Angeline was with her father, so no men reached out to her. Not that Angeline was the least bit bothered; she sat in the

wagon, grinning, as she watched Anessa and Miriam handle them.

*Will she ever get married like this?* Belgrieve grew a little anxious.

Kerry slapped his shoulder with a laugh. "You're a busy man, Bell!"

"Ha ha, a strange thing it is."

"Well, take care. I'll keep an eye on your fields."

"Yeah, sorry about that. Thanks."

Belgrieve grinned, patted Kerry's shoulder, and slowly climbed into the wagon. There was still some pain remaining, and he couldn't move nimbly. There was plenty of space inside, as their luggage was minimal. Angeline eagerly nestled up next to him.

"Good to go, dad?"

"Yeah, let's get to it."

"All right, then onward!"

"Yeah, yeah, I'll get to it." Anessa flicked the reins, prompting the horse to start into a slow walk. The wagon creaked as it took off.

Belgrieve leaned out and told Kerry, "I'll be going now. Look after the house for me."

"You got it! Have fun!"

"I'm not going to play around," Belgrieve scratched his cheek with a wry smile.

The carriage left the village, picking up a little speed along the outside plains, and gradually eased into the mountain trails. The roads were poor, so there would be a jolt each time the hard wheels struck a rock. However, the wagon was lighter than it had been on the way there, so they were able to travel faster.

When the slopes were too steep, they had to climb out and push from behind. The horse was, of course, a living being that would stop moving if pushed too hard. *These paths will be maintained eventually, and it will be easier on the carriages*, thought Belgrieve.

The clouds from the north had not given chase, becoming thinner the further they got from Turnera. Soon, the weather was wonderful.

Belgrieve sat leaning against the back of the wagon, under the shadow of the improvised canopy. Anessa kept hold of the reins at the front, while Angeline and Miriam sat on either side of Belgrieve, having been fiddling with his beard for a while now. Perhaps they found it curious, seeing as they had no facial hair. However, it was ticklish and made him feel restless.

“The beard is rough over here... and fluffy over here.”

“Interesting. Do you do anything to maintain it, Mr. Bell?”

“I’m not that fussy about it... But that tickles. Both of you, please.” Those words only made them laugh, and they were not going to stop. *It’s like I’ve got even more daughters now.* Belgrieve sighed.

The horse proceeded at a walking pace, but it was still faster than going on foot. At this rate, they would reach Rodina before or just at sunset.

Rodina was the village closest to Turnera. It wasn’t very large, but the nearby acorn forests gave way to a thriving pig-rearing industry, and they were known for their high-quality smoked meats, sausage, and lard. Turnera would trade for these with wool, produce, and goat hides. Their relationship was not purely business-related though, and many visitors from Rodina would come to the fall festival.

Belgrieve, however, had only been there twice: once, when he set off to become an adventurer, and again, on his defeated way back. This really hammered home how rarely he left the village. He knew the area around Turnera like the back of his hand, but the regions beyond the mountains were almost completely unknown. Even his memories of them were vague, so this was a fresh experience for him, and he found himself growing excited in spite of his age.

The sun gradually dipped west, and the shadows stretched out. Despite the spring weather, the wind was enough to make him shudder—it was a wind from the north, after all.

While there was a cloth stretched out beneath him, his bottom hurt if he sat still for too long. He had changed his posture a number of times, while the girls seemed more accustomed to the road. It wasn’t as if it did not hurt for them, and at times, they

shifted or got up to move as well, but they did so far less frequently than Belgrieve. In fact, Anessa remained in the driver's seat, nearly completely still for the entire trip. Feeling as if he was being shown the difference between himself and an active adventurer, Belgrieve smiled bitterly.

It had been quite some time since he had traveled by wagon like this. When it was time to harvest the wheat and potatoes, he would sometimes hop aboard the wagons carrying the crops to the shed, but that was about it.

"You're all used to traveling, are you? That's quite something," Belgrieve said.

Angeline immediately looked boastful. "Incredible, right... Aren't we amazing?"

"Yeah, amazing."

Angeline smiled in delight, snuggling up to him and looking at him with upturned eyes. She used the opportunity to nuzzle her head into his shoulder. When he patted her on the head, she looked terribly satisfied.

It was a bit worrisome that Angeline was just as spoiled as ever, but as he mulled over that, he felt a weight from the other side. Miriam was similarly leaning against him. She had taken off her hat before he realized it, pressing her head into his shoulder much like Angeline.

"No fair, Ange. Aren't I amazing too, Mr. Bell? Why don't you pet me?"

"Hmm, well, not that I mind..."

He wondered if it was really so great to be patted on the head, but there wasn't any particular reason for him not to. He stroked her head, and she laughed.

"You've got a big old hand, Mr. Bell."

"You think so? Those are some splendid ears if I do say. Won't they get cold if the wind hits them?"

Miriam burst out in laughter. "Heh, heh heh heh! Not at all! Hey, try touching them. They're fluffier than you'd think."

"It's true..."

The surface of her ears was indeed packed with short but soft bristles, and were quite nice to touch, like high-class fur. She probably wouldn't get cold like that—in fact, she was probably better off than the rest of them. Once he knew that, however, he realized how insensitive he had been, and grew a little embarrassed.

“Looks like I really missed the mark...”

“Not at all! I appreciate the concern. Heh heh.” Miriam giggled as she drew closer. She stuck out her index finger, pushing it into his cheek.

Angeline did not seem to take kindly to this. “Merry... Don’t be so clingy with my dad.”

“C’mon, what does it matter? Why do you get to monopolize him?”

“Because he’s my dad.”

“No fair! Mr. Bell, hear me out! You don’t mind having one more child, do you?”

“Huh... Wh-What do you mean?”

“I call foul play. No taking advantage of his kindness... If you want to be my little sister, you must first defeat me.”

“Hey, hey! Aren’t you forgetting I’m the older one!?”

Carrying on this incomprehensible quarrel, the two began pushing at each other. Belgrieve immediately fled to the front of the wagon, whispering, “They really get along, don’t they... ow, ow.” He grimaced in pain.

Anessa smiled from the driver’s seat. “Ahh, what to do with them...”

“Are you getting tired, Anne? Want to change with me?” Belgrieve offered.

“No, no, I’ve always liked this sort of thing.”

“Hmm... Do you like animals?”

“Something like that. Well, it’s like I’ve lived with animals my whole life... I’m used to it by now,” she said, glancing back at Angeline and Miriam’s tussling.

*These three really do get along. I'm glad Ange made some good friends.* Belgrieve smiled.

They took a break and ate a late lunch, after which they proceeded in earnest, only occasionally stopping to give the horse some rest. It was not long before they had entered the acorn forests.

A veil of darkness was gradually descending, lowering visibility. However, there were people coming and going, and they never lost the path. Acorns let off dry snapping sounds beneath the wheels, empty shells left behind by the pigs. The scent of livestock carried on the wind.

By the time the sun had entirely set, a light in the distance had given way to a village surrounded by a wooden fence.

"We're here. That's Rodina."

"*Sigh*, that was long."

They all stretched out their ride-stiffened bodies, filling the air with cricks and snaps. A brief talk with a young man of the watch was enough to be let inside.

Unlike Turnera, which was too far into the remote regions, there were bandits around these parts. Thus, security was strict. The village was frequented by merchants who came for pork, so there was a small inn as well. That was where they intended to stay the night.

Gazing at the village from the wagon, Belgrieve muttered, "I haven't been here in a while... I don't remember it at all."

"How long has it been since you left Turnera?" Anessa asked.

"About that..." He scratched his head. "It's been over twenty years now."

"Aha ha, that's incredible. It really has been a while then."

"It has... It's a strange feeling, it is."

He was sure he'd spend the rest of his years in Turnera. However, since Angeline arbitrarily began calling him the Red Ogre, this led to Helvetica stopping by the village—which then led to talks about maintaining the roads. Now here he was, with

a letter in hand, and his daughter and her friends in tow.

*I never thought my daughter's adventuring would take me on a journey too,* he mused to himself. He could feel something deep in his bones. *The world works in mysterious ways.*

The inn was not completely booked, but it had its fair share of merchants and travelers. It must have been dinner time, as the smell of scorched fat filled the air. There was a bar with a dining area on the first floor, where guests could take their meals. Further back, there were communal rooms where everyone would sleep in a huddle, though there were a few private rooms that could be booked on the second floor. It seemed most of their guests were on the poorer side, as there was still a private room available while there was barely any space left in the communal rooms.

Belgrieve insisted on booking a room for the girls, while he would sleep in the communal room, but they were incredibly against it.

"I could never abandon you like that, dad... I just can't!"

"That's right, Mr. Bell. Don't be like that. Right, Anne?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"I mean, there's only one bed. How is it going to fit four?"

"That's all right. Dad, you will sleep in the center. Merry and Anne will take the sides, and I will sleep on top of you."

"Are you trying to cook me to death...?"

"But isn't it so cold at night? It's easier to sleep huddled up, I'm sure of it."

"Merry. Do you honestly think you'll all fit once I'm in bed?"

"Hm... hmm."

Belgrieve boasted a large physique. He was not fat, but he was tall, and trained, and naturally larger than the girls. And the bed wasn't that large to begin with. It could fit the three adventurers if they squeezed in, but if Belgrieve was in there, it would fit only one more at most.

It was then that Angeline looked as if she had been struck by a divine revelation.

"In that case... me and dad can take the room, while Anne and Merry can sleep with the rest of them..."

"Hey," Belgrieve prodded her on the head. "Don't just think about yourself."

"Aww... Sorry."

After arguing back and forth, they ultimately settled on his initial plan. Belgrieve would sleep in the communal room while the girls got the private one. In exchange, he would have to stay with them until right before they fell asleep, and Angeline stuck fast to him during that time.

They had dinner in the first-floor dining room. Delighted that she could go on a journey with her father, Angeline drank heavily, growing ever more unsteady and sleepy. The other two were in a similar state. *They're still children*, Belgrieve thought, finding the scene a bit nostalgic. It seemed even a high-ranking adventurer could be done in by a drink.

Gradually, the night drew on, and they climbed to the second floor to sleep before it grew late. Angeline teetered on her feet before receiving a piggyback ride from Belgrieve, and couldn't have been happier.

He grimaced at his aching body as he tucked a drowsy Angeline into bed. Then, he let out a long sigh. "Good night."

"Yesh, gwood night..."

"Good night, Mr. Bell."

Belgrieve left the room, got a blanket from the front desk, and headed to the communal room. The fireplace burned hot, and there were pillows littered all around. It was already packed with people in all manner of attire. There were those already asleep, some still chatting, others drinking, and a few playing cards.

He watched his step as he sought out an empty space and sat down. He was by the wall, far from the fire, but there were enough people to make the entire room warm.

Belgrieve slowly removed his peg leg, placing it beneath his pillow. Travelers came in

all sorts, and he didn't want to lean it against the wall only for it to be stolen. He had left his sword and his valuables on the second floor, but he couldn't quite leave his leg.

One of the drinking men took note of this, striking up a conversation. "You use a peg leg, do you?"

He seemed to be an adventurer, perhaps in his mid-thirties. He was stout, but well trained with thick arms. His dark brown hair was beginning to thin, but the bottom half of his face was covered in a thick beard. While he looked a bit fierce, his eyes came off as affable enough. Beside him, he had his weapon—a battle-ax propped against the wall.

"Yeah, for a long time now," Belgrieve cheerfully replied.

"You were moving so naturally when you came in, I never noticed. I only picked up on it when I heard it tapping against the ground. I was surprised when I looked down and saw how obviously fake it was."

"Ha ha, it's all about getting used to it. I'm just lucky I still have my knee. Without that, I'm sure my movements would be stiff no matter what I did," Belgrieve said, shifting his right knee around.

The man's eyes narrowed, impressed. "Sure, but it must have taken a lot of effort to move that smoothly. I'm amazed, even. Truly splendid."

"You speak too highly of me." Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his cheek.

The man held out a leather flask of spirits.

"How about it? That is, if you've got a palate for grape wine."

"Thanks, I'll take you up on that."

Belgrieve took a mouthful. It wasn't the most refined of wines, but it was good, with a taste reminding him of his adventurer days. He swallowed, bowed, and returned the flask. The man grinned; he seemed to like talking.

"I've crossed many lands as an adventurer. I enjoy traveling, and I especially enjoy challenging esteemed martial artists."

"Oh?"

"I've traveled northern Estogal, from Orphen to Elvgren, and Asterinos as well. I stopped by Bordeaux before I arrived in Rodina, and the adventurers there were wonderfully skilled. Especially the sister of the countess—Sasha, her name was. She possessed a surprising level of skill. I was confident in my own abilities, but I wound up eating dirt. They say she is still AA-Rank, but she's got talent. She will be S-Rank before long."

The man happily spoke of his loss to Sasha. *I see, so Sasha's grown stronger*, thought Belgrieve. He would occasionally chime in to make it clear he was listening but mostly heard him out in silence.

The man took a swig of wine and continued. "Yes, I heard a rumor in Bordeaux that a master swordsman lives in Turnera. That he never leaves, not wanting a shred of fame. He is called the Red Ogre and wields a fierce sword that lives up to his name. Do you know him?"

All of a sudden, Belgrieve was sweating. His smile stiffened. "No... I've never heard of him."

"Hmm, I see... I was surprised to hear even Sasha Bordeaux could not win against him, and even more so when I learned he was the father of the demon slayer, the Black-Haired Valkyrie. I would never have imagined I would find such an individual living in the northernmost outskirts of the empire."

"Really..."

"In fact, I'm headed to Turnera to witness his skills firsthand. I heard the Red Ogre had red hair and a false leg, just as you do. To be honest, that is precisely why I could not help but call out. Ha ha ha!"

"Ha ha... ha... What a strange coincidence." Belgrieve let out a dry laugh. The man still seemed to want to talk, but he told him, "I'm sorry, I've got an early morning tomorrow," and pulled the blanket over himself.

"I see, I've got an early morning too," the man said. He lay down, and was soon snoring in no time at all.

*I'm glad he was so frank and dense.* Belgrieve shut his eyes, relieved.

# CHAPTER 20

## IT WAS DEAD SILENT IN THE ROOM

It was dead silent in the room. Belgrieve woke up early, as was his habit, but everyone else was still sound asleep. He quietly made his way out to take a walk around Rodina.

The pain in his body had softened a bit but had not gone away. It really was dragging on to a troublesome degree.

He passed by farmers headed off for work and saw the smoke of cooking breakfasts rising. The town was no different from Turnera in that regard.

He could smell pig here and there—a little different from sheep and goat. He could not tell whether it was their body odor or their excrement, but it stung his nostrils a bit as he was not accustomed to it. *Come to think of it, didn't it smell like this when I last came to Rodina?* he reminisced.

He was back at the inn by sunrise. The travelers who needed to leave early were up and eating. While he returned to the communal room, he did not see the man he had spoken to the previous night. Seeing as he wasn't in the dining hall either, perhaps he had already left. Belgrieve felt a little bad for deceiving him, but there was little he could do if the man wasn't there.

Climbing the stairs to the second floor, he headed for the girls' room. Before he reached it, the door swung open, and Angeline popped out.

“Good morning, dad.”

“Ah, morning Ange... Were my footsteps loud?”

“Yes... on the second floor, especially.”

His wooden leg made quite a loud sound when it tapped against a wooden floor, even more so when there was hollow space beneath. Belgrieve stroked his beard, frustrated.

“I should wrap the tip in cloth next time...”

“Heh heh.”

Angeline clung onto him. She breathed in deeply as if taking in his scent. Then, she lifted her face, looking ever-so satisfied.

“All right... Breakfast time!”

“Sure. What about Anne and Merry...?”

When Belgrieve mentioned them, they peeked their heads out of the room.

“We’re awaaake.”

“Good morning Mr. Bell.”

“Yeah, morning. Let’s have breakfast and go.”

It was not a specialty product for nothing—the pork in Rodina was delicious. There wasn’t much fresh meat at the beginning of spring; most was pickled or smoked, but even that was plentiful.

Toasted, thick-sliced ham with the season’s first watercress and pickled mustard seeds was sandwiched between two buns. Unlike Turnera’s simple cuisine, this was a substantial, hearty meal. Of course, it had a price tag that matched, but there was little need to worry about money as far as S-Rank adventurers were concerned. They could partake in good food from the break of dawn.

Belgrieve feared what would happen after he grew accustomed to eating like this, but this was also the thrill of the journey. His normal life was so simple, he felt he would incur heaven’s wrath if he indulged too much, the thought of which made him shudder a little. The girls, however, stuffed their faces as if it was nothing.

After breakfast, they rested a bit, sipping on floral tea. Belgrieve wanted to swing his sword, but he recalled the man from the night before. Perhaps he wasn’t the only one, and there would be some trouble if someone noticed him.

Belgrieve didn’t hate sparring matches, but he also did not want to stand out as the Red Ogre. First and foremost, he was not aware of having done anything to deserve the name, and disliked accepting accolades that did not belong to him. No matter what anyone said, it was simply unsettling. It felt like he was betraying their expectations.

He also felt sorry for sending the man on a fool's errand, but travelers were a once-in-a-lifetime encounter. Surely, he did not want any undue trouble either. Belgrieve silently sent an apology.

Soon enough, they were on the road. The horse had rested and eaten its fill of fodder, and was brimming with energy, and the wagon proceeded at a leisurely pace. From the crack of dawn, the weather remained favorable. The sunlight was a tad blinding, but it was not so bothersome once it was intercepted by the canopy.

It was two full days from Rodina to Bordeaux. There were more mountain roads along the way, which would eat up a bit of time. They were precisely where Angeline had saved Seren. It was a more heavily traveled road there, so it was not as bad as the stretch from Turnera to Rodina, but it was still a slow trek.

One day was spent crossing the mountains to the next village. They left the next day and were about to reach Bordeaux, when the sky was gradually overtaken by thick clouds, and it finally started to rain.

Early spring rain meant large droplets, and these splattered against the canopy. It was not rare for it to snow in the northern regions, but when it rained, it was a drizzle at most. It was unusual for it to all come down at once like this.

The winds were weak, so not much water got into the wagon, but it was still wet. Droplet struck upon droplet, forming a mist that lingered. The horse had to slow its pace as well.

"Good grief, what have we here?"

"Urgh... It's getting cold..." Angeline restlessly clung to Belgrieve. Her hair was damp. There was steam rising from the body of the horse pulling the wagon. By the time they reached Bordeaux, shivering, the sun had already set, and the rain carried on.

Bordeaux was the largest city north of Orphen. This was mostly because it was where the Bordeaux House, the house of the regional lord, resided. There were rural farmlands spread around it, and the city, surrounded by stone walls, was lively. It was not as large as Orphen, but the people within were just as animated, if not more so. Perhaps the talents Helvetica had gathered were properly doing their jobs.

They were reluctant to visit the lord's estate looking soggy and miserable. For the time being, they booked a room at an inn to rest and agreed they would drop by the next

day. Sure, they had sat through the entire trip, but the shaking of the cart had taken a surprising toll.

The inn they found in Bordeaux was incomparably larger than the one in Rodina. The first-floor bar was rowdy—this was evidently the haunt of adventurers, and they could see many who looked the part.

The owner showed clear disdain as he welcomed the sopping wet party, but this changed completely after Angeline sullenly flashed her S-Rank plate.

“Please, come in. I insist.”

They were led to a room with their bags. Angeline was looking at Belgrieve smugly. *She's learned to be calculating.* Belgrieve sighed and followed. The room was decently sized with two beds. They would be able to sleep two per bed like this.

Thinking back, Belgrieve often slept on straw and floor, and he was surprised at how long it had been lately since he had slept on a bed. The softness flustered him when he touched it. Would he even be able to sleep?

They left their things, changed out of their drenched clothes, and returned to the first floor. It was considerably boisterous there. A group from the wandering tribes was playing tunes, and this was mixed in with the clinking of tableware and the clamor of conversation, laughter, and yelling all at once.

“It’s lively.”

“Yeah... I’m hungry.”

There were no empty tables, so they lowered themselves down at the counter. The inn wasn’t just large, it had its facilities in order. It even had an expensive magic fridge. The menu was fast, and included seafood even when they were so far from the sea. However, the dish names were meaningless to Belgrieve. He had seen some of them before, but they had hardly lingered in his memory.

He mainly left the dinner order to the others. Meanwhile, he asked the bartender for Bordeaux’s specialty ale, and some of a small anchovy dish—that was one fish he vaguely recognized. Ale was grain-based alcohol. It had a bitter taste different from wine and cider, and he was a little taken aback by it.

The anchovies were small, salted fish and were apparently served alongside boiled vegetables and bread. They were slightly fermented, lending a strange pungency to their flavor. This too left him shocked.

Angeline giggled. "Dad, those pickled anchovies are an acquired taste..."

"You could've told me that earlier."

"Hee hee, I wanted to see how you would react."

"I'm sorry... Some people like them. I thought you knew what you were doing."

Belgrieve shrugged. He didn't find them particularly appetizing, but he ordered them, and so he would eat them. Back when he was an adventurer, he had to eat whatever he could find, and he had eaten all sorts of things. It seemed that his taste buds had settled down over the years.

As he swallowed an anchovy with a sour look, a guest sitting beside him piped up.

"Hmph, you don't understand the glory of anchovies? This is why you'll always be a bumpkin."

He thought it was about him, so he looked over to see that the young girl next to him was looking the other way. She seemed to be around ten with long hair as white as snow.

"Are you listening? This depth of flavor is something you can't get anywhere else. Calling it salty or stinky... Why, you're just announcing to the world that you're from the middle of nowhere, Byaku."

She was, luckily, talking to someone else—a boy, likely a travel partner. The boy grimaced, clearly not having it. He was around fifteen or sixteen, his hair a similar white, though completely unkempt. Unlike the girl, he gave off a somewhat dirty impression.

"Not my problem... I know awful when I taste it. Sure, you lived in Lucrecia, so you might be used to it."

Lucrecia was where the main temple of Vienna was situated, bordering the Rhodesian Empire in the southeast. Its theocratic state centered on its clergymen had lasted for more than two hundred years. Its territory consisted of a peninsula jutting out from

the continent, as well as the surrounding islands, and it had a deep connection to the sea. As it was the main base of the Church of Vienna, with adherents all throughout the continent, it had a powerful sway over all its neighboring powers. There was a never-ending list of messy political rumors and incidents that sprung up because of this.

Lucrecia was a considerable way from Bordeaux. Belgrieve was impressed to hear that the young pair had spanned such a distance.

The girl placed an anchovy on her bread, took a bite, and started talking with her mouth full. "Well, the taste is nowhere near the anchovies in Lucrecia. Ahh, I want to go back, but alas, here I am. In the north. In the middle of nowhere. For what?"

"Shut up and eat... You're saying too much."

"Hey, Byaku! What attitude are you taking towards your master?!"

The girl's bar stool shook back and forth in her rage. It must have been an old chair, as its joints detached with a snap, sending her toppling backward.

"Eek!" Her eyes opened in fear.

Belgrieve immediately reached out, propping her back up to stop her. Not knowing what was going on, she opened and closed her mouth blankly.

"Are you okay?" Belgrieve asked. The girl turned to him in shock. Her pure white skin turned a little red.

"Th-Th-Th-Thank... I did not need your assistance!"

Confusingly enough, her gratitude suddenly turned to anger. Belgrieve cocked his head, but he wasn't the least bit irritated as he was dealing with a child.

The boy took over from there, lowering the girl onto the ground. He didn't crack the slightest smile, but he offered a polite nod.

"Sorry about that... She's terrible at communicating."

"Hey, look who's talking! You are trying to tell me I'm—mmff."

The boy cupped a hand over her mouth, heaving a fed-up sigh. *They're like siblings*, Belgrieve observed with a smile.

"What's wrong...?" Ange peeked over.

The moment he saw her face, the boy furrowed his brow. "Don't mind us. We're going, Your Holiness."

"*Mmff! Urgh! Mmmf!*"

The boy left, with the girl he held under his armpit thrashing about. *What a lively duo.* Belgrieve chuckled and rubbed his beard.

Around that time, there was an angry yell from the other side.

"The hell's your problem?! Quit pushing your luck! Do you even know who I am?! I'm Gort, the goddamn Thunderclap!"

An adventurer was causing a stir. There was the look of a drunk in his eyes, and Anessa, whom he was picking a fight with, was tiresomely waving a hand.

"You're just a frog in a well. I've seen loads of people like you."

"Don't screw with me! Think I'll hold back just because you're a woman?!"

The man reached for the sword at his hip—but before he could take hold of it, Anessa had swiftly extended her arm, grabbed his wrist, and twisted. The man yelped.

"Picking a fight without knowing your opponent's strength. You're not going to live long like that, Mr. Thunderclap."

Seeing Anessa's composure remain firm, the surrounding adventurers laughed and cheered. It seemed the man was notorious already. His face contorted in shame, and he immediately took off.

Miriam grinned, prodding Anessa. "Trying to look cool, huh."

"Shut it. It's those sorts that ruin the reputation of all adventurers..."

"A swordsman who loses to our archer in close combat..." Angeline cocked her head.

"Does he really have a moniker...?"

The bartender across the counter laughed. "Of course not. He's a C-Rank, that moniker is just what he calls himself. Granted, he's still somewhat skilled..."

"Hmm... how uncool..." Angeline muttered and took a sip of wine.

Belgrieve felt a strange sense of embarrassment. *Oh, daughter of mine, did you not do the exact same thing for me?*

The adventurers, impressed that a fair maiden had handled a man so easily, began treating them to drinks, and it was heating up around the counter.

"You really gave it to him. You an adventurer, missy?"

"Yeah, in Orphen. This is my party."

"Wow, a party of beautiful girls! Just what I like to see!"

"You gotta be high rank to do one on Gort like that. A? AA?"

Anessa glanced at Angeline and Miriam, getting their confirmation before saying. "Me and her, we're AAA. The black-haired one is S-Rank."

"You gotta be kidding..."

"No... no, wait. A black-haired girl... You mean the Black-Haired Valkyrie?"

"The demon slayer?!"

Angeline nodded, looking somewhat annoyed, and then it was like a bomb had gone off as the bar burst into noise. The arrival of an adventurer at the rank they all dreamed to be—and it wasn't just the adventurers, the bartender was delighted as well. This would raise the establishment's prestige.

One after another, mugs and cups were placed in front of the three of them; everyone wanted to take home a story of treating an S-Rank party to a drink. And beside the lionized girls, Belgrieve drank his ale in peace. Once he had grown accustomed to it, the shockingly bitter taste became fairly enjoyable.

One of the excited men took a seat beside Belgrieve.

"Amazing. I never thought I'd ever see her in person, not in all my life. Hey, don't you think so?"

"Hmm? Yeah, I guess."

Angeline turned. "Dad... I can't drink this much. You have some too."

"You got a lot... Daddy can't drink this much either."

The man beside him stared at him blankly. "You're the Black-Haired Valkyrie's father?"

Before he could reply, Angeline triumphantly leaned in. "That's right... My father, the Red Ogre Bel—*mff*."

Belgrieve quickly covered her mouth, playing it off with a laugh. However, he was evidently too late. The man's eyes pierced into him.

"Red hair... and a peg leg! Then—then you really are the Red Ogre! A man who can lead even Bordeaux's strongest, Sasha, by the nose!"

"B-By the... No, I'm not that..."

"Heeey, everyone! We've got a loaded house today! Not only do we have the Black-Haired Valkyrie, we've got the Red Ogre too!"

Attention gathered on Belgrieve all at once, and he recoiled in a panic, only to be surrounded in no time at all. From what he could piece together from the fragmented cries of onlookers, Sasha had spread the news so far and wide that there wasn't an adventurer in Bordeaux who didn't know the Black-Haired Valkyrie or the Red Ogre.

*She really didn't have to...* Belgrieve held his head. *Maybe I should start wearing a hat,* he seriously considered. Trying to make himself scarce, he closed in on his proud daughter's ear and whispered.

"Ange... Didn't I tell you not to spread it?"

Angeline suddenly gasped, as if she had completely forgotten. "That's right... I'm sorry."

But it was already too late. He had the feeling it was too late the moment he decided to travel with her, but even knowing it was inevitable, it didn't sit right in his stomach.

Around the time the undeserved praise and expectations were becoming unbearable, the crowds parted with a loud, "Pardon me!"

"Angeline! Master! Miriam and Anessa!"

They turned their heads to a familiar voice, and there stood Sasha, out of breath. She must have run through the rain, as her bangs were dripping. The adventurers were astir.

Sasha briskly walked over and took Angeline by the hand.

"I ran as fast as I could once I heard the rumors you were here! Don't be so distant! You came without a word to us! If you'd just sent a note, we would have welcomed you in!"

"Well... We were wet and dirty, so we thought we'd wait until tomorrow."

"Is that it? What does it matter if Bordeaux's benefactor is sopping or filthy?! Please, everyone, come to our manor! I want to introduce my elder sister!"

"Hmm... What do we do?" Angeline glanced at the rest of them.

Anessa and Miriam shrugged.

"If she says it's all right, then why not?"

"Yeah. I'm sure the beds are fluffier there."

"Dad?"

Belgrieve thought a bit then nodded. "I came to deliver a letter. If I'm being invited, I have no reason to decline."

Most importantly, he wanted to escape from this unsettling place.

In any case, they headed to the Bordeaux Estate. That was more proof than anything that they were the real deal, and the adventurers became even more excited still. The

innkeeper was irritated that he missed out on having the inn where an S-Rank party and the Red Ogre stayed the night, but Sasha paid a bonus on top of the cancellation fee, so he sent them off without a complaint. He would probably have a good sales pitch by the next morning.

It was still raining outside.

# CHAPTER 21

## AS THE RAIN HAMMERED AGAINST THE GROUND

As the rain hammered against the ground, two shadows walked through the city of Bordeaux. At the lead was a boy in a hood, with a white-haired girl hurrying to keep up. Despite the rain, neither was the least bit wet—it was as if an invisible membrane stretched over them.

The girl was grousing, apparently quite irritated. “Hey! Are you listening, Byaku?! Shouldn’t you show at least a little respect for your master?!” she hollered, gesticulating with her hands. All of a sudden, the membrane vanished over only her.

“Quiet down...”

“Yikes!” the girl cried as she clung to the boy. “Stupid! What do you think you’re doing?!”

“This is all because you were so obstinate about eating those blasted anchovies... You should have just relented and eaten dinner at the manor.”

“What are you talking about? Nothing bad came of it.”

“Hmm... The one who beat Ba’al was at the pub.”

The girl’s face suddenly stiffened. “Y-You can’t be serious. Shouldn’t she be in Orphen...?”

“She was there, what do you want me to say? It’s actually good that we know in advance... Perhaps we should put the plan on hold.”

The girl furrowed her brow, but eventually relaxed her scrunched-up expression with a huff. “We don’t have to be scared of her. Not as long as we have Samigina’s ring.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. You sure you’ve recovered enough strength for that?”

“Naturally. We’ll wipe the Vienna cult clean off the continent... Heh heh... heh... I can’t

wait. I'll color those damn priests' faces in fear! I'll slaughter every last one of them..."  
The girl's eyes burned in resentment.

The boy sighed. "Let's get back already. We'd have a hell of an easier time if you weren't so out of it."

"What rudeness! You must revere me, I say! Hey! Don't rush ahead! Byaku!"

They swiftly crossed the street.

○

It was a large estate. Constructed of tightly packed stone, it had a rustic majesty to it, as if the building had been kept perfectly the same as the days the settlers first cultivated the land. A step inside, however, revealed a tidy interior. The walls were lined with vases, paintings, and other such ornaments, just barely enough that the place did not come off as crude. On the contrary, it emphasized the quality of each individual item.

The front garden was beautifully landscaped with rocks and trees. The backyard, visible from a window in the hall, seemed to have a shed and a stable, which was presumably where the horse they rode in on would be tended to.

There was a field and a well, and buildings where the servants probably lived. Here and there around the manor, soldiers stood on guard.

*We're not really suited for such a dazzling estate.* Belgrieve sighed. He was admitted as a commoner, so he likely didn't have to worry about that, but he couldn't help but feel out of place. He was sorry for sullying the halls with his dampness.

Sasha accompanied them for the most part until an elderly maid dragged her off somewhere. The maid had said something about her being slovenly, so she was most likely changing clothes. Perhaps the servants were at a loss over her tomboyish personality. In her place, a young maid took over as their guide.

It was around that time that someone raced from down the hall and clung onto Angeline. It was Seren, her expression brimming with joy.

"Angeline! You really came!"

"Oh, Seren... Have you been well?"

"I have! You seem in good health too, my lady..." she purred as Angeline stroked her head. Evidently, she had become quite attached to her since the incident with the bandits.

"I believe you've already met my father," said Angeline. "This is Anne, and this is Merry—my party members and friends."

With a start, Seren corrected her posture and put a hand to her glasses. "Ahem... Pardon me. Thank you all for making the long trek out here. We welcome you." She bowed her head, and Anessa and Miriam politely returned the gesture.

Belgrieve grinned. "I'm glad you look well, Seren. I'm sorry for barging in so late at night."

"What are you saying, Belgrieve? Please, come anytime you want." She softly smiled back at him.

It then occurred to Belgrieve that he was better off concluding his business before anything else, and so he produced Hoffman's letter from his bag.

"I've brought a letter from the chief about the roads. I'd like to get this to Helvetica..."

"I see, so that's what you're here for... But please, settle in first. We'll prepare something for you to wear."

It certainly wasn't appropriate to meet the countess in drenched, grimy clothing. Regardless of whether or not Helvetica cared, they could not be too disrespectful. Belgrieve nodded and urged the girls to follow the maid. Seren, meanwhile, took the letter and rushed off to deliver it.

The room was small but tidy and high-class. Belgrieve and Angeline got a room for the two of them, while Anessa and Miriam were led to the one next door. They set down their bags and hung up their damp coats.

"Phew... What a splendid manor," said Belgrieve.

"Yes, it hasn't changed, from the last time I came here..."

"Oh, right, you came here with Seren. Did you stop by again on the way to Turnera?"

"If I did, I would have been stuck here for a while. I snuck by—I wanted to get home quickly..."

She didn't seem to have the slightest bit of respect towards the nobility. Not knowing whether this made his daughter unaffected or unfathomably high-minded, Belgrieve opted to laugh. That was her good point, after all.

There was a knock on the door, and a maid came in. "I have brought something to wear," she said.

"Oh, thank you."

The clothes she brought were simple: a shirt and trousers for Belgrieve, and an unornamented dress for Angeline. Still, Angeline was not used to wearing dresses, and she began to pace around a bit.

"It's... unsettling, how it flaps around."

"Ha ha, you're just not used to it. It looks good on you."

"Really? If you say so, dad..."

She was suddenly in a good mood, lifting up the hem of her dress, and trying out various poses. *There's no way a girl her age has absolutely no interest in fashion,* thought Belgrieve. *She's just not used to it.*

He had the maid put a tie on him—which he had never worn before—and looked at his daughter. "I have to meet with Lady Helvetica. What do you want to do, Ange?"

"Helvetica... Seren and Sasha's sister..." The warm expression vanished from Angeline's face, and Belgrieve suddenly had a terrible feeling.

"On second thought, I'll go alone. Stay in the room."

"I'm going too."

"We're just going to talk about the roads."

“I’m going too.”

She had an intensity to her that would brook no refusal. Unable to muster any rebuttal, Belgrieve sighed.

The maid led them to what seemed to be a study. When the door opened, there was Helvetica, seated behind the desk, her eyes scanning the letter. Seren was to her side, as well as a young man in his early twenties with olive-brown hair and glasses.

Once she noticed Belgrieve, Helvetica stood and pranced over. “Sir Belgrieve, how nice of you to join us. I’m relieved you look as dignified as ever.”

“It... is my honor. Clothes do maketh the man, as they say. You look well... Oh, this is my daughter, Angeline.”

“Angeline, right! I cannot thank you enough for saving Seren... Truly, thank you.” Helvetica smiled, bowing her head to Angeline.

However, Angeline did not smile; she stared at Helvetica with harsh, appraising eyes. “Are you the one who is trying to become my mother?”

“H-Hey, Ange. What do you think you’re saying?”

“Please be quiet, dad.” Angeline glared at him. There was a fearsome glint in her eye, and Belgrieve inadvertently swallowed his breath. She looked at Helvetica once more. “I cannot forgive you for trying to snatch my father when I wasn’t around. However, that does not mean I am against my father having a wonderful person by his side... The problem is, I do not know if you are worthy.”

“Oh my, does that mean there is a chance of you recognizing our relationship, Ms. Angeline?” Helvetica spoke softly, with composure, as if Angeline’s provocations meant nothing. Yet still, she said the strangest things. *She’s incredible*, thought Belgrieve, equal parts impressed and jaded.

“Hmph,” Angeline huffed. “With all the migraines you’ve given me... your favorability rating is far from positive. Don’t think it will be easy to win me over...”

That was when the young man in glasses angrily intruded on the conversation. “Hey, what’s with your attitude? I don’t know about saving Seren and whatnot, but what right does a mere adventurer have to speak to Lady Helvetica like—”

“Ashe,” Helvetica said in a cold and clear voice. “You’re being disrespectful. Stand down.”

“B-But Helvetica...”

“Are you unable to hear me?”

“Grr... My apologies.” The young man called Ashe reluctantly backed off.

Belgrieve placed a hand on Ange’s shoulder. “Ange, you were pretty rude too. Your father doesn’t intend to do anything with Lady Helvetica here, so please don’t be so wary of her.”

“Eh... Sir Belgrieve, you were just toying with me...”

Helvetica attempted to cling to Belgrieve, only for Seren to grab her by the scruff of the neck. “Sis, give it a rest already. Didn’t you say you gave up on him?”

“I mean... Seren, it’s such a waste. He’s so mild-mannered, magnanimous, and incredibly skilled to boot...”

“Sis...” Seren glared.

Frustrated, Helvetica pursed her lips. “Fine... I get it. Seren, you meanie...”

“Please don’t make this my fault!”

“Umm... Can I talk yet?” Belgrieve timidly interjected.

Snapping to her senses, Seren’s cheeks turned red. Helvetica grinned at her, triumphantly. Though it seemed Seren wanted to say something, perhaps she believed another word would mean her loss, as she quietly stepped back.

*What close sisters.* Belgrieve found this strangely heartwarming—though Angeline continued to glower at Helvetica with a sour look.

Helvetica took up the letter again and smiled. “I’ve given it a read. I’m delighted that we have Turnera’s cooperation in the matter.”

“Much obliged. I’d also like to talk about the specifics. There are other villages between

Bordeaux and Turnera, and quite a few of our youngsters want to help out with the construction work—though some of them can't leave during the farming season.”

“Right, about that... Can we wait a bit? Truth be told, a little trouble has come up.”

“Hmm?”

According to Helvetica, there was someone objecting to the plan: Count Malta, who governed the small town of Hazel on the edge of the ancient forest in western Bordeaux. Maintenance was still being carried out on the road to Hazel, and he was strongly opposed to sending this workforce off in a completely different direction.

“Hmm... That makes sense to me...”

“Yes, but the thing is, the work on that road is ninety percent complete. They do not need nearly as many on-site managers at this point—in fact, I've spoken with those very managers, and they said there was absolutely no problem with starting a new project.”

“It's harassment, plain and simple,” Seren piped up, sounding quite troubled. “Estogal's central powers originally sent Count Malta here as a form of demotion. He lost a power dispute, from what I've heard. He looks down on Bordeaux as some ignorant backwater and finds fault with everything we do. He wasn't so bad when our father was alive, but I'm assuming having a female head has caused his actions to escalate.”

“I have my own inadequacies to blame. I've taken many skilled talents under Bordeaux's wing, but a few nobles are unsatisfied with me as the lord of the territory... There are signs that Count Malta is instigating them, but we don't have any definitive leads to investigate.”

As Helvetica sighed, the young man next to her furrowed his brow. “Hmph, that vulgar man should just be punished already. He's like an old rug—you'll get all sorts of dirt out if you beat him a bit. A somewhat forceful investigation would easily lead to his downfall. Then, we can punish the nobles supporting him one after the next.”

“We cannot. Even if we have a reason, we will lose trust with a political purge like that.”

“But Lady Helvetica—it is the people who will suffer the most if you let him run free. Please do not forget.”

“I understand, Ashe. That is the last resort.”

“Sis, we can’t fall behind in gathering information... It wouldn’t hurt to have more cards to play, whenever the time comes.”

“Right. At the very least, I’ll make sure he can’t make any large moves.”

Belgrieve scratched his cheek. “Looks like you’re talking about difficult things... I believe outsiders like us shouldn’t interfere in these matters.”

“Ah... My apologies,” Helvetica’s cheeks flushed in embarrassment.

It was then that the door burst open and Sasha entered. She wasn’t in her usual adventurer attire, instead wearing a pretty dress befitting a noble. However, with one step, and one word from her mouth, it was the same old Sasha, entering with a chuckle and a vigorous stride.

“Oh, finally found you! Good grief, these clothes are hard to move around in...”

As Sasha waved around her skirt’s hem, Seren sighed. “Sash... I know it’s useless to tell you, but have a bit of modesty...”

“Ha ha ha, what are you saying, Seren? It’s all about having the right person in the right place. You and big sis both have things I don’t, but I possess what neither of you has. House Bordeaux would have no future if all three of us were identical—progress comes precisely because we are three souls compensating for one another! Isn’t that what father said?”

Seeing her not even attempt to correct her posture, Ashe looked rather fed up with her. “There should still be a limit to that... Lady Sasha, why not develop some awareness of yourself as a—”

“Oh, that’s right,” Sasha said, the moment she saw Ashe. She grabbed him by the hand and dragged him out in front of Belgrieve. “Sir Belgrieve, perhaps he has already introduced himself, but this is Ashcroft. He’s still young, but he serves as the steward of our house. He’s also a swordsman, albeit inexperienced, so please, won’t you show him some of your...”

“Please, don’t. I have no need of it,” Ashcroft sullenly waved her off.

Sasha pursed her lips. "Good grief, what a hardhead."

"You came at just the right time, Sasha," Helvetica suddenly said. "Please tend to Angeline and Belgrieve. I don't want to drag them into a battle of nobles."

She nodded, her eyes glimmering. "Of course! Understood, sis!"

"Anyways, you heard the story, Belgrieve. Please wait a little longer for an answer. And take it easy here until then."

"This way, please!" Sasha urged them, and Belgrieve left with a bow.

Angeline followed behind him. Belgrieve could feel a chill, seeing as he had just glimpsed the unseen underbelly of the relationship between nobles. Maybe Helvetica trusted them enough to speak of such things with them present. Or perhaps she purposely let them hear so they would share the same lot.

"I want to think that she isn't like that, but..."

"What's wrong, dad?"

"No... it's nothing. Talking to myself. By the way, Ange, how long are you planning on staying here?"

"I'll stay until you return to Turnera..."

Sasha looked back at them. "Come to think of it, what happened to Anessa and Miriam?" she asked. "Weren't they with you?"

"They are in the next room."

"Oh, I see. It's a tad late for dinner, but how about it? I'd love to drink with all of you."

"Hmm... Sounds good. That's fine, right dad?"

"I don't mind. But daddy has to tuck in early. My body hurts..."

"Aww... Really?"

"I'm sorry. It will be a bit hard for me."

"Unfortunate... Sleep well."

"Hmm... I wanted to talk about all sorts of things with you, Master, but there's not much we can do."

"I'm sorry, Sasha. It will have to be another time... Don't drink too much, Ange."

"Got it."

Angeline and Sasha reluctantly went off to the adjacent room while Belgrieve returned to his own guest room alone. He loosened his tie and sat on the bed, removing and propping his leg against the wall.

His joints hurt. There was a creaking in his bones. He could ignore it while he was still moving, but once he took it easy, the pain descended upon him at once. *This never happened before*, he thought with a bitter smile.

"Well I'll be... I'll need to rethink how I use my body..."

It would be impossible to retire as long as he lived in Turnera. This body would need to be with him until his last day. In that case, he needed to forge a good bond with it.

He stroked his aching joints and muttered, "I shouldn't bend my core that far... I won't do anything that crazy again."

He took a deep breath, then lay down. The bed—not the straw he was accustomed to—softly accepted his body. It was terribly comfortable. Unaware of when exactly he dozed off, he was breathing peacefully before he knew it.

○

There was a clatter as glass cups were thunked on the table. What meager amount remained of the wine contained within them rippled in waves around the bottom.

Her cheeks a little red, Angeline propped one of her feet up onto her chair, attempting to affect a domineering aura. "The way Ol' Angeline here sees it, Helvetica's not got enough of that motherly stuff."

"You think sooo?"

“High-handed today, are we... In the first place, what is this motherliness you’re talking about?”

Angeline pouted at Anessa’s question.

“It’s this all-encompassing thing, you know... I want to be wrapped up in love. Thing is, I don’t feel like having Helvetica dote on me, it just doesn’t feel right... In the first place, a couple’s gotta be equal in marriage. She just doesn’t match up to dad’s fatherliness. Not even close.”

“Oh, you can’t say for sure, Ange! Despite how she looks, my sister is very reliable,” Sasha mustered.

“Reliable re-shmiable. Look at Anne over there. She’s reliable... but she’s got no motherliness to her.”

“Erk, that may be true, but...”

“Oi, did you just implicitly insult me?”

Sasha sputtered, “N-No, not exactly!”



"But it's true..." Angeline flatly stated. "Anne already lost to dad's fatherliness a while back."

"Grr..." Anessa held her tongue. She couldn't muster any rebuttal.

Sasha filled her cup to the brim and then immediately downed half of it. "However, if my sister does marry Master, then Master will be my brother-in-law... H-How invigorating!"

"Oh, that means you'd be Ange's aunt," Miriam chuckled.

Angeline violently grabbed the bottle by the neck, pouring some for herself. A bit of it splashed onto the table and pooled. "I don't want such a young aunt!"

"S-So cruel!"

"Why do you look so shocked?" Anessa propped up her head with a hand, staring into Sasha's teary eyes.

Uncorking a new bottle, Angeline said, "In any case, her motherliness just doesn't cut it."

"But what about Mr. Bell? There's no telling if your tastes are the same as his, Ange," Miriam said, tossing a roasted bean into her mouth.

Angeline folded her arms. "What sort of women do men like...?"

"No, don't ask me... Maybe kind, home-oriented, something like that?" Anessa suggested.

Miriam shook her head. The wine was clearly getting to her, and her face was red. "Not. Even. Close! Those men don't care what's on the inside."

"A-Aren't you being a bit extreme?"

"Not at all, my dear Sasha. The first thing a man looks at is the chest, then the legs, then the face, in that order. This is the iron rule! See, don't you start feeling stares when you dress light in the summer?"

"I see... You have a point. When I spar at the guild, I end up taking the top layer off when I get too hot. Then the men get a little weaker. I didn't know until now, but they

must have been looking at my chest! Surely! How pathetic, to lose concentration over something like that!"

"Come to think of it, I sometimes feel gazes..."

"Right? Especially around the—" Miriam looked at Angeline's chest. "I'm sorry, Ange..."

"Why are you apologizing?"

A beat passed. "I'm sorry."

"Hey, explain yourself."

"Now, now, Ange. Have another." Sasha poured another glass of wine.

Angeline didn't look very convinced, but said, "Well, whatever... You're saying the chest is important?"

"That's right! And a large chest is filled with motherliness! They've taken down many a man."

"Hmm..." Angeline looked at Miriam with dubious eyes. The light dress she borrowed had been filled out rather impressively.

Sasha looked at the magician's face with deep intrigue. "Then is Merry overflowing with motherliness?"

"Nope, she's got none."

"Nada."

Ange and Anessa immediately refuted this.

Miriam stuck out her lips. "This and that are separate issues!"

"You're the one who started going off on breasts, Merry..."

"Merry here doesn't plan on becoming a mother yet!"

"But even if Merry is a special case, I definitely do feel something motherly from large

breasts," said Sasha.

"Ah! You just insulted me, didn't you!"

Sasha stammered, "N-No, not exactly..."

"Sasha, you're a natural at this... Though I admit, I do understand where you're coming from."

"Does motherliness have to do with softness...?" Angeline tilted her head.

Sasha held a glass out to her. "If that's the case, my sister is pretty soft all around! She's got size too!"

"Really?"

"Hmm, is Mr. Bell going to lose to the breasts?"

"Of course he won't... My dad is a gentleman! Surely he understands that size is inconsequential."

"How did we get here?"

"I think it was something about motherliness...?"

"That's right! Why are we talking about breasts then?!"

"Umm... Oh, it's empty. Let me get a new one."

Before they knew it, there were already four, then five empty bottles rolling about. Because of how much alcohol was already in them at that point, they hardly noticed the bottles of distilled liquor mixed among the wines. Gradually, they began quarreling in inarticulate tongues as they emptied one glass after another.

# CHAPTER 22

## WHEN HE OPENED HIS EYES

When he opened his eyes, Angeline was sleeping in the same bed. There were two beds in the room, and she had chosen to crawl into her father's. If she was this severely dependent, Belgrieve worried about what would happen to her once she was back in Orphen. In fact, back when she was twelve years old, she said she would train to sleep alone—perhaps she was more mature back then.

It wasn't yet daybreak; even if he wanted to take it easy, his habits were solidified by age and wouldn't leave him so easily. When he lifted his torso, his muscles and joints grated and jarred, but he felt he was better off than he had been the day before. Perhaps the soft bed had helped him.

He bent his knees and rolled his shoulders. His movements did not feel too restricted.

"Attaboy..." He patted his shoulders, equipped his leg, and stood. It did not seem like Angeline was going to wake. She groaned and rolled over, reeking of alcohol. Perhaps she had gotten into a heated debate, but it seemed she had drunk quite a bit. He had warned her against it, but now Belgrieve realized such a warning was useless on a young'un.

The rain had cleared, though some clouds still loomed overhead, and the wind was still fierce.

It was rather unsettling to wear unfamiliar clothes. He changed, grabbed his sword, and headed out. The mansion was quiet, but there was a bustle in the kitchen. The servants were busy at work preparing breakfast before the master of the household awoke. As he walked the halls, Belgrieve could smell the fine scent of bread baking in the ovens.

He greeted the soldiers on patrol as he passed them, feeling a squishiness beneath his feet as he stepped onto the dew-speckled turf. It must have rained considerably through the night, but the sky would likely clear up during the day.

Belgrieve carefully stretched before taking his stance, swinging as if testing each and

every motion. His joints ached a bit; this was surely the recoil from overexerting himself.

Bit by bit, he changed his movements, probing out the root cause of all this pain by swinging his blade, facing off against his own body. He could have pushed himself a bit when he was younger, but at his current age, an excessive injury could take him past the point of no return. He needed to know his own limits.

He focused his inner power, feeling it flow from the tips of his toes up to his hips, then his spine, and finally to his arms. He ensured his body didn't hurt while still drawing out his maximum output.

"It's feeling stiff," he muttered. It felt as if his face-off with Angeline had misaligned his center. However, this was not irreparable. It was impossible to do it immediately, but he just had to regain the sensation bit by bit, every day. He would, after all, have plenty of time once he returned to Turnera.

*Or I could just give up on swinging this sword.* A self-deprecating smile crossed his lips. At this point, the time he spent swinging his sword far outweighed his time spent with idle hands. He likely wouldn't be able to stop unless he lost both his hands, or he died.

After spending around an hour practicing, Belgrieve lowered his arms and took a deep breath. His swings were a far cry from what they were usually, but he felt even more tired than usual.

"Splendid," a voice called from behind. He turned, and there stood Ashcroft, leaned against the wall with his arms folded. But the eyes behind his glasses were sharp and narrowed in displeasure.

"From the sway of your center to the sharpness with which you lower your blade. All of this should be impossible with an artificial leg. You are quite something."

"Thank you..."

"But not nearly as good as Sasha makes you out to be," he declared, letting out a belittling scoff as though to provoke him.

Belgrieve scratched his cheek. "Yes, I think so too... but Sasha has a very wild imagination."

"Hmm..." Ashcroft seemed somewhat taken aback. He must have expected rage or some witty retort.

*Looks like he's got quite a terrible impression of me,* thought Belgrieve. He could tell this came from Ashcroft's youthful confidence, and his envy at all the praise Helvetica and Sasha had heaped upon Belgrieve. For someone skilled enough to be entrusted the house of a major northern noble while still in his early twenties, it was only natural Ashcroft couldn't stand some middle-aged man from who-knows-where.

Ashcroft was rude, but Belgrieve honestly wasn't bothered. He even felt this youthful high-handedness was a bit charming, and he was also glad to finally hear an honest critique of his sword without any rose-tinted glasses.

Seeing that Ashcroft had completely lost interest and wasn't motivated enough to muster any more words, Belgrieve sent him a smile. "Sir Ashcroft, I heard you had an interest in the blade..."

Like a fish given water, Ashcroft said, "Yes... I'm not as good as Sasha, but at the very least, I can swing better than what I just saw. No one in the guild can beat me save for Sasha."

"I see, that's very impressive. I'm sure Helvetica is relieved to have someone like you by her side."

Belgrieve had meant this as honest praise, but it wasn't taken as such. Ashcroft looked a bit annoyed with his next words. "Hmph... Spare me your sarcasm. I don't care if you're the Red Ogre or what—I don't think you're anything special. Don't get in over your head."

"My thoughts exactly. I will take that to heart."

Ashcroft had finally had it with Belgrieve's stalwart humility. He angrily pushed up his glasses and turned on his heels. Belgrieve saw him off with a chuckle; reckless youths like him had a certain charm to them.

After knocking the mud off his peg leg and his shoe, he returned to his room. Angeline was still sprawled out over the bed, groaning. *Did you really drink that much?*

He shook her head a bit. "Wake up, Ange. It's morning."

"Mm... mmm..." She slowly wormed her way upright, her eyelids fluttering open faintly. The buttons and hooks of the dress she was unaccustomed to wearing had nearly come undone, and her body was unsteadily swaying back and forth.

Belgrieve sighed. "I told you not to drink too much."

"Mmm... morning... dad."

"Yes, good morning... Do you need to sleep more?"

"I'm... sleepy..."

She collapsed onto Belgrieve, asleep once more. *If she's like this, the other two are probably the same.* Belgrieve tucked her in properly, draped the blanket over her, then sat in the chair and gazed out the window. The sun had emerged in the middle of his practice, and the clouds had streamed away. There were blue skies above, and the leaves and blades of grass moistened by the rain now glimmered in the sun—a beautiful sight.

He watched the sun slowly climb higher and higher. Once the morning mist cleared, the birds were flying about. Those who were sleeping opened their eyes, and it was as if the world itself was alive once more.

*How long will it take for the matter of the roads to be settled?* He hoped it wouldn't be long.

He had been staring outside for a while when there was a knock at the door. "Come in," he said, and a young maid poked her head in.

"Good morning. Umm, the countess wanted to know if you would join her for breakfast..."

"Oh, thank you. I'll take her up on that."

"Then follow me..."

"Give me a second. My daughter..." Belgrieve stood, and shook the sleeping Angeline. "Hey, Ange. Breakfast."

"Mmph... no need..."

“Don’t be like that. Helvetica is inviting us...”

“Dunwanna.” Angeline pulled the covers over her head and curled into a ball.

Belgrieve sighed. “I’ll be going then.”

There was no response; she was presumably asleep. Belgrieve shook his head and followed the maid.

In the dining hall, he found the three Bordeaux sisters already seated, having a chat about something. Ashcroft stood to the side. Upon noticing Belgrieve, Helvetica smiled and beckoned him closer. Belgrieve smiled back and lowered himself into a chair.

“Good morning, everyone.”

“Good morning, Belgrieve. Did you sleep well?”

“Yes, and I have your bed to thank. The girls drank too much and aren’t up yet, though...”

Seeing Belgrieve’s wry smile, Sasha laughed. “Ha ha ha, we did drink quite a bit last night, after all! What a fun time it was!”

“You sure you didn’t put them up to it, Sash? Not everyone’s a heavyweight,” Seren said with a sigh.

*Come to think of it, Sasha surely had been drinking with them. And yet, here she is, completely fine. She’s quite strong.* Belgrieve was mildly impressed.

A noble’s dinner table was beautiful, as to be expected. Especially so when lined with soft bread and bacon, boiled eggs, stew, sauerkraut, sausage, steamed potatoes, and yogurt with jam. The arrangement was also top-class—so refined, that Belgrieve found it quite unsettling. Once the blessings were said, he found himself simply watching the sisters eat. He didn’t know proper etiquette and felt too embarrassed to make the first move.

Helvetica picked up on this and giggled. “Sir Belgrieve, just eat however you want.”

“Yes, but...”

Seeing that he was still hesitant, Seren kindly said, “It’s perfectly fine. Sash here knows all the rules and ignores them anyway.”

“What are you saying, Seren? I know how to pick a time and place. What reason do I have to mind my manners before my own family and master?” Sasha said, tossing an entire roll of white bread into her bowl of stew, and stuffing it into her mouth. She ate just like an adventurer, which took a load off Belgrieve’s mind. There was little holding him back from the feast now, but it suddenly occurred to him to ask Helvetica a question.

“How was it? Did the talks get anywhere?”

“No, it will take a little longer... I want to do something about it within the next three to four days. Are you in a hurry?”

“I’m not in any hurry, but this is the first major event since the village was founded. Everyone’s on tenterhooks.”

Helvetica chuckled. “Understood. I wouldn’t want to be careless with my reply, so it will be a while longer, but I will try to hurry. Please take it easy until then.”

“Much obliged.”

Peeling the shell off a boiled egg, Sasha said, “Master! Do you have time today? I would love to have a match!”

“Ha ha, I don’t mind. Though I’m sure today will be the day I lose...”

“What are you talking about?! Today will be the day I make you take me seriously!”  
Sasha was in a fervor.

*I’ve never held back against you before though.* Belgrieve stroked his beard, feeling rather troubled.

Ashcroft was looking at him scornfully from the foot of the table, and eventually said, “If I may, Lady Sasha, his sword skills are not as outstanding as you make them out to be.”

“What?” Sasha glared at him. “What are you playing at, Ashe? Have you seen Belgrieve’s sword before?”

"Yes, I spotted him while he was practicing this morning. I could tell he had a firm center of gravity, and his swings were sharp. But that was it. Lady Sasha, I cannot believe you lost to him. Didn't he use some underhanded—"

Sasha was up on her feet before he could finish. "Silence! You are not worthy to speak of swords! Say that after you've beaten me!"

"I doubt I can defeat you, Lady Sasha. But I don't feel I will lose to the Red Ogre."

"Curse you, insulting my master... Master!"

Belgrieve—who had been nonchalantly eating sauerkraut—lifted his head, startled.  
"Yes?"

"Knock this fool down a peg or two. He needs to get a taste of reality!"

"Huh?" he said, after a beat.

Ashcroft stood with a grin. "Very well, interesting. I'll dispel your illusions, milady. Come at me, Red Ogre—I'll break that confidence of yours."

"Okay...?"

Still not quite grasping the situation, Belgrieve cocked his head and furrowed his brow. Seren's eyes were swimming while Helvetica was grinning.



Still oblivious, he was led to the parade grounds out back. The rain had turned the exposed ground into mud, and it seemed like quite the harsh place for a match.

Belgrieve was handed a wooden sword, and it was only after he gripped and swung it, acclimating himself to its feel, that Angeline and the other girls finally came out. Angeline just seemed a little sleepy, but Miriam and Anessa were holding their aching heads. Their faces were pale.

“Urgh... drank too much...”

“Sasha’s way too strong... Dammit, shouldn’t’ve gotten competitive...”

“Hey dad... what are you doing?”

“Daddy doesn’t really know either, but... I’m apparently supposed to have a match with Sir Ashcroft here.”

“Hmm.”

Angeline stared at Ashcroft closely—he glared back, dubiously. After staring at him a while, Angeline finally let out a large yawn. “*Hwah...* Small fry...”

“What?!”

Those two words were enough for him to fly into a rage. He turned the tip of his wooden sword on Angeline and howled, “Demon slayer or not—after I’m done with the Red Ogre, you’re next!”

His tone got to Angeline, and she turned to Belgrieve in a terrible mood.

“Dad... Crush him.”

“Oh c’mon... You don’t have to be so...”

“No, she has a point, Mr. Bell. That man needs to be put through the wringer for his own sake.”

“Right, right... Not knowing the strength of who you’re picking a fight with can turn fatal. This will be a good lesson.”

Either irritated that their party member was belittled, or because the hangover was getting to them, Miriam and Anessa were grimacing for once.

"Our seniors are right! Ashe! You must go through a little pain!" Sasha was enthusiastically and loudly on board.

For some reason, it seemed the audience was far more excited than the contestant; Belgrieve felt a little left out, and a bit sympathetic towards Ashcroft. In any case, it would be rude to hold back in a match. He breathed in deeply and took his stance.

So too did Ashcroft—and a fluid stance it was. He was clearly a man of skill. Whatever the circumstances, Belgrieve did not hate crossing blades with strong foes. At times like these, it felt as if he was a different person from his usual self. When he faced a foe with a sword in his grasp, he felt a strange sense of calm—and something fiery enkindling beneath the surface of his serenity.

Their poor footing prevented Ashcroft from finding the right time to rush in. He closed in inch by inch, watching Belgrieve's every motion. He was a fine swordsman, as far as Belgrieve could tell. If there ever was an attack, Helvetica would be safe with a man like him as her steward.

The silence was abruptly broken as a skylark raised a conspicuously loud cry. Belgrieve's brow twitched, and the next instant, Ashcroft had stepped in and was racing towards him. *What fearsome acceleration.*

However, Belgrieve reacted—he stooped down, putting his right leg out front, readying himself to parry Ashcroft's wooden blade.

He shifted his weight forward—and that was when something unexpected happened. His artificial foot dug into the ground, which was wetter than he had anticipated, leaving the rest of his body falling forward. What started out as a tilt soon turned into a full topple.

"Hrrrgh...!"

For better or worse, this complete accident had Ashcroft's sword swinging through thin air. It passed over Belgrieve's head—and as for Belgrieve's sword that fell with all his momentum, it struck squarely onto Ashcroft's shin.

Ashcroft screamed, stumbling over Belgrieve, then collapsed in the mud, clutching his

shin.

"Yaaaaargh...!"

"A-Ashcroft, are you okay?"

Having barely saved himself from falling over entirely, Belgrieve frantically stood and placed a hand on Ashcroft's shoulder. The lad was covered in mud, and he seemed to be in quite some pain. As Belgrieve hesitated over what to do, he could hear cheers from the peanut gallery.

"Ha ha ha ha! As expected of Master! Ashe—do you know your place now, fool?!"

"Hmm... Dad really is super strong."

"Oh dear, even Ashe couldn't beat him... I really do need to bring him into the house."

"Sis."

"I-I understand, Seren..."

*No, that was an accident,* Belgrieve was about to say, when Ashcroft stood in indignation. "I don't accept it! This result is utter nonsense! Lady Sasha! That was an accident! He simply slipped on the mud, and his sword landed a hit by pure coincidence!"

*Exactly!* Belgrieve felt like giving him a round of applause.

Sasha, however, looked down on Ashcroft with disdain. "Ashe... How the loser doth whine... Do you think the enemy would accept such an excuse on the battlefield? Do you think it being an accident is enough to invalidate it? Not to mention Belgrieve's sword skills far exceed common practice in some regards. While it looked as if he slipped, he splendidly evaded and attacked all at once. You fell for his carefully laid trap, and now give excuses after the fact. How truly unsightly..." She shrugged, seeming genuinely sad for him.

Belgrieve timidly approached her. "Sasha? It is exactly as Ashcroft explained..."

"Don't humble yourself, Master! There is no need to show consideration for a man like this!"

“N-No, I really did...”

“Oh, oh! What compassion... Despite all of Ashe’s numerous discourtesies, you attempt to uphold his honor... You really are exactly the man I thought you were!”

“Umm, Sasha? Could you listen to me...?”

As Belgrieve’s fretting fell on Sasha’s typically deaf ears, Ashcroft looked at him awkwardly.

“Yes... how should I put this... You have your share of troubles...”

“Ha ha... I don’t have it as bad as you.”

But just as a strange sense of solidarity was forming, a hand was placed on Ashcroft’s shoulder. Angeline stood with a full smile on her face.

“After dad is me, right?”

She was smiling, but the furious fighting spirit and pressure emanating from every inch of her body made Ashcroft’s hair stand on end.

“N-No, that was just...”

“I’ll humor you... Come.”

“A-Ange... Sir Ashcroft is tired.”

“Dad.” Angeline grinned at him. “Just watch.”

The morning parade grounds echoed with Ashcroft’s screams.

# CHAPTER 23

## IN A ROOM OF THE BORDEAUX ESTATE

In a room of the Bordeaux Estate, Ashcroft lay in tatters on the bed. He had been done in by Angeline's merciless, relentless attacks. However, Angeline, who was supposed to have been victorious, was instead despondent and shamefaced. In front of her, Belgrieve stood scowling with folded arms.

"Ange... I know you're strong. But your father doesn't think it's right for a strong person to one-sidedly attack someone weaker."

"But dad... he started it."

"Even if he is at fault, is that enough reason for you to go berserk?"

"Urgh..."

"No griping. If you're going to let power go to your head, you'd be better off not picking up a sword at all."

For once, Belgrieve seemed sincerely angry. Angeline was down in the dumps, of course, but she wasn't the only one—Miriam, Anessa, and Sasha, who had all egged her on, seemed affected as well. Helvetica and Seren exchanged glances, watching silently from the back.

It was around that time that Ashcroft groaned as he raised his torso from the bed. "No, sir... This is my mistake. Sir Belgrieve, please don't be so angry at Angeline."

"But Ashcroft, you're an important official tasked with the internal management of the territory. Now that she's put you out of commission..."

"That is precisely why I should have shown some self-restraint... Despite being a steward who should have known better, I let foolhardiness get the better of me. Belgrieve, Angeline, you have my apologies. It's not as bad as it looks. My bones and muscles don't hurt so—ow!"

Ashcroft grimaced as a maid pressed a cloth soaked in disinfectant against his wounds.

Belgrieve sighed. "You don't know how thankful I am to hear you say that... Ange, apologize to Ashcroft."

"Ugh... but..."

"Angeline."

"I'm sorry..." Though clearly wholly reluctant, Angeline bowed her head.

"Umm... Sir Belgrieve," Sasha timidly piped in. "This all happened at my suggestion. Please don't be too angry at Ange..."

Anessa and Miriam were likewise apologetic, their gazes fixed on the floor.

"We fired her up... Sorry, Ashcroft."

"It's not all Ange's fault. Sorry..."

"You have some good friends..." Belgrieve cracked a slight smile, placing a gentle hand over Angeline's head. Angeline's face, while sullen, softened ever so slightly. "Now then," he said, purposely trying to sound cheerful, "I've made things rather awkward between us. You must be busy, Helvetica. Please, don't mind us and return to your duties."

Helvetica chuckled. "Thank you for the concern—I think I'll do just that. I'll be back with good medicine, Ashe. Rest well and restore your spirits. It was a good lesson for you, wasn't it?"

"It was an honor... I have been reminded of my own immaturity." Ashcroft inclined his head in humility.

Helvetica beamed as she pulled a chair up by the bed and took a seat. "Good... Well, now that Ashe can't move, we'll need to have your discussion here. After all, it seems that Count Malta will be here soon."

"What?" Ashcroft grimaced.

Seren nodded. "We received a letter this morning. He'll be here tomorrow at earliest,

and if not, the day after."

The discussion had begun, and Belgrieve hurriedly evacuated the room. He didn't want to hear anything he shouldn't.

"Good grief... What to do now? I don't come here often, so maybe I should head to town." He spoke to Angeline beside him, but she was still feeling down and offered no reply. And so, he patted her head with a wry smile. "Don't be like that, Ange... You understand you went too far, don't you?"

"That Ashe boy is more important to you than me... Isn't he?"

"Hey now, don't even think about that. Your daddy understands you got angry for my sake..."

For a while she stayed silent, but eventually she turned to him and held out her arms. "I'll forgive you if you carry me."

Belgrieve wrapped an arm around her waist and lifted her onto his shoulder. Angeline buried her face into his hair, her eyes closed in satisfaction.

For some reason, Sasha watched with a sorrowful look on her face. "Hmm... I should have fawned over my father more..." she muttered.

Miriam meanwhile gave a mischievous laugh, circled around, and pushed her in the back. "It seems Sasha wants to be picked up too, Mr. Bell."

"Whaaaat?! Merry?!"

Seeing her bright red face, Belgrieve quizzically tilted his head. Angeline frowned a bit, but nodded to herself and jumped down.

"She's lacking fatherliness in her life, I see... Very well. I'll make an exception."

"Huh? Umm... err... Is that all right, Ange?"

"Yes... Pick her up, dad."

"Hmm... Well, I don't mind, but... Pardon me, Sasha."

Still not quite understanding what was going on, Belgrieve reached around and placed the young woman on his shoulders in the same way he did for Ange.

"Whoa!" she cried out excitedly. "How... how nostalgic...!" Sasha placed her hands on his head, her eyes sparkling. "Yes... I remember father lifting me high like this... back when I was an infant."

"I-I see..."

Sasha was taller and heavier than Angeline. However, it would be rude to call a woman weighty, and so Belgrieve put up with it, holding her aloft for a while. However, his aching joints eventually caught up to him, and he had to let her back down. It would probably get to his lower back if he pushed himself too far.

Sasha was visibly delighted. "Thank you, Master!"

"You're welcome... Umm, would you quit it with the 'master' stuff..."

"Keep up that momentum, Mr. Bell! Anne's next!" Miriam butted in.

"Hey, I'm fine, I say!" Anessa said in a panicky voice.

Belgrieve offered a troubled laugh. "Can you cut me some slack? My back is..."

"Y-You heard him! See, Merry? It's not happening..."

"It will probably be fine tomorrow. Are you good for tomorrow?"

"Huh? Ah, err... sure," Anessa said, turning red.

Miriam chuckled aloud. "Hee hee, then maybe I'll let him hold me too, tomorrow."

Hearing that, Angeline grimaced and shook her head. "Merry is no good... Too heavy."

"Hey, who are you calling fat?!"

Miriam's rage provoked laughter all around.

○

There was another mansion that could hardly be called luxurious. It was fashioned of wood and stone—sturdy, but sparsely ornamented. The decorative pieces that were on display all seemed terribly expensive, but they did not have much artistic sense or merit—it was as if they were chosen simply for their price, even betraying a certain lack of refinement.

In one of this mansion's rooms, a disgruntled man in well-tailored clothes took a seat. He was just a little over fifty. Perhaps he didn't exercise very regularly, or his middle age had not been kind to him, as he was putting on fat in all the worst places. And while he had an impressive mustache, the top of his head was not so blessed. This was Count Malta, Lord of Hazel, a town west of Bordeaux.

The count drank a mouthful of wine before roughly setting the glass on the table while he licked off the droplets caught in his mustache.

“I see. An S-Rank Adventurer... I've heard rumors of the demon slayer”

An albino girl in a fur cap sat across from him. She remained silent, looking at the count as she would at a pile of filth.

The hooded boy standing behind her spoke up. “Then put the plan on hold. The Bordeaux House is enough to contend with; it would be reckless to make an enemy of her as well.”

“Hmm... This Solomon fellow's power must not be all that great then.”

The girl's brow twitched, but the boy interjected before she could say anything. “There's no use in provoking us. It's your head that will fly upon failure. As long as she leaves, everything should go as planned. Just hold on for now,” the boy said, his cool demeanor never wavering.

Count Malta responded to this with a humorless laugh. “Are you playing at being a first-rate schemer, whelp? I will keep your warning in mind.” The count poured more wine into his glass. “I'll be going to Bordeaux after this. I should arrive by nightfall.”

“Hey, what about holding off on the plan?”

“What would holding off accomplish? You want me to wait until that S-Rank has left the territory... Do you know the pain of cowering in a corner in fear of uncertainty, child? The agony of watching your authority be lost to you, and suffering imprisonment

in the middle of nowhere year after year?!"

He slammed his hand against the table, still holding his glass and spilling wine all over. His otherwise dull eyes burned with ambition and resentment.

"I've endured it for years, waiting for none other than this very day... The previous Count Bordeaux was formidable... However, he could not triumph over his illness. His daughter is resourceful, but she is only a woman. She conducts herself too cleanly. She is nothing compared to the vile serpents I had to contend with in the capital."

Over the past few years, Count Malta had rallied the anti-Bordeaux faction within their territory. The House of Bordeaux had initially been an influential family that helped settle the land, and their moderate policies always took the common folk into careful consideration. This earned them immense support from the populace. However, it also ran completely against the aristocratic mindset of the nobles who drifted there from the central regions.

Nobles from the capital had a tendency to look down on the House of Bordeaux as ignorant hicks. The way that Sasha worked as an adventurer despite being a noble, and the way that the sisters toured their territory, at times even shedding sweat alongside the farmers—it all seemed so vulgar and lowborn to them.

Count Malta had spent years taking these opposing nobles under his wing. His forces were not yet overwhelming, but he had reached the point where he could hold real power if he could sway the opportunists to his side—so long as he could get the current countess out of the picture.

He had been driven from the capital, but he was still someone who had spent nearly all his life devoted to power struggles. His competency was such that he kept his peerage upon his defeat, and got off with merely being dispatched to the frontier.

"Nobles are different from those ill-bred lower classes. If they continue like this, the peasants will grow arrogant and begin proclaiming that the difference in status is but a trifle. Once that happens, forget the dukedom—the very empire will fall apart. A noble is a noble precisely because they maintain a noble demeanor. These girls do not understand... Listen well, the plan goes off today—tonight!"

The count chugged his wine all at once. Perhaps he was drunk—but this man had been just as mad the last time they had a meeting with him, and he was sober then. His lust

for power was so strong it was getting to his head.

The boy exhaled a fed-up sigh. "I don't care about your philosophy. However, we'll cooperate as long as our interests align."

"Fret not. Just play your part, and I'll play mine. Who do you think I am? A noble must be noble. Wealth and authority... You understand, don't you? Saint of Solomon?"

Without providing an answer to that question, the girl irritably stood and left the room, the boy trailing behind. She could hear Count Malta's eerie laughter from behind.

Swiftly walking down the hall, the girl spat, "He's as vulgar as ever, that man. A ghost of authority. Why, he reminds me of those damn monks in Lucrecia."

"You're not much better..."

"Don't lump us together! Authority must be held by those worthy of it! Do you think that pig has the qualifications?!"

The girl turned with raised eyebrows, throwing a punch at the boy. The boy simply caught her fist.

Gritting her teeth, she turned and walked off again. "Trash, the lot of them! I'll change it, goddammit... Change this whole world!"

"Do whatever you want, just don't self-destruct."

"Such nerve!"

She walked out into the courtyard. The sun loomed directly overhead, pouring down radiant light and causing mist to rise from the sodden earth, leaves glistening beneath it.

The girl lifted her right hand, which bore a ring on the middle finger. It was bestowed with hair-raising ornamentation, modeled after some beast or spirit of evil, and was inlaid with a small, black gemstone.

"Kingdom of the Abandoned!" she chanted, practically howling. "The winds turn to favor the drifters and the lost! May the curtain of twilight fall upon those who proclaim us evil! What a harsh path lies ahead!"

A fearsome torrent of mana began to build around her. It was as if this small girl's body possessed several dozen times more magical energy than a normal person.



The maelstrom of mana coalesced in the ring, and just as all seemed to calm down, a dark cloud rose from the black gemstone, breaking off and rising into the sky. It spread and spread until it had painted over the blue and flowed towards the east.

The girl huffed. "The Ring of Samigina... As long as I have this... Heh heh... heh..."

The boy folded his arms and frowned. "So in the end, we're just being used..." he muttered.

○

It was lively in the city of Bordeaux. The rain had passed, and the puddles that remained reflected the blue sky as many people crossed over them: the farmers who came to sell produce and wild plants, the merchants of the south, the wandering tribes that played their songs in the alleys, the apprentices pulling wagons, and the children racing about.

After leaving the manor, Belgrieve and the girls ate lunch at a place Sasha recommended and then took a stroll along the avenue. Belgrieve asked Sasha if her work was all right, but it seemed she was not involved in the difficult talks. Even if she wanted to weigh in, such negotiations were beyond her understanding and her input would just cause more confusion—at least, that was what she proclaimed herself. Belgrieve wondered if that was really okay, but when he thought about it, he was also trying to steer clear of it all. This was because they both trusted Helvetica and Seren to handle the matter. The way Sasha could clearly discern and declare that she would be useless in that arena was part of her charm.

The girls walked boisterously a few steps ahead of him. Their hangovers had evidently died down, and in any case, the drinks had let Sasha open up to them.

"Hey, hey, Sasha. Are there any good sweet shops around here?"

"Indeed there are! Bordeaux grows good wheat, so the bakeries are divine."

"Oh, I like the sound of that. Hey, let's go to one then."

Anessa grinned and placed a hand on Miriam's shoulder. "Who was it that complained about being called fat?"

"Shut uuup! This is completely different!"

"Oh no, I find Merry's chubbiness rather adorable! Please, stay just like that, by all means!"

"Ahhh, even Sasha! Waaah, Ange, everyone's bullying me!"

"There, there... Now let's go to the sweet shop. We'll fatten her up a bit more..."

"Wh-What are you saying?!"

"Heh heh heh, just kidding... I want something sweet as well. Is that all right, dad?"

"Yeah, I don't mind."

Belgrieve felt he was being kept out of the loop, but he was taking on more of a chaperone role in any case, and didn't really mind. It was enough that the girls were enjoying themselves.

After having their fill of the sort of sweetness it would be near impossible to taste in Turnera, they set out for the adventurers' guild on Sasha's recommendation. She wanted to introduce them to the guild master. *Am I going to receive another overblown evaluation?* Belgrieve was a little apprehensive about the idea, but couldn't find any reason to turn her down, and so he ended up tagging along.

This too was a sturdy stone building. In Bordeaux, new developments were often made of wood, but the older constructions were all of stonework. Back when the land was first settled, they were made sturdy and long lasting.

The guild was brimming with energy, teeming with men and women of all ages coming and going, while others enjoyed friendly chats here and there. The adventurers were mixed in with merchants and craftsmen who had come to buy materials.

*This takes me back,* Belgrieve thought. He had once been a part of this ruckus. Even now that he had grown accustomed to the quiet life in Turnera, the memories of his mere two years of adventuring remained vivid in his mind.

There were adventurers here who had been in the pub the night before, and their group was soon surrounded by a cheering crowd.

"Oh! The S-Ranks are here!"

“Tell us how you slew the demon!”

“I want to ask the Red Ogre something! How do you raise an S-Rank adventurer?”

“Hey, why do you stay holed up in Turnera?”

“That’s such a waste! If you’re good enough for Sasha to call ‘Master,’ you’d make it to the top of Bordeaux’s guild in no time.”

Smiling wryly at the tempestuous barrage of questions, he followed Sasha through a door behind the counter. While the adventurers continued making noise about it, they were held back by the receptionist lady.

Belgrieve sighed as they ascended the stairs. “Well, I’ll be... My name’s taken on a life of its own.”

“Hmm? What are you saying, Master?”

“Just talking to myself... Also, Sasha, you don’t have to call me ‘Master.’”

“Guild master! Are you here?”

Sasha threw open the door at the end of the stairs. It opened into a vast study, with a sofa and a six-seater table in the front—perhaps to receive guests. There was an office desk in the back, tidily piled with numerous documents.

Behind the desk, there sat an old man. He was perhaps in his early sixties. His long white hair was bundled at the back, and while the creases in his face were deep and his eyes were misted by the sort of gloom that only came to the elderly, he gave off a terribly gentle impression. Sasha brazenly made her way over and placed a hand on the desk.

“I apologize for interrupting your work. There is someone I must introduce to you by all means!”

The guild master smiled at her. “Yes, everyone’s whispering about it, Sasha. The Black-Haired Valkyrie Angeline and her party, as well as the Red Ogre Belgrieve, correct?”

Sasha introduced everyone with a proud smile on her face. “This is Angeline, the Black-Haired Valkyrie. Over here, we have her party members Anessa and Miriam. This man

is the Red Ogre I told you about. And everyone, this is the guild master of Bordeaux, Elmore!"

They each nodded as Sasha mentioned their names. The guild master slowly stood, and gave a courteous bow of his head in return.

"I am Elmore. I do my best to manage the adventurers' guild in Bordeaux. It is a pleasure to meet you."

"We're greatly obliged. And, about barging in so rudely out of nowhere..."

"Oh, no, I wasn't working on anything important."

With the same gentle smile, Elmore ushered the five of them to the guest sofa.

As she sat down, Angeline said, "Very upstanding, Mr. Elmore... Completely different from our guild master in Orphen."

"Hey, don't say that..." Anessa said with a chuckle. Certainly, Orphen's guild master's office wasn't so tidy, and Lionel didn't have a shred of dignity.

Elmore took a bottle of mint water from the shelf. "Lionel is doing his best. I think he did a very good job at handling that mass outbreak of fiends without any assistance from the other guilds. We would have sent reinforcements, but we do not have any S-Rank adventurers in Bordeaux..."

Taking a sip of the liquid poured into her glass, Angeline asked, "What rank were you, Mr. Elmore...?"

"I was AA-Rank. That was as far as my adventuring talent would take me, but I had a surprising knack for desk work, you see. It's been twenty years since I've taken the position."

"Hmm... According to our guild master, it's a do-nothing job for incompetents... Is that true?"

"Hey, Ange, you're being rude," Belgrieve hurriedly reprimanded her.

However, Elmore laughed pleasantly, not the least bit offended. "Yes, yes, I understand completely. At present, nearly all guild masters are mere figureheads. They stand

between the central guild and their own guild and exist to receive the complaints of both. However, the situation is a little different in Bordeaux.”

Sasha leaned in. “Bordeaux’s guild has always had connections to the lord. Pedigreed nobles from the capital generally scorn adventurers, but the House of Bordeaux has always been quite close to the adventuring trade.”

“Yes. And that is precisely why our guild has a role in the city’s defenses. Lords usually despise the mere thought of issuing requests to adventurers. It takes money, and they have their own honor to consider.”

“All absurd,” Sasha said, frowning.

Elmore smiled. “But Bordeaux is different. The family made a proper contract with the guild from the start, establishing a system where their soldiers work together with adventurers to deal with fiends and other abnormalities. Because of this, my position is similar to that of a commanding officer. Since the system here is different, I do have a little more work than the other guild masters, but I find it very fulfilling.”

Belgrieve was impressed. Back when he was an adventurer, it was normal for town soldiers to be on terrible terms with adventurers. Here, they worked together, with the younger sister of the countess working as an active adventurer.

However, at the same time, he could see this harming their reputation as nobles. Perhaps the nobles who they had connections with for generations would be fine, but the ones who moved from the central regions would have a hard time putting up with Bordeaux when they deepened their bonds with adventurers—practically the bottom rung of the societal ladder. *This is probably one of the reasons they’re hindering the road maintenance*, Belgrieve mused with a furrowed brow. He could never bring himself to understand the world of nobility.

As they were chatting, the sky outside the window suddenly turned dark, and as there hadn’t been any candles lit, the room was pitched into darkness as well. Elmore cocked his head curiously, stood, and walked over. For a moment, he thought the sun was setting, only to see the sky covered in thick clouds.

“That’s peculiar. It was clear a moment ago...”

Miriam rushed over with a frown. She looked out, narrowing her eyes. “Real strange... I can sense some incredibly distorted mana.”

Angeline's brow twitched. "I feel a prickling sensation... I have a bad feeling about this."

An adventurer burst into the room. "Guild master! Big trouble! There's a mass outbreak of undead from the graveyard!"

"What? How could this be..." Elmore knit his brow. "How many of them?"

"More than a hundred. Everyone who was available is holding them back, but there's no end in sight."

"Understood, we'll have the soldiers on the case as well. Sasha?"

"Loud and clear! I'll get to it at once! Pardon me!"

Sasha took off like the wind, and Angeline stood as well.

"I'll help..."

"Oh, that's... Are you sure?"

"It will be a good warm-up before we return to Orphen..."

"I've gotta regain my senses. Else, they'll say I'm slacking off."

"Been a while since I went on a rampage."

They weren't wearing their usual adventuring equipment, but even when going out to have fun, they always carried their weapons. This was an adventurer's habit.

Elmore looked relieved. "I couldn't ask for more... I'll go to the church and ask them to put up a barrier. Can I ask you to investigate the graveyard?"

"Leave it to me." Angeline looked at Belgrieve. "You too, right... dad?"

"How could I say no?"

*I just hope I won't get in the way.* But he kept that to himself—excuses were useless on the battlefield. He could only give it his all. Angeline was delighted to fight alongside her father, and she grew visibly motivated.

It was dark out, and it looked like the rain would come again.

# CHAPTER 24

## THE WIND WAS LIKE THE BREATH OF A FIEND

The wind was like the breath of a fiend, damp and coiling uncomfortably over the skin. They ran behind the adventurer in the lead, who was prattling on excitedly.

“The clouds, see, they were coming from the west without any wind, and then guess what? They spread all across town before I knew it. Then an army, an army I say! From the graveyard! What the hell is going on?!”

“So these clouds... must have been someone’s doing.”

Belgrieve cocked his head. There were many people fleeing through the streets, all of them running in the exact opposite direction from the graveyard. Given that was their destination, it was quite a hassle to pass through the crowds.

“This ain’t good. Everyone’s panicking.”

As they found themselves at a standstill, a clear and dignified voice resounded through the crowd. “No need to rush, everyone! Calm down, and listen to the soldiers!”

Sasha raced in with a company of soldiers. The civilians burst into a relieved clamor as the soldiers began directing them.

“I’m sorry I kept you waiting! Now let’s go!”

“Nicely done, Sasha... Let’s go.”

Bordeaux’s graveyard was on the edge of the city. It was quite a large site, given this was a city on the northern outskirts. It was covered in countless undead.

The undead were, to put it simply, dead bodies that moved. It didn’t matter if they were once human or beast; when mana penetrated an empty husk, it would turn into a fiend. Fresh corpses maintained their human form, but the older ones were rotting away, permeating the air with a terrible stench. They were not much of a threat on their own, but they had strength in numbers. They could even be classified as a calamity

once they numbered in the hundreds, and by that point, high-ranking adventurers would need to be called in. On top of that, it seemed that other variants—ghosts without substance, and greater undead, a more powerful variant—were appearing as well. These were the sorts of fiends that could not be vanquished without mana-infused weapons or magic.

The adventurers were putting up a hard fight against the fiends that sprung up one after the next. There were too many of them, and the rotting smell pierced the nose, disrupting their concentration.

“Vile buggers! Why are there suddenly so many of them?!”

“How should I know?! Quit talking and just keep swinging!”

And just as the situation seemed to be taking a turn for the worse, several arrows were sent flying and pierced the nearby undead. Anessa’s arrows seemed to have spells carved into them. They exploded on impact, erasing the foes near her targets as well. Just like that, the enemy was pushed back quite a distance, and the adventurers all breathed a sigh of relief.

Then in no time at all, Miriam’s magic flashed as she deployed layer upon layer of geometric symbols, sending bursts of lightning all around. Her bolts accurately pierced through their decomposing bodies, charring them black.

That was when Angeline jumped in. She advanced as if sliding along the ground, carving up one foe after another. It took just one slice to bisect even the ghosts that had no corporeal substance. These undead would not otherwise be destroyed by any ordinary sword, but they were easy pickings for a blade she was pouring so much of her mana into.

Cheers rose at the sight of her felling many an undead fiend.

“Amazing! As expected of an S-Rank party!”

“Aha ha ha, they’re on another level...”

“You buffoon! You’re gonna let them overtake you? Show them the backbone of Bordeaux’s adventurers!” Roused to act, the adventurers launched a counterattack with even greater momentum.

Belgrieve watched them, a little further back. He couldn't help but burst into a smile as he saw his daughter in action. The girl he was seeing now wasn't the spoiled Ange—this was the S-Rank Adventurer Angeline, the Black-Haired Valkyrie. *That's one load off my mind*, he thought. *How many times did I find myself fighting alongside the whole guild like this?* He found himself growing a little nostalgic. He never thought he would be standing here again.

"This is no time to grow emotional..." Belgrieve drew his sword and stepped forth, slicing through an undead that was about to take another combatant by surprise.

The adventurers were all astir at the sight.

"Oh, you're the Red Ogre..."

"I'm not all I'm cracked up to be, but I'll help out."

"Glad to hear it! You're worth a thousand men!"

"What reliable reinforcements!"

They raised their weapons with even more vigor than before. *I don't think I'm that reliable*, Belgrieve mused with a self-deprecating smile.

The undead had lost some momentum from the party's preemptive strike, but their strength in numbers still held fast. They sprouted up one after another, and it was not long before they had recovered from their losses.

Angeline screwed up her face at the smell, though her movements did not dull as she sliced through the hordes with Anessa and Miriam providing support. Sasha also raced about, her sword whirling like a hurricane.

*I can't run around like that, not with my body like this.* Belgrieve took a deep breath. The miasma stung his nostrils, but not to a degree he couldn't withstand. He formulated movements that would suit his body, finding it a little laughable that he would be doing so in real combat.

Back and forth, he swayed with his peg leg as an axis. He did not cut through with raw force; his foes were mindlessly coming at him, so he dodged with the minimum movements required, moving his sword in accordance with his lunges. He did not have much mana in his body, but he made sure to channel what he had into his blade. The

undead were sliced through, rendered immobile so easily it even took him by surprise, giving him pause.

"Would I be able to use this on foes that aren't undead?" he muttered, just as the next undead approached. The decayed state of its body prevented it from moving quickly, and Belgrieve once again easily evaded and sliced through.

Moving like this was not a great burden on his body, but it would take some getting used to. He felt he would leave himself completely open if he grew distracted.

"No use thinking about it..."

*Sharpen your senses*, he told himself. He corrected his grip on his blade and made his way towards the next undead. *My body aside, it's like my heart is returning to what it once was*. He chuckled.

The entry of an S-Rank party gradually shifted the battle to favor the adventurers. The undead numbers were going down little by little. Unfortunately, the barrier Elmore said he would request wasn't yet operational; once it activated, they would be rid of the fiends in the blink of an eye.

As the adventurers began showing signs of fatigue, Elmore raced over. He came up to Belgrieve, who had momentarily retreated to catch his breath, and said, "It's not looking good. These clouds are preventing the barrier from going up. We won't be able to pin them down like this."

"They're affecting the barrier... What exactly are these clouds?"

Belgrieve looked up at the sky. Perhaps the sun had set beyond them, as the clouds were growing even darker, covering the sky with their inky-black taint. However, there was still some gradient to them, likely due to the volume of clouds.

Suddenly, Belgrieve looked towards the Bordeaux Estate. It seemed as if that was the only place where the clouds were strangely thick.

"They came from the west, as I recall... From Hazel?" He had a bad feeling about this. Hazel was a town that had voiced staunch objections to Bordeaux's policies. Belgrieve turned towards Elmore. "Elmore, are a majority of the adventurers here?"

"Yes, excluding those away on requests, a majority should be gathered here in the

graveyard. The soldiers are also either here or helping the civilians evacuate. Though not as much, there are still undead in town as well.”

“This might be someone’s scheme... If it is, they must have a separate objective...”

Elmore nodded. “It’s certainly unnatural for something like this to happen without warning.”

“I’m going to the Bordeaux Estate. The clouds there are thickest, and I know nothing good will come of it.”

“Huh... You’re right.”

Elmore glanced at the graveyard. The adventurers were worn out, but Angeline’s party was still racing about the front lines.

“Let me join you. I have nothing to worry about with Angeline and Sasha holding the fort here.”

“Thanks. Truth be told, I don’t know the roads...”

Belgrieve sighed. With some nearby adventurers who had listened in and volunteered to join their ranks, Belgrieve and company made haste towards the Bordeaux Estate.

○

It had come as a complete surprise. A majority of the soldiers guarding the manor had left for town, and they were short on hands. There were already undead roaming the first floor, preventing escape. This was the textbook definition of being outnumbered.

Ashcroft set up a formation in the second floor corridor with a handful of soldiers. They had been pushed back this far from the front door.

The room behind him sheltered Helvetica, Seren, and a few servants and guards. The space in front of him was filled with undead. The wounds he had received from Angeline that morning had been healed, to a certain extent, by the elixir he had been given. However, it would take a night’s sleep for it to permeate through his body, so he was not in peak condition.

To make matters worse, it was not just undead. There were a few powerful higher-

ranking types mixed among them. The stench pierced his nose, and he could not focus. He was confident about fighting people, but as he was not an adventurer, Ashcroft was somewhat inexperienced at combating fiends. Soldiers fell one by one, and now only ten of them remained.

*To think it would happen now of all times.* He bit his lip, vexed at how his own selfish spite prevented him from giving his all during an emergency.

“Dammit... Steward of the House of Bordeaux... What a laugh.”

Ashcroft was the fourth son of a certain baron. He would never inherit the barony no matter how he struggled—at most, he could earn a payroll as a servant of some other house. However Helvetica saw his talent and appointed him, and thus he found himself at the center of the territory’s management during the time of the late Count Bordeaux. Therefore, his faith in the House of Bordeaux was unshakable. He had developed the land without a hitch and had the confidence that came with his devotion. Admittedly, he had grown a little conceited, though it was inevitable for him to grow envious of how Helvetica and her sisters all adored Belgrieve so.

The results spoke for themselves, and perhaps he would lose the life of the countess—a life he valued far more than his own. Compounding his failures that morning, it felt as if the pride and self-esteem he had built up over the years had all come crashing down.

But this was no time to be depressed. He encouraged his aching body and yelled, “I’ll protect this point even if it costs me my life! You won’t get a single step closer to Lady Helvetica or Lady Seren!”

He personally stood at the forefront, swinging his blade. He was not as good as Sasha, but the skills he had trained up were vicious even when he was not in perfect form.

Still, the undead remained undeterred, both in numbers and momentum. When one in the front fell, the next would climb over its remains. Added to the stench, his fatigue and lack of focus were beginning to mount.

A soldier beside him screamed as an undead bit into his windpipe. Ashcroft swiftly sliced it down, but the soldier had already breathed his last. They were gradually being pushed back.

“Is this what I get for my ignorance?” Ashcroft muttered. However, he was the only one

who deserved to be punished. At the very least, he needed to aid his lady's escape.

He straightened his glasses, clenching his sword to slice open an escape path when suddenly he heard something from behind the undead. It did not seem to be enemy reinforcements—he heard the death groans of fiends, the sound of tearing flesh, and of something bursting.

“Wh-What...?”

The sound gradually drew closer. The undead closing in on Ashcroft was sliced from behind.

A sway of red hair rendered him dumbfounded. “Bel... Belgrieve...”

“Ashcroft! You’re alive!”

Belgrieve offered a relieved smile and took a deep breath. He had sprinted through town, barged into the mansion, and single-mindedly carved his way here. This meant he had to press through while ignoring minor injuries, which was a little tough on the body of an injured forty-year-old.

There was a burst of magic behind him. A burst of mana erupted from Elmore’s hand, erasing a fiend. Ashcroft turned to see the smiling old man.

“You’re all right, Ashcroft. Then Helvetica...”

“In the room behind me... But why are you two here?”

Belgrieve collected his breath, then said, “I felt a chill. It was mostly intuition... I’m just glad you’re in one piece.”

There were tears forming in Ashcroft’s eyes—though he himself couldn’t tell if he was relieved, or ashamed of his own pathetic state. Whichever it was, he grew bashful as a result, drooping his head and sobbing. Belgrieve placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Now, now—this is no time to cry! We need to get out of here, and fast.”

He stood silently for a moment, determination welling up inside. “That’s right!” Ashcroft opened the door and called, “Lady Helvetica, Lady Seren! The enemy’s numbers are down! This is our chance to escape!”

Helvetica—who had a calm expression even in this situation—nodded. Seren seemed a little fearful, though she showed a bit of relief when she saw Belgrieve and Elmore.

They made their way out, clearing out any undead that remained in their path. Though he had stepped back from the front lines a while, Elmore was still a former AA-Rank adventurer, and the ones who had accompanied them were specialists at fiend extermination, driving off the undead with more expertise than the soldiers. Belgrieve was also overexerting his aching body to swing his blade.

The sun was already setting outside, and the thick clouds made for a deeper darkness than night. Elmore manifested small balls of light from his hand to illuminate the way.

They proceeded as a party, surrounding the two ladies. Belgrieve kept on his toes as he made a suggestion. “For now, it would probably be safest to join up with the other adventurers and soldiers.”

“Yes, I hope the battle at the graveyard has wrapped up,” replied Elmore. “On another note, you look like you’re in pain, Mr. Belgrieve. Are you quite all right?”

Belgrieve winced. “I’m embarrassed to say I injured myself a short while ago... I pushed my body a little too far.”

“My word...” Elmore apologetically frowned. “I had no idea... And I’ve probably made it worse for you.”

“Ha ha, I can’t be the only one loafing about at a time like this. Don’t worry about it.” Belgrieve laughed calmly.

Ashcroft timidly reached out to him. “I was injured as well, and couldn’t do my job properly... You are quite something, Belgrieve. Let me once again apologize for my insolence this morning.”

“What are you talking about? We only made it in time because you managed to hold them back for so long. You did a wonderful job, Ashcroft. Be proud of yourself.”

“I’m... truly no match.” The boy bashfully scratched his cheek. Then suddenly, there was a hand atop his head, ruffling up his hair.

Helvetica smiled. “Sir Belgrieve is correct. Nicely done.”

"Your words are wasted on me."

Noticing that Ashcroft was about to cry again, Seren giggled. "You're kinda becoming a crybaby, Ashe."

His face turned a terrible shade of red, and he tried to play it off by pushing up his glasses.

○

There was a large swelling of mana in the depths of the graveyard. There were far fewer undead by then, and they had likely dealt with the brunt of them. However, Angeline could keenly sense that things weren't going to end so easily.

*Where's dad?* She looked around. She had seen him fighting in the back a short while before. It made her terribly giddy to fight on the same battlefield, but now he was gone. *Did he retreat?*

"Ah!" someone cried, pointing overhead. Everyone looked to the sky.

The black clouds covering the entire sky overhead were gathering onto a single point, further in the graveyard. A damp wind pelted them, almost like something vile was breathing down their necks.

Angeline narrowed her eyes—she knew this sensation. It felt as if she had confronted it before...

As the clouds coalesced, they revealed the evening sky. There was still a faint tint of red in the distance, shifting in gradients of purple and ultramarine the higher it climbed. A number of stars were out, and under the beautiful sky stood something sinister. It was as though the dusky sky itself had been scraped together into some crude being, like a shadow puppet. However, its shape was indeterminate, and it wriggled and shifted like a viscous fiend called a slime.

Mana filled the air, of a kind that prickled the skin. Angeline rolled her shoulders and took a deep breath.

"Another demon...? But..."

It felt a little different from the one she had fought before. It had a similar appearance

and aura, but it seemed somewhat synthetic.

Anessa and Miriam stood watching from beside her.

“What a strange presence... Is it that black lump?”

“What’s that thing supposed to be? I’ve got a terrible feeling about this.”

“A demon... maybe?”

This statement caused the two of them to look at the shadow blankly. It was beginning to change shape again, slowly moving about. Several feeler-like appendages sprouted from what had condensed into a round body, letting it crawl like a spider.

For a moment, it seemed as if its body arbitrarily split in two, only for teeth and a tongue to flash out of the gap. “Want... to... g... go home...”

The next instant, a great number of shadow-like fiends emerged from within its mouth: darkwalkers, a type of ghost. Their dark hues melded with the dusk, making them difficult to make out. The adventurers were astir.

“Light magic!” Angeline called. “Set up some lights!”

Her words returned them to their senses, and the magicians each began chanting and launching glowing orbs. The dark graveyard was filled with light, staggering the darkwalkers.

Sasha lifted her sword and cried, “This is our chance! Go on the offense!”

With war cries and raised weapons, the adventurers pushed forward.

“I’ll leave the small fries to you...” Angeline said, kicking off before she got any reply. She threaded her way through the slow-moving darkwalkers, closing in on the shadow puppet.

She swung her blade and severed a feeler with no difficulty whatsoever. Once it fell to the ground, it disintegrated into black smoke and vanished.

Angeline observed this dubiously. “I didn’t feel any resistance... What is this?”

But there was no time to think—a blow came from the side. Another of its arms came at her like a whip, striking her in the flank.

Angeline was thrown back, but she corrected herself mid-flight and landed. The impact was immense, but it had hardly caused any pain. She rubbed her side and noted she hadn't incurred any injury.

"Is it just for show...?"

More arms came at her from every angle. It seemed it could sprout as many from its body as it wanted. They were fast, but not so fast she couldn't react to them. Angeline stooped down and sliced, severing consecutive limbs, but it was as if she was swinging her sword through the fog. It felt like she was on a fool's errand.

"You're underestimating me!"

Once she had cleared away most of its tentacles, Angeline raised her sword and lowered a strong blow straight at the main body. As expected, she severed it just as easily as she had its limbs—but this time, the black fog spread out and enveloped her.

"Ack..."

The moment she had inhaled some through her nose and mouth, her shoulder began aching even when it should have been completely healed. *Poison?* she wondered, and immediately channeled strength into her legs to leap back. However, it was as if the fog had suddenly gained substance, a physical mass that prevented her from moving. Angeline fell to her knees as if something was pinning her down.

A strange voice echoed in her head. "Thesamethesamethesamethesame..."

"Ack... gasp!"

She struggled for breath, panting heavily and clutching at her chest. Each time, she would take in a little more of the fog. There was a heavy sweat oozing down her brow. A burning pain came from her shoulder wound, and it was beginning to bleed as well.

"What is this..."

She mustered her power to twist her body, and it took everything she had just to jump out of the fog. She tripped over herself, not even landing properly; she hit the ground

shoulder first.

“Ange!”

“What? What happened?!”

Anessa and Miriam raced over. However, the fog had gathered again into a shadow, its appendages swinging about like whips to obstruct them. Other feelers wrapped around Angeline’s arms and legs.

“Gohomegohomegohomegohome.”

“Shut... up!”

She forced herself to swing her sword and cut herself free. However, there were more feelers by the moment, now wrapping around her entire body. Every single one wriggled like a living being, and she could feel goosebumps rising on her skin. The strange voice continued resonating in her head.

“Thesamethesamelet’sgohomelet’sgohome...”

It was as if she wasn’t herself anymore. A dread crept all about her body, sending her into a panic, and before she knew it, there were tears clouding her eyes.

“I don’t... want this!”

“Ange!”

That was when Sasha leaped in with a powerful slash. With one swing of her blade, she had lopped off all the feelers binding Angeline and caught her before she could fall. The voice fell silent, but her body was numb. Angeline took in a deep breath and groaned.

“Sorry, Sasha... I’m pathetic...”

“Ange... What a fiend...”

Sasha fell back with Angeline held over her shoulder. The adventurers were astir as soon as they saw an S-Rank adventurer retreat. They were visibly dismayed, and it was affecting their movements. Once again, the shadow puppet split open, and more

and more darkwalkers crept from its mouth. The situation was immediately taking a turn for the worse.

The shadow's tentacles wriggled, slowly pulling it towards the front lines. With more darkwalkers, the adventurers were gradually forced to pull back. And then, the air pulsed. The adventurers looked around, startled. A lone ten-year-old walked through their ranks—her hair was white and long, while her eyes were a dark red.

"Hey! That's dangerous! Get back!"

The girl turned back to face the adventurers, an affable smile on her face. "No need to worry!"

At the same time, a darkwalker was upon her. The adventurers swallowed their breath, some even jumped forth to save her. However, the girl held up her right hand, unperturbed. The darkwalker leaping at her was shot back as if repulsed by some unseen force.

"Bear witness to the miracle of Master Solomon!"

In an instant, a fearsome torrent of mana burst from the girl's body flying towards the shadow. It formed a whirlwind around the fearsome foe, gradually growing stronger and stronger. Bits and pieces of the shadow's body broke off, the mist sucked away into the flow and lifted high into the air, until at last every last scrap of it was gone. Before anyone realized it, the darkwalkers—and even the remnants of the undead—were gone too.

The adventurers were taken aback. What could this be? Some sort of miracle? Everyone felt as though they were dreaming.

The girl spun around, spreading her hands out with a cheerful smile. "Good work, everyone! The crisis has been averted!"

"Who... Who are you..." somebody asked. The girl was happy to answer.

"My name is Charlotte! I have journeyed all across the land to bring salvation to this world!"

Her statement was followed by the clopping of hooves. They looked up at the stout man atop a horse in surprise.

“C-Count Malta?”

“Why is he here...”

Count Malta glanced over the adventurers with cold eyes until he spotted Sasha. He led his horse towards her, lowering his head with such abject courtesy it came off as insulting.

“Why if it isn’t Lady Sasha. It must have been a difficult battle.”

“Count Malta... What brings you here?”

The count chuckled. “I saw some peculiar clouds headed west this afternoon. Charlotte here happened to be a guest at my house at the time, and she told me the clouds contained mana, and that they were dangerous. I felt unease in my chest, so I raced here as fast as I could with my army. Oh, I’m so glad I made it in time.”

His tone was polite, but he continued to look down on her without getting off his horse. *He knows what he’s doing.* Sasha bit her lip.

Malta went on, “It seems they were fiends of the undead variety. What happened to your barrier?”

“It wouldn’t activate for some reason...”

“I see! What tough luck! And I see you were at a disadvantage, even with so many splendid adventurers banded together! Dear me, what would have happened had I not made it in time... The Bordeaux House must be haggard with all the politicking, to fall behind at such a critical moment.”

Sasha hung her head, frustrated at the man’s mocking tone. She wanted to reprimand him for his insolence and drive him off, but it was undeniable that his guest had repelled the shadowy fiend. Taking an overbearing attitude against him would affect the dignity of House Bordeaux.

Count Malta disinterestedly scoffed once he realized Sasha would offer no rebuttal. “In any case, I’m glad to see you safe, Sasha. I only hope I can say the same for Helvetica.”

“My sister is in the manor. She should be safer there than here.”

"Oh, is that so?"

The count was grinning from ear to ear, clearly finding something simply thrilling. He showed not the least bit of hesitation, and there was glee in his eyes.

"He's acting pretty important after showing up late... Who is this pig?" Angeline muttered.

This was picked up on by the count's sharp ears, and the smile vanished from his face.  
"What... What did you just say, girly?!"

"Adventurers who barge in late and take all the good parts are the lowest of the low... In short, you are the worst."

Angeline's frankness elicited quite the reaction from Count Malta; his face flushed, he grit his teeth, and he began to quiver. However, when he was about to speak up, Sasha cheerfully cried out, "Sister! Seren!"

Malta turned with a start. His eyes opened wide as if he was seeing a ghost. Helvetica, Seren, and Ashcroft had returned along with Belgrieve.

With her usual smile, Helvetica greeted the count. "Sir Malta, you have my eternal gratitude for marching such a distance with reinforcements. I offer my thanks as Countess Bordeaux."

"Grr... I-It need not concern you."

While Helvetica's mouth was smiling, her eyes weren't in the slightest. It was as if her gaze was piercing through him, and the count's eyes were swimming in his flustered state.

Then, Ashcroft stepped forward. "Count, I'm not sure what to think of a man of your stature remaining mounted before the one he serves."

Snapping back to reality, the count got down and bobbed his head. He was immediately out of Helvetica's consideration, and she quickly turned to look at the soldiers around her.

"We don't know what else might happen tonight. Let's have the residents continue their evacuation. I know how unreasonable I'm being, but please keep watch on

rotation. Adventurers, thank you for your hard work. I know I might need your assistance again soon, but first, please rest your bodies.”

The adventurers were relieved to hear this, and they sluggishly made off in the direction of the guild.

Helvetica turned back to Count Malta. “Count, I cannot offer much in this situation, but you didn’t come here to be entertained, did you? You came with your troops, so I’d like them to help with the watch if possible.”

Malta begrudgingly gave his consent, leaped atop his horse, and made off with haste. Charlotte frantically ran after to catch up with him.

“My survival seems to have been a miscalculation on his part...” Helvetica said with a sigh.

“We don’t have any evidence, sis. We’ll need to move cautiously.”

“I know, Seren... Now then, we’ll have to tidy up the manor.”

They all began moving to fulfill their respective roles. Belgrieve scrunched his face at the pain that assailed him the moment he relaxed, and walked away slowly in search of Angeline. He was horrified to see her hoisted over Sasha’s shoulder, and forgetting his own pain and exhaustion, he rushed to her like lightning.

“Ange! What’s wrong?! Did something happen?! Are you all right?! Are you injured?!”

Angeline giggled, seeing her father in such a mad dash. “I’m fine... but I can’t muster my strength... Carry me.”

“I see... That’s good... All right, upsy-daisy.”

Belgrieve took over from Sasha and carried Angeline on his back. She hugged him, content—before scowling as she recalled the strange sensation of the black fog enveloping her.

“Wrong. I am... myself.” She shook her head to rid herself of it. For now, she simply had to let her father’s large back reassure her. Now that the battle was over, she was unable to resist the drowsiness that had softly crept its way in. She was asleep before she knew it.

# CHAPTER 25

## IT WAS A ROOM ON THE SECOND FLOOR

It was a room on the second floor of an inn. The Bordeaux Estate had been rendered unusable with the fiend attack, so Count Malta had been forced to rest here. As an inn for adventurers, travelers, and merchants, it was not high-class by any means. The room contained only a bed, and two chairs. There was not a single decorative piece—no better than a pigsty, as far as this noble was concerned.

Count Malta smacked the table in a fury.

“Why is Helvetica alive?!”

“Don’t shout at me! I made sure a bunch of strong ones appeared at her manor!”

Charlotte, who was sitting in one of the chairs, was similarly irritated, tapping her heels into the chair’s legs.

The boy leaned against the wall—Byaku—opened his mouth. “Not too loud,” he said, sounding rather fed up.

“Silence!” the count screamed. “To hell with Solomon! He was of no use whatsoever!”

Charlotte’s face twisted into an expression of loathing at this, but paying her no heed, Malta paced about the room, practically stomping with each step.

“Sasha is incompetent in politics, and while Seren is an intellectual, she is still a child. Neither is fit for lordship! It would have been simple so long as Helvetica was out of the picture...”

Count Malta had intended to use the confusion to kill Helvetica, then make himself out to be the hero who saved the city. Then, with the backing of the anti-Bordeaux faction, he would seat himself as the regional lord, even if only as a proxy. Once that was done with, Sasha and Seren would be the least of his concerns.

He was a master of using his authority to rid himself of his political opponents—in

fact, that was nearly all he did at the capital. Once they were assassinated or incarcerated for whatever reason, he was free to do as he pleased. Just like that, the opportunists would jump aboard his wagon, and the Bordeaux region would be his. At least, that was the plan... but it was all ruined now. With Helvetica alive and well, the anti-Bordeaux nobles couldn't lift a finger against her. Perhaps they would even sell out Count Malta to save their own skins.

Malta stamped the ground, his flabby stomach jiggling as he cursed. "Dammit! Dammit! This can't be happening! I'm surrounded by incompetents!"

"That's why I told you to wait..." Byaku said with a sigh. "It would have succeeded if you waited for them to leave. You're the incompetent one here, Count Malta."

The count turned red, and it seemed like he might have an aneurysm. No matter what he tried to say, he was too choked for breath to utter a word, and his mouth was left puckering like a beached fish. He took a swig directly from his wine bottle to calm himself, red liquid dribbling from the corner of his mouth down his shirt collar.

Byaku was growing more aggravated by the minute that they had to form a cooperative relationship with such a foolish man.

Charlotte scoffed. "It's not over yet. In short, we just need Helvetica dead, yes?"

Panting, Malta wiped his mouth off with the back of his hand. "That's right... We haven't failed. Tonight... tragedy strikes, and Helvetica will be attacked by a new wave of undead, and perish... Ha... aha ha..." His eyes glazed over. Unable to admit his loss, yet unable to cast aside his lust for power—and what had it brought him?

Byaku watched him with cold eyes. "*Sigh...*"

As Charlotte stood and attempted to leave the room, the count called her to a stop. He muttered to her something unspeakable, and Charlotte immediately laid her disgust bare.

"Are you out of your mind?!" she cried. "There's no way I could do... something that horrible!"

"We are defeated otherwise... You should understand the pain of losing family more than most. With that, we could easily rock them all to the core..."

"Enough!" Charlotte screamed and stormed out of the room. Byaku followed behind.

It was rowdy in the inn, as adventurers made merry on the first floor. Their loud, hearty conversations told tales of the first time they had seen an S-Rank adventurer fight, and how terrifying the shadow fiend's magic had been. Watching stealthily from a corner, Charlotte furrowed her brow.

"This is the worst... They'll forget about Solomon's miracle at this rate."

"Your methods won't work against those who've got no complaints with the current system. It's just a scam, after all."

"Then what do you call what the Vienna Church is doing? Hmph... useless." Charlotte gritted her teeth. She recalled Helvetica's composed face, though she had only seen it for a brief instant. She was a woman who could take complete control of the mood just by being present. She carried herself as if happiness and good fortune were only natural—even though Charlotte had lost everything.

"I can't stand it...!"

Charlotte had felt nothing but disgust towards Count Malta's proposal, but now, she wanted to grant the unthinkable to the countess. Charlotte despised her. She understood how unreasonable she was being somewhere in her heart, but her rationality was not enough to keep her hatred and disgust in check.

Charlotte looked at Byaku. "We'll need a bit of chaos. Byaku, we'll take out Helvetica, no matter what."

Byaku closed his eyes without a word.

○

Corpses scattered all throughout the estate emitted their fetid odor, the sheer stench making it all difficult to bear. Moreover, it was an inescapable fact that they had once been human; thus, the cleanup efforts were having a hard time getting anywhere.

Even so, servants and soldiers cleared away the undead corpses. Meanwhile, the bodies of those who had been slain in the struggle against them were gathered in one place, where they were prayed over in silence. Night had fallen by the time things had settled down, and Belgrieve let out a deep sigh in one of the rooms that had luckily

remained untouched.

His whole body ached; he had overexerted himself once more, and even if it had been unavoidable, he lamented the pangs nonetheless. Angeline hadn't awoken since the time she passed out on his back. She was sound asleep on the bed, snoring. Anessa and Miriam had pulled up chairs to watch over her, but as the night drew on, their own fatigue caught up with them and both had nodded off.

Helvetica and the others seemed to be discussing things elsewhere. Belgrieve would have liked to join in if he was well enough, but now that he had taken a seat, it felt far too bothersome to get up. And yet, he feared falling into sleep—he wasn't sure he would ever be up on his feet again if he did.

He sat there, silently staring out the window until there was a knock on the door.

"Come in," he said, and Ashcroft made his way in.

"Sorry for bothering you when you're resting, Sir Belgrieve. How is Angeline's condition...?"

"Don't worry about it... She's just asleep, as far as I can tell. She's not in any pain, and I believe she should recover after a night's rest."

Ashcroft looked at the girls asleep on the bed and let out a relieved breath. "That's good... They're all the saviors of Bordeaux. We must give them our gratitude."

"Ha ha, you're exaggerating. The adventurers and soldiers all put up a good fight together."

"It is no exaggeration, Belgrieve... If you hadn't fought through the mansion, then I—as well as Lady Helvetica and Lady Seren—we would all be dead..." Ashcroft said as he placed a small bottle on the table. "This is a token of my gratitude... Please take it."

"Hmm?"

"An elven elixir. We don't have very many, but it works wonders on wounds and fatigue. It's completely different from the imperial elixir I took this morning."

The elixirs mixed in the elven territory across the northern mountain range were far more effective than the ones compounded by the empire's magicians. Their ingredients

were rarer as well, and they went for quite a pretty penny. Ignoring high-ranking adventurers and powerful nobles, most people would never even see one, let alone use one in their lives. Ashcroft had spent a fortune on this bottle, saving it away for a time when it might prove absolutely necessary.

"I can't accept something so valuable..." Belgrieve waved it off. "I'll be better with some rest. Please save it."

"No, I want you to have it. This isn't even half of what it would take to repay you, but it is the most I can offer. Please, on my honor."

It was hard to turn him down after he had said that much. Belgrieve scratched his head, troubled. "I see... then I'll graciously accept."

Ashcroft's tense expression relaxed. Perhaps he had feared that Belgrieve would be obstinate in his refusal. He left with a bow, and the room was silent once more.

Anessa and Miriam still slept, slumped forward over the bed.

Belgrieve held up the bottle, closely examining the liquid inside. It was a little viscous, though the bottle's blue tint made it hard to discern its actual color. He opened the lid and tried taking in a sniff of its scent. He had expected something sharp and medicinal, but it was almost as if he had been transported into the forest with its refreshing—and somewhat nostalgic—aroma. Just a whiff and his body seemed a little at ease.

It was then that Angeline let out a muffled voice. Belgrieve hurried to her bedside. Perhaps she was having a nightmare, as her brow was painfully knit, and her body shifted under the covers. Her breathing was a little labored as well.

Belgrieve reached out and stroked her forehead to put her at ease. She did not have a fever, thankfully, and she seemed to calm as he patted her.

"You don't come across these every day... I might as well use it." Belgrieve tilted the bottle, letting a single drop fall into Angeline's mouth.

"Mmm," Angeline mumbled as the taste spread across her mouth. For a moment, Belgrieve wondered if it was bitter, but this was dispelled as he saw her complexion improve right before his eyes. Her breathing was now tranquil, and her tension drained away.

*It's incredibly effective,* Belgrieve thought, startled.

"I don't know what I'll do if I can't move tomorrow..." He offered his silent gratitude to Ashcroft before letting a drop of the elixir fall onto the back of his hand. It was amber and thick, like honey, but it flowed quite a bit more smoothly. Bringing it up to his mouth, he gave it a lick. Contrary to all the things he had been imagining, it was tasteless—though his nose was pierced by the scent of fresh grass. Strangely, his body felt quite a bit lighter. This single drop of medicine spread across him with every pulse of his heart. The warmth returned to his slightly chilled limbs.

"That's quite something..."

Belgrieve left the bottle on the table. He leaned into his chair, and closed his eyes—the drowsiness was immediately upon him as if it had been waiting with anticipation for this very moment. However, he was still a bit restless, and couldn't entrust himself to it completely.

When he nodded off, it was as if he still maintained awareness as he dozed. He drifted about an unconscious world in terrible comfort.

○

Helvetica had given the order to capture Count Malta, and Sasha left the estate in great haste. Malta would surely be in one of the inns; it was inconceivable that he would set up camp outside.

Sasha had no intention of forgiving that vulgar man who had put the House of Bordeaux—and more importantly, Bordeaux's citizens—through hell. She had been told not to kill him, but...

*Maybe I can take an arm, or two, or three...* So her thoughts ran, before she tilted her head in a thoughtful gesture.

"He's only got two!" she said, chuckling to herself.

The Bordeaux Estate was a short distance from the city, and she had to pass by the barracks and the tool sheds where all the farming implements were kept. The manor itself, while rough around the edges, was still built for nobility, but the land around it made it seem more like the house of a wealthy farmer.

There were also barns and stables, where well-trained horses munched on fodder. These horses were kept saddled, so they were ready to sally forth at any moment. Sasha hopped up and mounted one of them, masterfully riding it towards town with a lamp in one hand. She raced onward with a strange sense of unease under skies that were becoming cloudy once more, masking the glow of the stars.

She passed by someone along the way—two people, in fact. Sasha promptly stopped her horse before they passed from her sight.

“Halt!” Sasha stuck out her hand, circling around to the front of the party of two. “My name is Sasha Bordeaux. Aren’t you the fine lass who subjugated the shadow?”

Charlotte smiled. “I’m honored that you remember me.”

“Ha ha, I couldn’t possibly forget you after all you’ve done for us. In any case, where are you going at this hour?”

“I thought I should see Lady Helvetica. I overheard that the mansion was targeted before. I was worried, so I rushed out, neglecting the time.”

Young as she looked, Charlotte took on a strangely arrogant attitude, which didn’t quite sit right with Sasha. *She has to be hiding something.* While she was certainly the one who took care of the fiend, it was strange for her to be serving under Count Malta.

Sasha kept up her friendly attitude as she dismounted her horse.

“I commend your spirit. However, our house is still a mess—we haven’t finished cleaning up, and we are in no state for visitors.”

“Please, pay it no mind. I am a traveler, you see. I don’t mind a bit of grime.”

“No, this has to do with our dignity, you see... It’s already late. Won’t you come again in the morning?” Sasha asked, while stealthily sliding a hand towards her hilt. Sure, the girl’s words were coherent, but this was far too unnatural—she was perhaps far more dangerous than the count. It wasn’t as if Sasha had the sort of definitive rationale her sisters would act upon, but her instincts had been honed as an adventurer.

*I’ll arrest them while I’m at it.* The instant she began to draw her sword, she felt goosebumps on her skin and immediately leaped back. There was a thudding sound as something slammed into the ground where she had been standing a moment ago.

Her horse whinnied in shock, turning and fleeing.

"Byaku?! What do you think you're—!"

"Too late. She noticed. We should kill her."

Byaku, who had been standing behind Charlotte, sent Sasha a sharp glare. His hood now hung over his shoulder, and his hair—which should have been white—was now a dark black.

"Sasha Bordeaux—blame yourself for being only halfway clever."

"Damn you!" Sasha drew her blade. Yet again, she felt a chill and leaped aside; another crater pocked the ground.

Seeing Sasha pull back, Byaku grabbed Charlotte and gently set her down a safe distance away before racing into battle again.

"Curses!" Sasha chucked her lamp. Byaku swung his arm, and the lamp was smacked aside by the same invisible force. The field was now cloaked in darkness.

She honed every sense in her body, unable to wait for her eyes to adjust. The first thing she picked up was an intense presence of mana quickly approaching, which she swung her blade at. She could feel it slicing through something—a ball of colorless mana. She could only otherwise make it out by the way it slightly distorted its surroundings.

This was a first for Sasha. She swung and sliced through another ball of mana. She had to close in and force her foe on the defensive, knowing that she would be taken out if she let her guard down for a second.

It took a few exchanges before she finally saw her opportunity. His guard was down, and she shot towards him, swinging her weapon with all the momentum she had built up on the way there. Just one more step, and...

*I got him!* However, her blade stopped before striking his body. A translucent geometric pattern that flickered the color of sand had halted the sword's edge.

Sasha's eyes shot open. "What?!"

"No time to be surprised." Byaku swung his arm.

Sasha was suddenly assailed by a violent impact from the left. Taken completely by surprise, Sasha flew away, bouncing a few times before rolling across the dirt.

“Ah... grah! Grr... agh...!”

Her left arm wouldn’t move. It was turned in an ominous angle. Her chignon came undone, and her hair was draped over her face. She rolled onto her back for a breath of air but could already hear approaching footsteps.

*I have to stand,* her mind screamed, but her body paid no heed. Byaku stomped on her right hand, with which she had just barely kept ahold of her blade. In the darkness, she could tell his hand was pointed at her, and she knew his next incantation would be the end of her.

*How unsightly.* Sasha gritted her teeth.

“See ya,” Byaku coldly muttered.

But that was when the magic bullets came flying. Something blocked them and they faded before they hit Byaku, but his attention was taken off Sasha for a split second. She used that chance to release her sword and roll, and by the time Byaku snapped to and fired off his magic, it missed her by a hair’s breadth.

Another volley of bullets came at him, and Byaku jumped away with a grimace.

“Lady Sasha!” Ashcroft and Elmore raced in, leading a number of soldiers. Their eyes opened in shock as they saw her on the ground.

“How could this be...!”

“Ashe... Elmore... How?”

“The soldiers were raising a ruckus over how your horse returned without you after your departure. I never thought I would find you like this... First, I should treat you.”

Elmore swiftly sent out orders for the soldiers to carry her. Meanwhile, Ashcroft’s face twisted in wrath as he lifted his sword and turned to Byaku.

“Bastard! Don’t think you’ll make it out in one piece!” He slid along the ground towards his foe.

Byaku let out a painstaking sigh. “Just what I needed...” His arm thrust out as if for a palm strike, and Ashcroft, who was but two paces away, was thrown back as if he had been punched in the stomach. He narrowly managed to land safely, but he was gasping for breath. Each inhalation seemed painful, as though he had broken something. He desperately held in the contents of his stomach.

Elmore looked doubtful. “Strange... What is that magic?”

But Byaku wouldn’t give him the time to think. Elmore pointed his finger and fired a magic bullet, but it was interrupted by a translucent sigil.

“Stay out of this, old man.” Byaku swiftly closed in and swung his fist through the empty air.

Elmore immediately deployed his defenses, but what an intense impact it was. The guild master fell to his knees, and Byaku didn’t hesitate to attack him while he was down. His defensive magic shattered with the next clash, and Elmore was sent through the air coughing up blood.

Ashcroft, who had mustered the strength to stand, was blown away again before he could take up a fighting stance.

Sasha, Ashcroft, and Elmore—three people known for their skills all throughout the city—hadn’t been able to hold a candle to this boy. The soldiers didn’t know what to do.

Byaku lorded his victories over them, a ferocious smile on his face, and a fiery madness flashing in his eyes.

“Not a single one gets away. I’ll—” he said before he shook his head. “Wrong... Stay in there, goddammit!”

His hair became a mottled mess of white and black, before it settled on black again. The smile vanished from his face, and he was back to his usual expressionless state. His ice-cold eyes pierced through the soldiers. Though seized with fear, they raised their weapons to protect the others.

“You fools! Run!” Sasha uttered in a painfully faltering voice. “Forget about us!”

Byaku thrust out his arms. The surrounding scenery swayed like a mirage, and the

next instant, an enormous mass of mana approached them.

*It's hopeless...* Sasha closed her eyes. But the impact didn't come no matter how long she waited. She timidly peeked and saw a familiar back.

There stood Angeline.

# CHAPTER 26

## SHE LOOKED AS IF SHE HAD JUMPED STRAIGHT OUT OF BED

She looked as if she had jumped straight out of bed. Her hair was tied back, yet it billowed behind her with a touch of bedhead. The simple dress she had been wearing was wrinkled here and there as well.

Angeline narrowed her eyes, tapping her heel against the ground. She rolled her shoulders, seemingly making sure of her condition.

She had jumped in from the side the moment Byaku's magic was about to reach Sasha and delivered a powerful kick. The massive agglomerate of mana had flown off like a stricken ball, diffusing to nothing en route to somewhere far, far away. Everyone who witnessed this was too taken aback for words.

Angeline surveyed the wounded and frowned. "Bullying my friends, are you?"

Byaku scowled. "You..."

"Hmm," she looked at him, just a touch of anger on her face. The tip of her blade twirled goadingly. "Let me in on the fun..."

"Get real." Byaku kicked off from the ground and swung his arms. The faint blur of his invisible magic came at Angeline. However, Angeline was not the least bit perturbed. With the unsteady teetering of a sleepwalker, she precisely evaded or sliced through every shot that came at her. It was supposed to be unseeable, yet she moved as if she could make out every last detail. The ground was riddled with divots as the magic gouged out the turf.

"Hmph..."

Byaku attempted to close in for a powerful palm strike, but Angeline disinterestedly kicked him. The translucent sigils prevented a direct hit, but the force still sent him reeling back.

"I'm in top form... for some reason."

She felt like she had a nightmare in her sleep—a voice, calling to her from beyond the darkness. Gradually, the dark gained form, coiling around her, and pulled her deeper and deeper into its depths. And yet, the feeling of a warm hand pulled her back, and the strange smell of the forest drove the nightmare away entirely. She thought she must have slept quite soundly after that.

She didn't know why, but she was wide awake now. Her body had shuddered from a terribly ominous sensation, and she could no longer lay still. It was as though something had been calling out to her. And so, she raced out. As she recalled, they were all in the room—her father, Anne, and Merry, and...

Her thoughts were interrupted as Byaku's magic came flying her way again. Angeline parried it with her blade. "I'm trying to think... Give me some space."

"You're looking down on me."

Byaku stamped his foot. All of a sudden, a number of three-dimensional geometric glyphs flickering the same sandy color as before floated around him. They were mostly spherical, but there were triangles and squares as well, and ones with even more angles than these. The symbols continued to shift, transforming and squirming as though they were alive. The faint light they gave off faintly illuminated Byaku and his surroundings.

Elmore narrowed his eyes in shock. "Three-dimensional patterns... I see, so they weren't just magic bullets..."

Angeline simply scoffed. "A fine parlor trick... Is that all?"

"Wait 'til you see what they can do." Byaku swung his arm, and one of the mana assemblages shot towards Angeline.

She swung her sword to cut it down, but it was quite a bit heavier than the invisible magic from before—perhaps dispelling their concealment had increased their firepower.

Soon, figures big and small began rotating around Byaku at their center. He increased the number until they were like planets orbiting around him as their sun.

Forming three-dimensional magical patterns was an advanced art. They were devised

from layering several different spells with different effects atop one another—for instance, one might maintain the flow of mana, another would maintain structure, still another would increase power, and yet another to ensure it moved on the caster's whim. It was possible to impart such a construct with physical mass, which allowed it to block swords and bullets, and it could even serve as an attack if shot at a foe. If it was layered with a spell to function as an autonomous barrier, it could react to attacks, and automatically defend its caster. On top of all of these effects, Byaku had added invisibility. To give substance to so many spells, and have them all work in concert with one another should have been a herculean task.

However, Angeline was not interested in any of this—all she cared about was defeating her foe. And so, off she went. For his part, Byaku swung his hand without any panic. His three-dimensional spell circles burst off at her one after another, but she evaded with the slightest of movements and sliced through. She could tell what direction they were coming from as long as she focused on the movements of his hands.

However, a moment after she was convinced of this, an impact to the back of her head rang her bell. One of the spells had struck her, completely irrespective of his hand movements.

Her vision wavered for a brief moment, but her body moved before her mind, and she swiftly backed off. Apparently, there were spell patterns that moved on their own. *Is he simply matching his hands so he can take me by surprise?* she wondered, rubbing her head as she glared at him.

“If you need such petty tricks... that just proves you’re weaker than me.”

“Hmph.” Byaku was as expressionless as ever. However, at times, the corners of his mouth and eyes would twitch. It looked as if he was desperately holding something back.

Strangely, the pain in her head immediately dissipated. It wasn’t just that her body was in good condition, it felt as though her natural healing had improved as well. *Did something happen while I was asleep?*

“I see... This is probably the power of dad’s love.” It was unknowable what leaps of logic took her to that conclusion, but Angeline was convinced it must be so. In any case, once she knew this, she felt power surging through her. She decided not to think about anything unnecessary. “Let’s go...”

Angeline's form blurred like a mirage; her foot struck Byaku's stomach before he could react.

"Gah?!"

She moved so fast his automatic barrier didn't make it in time. The air escaped his lungs, and an expression of anguish crossed his face. Angeline then smacked the hilt of her sword into his shoulder. She could feel his bones breaking.

Byaku's face twisted as he grabbed Angeline's arm. The three-dimensional patterns orbiting around him simultaneously assailed Angeline. However, Angeline simply used his grip to pull him off balance, then kicked with all her might, slamming Byaku into the ground. The force of the impact caused him to tumble away, his solid magic sigils carving gashes through the ground around him; Angeline doggedly followed behind.

"Grr..."

He tried to stand, but Angeline placed a foot on his back. "I want to ask you something... Who are you? What's your objective?"

"That's what I wanna know. Who the hell are you?"

"I am Angeline... Daughter of the Red Ogre, Belgrieve."

Upon hearing that, Byaku's face twisted in rage. "Daughter? Ha... Pull the other one! Who do you think you are?!"

There was an uncanny cracking as Byaku's skin rippled and swelled. His broken shoulder twisted and writhed, knitting itself back together. Byaku shook Angeline off and rose to his feet. His once-expressionless face was a maelstrom of emotion, and there was a fiery madness in his eyes.

"Why is it always you?!"

"Huh...? What are you talking about?"

Byaku jumped on her like a nimble beast. His hand had changed to something black and grotesque, and he attacked with sharp claws.

“What... You’re not human?”

Byaku continued to attack, offering no answer. The blood was rushing to his head; though his movements were fast, they were also all over the place. Angeline dodged for a bit, but eventually gave up on that and swung her sword. Her blade carved through his shoulder.

“Ugh—?!”

Once he had stopped moving, she kicked him to the ground. He landed belly-up, his shoulder wound gushing not blood, but a spray of black mist. His hair was turning from black to white.

Angeline narrowed her eyes. “Seriously, what are you... a new form of fiend?”

“Cough... Same as you...”

Byaku placed a hand to his chest and closed his eyes. All of a sudden, his form blurred, and by the time Angeline had raised her sword, he was gone.

“Snap... He got away...”

Suddenly, there was a dull sound in the distance—the sound of something breaking. Angeline turned blankly to see a curtain of black clouds hanging over the Bordeaux Estate.

Earlier...

“Dad! Hold down the fort!”

Angeline suddenly sprang out of bed, grabbing her sword and bounding out of the room before he could say a word in reply. This surprising turn of events roused Belgrieve from his rest as well; though still drowsy, there was no way he could just go back to sleep after that. Perhaps due to habits ingrained in them as adventurers, Anessa and Miriam were swifter to rise, taking up their weapons and looking around with sharp eyes.

“Wh-What? Something happening...?”

“Huuuh? Where’s Ange?”

Belgrieve stuffed the small elixir bottle into his pocket, picked up his sword, and opened the window. There were clouds looming in the night sky. The wind was tepid, the same as it had been during their previous battle. He saw Angeline crossing the yard at a fearsome pace.

“So it’s not over yet... I’ve got a bad feeling about this.” Belgrieve turned to the two adventurers. “Let’s go. I’m worried about Helvetica.”

“But Ange is...”

“That’s precisely why. Now that she’s gone, it’s our duty to protect the manor.”

That was enough to convince them.

And so, they put the room behind them and headed off to find Helvetica. It had been such a struggle to move before, and yet Belgrieve’s body now felt surprisingly light. This was surely a testament to the incredible effectiveness of the elven elixir.

The stench still lingered around the manor, but the corpses had been cleared away and with the windows propped open, there had been some slight improvement. Soldiers stood here and there, keeping a watchful eye, while servants continued to clean up the remaining grime.

Helvetica was in her room, discussing something with Seren. Her guards were stationed by the door and window. Upon seeing Belgrieve, Anessa, and Miriam rush in, she raised her head curiously.

“Is something wrong?” she asked.

“The black clouds are here again. Something’s about to happen.”

She cast her eyes downward, knowingly. “If it was going to happen, it would have to be tonight... just as I thought.”

“Pardon?”

“The enemy is aiming for me. In which case, he’ll have to act before he loses his own head tomorrow.”

“Sis, Sash is...”

“I know... He’d catch wind of it if I sent an army, so I sent her out alone... Was that a mistake?”

She trusted Sasha’s skills, but her opponent’s abilities were unknown. It would be simple enough for Sasha to arrest Count Malta, but if he had a strong guard along with him... Helvetica clicked her tongue, lamenting her own shortsightedness. She had grown impatient to move before her foe could.

There was a commotion brewing outside the manor, and a servant suddenly raced into the room.

“My lady! The undead are at it again!”

“So they’re here... Deal with them calmly. Our foe is also panicking—do not make any rash moves.”

Anessa and Miriam stepped forth.

“We’ll help.”

“Yeah! I haven’t rampaged nearly enough.”

“Thank you,” Helvetica said with a smile. “I couldn’t ask for more reliable company.”

The two adventurers bowed and left the room. Belgrieve was about to leave too, only for the countess to gingerly grab the hem of his shirt.

“What’s wrong?”

“Umm... If possible, I want you to stay close... I’m anxious without Sasha or Ashe around.”

*I see, thought Belgrieve. While she carried herself courageously and with dignity, her hand was shaking ever so slightly.* Belgrieve nodded with a smile.

“Got it. I’m not sure how much help I’ll be, but I’ll take up guard duty for you.”

“Thank you...” Helvetica said with a relieved chuckle, while Seren drew closer to him,

looking a bit reassured.

Seeing as there would be nowhere to run should they be cornered in that room, Belgrieve proposed they move to the first floor. That would make every window an escape route if push came to shove. They met up with the servants, waiting for the undead outside to be cleared away.

Outside the manor, there were flashes of lightning followed up by explosions—Anessa and Miriam were on the job. There were far fewer undead here than there had been at the graveyard, and there was surely little to worry about with two AAA-Rank adventurers about.

More worrisome, however, was the ringleader behind all this chaos. If Count Malta was the mastermind, that would mean he would have to have a magician who could use necromancy by his side. Malta himself was not much of a threat, but they could not drop their guard with the magician around.

*Where has Angeline gone? Is something happening in town?* Belgrieve wondered.

A sudden strong wind rattled the windows, carrying a stench so foul they reflexively grimaced. Belgrieve immediately grabbed the two sisters, shouting, “Get away from the windows!”

Not a moment later, the window pane shattered and black smoke began flooding into the room. As bewildered as they were, the soldiers stood, weapons at the ready, between the smoke and their lady.

This black smoke shifted from one shape to another as it drifted along the ceiling. Belgrieve glanced at the exit. “Let’s get out of here.”

Helvetica nodded, taking Seren’s hand and cautiously edging towards the door. Belgrieve guarded their retreat, glaring at the smoke with a hand on his hilt. While much of it lingered in the air, some had begun to coalesce in one spot on the floor. Bit by bit, it was beginning to take shape; it seemed it wouldn’t be able to make a move before it finished doing so.

Belgrieve’s phantom pain began to act up; the same burning sensation from when he lost his right leg was creeping over him as he broke out in a sweat.

He gritted his teeth, never letting his guard down for a second while he ensured the

sisters had left the room, and then the servants and soldiers as well. Finally, he took up the rear guard, following behind.

They had gone a short distance before he heard the door busting open—the smoke must have finished coalescing. He stopped in his tracks and called out to Helvetica.

“Helvetica, the undead outside should be cleared up by now. Take the people of the estate, and leave with Anne and Merry.”

“Of course... What about you?”

“I’ll hold that thing back until you’ve escaped.”

He stared at it. An entity like a black shadow puppet was shambling down the hall. It possessed a round body from which numerous tentacle-like legs had sprouted. It was like a distorted spider—but it was far smaller than the one at the graveyard.

“Hurry!” Belgrieve shouted as he drew his sword.

“But... Angeline will be sad if you die!”

Belgrieve looked over his shoulder and smiled. “I’m not going to die. An adventurer’s first duty is to stay alive—I’m the one who taught her that. How could I look her in the eye if I died here?”

While Helvetica hesitated a moment, her expression quickly tightened. “Good luck!” she said to him. “Let’s go! Seren, pick up the pace!”

“R-Right, sis...”

Seren looked back anxiously at Belgrieve but ultimately ran off with her sister.

Belgrieve took in a deep breath. He looked forward. The shadow was approaching. His missing leg was hurting more and more.

“Now then...”

Scowling, he raised his sword and advanced towards the shadow, its feelers swaying about before swatting at him like whips...

“Too late.”

However, they were sliced through before they could make contact with him. These severed appendages disappeared in puffs of black smoke.

His body felt exceptionally light. The phantom pain still assailed him, but the adrenaline let him ignore it. His senses were strangely sharp, and he could vividly grasp his foe’s movements. From where his hand gripped the hilt to the tip of its blade, it all felt like an extension of his arm.

He carved through the feelers as though they were butter, and he realized he had closed in on the main body in the blink of an eye. His feet stopped there, but his blade continued forth with his momentum. The shadow was severed sideways with surprisingly little resistance. It let out a whistling sound as it dissipated.

“Is that all...?”

He felt a little letdown, and it was precisely for that reason that he knew the battle wasn’t finished. He had no time to waste there, though—he had to meet back up with Helvetica.

The moment he had resheathed his blade, he saw a figure beyond the smoke. He strained his eyes, barely making out a small girl.

Charlotte stood there. Her face was twisted in rage, and her clenched fist quivered.

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes dubiously. “I saw you, at the pub...”

“Each and every one of them... getting in my way!” she bemoaned, stomping her feet. “What’s your problem? Why me?!”

“Are you all right? It’s dangerous here. How about we...”

“Don’t come any closer!” She thrust out her arm as he tried to take a step towards her. The black gemstone on her ring glimmered. “I was so close... So close!”

Charlotte’s body emanated an explosive burst of mana, causing Belgrieve to instinctively reach for his sword. A maddened smile crossed the girl’s face.

“Die.”

It was as if the space behind her had distorted. As Belgrieve focused his eyes, a black smoke erupted from Charlotte's ring, taking shape again. The phantom pain he had been ignoring once again reared its ugly head, and Belgrieve gripped his sword tightly, his brow knitted.

The shadow tentacles reached out, swinging like whips. He dodged and sliced through. Just as before, they posed little threat. However, each time her ring glowed, his phantom pain increased.

"Grrr!"

Breaking into a cold sweat, Belgrieve rebuked his legs that had begun to give ground. He stepped forward, grimacing, before that one step turned into a charge. He severed the next wave of tentacles in one swing, that movement flowing into a high stance, before ending with his blade lowered. The shadow puppet was shredded once more, after which it dissipated into smoke.

Charlotte looked at him in disgust and chanted a few more words. A magic bullet shot from her fingers, and Belgrieve shielded it with the flat of his blade. It was a heavy blow, but he managed to nullify it with a little exertion. But then a second and third shot came flying at him. This would have been too much for him to shrug off, so he evaded instead. With exaggerated flair, these bullets exploded into the manor walls and floor.

"Aha... aha ha ha ha ha!"

Charlotte laughed as she began advancing, firing more of these bolts. With little else to do, Belgrieve gradually retreated. He was at a loss for how to continue as the magic bullets continued to fly without end, and every single shot was fearsome. More than that though, he hesitated to swing his sword when his opponent was a little girl.

The fight now seemed one-sided, until Charlotte's face suddenly contorted in fear. She drew her arm back and hurriedly grasped it with her other arm.

"Wh-What is this?!" she stammered. "No... no!"

The black gemstone in her ring had begun to swell in size as if gaining more mass. It began to wrap around Charlotte's hand like a viscous liquid, slowly worming its way up her arm. Charlotte tried to fling the black mass off, but it stuck fast. She began to wail.

"This can't... Not like this! Save me! Dad! Mom!"

Now that the barrage of bullets had ceased, Belgrieve was able to rush over to her. Losing her mind from sheer terror, she clung to him.

"Save me! Please! Save me!"

"Calm down!"

She twitched, convulsed, and then fell silent in response to his shout.

Belgrieve looked at her hand. The black mass was restlessly squirming, and it had completely covered her wrist. It was slowly gaining more mass as it steadily headed for her elbow.

He hesitated. It would be quickest to amputate her forearm. But as young as she was, he feared she might die from the shock. He thought it over before wondering, "Will that work?"

From his pocket, he produced the elven elixir. He uncorked it and dribbled the elixir over the dark matter. He could not carefully measure out a drop in this situation, so he poured out the remaining contents of the bottle. The moment the liquid made contact with the black substance it writhed and pulsed as if it were in pain.

Charlotte's eyes widened. "Eep!" she cried.

Belgrieve deftly took hold of her slender arm and slid his hand down it towards the tips of her fingers. The black mass peeled away, falling to the floor. Without hesitation, he raised his sword; his phantom pain had abated now, and with all his bodily strength and his newfound synergy with his blade, he slashed downward into the black matter. Taking the brunt of an attack that severed the corridor itself in two, the mass split, squirming only for a moment more before fading away.

Charlotte blankly sat where she stood while Belgrieve took a deep breath. That seemed to be the end of it. He sheathed his weapon and took a knee beside the girl.

"Are you okay?" he asked her.

For a while, she remained silent, but without warning, she burst into tears and clung to him.

“I was scared... So scared! Waaaah!”

Belgrieve sighed and patted her on the head. Right now, she was no more than a young girl. Why did such a small child possess that strange power? He tilted his head as someone pulled Charlotte away. He looked up, startled, to see Byaku standing there. He seemed wounded all over, but he one-handedly held Charlotte up by the scruff.

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes. “You’re...”

“Byaku... you...”

“Let’s go.”

Byaku held her close, painstakingly waving his arm, and their two figures began to sway like a mirage. Charlotte frantically looked at Belgrieve and opened her mouth.

“Th-Tha—”

Before she could finish, they were gone. Belgrieve, with furrowed brow, stood up. He could hear footsteps behind him. When he turned, something soft jumped into his arms.

“Dad!”

“Oh, Ange. You’re all right.”

“Yes. I’m glad you’re safe... Though I knew you’d be just fine!”

Angeline happily buried her face in his chest.

○

Turning back the clock a bit...

After parting from Belgrieve, Helvetica’s party raced through halls that were all too familiar to them. The undead had been contained outside, and it didn’t seem that any had managed to infiltrate.

Seren looked back anxiously a number of times.

"Sis, do you think Belgrave's all right...?"

"His skills are real; even Sasha recognizes him. Let's have faith in him."

If they didn't make it to safety, that would render his selfless risk pointless—and so, Helvetica hastened on. These passages were all the same ones she had grown up in, yet they seemed far longer—perhaps a reflection of her state of mind.

*I was naive.* She gritted her teeth. Her father was adored and revered as a wise lord; he had laid a sturdy foundation, and she had picked up right where he left off. She hadn't found the position to be much of a burden—she had always been clever, and under her father's guidance, she had surveyed their territory and involved herself in its internal affairs at a young age. Furthermore, on her own judgment, she had assertively recruited talented people for appointments, invigorating the territory even during her father's reign. She had a talent for management, and was popular as well. Even in the blade arts, she boasted respectable skill, though not as much as Sasha or Ashcroft. Everyone recognized, trusted, and adored her.

But perhaps that was precisely why she never turned her eye to the bad parts, and why it had been far too smooth of sailing until now. She had put off rounding up Count Malta and all the other opposing nobles. Everyone put on a nice face when they met her, and she believed that if she went at it wholeheartedly, they could come to terms eventually.

Of course, she still believed this, even now. But her duty was to those who lived openly and earnestly. The lives and happiness of such people could change in any which way on the single order of whoever stood at the top.

Count Malta specialized in power struggles and nothing else; it was hard to believe he would be a better governor than her. In fact, it was far easier to imagine him working his vile ways to prioritize his own desires. Helvetica did not think it would be completely impossible for them to reach a mutual understanding—perhaps they shared an opinion somewhere. However, what would become of the people if she fixated on this and allowed her own downfall? She could not keep her hands clean forever.

The weight on her shoulders was heavy—far heavier than she had ever imagined, and only now was she realizing it. She lamented that her father had left the world before she grew to understand this.

"My father bore this weight all his life, didn't he?"

Seren tilted her head. "Sis? What is it?"

"Nothing..."

They arrived at the front door. The yard was scattered with the remnants of bodies, and a little further down, they could see Anessa and Miriam. Seren sighed in relief.

"That's good..."

And then, there was a tremor behind them. The mansion shook. The parlor chandelier jostled, its chain jangling. Helvetica swiftly looked around, then pushed Seren's back.

"Out! Hurry!"

"Right!"

They exited, grimacing at the piercing stench of undead. Meanwhile, alerted by the noise, Anessa and Miriam rushed over to their side.

"You're both all right!"

"Huh? Where's Mr. Bell?"

"An enemy came in from the back. Sir Belgrieve stayed behind to stall it..." Seren explained.

Miriam glanced at Anessa in a panic. "That's not good! We need to help him!"

"Stupid! If Ange and Mr. Bell aren't here, we've got to protect Helvetica and Seren!"

"Erk... But if he's up against that shadow thing... I mean, even Ange lost to it once..." her voice shrunk as she went on.

Anessa sighed. "Mr. Bell will be fine. He's someone who can defeat that very same Ange."

"I see... You're right!" Miriam laughed, relieved.

Anessa looked around. "Still, where did Ange go..." She narrowed her eyes. Soon, she

was gripping her bow again, glaring into the dark. "There are more of them."

Everyone looked in that direction. There was a clattering noise as a gaggle of armored undead appeared. The soldiers and servants were astir. Their fallen comrades whose bodies they had just gathered and prayed for moments ago had returned with hollow eyes.

Miriam looked at Helvetica, a conflicted expression on her face. "Helvetica..."

"Don't worry about it. Let's free their souls."

"We'll do it," Anessa declared, stepping forth. She drew her bow and swiftly fired off consecutive arrows, while Miriam raised her staff to summon lightning. In an instant, the undead were pulverized and unmoving. The fate of those who had been alive and well just a few days ago caused a few of their former colleagues to break out in tears.

The two adventurers coldly and deliberately eliminated them all; they knew it was better to end it quickly before any emotion could creep in. Helvetica closed her eyes in gratitude, and that was when Seren let out a stiff scream.

"Eek... Sis!"

"That's...!"

Another undead had appeared—a relatively fresh corpse wearing well-tailored clothing, with platinum-blond hair and mustache, and an ashen yet unforgotten face...

"Fa... ther..."

The former count of Bordeaux. He had no identifiable expression, his two arms dangling loosely as he made his way over.

"No... no, this can't... be real..."

Seren powerlessly fell to her knees. Miriam rushed over and held her up by her quivering shoulder.

"Such cruelty..."

Anessa clenched her teeth in anger and readied her bow. However, Helvetica took a

step forward before she could loose an arrow. The countess drew her sword.

"An undead will die of a severed head... correct?"

Anessa frowned. "You don't have to..."

"I do."

*Perhaps this is a trial for me,* Helvetica thought. If she wanted to reign, she could not be the same sheltered lady she had been before. She could not run away or turn aside—she had to face reality head-on. The standing of nobility with respect to commoners also meant a duty to take a stand, the most decisive difference between them.

She had done all she could to erase the class divide. Together, she had shed her sweat with them in the fields, and spoken with them eye to eye. Together, they all developed the territory. Even so, she was not the same as the commoners, and this was where she had to exhibit that difference.

"If it is for the people to run away... The lady must not flee," she muttered softly, gazing at the thing that had once been her father.

The mansion shook again. Belgrieve was fighting, surely. Everyone was fulfilling their own roles. She would have to live with shouldering responsibility for so many people.

She took in a deep breath, nearly recoiling as the miasma filled her lungs, but she fixed her gaze ahead.

"Father... it's my turn to bear your burdens."

She slowly took up a stance. The undead halted before her; perhaps it was due to the shadows, but it almost looked as if it were smiling.



○

He received no word even as the night drew on. *They must have failed*, Malta thought as he hurriedly left the inn. *What worthless children!* He silently cursed them even as he wondered if they had used the corpse of the former Count Bordeaux as he had suggested. Naturally, a young lady would be shaken to the core. She would be unable to maintain her cool and would thus be vulnerable, presenting the perfect opportunity to attack. However, he received no further word. There surely would have been some uproar if Helvetica had died.

He knew he would be caught at this rate. He needed to escape the city and plot his comeback. *The eastern cities are anti-Bordeaux. Can't I hide there?* he wondered.

As he sprinted around a corner, he ran into a platoon of soldiers on patrol. They saluted and lowered their heads.

“Count, where are you going at this hour?”

“Hmm, um... I cannot remain quiet while the town is in crisis. I must make my rounds...”

“Oh, how commendable! You must be tired. It isn’t much, but how about a glass of wine at the station? Would you like to take some refreshment?”

Count Malta considered his situation: there was little point in leaving with nothing but the clothes on his back. If he went to the guard station, he would be able to meet up with the soldiers he had brought to the countryside with him, and he could obtain a horse as well. Furthermore, it would be suspicious for him to decline their offer. Who exactly would believe him if he were to suddenly act steadfastly here?

“Very well... Lead the way.”

The soldiers graciously led the count to the station, a sturdy stone building in front of which sat soldiers and adventurers around bonfires. Everyone cheerfully greeted the count. *Looks like they really believe I took care of the fiend.* He chuckled to himself. *What absolute buffoons.*

Their party entered, and the soldiers came to a stop in a room at the back of the hall.

“In here, count. This is a room for superior officers.”

“Good.”

Though he entered in high spirits, the count’s eyes widened in bewilderment when he saw Helvetica sitting there, waiting for him with a calm smile.

“You’ve finally made it, Sir Count.”

The door shut behind him. His arms were grabbed by a soldier on each side.

Count Malta turned pale. “Wh-Wh-What is this, Helvetica?! What sort of treatment is this—to me, of all people?!”

Helvetica chuckled. “You’ve gone a bit too far, you know... You should have spent the rest of your years peacefully in Hazel.”

“What are you talking about?! What are you saying I’ve done?!”

“You should understand that better than anyone.”

Helvetica stood, the sheath sliding off her sword. Count Malta swallowed his breath as he saw his own reflection in its mirror-like sheen.

“W-Wait! Your credibility will hit rock bottom if you kill me without reason! Where’s your evidence? What proof do you have that I’ve done wrong?!”

“I have none. Not yet.”

“Th-This is absurd! This is tyranny!”

“We can find out plenty once we investigate later... However, Malta, if you tell me who you were working with, I’ll spare your life—though you will be exiled from the territory.”

“Oh...! M-Most certainly!”

Malta rapidly listed out the names of every conspirator. Her eyes were cast down in sorrow with every new name she heard.

“That’s all of them! Isn’t that enough? Hurry and release me!”

"Hmm?" Helvetica cocked her head. She looked at the soldiers around her. "Did I ever say I would do that?"

"No, you did not. He must have misheard something."

"I did not hear anything of the sort."

Count Malta was taken aback; his face turned red as he understood he had been deceived. "Y-Y-Y-You wench! You... lied!"

Helvetica remained smiling throughout, though her eyes were not smiling in the slightest. "This incident was brought about by my own naivete—this I admit. You have my gratitude. It's thanks to you that I've found my resolve."

"Wh-Wh-What... You little girl! Do you think you'll get off lightly from this?! I'm from the dukedom, a noble straight from the capital! The blood in my veins is different from whatever filth flows through yours!"

"Oh, even better. It disgusts me to even imagine that the same blood might flow through our veins."

Helvetica slowly walked over to him. The soldiers pinned him down as he kicked and screamed.

She lifted the blade. "Some pigs must be slaughtered."

Her blade fell, and then there was silence. Helvetica took a moment to catch her breath.

"Place him by the side of the road. The brave and gallant Count Malta went on patrol on his own, only to meet his tragic end at the hands of bandits."

"Yes, ma'am."

The soldiers left through the back door, hauling the corpse away with them. Helvetica put her sword aside and slowly made her way out. "What a long night it has been..."

There was a sliver of white spreading across the eastern sky.

# CHAPTER 27

## THE SKY WAS CLEAR

The sky was clear, as though yesterday's heavy clouds had been nothing but a dream, and the hearty feeling of spring was carried on the wind as it softly brushed against the skin. Soft tufts of sprouting grass carpeted the ground on which small animals and bugs busily raced to and fro, and a lone bird traced a ring in the open air.

Charlotte stood absentmindedly under the sun, staring up at that bird. Her clothes and white hair were grimy; she had not cleaned up since the turmoil of the night before.

"To the very end, I never managed to thank him..."

"What's wrong with that?" asked Byaku, who was sitting on the ground beside her. His clothes were tattered, but his wounds were closed. Still, he was in his recovery period and would grimace and press down on the gashes each time the wind brushed against them.

Charlotte sighed as she sat down beside him. She rested her chin atop her knees, and holding up her right hand, she watched the light filter through the gaps in her fingers. Her ring no longer had a gemstone—not a sliver of power remained.

"I don't have Samigina's ring anymore... What am I supposed to do now?"

"How should I know? What do you want to do, Your Holiness?"

"Don't call me that. It was a scam, and it's over."

"What about getting revenge on the Vienna cult?"

"I still hate them. Of course I do, but..."

*Is that really the correct thing to do?* she wondered.

Charlotte was the daughter of a cardinal in Lucrecia. She was brought up in happiness, sheltered like a princess. Back then, she had been a pious follower of Vienna, and

marveled at the wondrous blessings of the goddess.

However, when she was eight years old, the Inquisition knocked on her door. Lucrecia was rife with the intense political strife between cardinals, and her father had become embroiled in it. The depth of their faith would prove irrelevant to whether they were heretics or not—in the end, it ultimately came down to money and power. And on those points, her house had lost.

They were thus branded as heretics. While the allegation was false, the deciding factor had been Charlotte's albinism and the fact she possessed tremendous mana. Under different circumstances, these factors may have lifted her up as a saint, but what did it matter when their enemies were simply looking for any reason they could use?

Charlotte fell into despair. She was enraged by the Church of Vienna, which scorned the innocent as sinners. She cursed the goddess who would not save those who had lived so devoutly, wholeheartedly offering their prayers. The Lucrecian nobles who made an about-face the moment the verdict was handed down, and the clergymen who would so smugly call them heretics—all of them were detestable. And the masses—oh, the masses—who believed the accusation without a doubt and cheered on her family's execution with self-satisfied looks on their faces...

It was not so bad in other nations, but heretics were despised in Lucrecia. Anyone the clergy charged with heresy would be put to death as a traitor to Vienna—and if that heretic was a high-ranking cardinal, their family would be killed with them.

Her parents had risked their lives to let her get away. She fled alone, and what a harsh flight it was. Her clothes were reduced to rags, and there were days she fished through garbage for food. Then there were the times she was attacked by ruffians. As someone who had been raised without want of anything, these wandering days were terribly cruel and pathetic; time and again, she would long for death. But when she thought of her parents, she could not bring herself to do that.

It was then that she met a man. He spoke to her about Solomon, who once had the whole continent in the palm of his hand, and bent the demons to his whim. The man said he would bring him back, and asked her if she would be Solomon's priestess.

Charlotte was entranced. With that power, she could save those that suffered from being branded as heretics, and she could take vengeance on those priests and nobles. *I'll take the stage as Solomon's saint and show them how it feels to suffer. I'll see their*

*faces twist in anguish and despair.* With that thought, she took the man's hand.

In only two years, she was giving sermons throughout the neighboring empire of Rhodesia with Byaku, her assigned follower. With Charlotte's refined features and innate gift of gab, her message spread far through the territories ruled by corrupt lords. She could bring about "miracles" with the Ring of Samigma the man had given her, and win power-hungry nobles to her side.

Rhodesia was walking down a similar path of corruption as Lucrecia; before that could happen, she would save it from Vienna's clutches. Then, she would make her triumphant return to her homeland.

That was the plan, at least. At this juncture, she was losing her conviction that this was the right thing to do. It felt as if the heated fervor clouding her vision was clearing away.

"His hand... was warm..."

She recalled the sensation of a hand caressing her head. *Did my father pat me like that? I don't remember.* Her father had been a bit younger than the bearded man, though.

Naturally, she still hated the Vienna cult and the clergy in Lucrecia. However, perhaps what she wanted wasn't revenge, but the warmth a parent could offer. Maybe she had given up on it, certain that it was a dream within a dream, and forged ahead on her path of vengeance in order to forget it. After all, there was no guarantee that, in times of despair, the hand that reached out to you was necessarily a righteous one.

Byaku lazily swayed backward and laid face up on the ground.

"Did you fall for the old guy?"

"What...? Don't be daft! I'm just saying he had a warm hand! I thought he was like my father, that's all!"

"A father, eh... Hmm," Byaku mused, discontentedly closing his eyes.

A parent's love—something so painful to remember she thought it was best forgotten, but now it was clearly coming back into Charlotte's heart. All of a sudden, the wickedness of all she'd done weighed down on her, and she covered her face. *What terrible things I've done,* she thought. Her tears fell in an endless stream.

“Ahh... Waaaaaaah!”

Byaku quietly lifted himself up and placed a hand on Charlotte’s head.

“Quit crying. It’s annoying...”

“Hic... ugh...”

Charlotte wiped the tears away from her eyes with her palm. “Hey, Byaku...”

“Hm?”

“If... hypothetically, you know. If I said I was giving up on revenge, would you still follow me?”

He hesitated a moment. “I’m your follower. You just do whatever you want.”

“Yes... Of course. Thank you...”

Her tears had turned into a torrent. She buried her face in her knees in a futile attempt to hide it away as she leaned against Byaku.

○

“I let my guard down, I did! It looks like Sasha Bordeaux has a long road ahead! Ha ha ha—ow, ow ow ow!” In the middle of her carefree laugh, Sasha suddenly grasped her left arm with a look of anguish.

Seren rushed over and patted her shoulder. “For crying out loud, Sash. You’re injured, settle down...”

“Yes... How bitter it is, to be unable to move...”

Sasha slouched against the headboard of her bed, her lips pursed. Despite the mansion’s appalling state, those gathered in one of the few untouched rooms smiled.

There were deaths among the adventurers and the soldiers guarding the Bordeaux Estate, but miraculously, while some of the civilians had been injured, none had died. The cooperative relationship between the soldiers and adventurers and the swift countermeasures that had been implemented paid off. Of course, the contributions of

high-ranking adventurers like Angeline could not be disregarded.

There was a bit of noise when Count Malta was found dead. He had been killed with a blade, so it couldn't have been one of the undead. His death was the subject of much speculation, but as the soldiers on patrol said they had seen him wandering the streets alone, the townsfolk came to the conclusion that he had been attacked by a looter. The count's clothes were high-class and visibly so; it was easy to imagine someone taking advantage of the chaos to make some money on the side.

His people were never so fond of him, so they took the news well. The anti-Bordeaux faction, however, was another story. The disappearance of their mediator caused their secret alliance to fall apart. After all, the count's corpse was clearly a warning from Helvetica.

With that said, however, there wasn't a single soul brave enough to publicly accuse her of the deed. No matter what they said, Helvetica's popularity in the region was astounding. Nobody would believe such allegations, and it would only result in the accuser's reputation taking a hit. These opposing nobles feared the day they received a summons from the countess, reining in their public opposition with indisputable impartiality.

The undead outbreak and Belgrieve's fight with Charlotte had left the mansion even worse off than before. It would take quite some time to make repairs, and there would hardly be any manpower that could be spared for the roads now. Not that the plan was going to be abandoned—once things had calmed down in Bordeaux, they would send a messenger to Turnera. Belgrieve had no objections to this; it would be cruel to demand more, given the situation.

Angeline was in perfect form from the moment she woke up, unable to settle down without keeping on her feet. She was consequently absent from the room and was instead running around the front yard, dragging Anessa and Miriam along with her, both of whom seemed worse for wear. Like Angeline, Belgrieve could feel energy surging through his body, and found it a little unsettling as he sat there.

The elixir had proven more effective than he had imagined. But it was gone now—there was a limit to how much liquid could fit inside a bottle small enough to palm.

Belgrieve offered a wry smile. "You took a real beating, Sasha. If I still had some of the elixir Ashcroft gave me, I would have shared it..."

"Oh, not at all, Master! Our house always has elixirs ready to use! No need to worry! I'm more ashamed I'm showing myself in such a pathetic state!"

"Is that so..."

"Umm... Sir Belgrieve?" Ashcroft approached. "Did you already use up the elixir?"

"Yeah, sorry about that. A drop for Ange, a drop for me, and... well, the rest for something else."

"A drop... straight?"

"Huh...? Yes, I think so."

The corners of Ashcroft's lips twitched as he said, "Ahem... I know I neglected to mention it, but... an elixir should usually be diluted in water."

"What?!"

"I thought you would know..."

According to Ashcroft, an elixir was too strong to drink straight. The ones produced in the empire weren't that effective, so some adventurers would take the undiluted concoction in the midst of battle for an explosive power boost, but the elven ones were something else entirely. It was recommended to mix it with several dozen times its volume in water and to ingest it slowly. Taking too much at once would induce restlessness as it had with Angeline. In worse cases, it would produce a discrepancy between the physical body and the senses.

In short, Angeline and Belgrieve would be unable to calm down until they had expended all their amplified stamina. *No wonder I healed so fast. Is that why I've been feeling hot for a while now?* Belgrieve pondered. And while he now had an explanation, he also felt terribly embarrassed.

There was little he could have done—an E-Rank adventurer would be lucky to even get a glimpse of an elixir. Still, he had used something so valuable in a single night and used it incorrectly at that.

"Ha ha ha!" Sasha cackled. "As expected of Master! Always going big!"

"You didn't have to say it, Sash!"

"Ha ha... Sorry..." Belgrieve sighed, awkwardly scratching his head.

His mind was clear, and he didn't hurt anywhere. But now that Ashcroft brought it up, he could feel a slight delay between how his arm moved, and how he thought it should be moving. He feared what would happen if he became accustomed to moving like this before the effects wore off. Perhaps he could have managed that in his younger days, but at his age, perhaps he would make a habit of motions beyond what his old bones could handle. The effects could be extended with another drop, but elven elixirs were not so easy to come across.

Helvetica entered the room with Elmore. She looked tired, but at peace. "How is your condition, Sasha?" she asked.

"Oh, sis. Not any worse than I look."

"I'm glad you're well," she said with a chuckle. "Shall we have lunch then? The mansion is a mess, so it will have to be in the yard if no one minds."

Seren gleefully nodded. "Sounds good. The weather's lovely."

"Then onwa—ow, ow ow ouch!"

"Please don't push yourself, Lady Sasha..." Ashcroft raced to support the girl when she nearly keeled over after springing to her feet.

As Belgrieve made his way out, Elmore addressed him. "Splendid work, Belgrieve. Thanks to you and everyone else, the damage to the city's been contained to a minimum. I offer my thanks as the guild master of Bordeaux."

"What are you talking about? I hardly did anything."

"I can tell after fighting alongside you. Your sword skills are exceptional. I've gotten a good eyeful of the Red Ogre in action."

"That name makes me feel itchy..."

While it still didn't sit right with him, Belgrieve still hoped he had worked hard enough to live up to his moniker.

Elmore smiled. "How long will you stay in Bordeaux?"

"Well let's see... I've finished my business here, so I think I'll go after I help clean up the mansion a bit. Two to three days, I'd say."

"If it's all right with you... won't you join the guild here? With skills like yours, I'm sure no one would complain if I instated you at a higher rank. It would light a fire under our younger ones."

"You must be joking. It's all downhill from here for me. My farmwork has become second nature to me. I appreciate the invitation, but I'll have to decline."

"Is that so... A shame, but understandable. I stepped back from the front lines once I figured out desk work was second nature to me, so I'm not one to talk." Elmore offered a friendly chuckle.

It was difficult to say Belgrieve did not have any lingering attachments to the adventuring life. But this was not where he belonged, he was sure of that.

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Belgrieve and Angeline spent the next few days cleaning up the mansion, enjoying the city, and having sparring matches with soldiers and adventurers. Sasha, unable to participate due to her injuries, grit her teeth and endured it, though she did send Ashcroft into a panic when she tried to join in regardless.

Belgrieve found being treated as a hero rather disconcerting, but Angeline was used to it. Seeing his daughter carry herself with such cool composure, Belgrieve felt his daughter had completely surpassed him.

Their days in Bordeaux were fun and completely different from Turnera, but Belgrieve thought it was about time for him to go. He was growing weary, and he worried about his field. Oftentimes, he would wonder if the children would take advantage of his absence to enter the forest on their own.

While it was sad to part with Angeline and her friends, he knew she was able to stand on her own two feet. And of course, he did not intend this to be a lifelong parting.

With that said, the moment he said he was considering leaving, Angeline stuck to him and wouldn't leave his side. Even as he packed his things, she remained clinging to his

back, pushing her face into his back and his hair. The ticklish sensation of her breath across his hair and clothes was rather irritating.

“Ange.”

“Yes, dad?”

“What are you doing?”

“I’m replenishing my fatherium supply.”

“What happens when you’re done?”

“I will be full of energy.”

“I see.”

He didn’t quite get it, but she sounded certain. In any case, this was not the first time Angeline had clung to him like this. With a conflicted smile on his face, he was about to give up when Miriam closed in on him.

“I’ll stock up on some Mr. Bellium too, then.”

“Hey now, not you too, Merry... I need to pack...”

The elixir’s effect had finally worn off, and his senses had realigned. Luckily, his joint and muscle pain had not returned, so it was less painful to have two girls hanging off him than it was troublesome how they prevented him from making any progress. They teased like children, but they were far larger than the kids he was used to dealing with.

Anessa watched the scene, an exasperated look on her face. “C’mon... If Mr. Bell is leaving, we should get on our way to Orphen too. Maybe you girls should start getting ready...”

“Hee hee, I know you’re just jealous...”

“Not being honest, are you Anne?”

“What?!” Anessa’s face flushed red, her mouth opening and closing blankly as Angeline and Miriam grinned at her.

Belgrieve sighed. "Anne's got a point. Have you two finished your own packing?"

"I never had any luggage to begin with..."

"Packing light is fundamental to being an adventurer, Mr. Bell."

"Hmm..."

They had a point. *I guess I'm no match for active adventurers*, Belgrieve mused. Even so, he finished up somehow or another. It wasn't as if Belgrieve had very much to pack though; he had brought little more than his clothing, though he had bought a few things in Bordeaux in the meantime. These included a large sack of salt, and another of sugar, a few smaller pouches of spices, a strong distilled liquor, and cookware made from high-quality iron.

Bordeaux was a large city; it rested on the trade route to the northern reaches, and goods from all over were gathered there. Belgrieve couldn't resist picking up the sort of goods that were either unobtainable in Turnera, or that the peddlers would attach a hefty price tag to. In short, he had bought plenty of souvenirs. Money was mostly unnecessary in Turnera, so he found himself splurging once he got the opportunity.

"Not that Ange's much better..." Belgrieve muttered, recalling the mountain of gifts she had returned with. They took after one another in the strangest ways.

Belgrieve ended up with the horse and wagon Angeline had bought in Orphen, since the group had no use for either once back in the big city; they would at least see more use in Turnera. The girls traveled light and bought nothing to take back with them.

Soon the wagon was loaded, and he was ready to go. *A simple letter delivery turned into something else altogether*, he thought as he scratched his cheek.

Belgrieve had begun his preparations early in the morning, and it wasn't yet noon. If he left now, he would be in the next town before sunset. Not that he had anything against camping out, but the nights were still chilly.

"All right... Off we go." His shoulders made a cracking noise as he rolled them.

Angeline, Miriam, and Anessa, having finished their own preparations, saw him off. They would leave a short while later.

Sasha stood, borrowing Seren's shoulder. Helvetica and Ashcroft were absent, perhaps too busy, while Elmore had returned to the guild.

"It's unfortunate I couldn't have a match with you, Master... Another time, for sure!"

"Please make sure you recuperate first."

"He's right. You should listen to him, Sash." Seren tapped her sister on the shoulder as she bowed her head to Belgrieve. "You've done a lot for us, Sir Belgrieve. If you're ever in the area, please feel free to stop by Bordeaux. You're always welcome."

"Thank you, Seren. I'll be looking forward to that then."

As he moved to board the wagon, Angeline hugged him. She pressed her face in hard, taking a deep whiff.

"Now, now." Belgrieve patted her head. "You'll always be daddy's little girl, Ange."

"Mmm... All right!" Angeline suddenly lifted her head. "I'll do my best. I'll work hard and be back by next fall."

"Isn't that too early?"

"It's fine. I want to eat cowberries. Right?" she said, looking back at her party members. The two nodded.

"It was brief, but fun."

"I'll be back to play some more!"

Belgrieve smiled, reached out, and placed his hands on their heads. "Yes, think of it as your own home. I'll be waiting."

It took a while for that to sink in, but when it did, their cheeks reddened in embarrassment.

All of a sudden, he heard light but swift footsteps. He turned to see Helvetica, rather winded. Once she had reached him, she placed her hands on her knees, panting. The sweat on her brow added an unusual gloss to her bangs.

“G-Good... I made it in time...”

“H-Helvetica. You don’t have to come if you’re busy...”

“What are you saying? It would be a stain on the family name if I didn’t see off our benefactor.” She took a deep breath and smiled. “Come again. I’ll be waiting.”

“Thank you. It’s an honor to—” He was interrupted when a gentle, sweet scent permeated his nostrils as he felt something soft on his cheek. Belgrieve was taken aback.

With a mischievous laugh, Helvetica placed a finger to her lips.

“It was just the cheek this time... Who knows what will happen next time?”

“Please don’t tease me so much...”



Belgrieve scratched his head somewhat bashfully. Then he was tugged down by the lapels, and there Angeline was with a teary face.

“Dad...”

“A-Ange...”

“I knew it... It’s the breasts...”

“What are you talking about?”

It seemed as if a good moment had been ruined. Angeline growled to intimidate Helvetica while Helvetica chuckled to herself. The girls who watched were either a little red or grinning.

“Good grief.” Belgrieve sighed. “I’m leaving.”

“Yeah...”

Angeline let go, just like that. After gently patting his hand against her head a few more times, he hopped aboard the wagon. He urged the horse onward with the reins in hand.

“I’m off, dad!” Angeline shouted.

“I’ll be back!”

“S-See ya...!”

Miriam and Anessa joined in.

*It’s almost like they’re the ones seeing me off,* Belgrieve thought to himself. Still, he returned the call.

“Come home safe and sound!”

The carriage slowly pressed on. With a blue sky above, and a grass-scented wind caressing his cheek.

# EXTRA

## NIGHT LIGHTS

Though the cold was descending from on high, the forest gave off a peculiar warmth. At the beginning of spring, it was filled with a surprising plethora of colors. There were the bare branches that had yet to regrow their leaves, others that already had fresh buds, and others still that remained evergreen. There was also a distinct difference in the intensity of green depending on where the sun's light was abundant and where it was scarce. However, every inch was filled with the impression of new life, a distinct line drawn from the stillness of winter.

The ground was not a flat plain. There were bumps and drops here and there, around which water from the snowmelt would flow and puddle. There were also rocks of all sizes, and withered trees covered in moss.

Belgrieve walked ahead, taking care not to miss a step, with Angeline, Anessa, and Miriam following him. Angeline was visibly elated, filling her lungs with the fresh air, and beaming as she looked around.

"Heh heh... I really do like it here."

"Hey, Ange, you have to watch your step."

"Okay!"

"Gah?!" Miriam raised a hysterical cry from behind as she stumbled, hastily holding onto her staff to keep her balance.

Anessa wearily helped her up. "What are you doing? Watch out!"

"Ugh, I just slipped. What am I supposed to do?" Miriam pouted with puffed-up cheeks, trudging onward in a huff. Anessa shook her head.

"This is practically our backyard, right dad?"

"Yeah... Sounds about right."

Belgrieve had roamed these grounds for more than twenty years, and Angeline had followed along from infancy. When he walked, Belgrieve naturally picked out the places with the best footing and had made a habit of taking firm steps. His peg leg made him even warier of his footing than the average mountaineer.

Anessa and Miriam had entered the woods a number of times for work, but that was not to say they were experienced enough to feel at home with poor footing. Still, as was to be expected of high-ranking adventurers, they planted their feet properly, albeit somewhat unsteadily. Miriam grew even more careful after she tripped.

Gradually, the sun set, and the meager rays that cleared the trees were disappearing beyond the western mountain. It felt as if the wind had suddenly grown colder, and Miriam shuddered.

“Eep! That’s cold.”

“It’s evening... Hey, couldn’t we have headed out when it was brighter?” Anessa asked Angeline, who was ahead of her.

Angeline turned and chuckled. “It’s better when it’s dark... You’ll see why when we get there.”

“Hmm?”

“Oh, I can’t wait...” Miriam snarked, before something ahead suddenly caught her gaze. “Huh?” This led the others to look as well. It was a lone bird on the ground, twisting and turning. “Is it injured, do you think?”

“It might be... Should I help it, dad?”

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes, looked around, then shook his head. “No, you can leave it alone.”

“Huh... Why?”

With a wry smile to Angeline’s sorrowful face, Belgrieve pointed in a different direction. There, in the thicket, he could see a sliver of white—an egg.

“That’s the parent. It’s trying to take our attention off of its eggs.”

“Ah, so that’s it...”

“So it’s because we’re here...?”

“Pretty much. Now let’s hurry.”

The sun quickly sank below the horizon, and Belgrieve lit a flame in his lantern. The path ahead gradually grew steeper, and as their gaze was drawn upward, they began to see the stars twinkling through the gaps in the trees. Those dazzling points grew much greater in numbers before their eyes.

“The night sky here is amazing...” Anessa let out a longing sigh. “You can’t see this in Orphen.”

“That so? Is it because there are no lights around?”

“Hee hee... the stars are nice, but just wait. You’ll see something even more surprising.”

“Oh, just tell us already.”

“Glowgrass, I’m guessing. I’ve heard it’s beautiful, but you don’t have to make such a big deal about it...”

There was a sudden gust of headwind. They were out in a clearing with nothing overhead to protect them from the wind blowing down the mountain, which rustled the grass and trees around them. Suddenly, Belgrieve snuffed out his light.

Anessa and Miriam stared wide-eyed. Countless stalks of glowgrass swayed, each bulb exuding a pale blue glow. Their feeble glowing lights, extending no further than a few inches, blended into one another to create a distinctive lake of light. The mountain towered beyond as a black silhouette, while a full bespangled sky stretched out above them. It was as if the stars had been reflected onto the earth.

“How about now...?” Angeline said, turning to them triumphantly.

“Fine. You win.”

“Hey! Hey! Are we allowed to go in there?! ”

Belgrieve nodded, and Miriam excitedly raced forth, parting the glowgrass seas.

Angeline and Anessa were soon to follow, the pale blue light illuminating the girls from below.

In the cold, early spring dusk, the wind swept over the glowgrass, forming waves and ripples that caused the shadows to flicker and sway.

# EXTRA SISTERS

When Belgrieve was still staying in the Bordeaux manor...

Under the morning's uninterrupted sun, it had been bright and cheerful, but soon enough the clouds came to cast their shade. A look upwards revealed an oppressive gray expanse that seemed to herald rain at any moment. "We're having a lot of rain this spring," someone muttered.

Belgrieve had been helping sort through the rubble extracted from the manor, but once the skies started looking dicey, he and everyone else retreated inside. Not that there was anything to do inside; after walking a circuit around his room, he lowered himself into a chair.

A few days had gone by since the chaos. The manor had been roughly tidied up, but the gashes in the walls and floors had yet to be repaired; carpenters could be seen coming and going every day.

It was soon pouring outside the window. It did not come down too heavily, but enough to drench anyone who stepped out; perhaps its lack of forcefulness would conversely make it easier to end up completely soaked without noticing. Retreating had evidently been the right decision.

While he could tell it was raining, the droplets were so fine that they barely made a sound upon landing. Perhaps for that reason, he found it rather unsettling to keep still. As he sat there, gazing out the window with reluctantly idle hands, in came Angeline. She must have been outside, as her black hair glistened with minute droplets.

Not a moment after entering, she clung to Belgrieve's back.

"Rain..."

"Yeah, looks like it."

"We can't clean up like this..."

"Not much we can do about the weather."

For a while, she delightedly buried her face in his back, before eventually placing a hand on his shoulder to hoist herself up.

"I'm going to check up on Sasha with Anne and Merry... Will you join us?"

"Hmm... um... maybe next time."

"Huh?"

Angeline pursed her lips, but she wouldn't try to force him. "I'll be going then," she said, after squeezing him a bit longer before taking her leave. Belgrieve sighed.

The sky outside gradually grew darker. Little by little, the droplets swelled until the air was filled with a roaring rumble as they smacked against the window and ground.

○

When Angeline entered the room, Anessa was in the midst of toweling her damp hair, while Miriam did the same for her hat. The rain had picked up while they were out sparring with the soldiers. It had been light enough that they thought they could continue, but it seemed idiotic to catch a cold for no reason and they soon called it quits.

Once she noticed Angeline, Miriam waved her towel. Her cat ears twitched atop her head.

"Huh? Where's Mr. Bell?"

"He's not coming... I don't know why. Does he dislike Sasha...?"

"I doubt it... Maybe he feels awkward being surrounded by only girls."

*I see,* thought Angeline. It was certainly nothing but young women apart from Belgrieve. Although he kept his composure, perhaps it wasn't so comfortable for him here.

"How bothersome," she said. She was perfectly fine with having a single older man mixed in. "Is dad hitting his rebellious phase...?"

"What are you talking about... Whatever, let's go."

The three left the room. The outside gloom had seeped all the way to the corridor, making it feel strangely somber. *Perhaps it's because the rain sounds are muted here. It's quieter than it has any right to be.*

When they knocked on the door, they received an energetic, "Come in!" Sasha was sitting on the bed. Although her left arm was wrapped and hung from a sling, her complexion was wonderful.

Seren was seated in the chair beside her, her expression brightening as soon as she saw them. "Oh, you're all here!" Seren stood with a smile. "This way, please. I'll get you some tea."

"Don't worry about us... We came uninvited," Angeline chuckled as she pulled a chair up to the bed. "How are you feeling?"

"I've got energy to spare. In fact, I feel like I'm slacking off and I can't stand it."

"Come now, Sash. You need to rest if you want to recover quickly."

"I understand, but... urgh," Sasha let out a troubled sigh. She was energetic as could be and irritated she had nowhere to spend that energy. Only a few days prior, she had caused quite a fuss by demanding to join in on the sparring matches, which greatly troubled Ashcroft.

"You used an elixir, right? Won't you be better in a month...?"

"Right. But it's frustrating, Ange. I'm out of it right when both you and my master are here."

"You really like swinging your sword, Sasha..."

"But that's pretty rare," said Miriam. "Why did you become an adventurer? You could have been a soldier if you wanted, and since you're a noble, I'm sure you could have been a knight."

Sasha bashfully scratched her head. "Well... I just looked up to adventurers."

"You did?"

"Yes. Admittedly, I first started flailing about with a sword because I looked up to knights, but..." Sasha went on in a longing tone.

Her father, the late Count Bordeaux, was well aware that the three sisters each had their own fortés. The eldest, Helvetica, boasted the ability to win over hearts and minds and to see the bigger picture. The youngest, Seren, was imbued with political acumen, while the middle child, Sasha, possessed abnormal competency with the blade. The count taught his daughters that there was no need to be good at everything, that they could all focus on their strengths and help one another.

"So, I've been studying the blade since I was young."

"And that led to becoming an adventurer?"

"Yes, one time I was accompanying my father on his inspections. A fiend attacked us—a fiend with a sturdy shell, and the soldiers who were unaccustomed to facing monsters were struggling. That was when an adventurer showed up, accurately piercing the gaps in its carapace and taking it down in no time..."

"Hmm... an armored rat, perhaps? They are B-Rank, as I recall..."

"Oh, how knowledgeable! Anyways, I've looked up to adventurers ever since."

"I see... Your father wasn't against it?"

Sasha shook her head. "Bordeaux has always had a close connection with its adventurers. My father gave me a push on the back, saying that fighting fiends was just as important. It is an important duty that protects our citizens just as much as the soldiers do."

"I see... Count Bordeaux was a good father."

"He was!"

"My dad's not too shabby either..."

"Why are you making this a competition?"

The mood was lighthearted, but as Angeline glanced at Seren, she saw the girl silently hanging her head. She had not been participating in the conversation for a while now.

“What’s wrong, Seren... a stomachache?”

“Hmm? Ah, no, I’m fine.” Seren smiled.

Sasha narrowed her eyes doubtfully. “You’ve been behaving a little strange ever since everything that happened. If something’s wrong, you need to tell me properly. Don’t hold it in.”

“I really am fine... Umm, I’ll go ask for tea.” Seren stood and fled the room.

Anessa and Miriam exchanged looks.

“What do you think?”

“Something’s up. I took her to be a bit more composed than that.”

“She’s been out of it ever since that mess,” Sasha said, sounding rather troubled. “Sometimes, she stares into the distance, and sometimes she has this sad look on her face... Whenever I ask her, she always just says she’s fine.”

“Hmm... It must have been a shock to her.”

“Right, our father came back as an undead, after all,” Sasha sighed. “I know I lack a bit of tact. Whenever I try offering advice, I come off as preachy... If it’s all right, I’d like the three of you to casually get closer to Seren. She might tell you things she won’t tell me.”

Sasha was aware of how boorish she could be, while Helvetica was still incredibly busy dealing with the aftermath. Although both had noticed Seren’s strange behavior, neither had the chance to get to the bottom of it.

“Got it,” Angeline nodded. “Get well soon.”

“Thank you, Ange. It means a lot.” Sasha offered a feeble smile—a rare display from her. She was evidently fretting over how she was unable to properly hear out her little sister’s worries.

A moment passed, and then a maid entered with tea.

“Where’s Seren?” Sasha asked with a tilt of her head.

"She said she was busy and returned to her room."

"Hmm..." Sasha scratched her head looking wholly unconvinced. "It's at times like these that I hate how tactless I am."

"Don't worry about it. I doubt Seren's avoiding you because she hates you or anything."

"Right, right. She's a good girl, so she's got a lot to worry about. Definitely."

Anessa and Miriam said as much to cheer her up. Sasha timidly nodded.

○

Around that time, Belgrieve had been invited to have tea with Helvetica, who was evidently taking a small breather from work. He sat across from her in her study while she piled sugar into her cup, smiling. "Thank you for all your assistance."

"You did give us a place to stay," Belgrieve said before taking a sip. The tea leaves gave off a most peculiar aroma. "This is some strange tea you have here."

"Yes, the leaves are fermented. I bought them from a peddler just the other day... Do you like it?"

"It's not bad, but, well, it could take some getting used to. Are you supposed to add sugar?"

"Yes, and I'm told people add milk or squeeze a lemon into it as well."

Belgrieve stroked his beard, bemused; he had never heard of such ways to drink tea before. Though there were plenty of things in the world he didn't know about. He glanced back at the desk, noting the stacks of envelopes and documents. Helvetica had to send out quite a few letters to the other towns and nobles to repair the city, among other things. *That's one thing I can't help with*, Belgrieve thought, a wry smile on his face.

Watching Belgrieve with a bit of interest, Helvetica placed her cup down and sighed.

"What's wrong?" he asked her.

"Oh, no... I was just thinking about how time flies," she said and looked around the

study.

Belgrieve followed her gaze. Apart from a window in the back, the walls were completely covered by shelves lined with books and bundled documents, and while they looked rather uneven and messy, everything was, perhaps, in its correct place.

“It’s hardly changed from when my father used it.”

“I see.”

“I haven’t been the countess for long... but it’s still been almost half a year.”

“Even so, you’re quite adored, aren’t you? I’m astounded.”

“Hee hee, thank you. It’s a relief to hear that from you.” Helvetica corrected her posture and turned to him. “I must ask you again, Sir Belgrieve. Will you take up service with House Bordeaux? Your contributions in the undead incident are beyond compare. Please lend us your strength.”

Belgrieve scratched his cheek. “I’m sorry. I have to decline.”

“I see.” She did not linger on the topic, closing it with a single, disappointed sigh. Then she smiled. “I thought you would say that.”

“I’m real sorry.”

“Don’t be. You have a duty to protect Turnera,” she said, before her lips twisted into a mischievous smirk. “But I’m not giving up.”

“I’m not sure what to say about that.” Belgrieve shrugged. “I think you can do perfectly fine without me. You’ve got two excellent sisters, and Ashcroft as well... And let’s not forget how you’ve grown, at least since I last saw you in Turnera.”

“Right...” Helvetica narrowed her eyes. “Perhaps it’s because... I’ve overcome one of the trials set before me.”

“Hmm...”

“It’s strange. The incident the other day was sad, to be sure. However, I feel it happened because it had to. In a sense, I would have remained a sheltered little lady without it.”

Her eyes, now wide open, locked onto Belgrieve. “Though... it was a bit painful.”

“Are you talking about your father?”

She gave a small nod. Belgrieve hadn’t been there, so he didn’t know the specifics, but apparently, she had come face-to-face with the undead fiend that had once been Count Bordeaux. He couldn’t even imagine how it must have felt to give the coup de grâce to her father, a man she had respected from the bottom of her heart.

“I don’t want to say anything thoughtlessly, but... you did good.”

“Thank you.” Helvetica smiled.

Belgrieve didn’t know what it meant to live as a noble. The fact that the livelihoods of himself and everyone close to him rested on her shoulders was perhaps a heavy responsibility too far beyond what a commoner was accustomed to. There were nobles who threw out this duty to satisfy their own selfish desires, but she wasn’t one of them. It was simple enough to compliment her, but he genuinely believed she had done the best she could.

Seeing his serious face, Helvetica could not contain her giggle. “I’m sorry, calling you here just to talk about these things.”

“I don’t mind it. I turned down the position, but I will help out however I can.”

“Hee hee, then will you become my husband?”

“There you go, teasing me again.”

“Hmph, it wasn’t completely a joke.” Helvetica puffed out her cheeks like a child.

Belgrieve laughed as he brought the teacup to his mouth.

○

After chatting a bit longer with Sasha, Angeline separated from the group and returned to their room. Belgrieve was sitting by the window gazing outside. The rain had stopped while she wasn’t looking, and the sun shone through the tears in the clouds. Its red-tinted hues hinted that it was already close to sunset.

He glanced over as she sat beside him.

"How is Sasha doing?"

"She's upbeat."

"Ha ha, I see. I'm glad it's nothing serious."

"Dad... What do you think about Seren?"

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

In brief, Angeline explained that there was something strange about Seren and that she seemed to be worrying about something.

Belgrieve kneaded his beard. "You may be right about that," he said.

"You think so? I was wondering what to do..."

"Hmm... For now, you'll need to hear her out, or we won't get anywhere."

"Yeah. I think I'll stop by Seren's place for a bit."

"Right. Sometimes it's hard to talk to family. Maybe a little chat will ease her up."

Angeline nodded, stood, and left the room. She wandered around a bit aimlessly, as she didn't know where Seren's room was. Upon asking a passing maid, she managed to pinpoint the location, only to find out the girl had gone out somewhere, which took the wind out of her sails.

"Where did she go...?"

"She said she was headed out to town." She had apparently left on horseback.

*What is she heading out to do when the sun's almost set?* Angeline wondered. Once again, Angeline found herself back in her room.

Belgrieve looked at her curiously. "That was fast."

"Seren was out."

"At this time of day? Hmm..." Belgrieve looked doubtful.

Angeline sat beside him with an elbow on the table. "What could she be worrying about?"

"She did meet her father as an undead. And she witnessed Helvetica cut it down."

"Yeah... So it really was a shock..."

Angeline tried to imagine it. If Belgrieve died, and his corpse appeared before her in such a way that she had to defeat it... Once her thoughts had reached that point, she was so heartbroken that she had to spring up and cling onto the man.

Belgrieve blinked. "What? Something wrong?"

"Wah..."

*So this is what Seren and Helvetica had to go through,* Angeline thought. Her eyes were already teary at the mere thought.

"You have it hard, Seren... Incredibly hard..."

"Why are you crying then? Good grief..."

"I mean... Her father died, and the undead! Urgh..." Angeline sobbed, her face buried in her father's chest.

Belgrieve sighed and stroked her back. "That's true... Perhaps she doesn't know how to deal with those emotions."

"What should I do? What can I do for her, dad?"

With a troubled look on his face, Belgrieve stared out the window, searching for the right words.

○

Night had come, but in the end Seren hadn't returned even as dinner rolled around. The soldiers on patrol confirmed that she was somewhere in the city, so Helvetica intentionally did not send anyone to find her. She apparently understood how her little

sister felt.

Once dinner was over, Belgrieve left the manor for a short walk. There were thin wisps of clouds stretched over the sky, the nearly full moon shining dimly behind their veil. He stared at it absentmindedly, when he heard footsteps behind, shortly followed by someone glopping onto his back. It was Angeline.

“Don’t leave me behind...”

“Hmm? Ange... Weren’t you with Anne and Merry?”

“We’re here.”

“She ran off saying she would rather be with you, Mr. Bell.”

The two girls appeared from behind Angeline, having followed her when she dashed out.

Belgrieve patted Angeline with a resigned look on his face.

The four of them walked aimlessly, coming across a bonfire blazing in front of the nearby guard post. Several soldiers had laid out furs to sit on, holding lively conversations with mugs of ale in hand.

“You should have seen how Angeline moved back then! She didn’t shy back one step when she gave that brat a good kicking!”

“He was pretty strong, that brat. I never would have imagined that Lady Sasha, Ashcroft, and Elmore together wouldn’t stand a chance against one boy.”

“Who were they, anyway? I’m pretty sure Count Malta was just using them, but... Oh, Mr. Belgrieve!”

“Angeline too!”

“Stay awhile if you like!”

The young soldiers invited them to sit around the fire. There was little reason to decline, and they were handed wooden mugs filled to the brim with the mild concoction.

“Here you go! It’s an honor to drink together.”

“Thanks.”

“No, thank you, Ms. Angeline. That match we had earlier was a good lesson.”

“You’re welcome...”

“How did you get that strong?”

“But Mr. Belgrieve’s pretty amazing too. You’re even stronger than Angeline, aren’t you?”

“Oh, not at all. This girl’s far stronger than me.”

“On the contrary, my dad is stronger.”

“Ha ha, I envy how you can quarrel about it.”

“What sort of training do you do? It must be quite rigorous.”

“I’m not so sure... I don’t think we do anything special, though in my case, my leg is like this.”

“Now that you mention it...”

“Still, it’s amazing how strong you are despite that. I’m not confident I could move so freely if I became like that.”

“Hey now, you’re making me embarrassed with all the unabashed compliments...”

“What does it matter? You really are strong, Mr. Bell.”

“She’s right. You’re the one who noticed something was wrong with the mansion.”

“Yes. My dad is incredibly strong.”

“You’re really putting me on the spot here...” The wind stroked Belgrieve’s neck as he gave a strained laugh. The winds were cold on this fine spring evening, and he moved his hands by the fire.

The soldiers admired Belgrieve for rushing to help the manor during the first attack and adored him for issuing precise orders and making the proper calls on the second one. They believed without a doubt that the three Bordeaux sisters had only come out in one piece thanks to the girls and Belgrieve. And so, they wanted to hear their tales and praise them to their faces.

As they talked, sipping at the ale, they heard footsteps from behind.

Angeline's eyes widened as she called, "Seren."

"Oh... You're all here." Seren looked somewhat haggard as she walked over to them.

The soldiers were astir.

"Lady Seren, how unusual."

"It's still cold out. Please come over"

Seren opened and closed her mouth silently, her eyes wandering. She seemed to be hesitant. Angeline stood, rushed over, held her by the shoulder, and ruffled up her hair somewhat violently.

"Come over, won't you?"

Seren blinked a few times. "All right."

The soldiers grew lively as Seren entered their circle. Unlike Helvetica and Sasha, Seren rarely joined them on such occasions.

"Here, Lady Seren! Have a seat right next to the Red Ogre! Best seat in the house."

"Aha ha ha!"

"Move over! Make space!"

"What do you think I'm doing?!"

The soldiers busily cleared away a seat next to Belgrieve.

"Heh heh, thank you..." Seren smiled. She found herself sandwiched between Belgrieve

and Angeline as she held her knees, her shoulders trembling.

One of the soldiers produced a large jug. “Care for some ale, milady?”

“Stupid, Lady Seren’s not gonna drink your nasty ale. Wine! Bring out the wine!”

“Someone get it.”

“It’s fine, perfectly fine. Don’t worry about me... I’ll have some ale.” Seren waved her hands in a fluster.

The soldiers chuckled as they filled a clean mug and handed it over.

Seren took one sip before falling into a daze. “I-It’s bitter...” she muttered.

“Are you okay, milady? Should I get some wine?”

“No, I’m fine,” said Seren. Her face remained scrunched up as she took another sip. While the soldiers exchanged looks, none of them intended to go against her will, and they were quickly back to their usual chatter.

“Was that your first taste of ale?” Belgrieve whispered to her.

“Yes... I’m ashamed to admit it was. Even though I live in Bordeaux of all places...” her cheeks turned ever so slightly red.

Belgrieve laughed. “Truth be told, I’m not used to ale either... It’s pretty bitter.”

“Oh, really...? Even you have those moments,” Seren said. She blinked, a little alarmed, before a touch of relief settled on her face, and the tension drained from her shoulders as Angeline comfortingly wrapped an arm around them.

The lively conversations continued with a bit of Seren’s input until eventually the small banquet had reached its conclusion and the soldiers stood up.

“We have an early day tomorrow... Please take it easy.”

“Yes, good work, and thanks,” said Anessa.

Seren stood and bowed her head as the soldiers left with empty jugs and mugs. “Thank

you for everything.”

“Y-You don’t have to bow to us, milady.”

“I’m ashamed that bit of ale was all we could offer.”

The soldiers nodded several times before they were gone. Seren once again sat down with the others. Anessa tossed a log onto the flame that had nearly burned to embers, accompanied by a snapping sound and a scattering of sparks. The thin clouds gradually cleared, giving the hazy moon its definitive outlines. As the area grew brighter, their breaths were illuminated with a light pale tint.

“Did you head off to the city?” Anessa asked.

Seren nodded. “I’m sorry for worrying you...”

“It’s fine. Sometimes, you just have one of those days,” Miriam said with a laugh, patting Seren on the shoulder.

Seren let out a long breath. “I never knew.”

“Hmm?” Belgrieve cocked his head.

Seren stared into the flames. “I’ve hardly spoken with the soldiers... I do like horse riding, but fighting is not my strength... It always felt like there was an uncomfortable distance between me and them.”

“Is that so... But everyone has their strengths and weaknesses. I don’t think you have to worry about it. You’re still young.”

“Heh heh... that may be so. But given what happened...” Seren pressed her mouth into her knees. Her glasses reflected the red of the flames. “I was unable to do anything... I was simply protected.”

“It wasn’t your fault,” said Anessa.

“Right, right. It’s not like everyone has to fight,” added Miriam.

Seren closed her eyes. “Right... But I don’t know if I should have been standing there... I was saved by Angeline, then saved again by the soldiers and Belgrieve... Yet I feel as

if I'm the one who should be doing the protecting—as a noble, as someone who must stand above others..." She pulled her knees closer to her body. "I feel pathetic. When my father appeared again, my body wouldn't listen to me. I cowered... It was too much for me."

"I understand..." Angeline hugged her. "It's nothing to be ashamed about."

"But... my sister faced him head-on. Ever since, she's been carrying herself even more magnificently than before. Sash hasn't changed, but she's always been like that, and I think that fighting as an adventurer has strengthened her heart... Now, it's as if I'm the only pathetic one."

Sasha often fought with fiends and could adopt a far-sighted perspective in some respects. Helvetica had matured after overcoming her grief. And yet, Seren had folded to it, frozen in her tracks. This was her worry.

"They keep saying I have a gift for politics, but I didn't know a thing—not about fighting, or how I need to confront what I don't want to see... I didn't know what to do. It just hammered home that I'm still a child," she concluded with a powerless smile. "I'm sorry for being so negative..."

Neither Angeline nor Anessa nor Miriam knew what to say; Seren's worry was more complex than that she was sad after encountering her father as an undead fiend. *She's really earnest*, thought Angeline, and she found the girl even more endearing. However, not knowing what to say, she could only strengthen her embrace.

"I was around your age when I set off for Orphen to become an adventurer," Belgrieve suddenly started off. He spoke slowly but deliberately.

"Really?"

"Yes. At first, I was bewildered by everything... Life out there was so different from Turnera, and I made some crucial blunders. I was ripped off when I tried to buy things, and I ended up in scraps over false accusations."

"I wonder if that happened to me too...?"

"Me too. They palmed faulty tools off on me..."

"Right, I remember! Just when I thought I'd finally haggled right for once, it turned out

their first offer was twice the market price.”

The girls agreed one after another.

Belgrieve smiled. “I couldn’t help but be frustrated when that happened. Many times, I would think to myself, ‘This is pathetic. I’m supposed to be an adventurer.’”

“So it even happened to someone as strong as you...”

“Everyone starts out inexperienced. They fail, think it over, and work things out as they grow. That’s how you truly achieve mastery.”

Seren stared at Belgrieve. “Is that really the case...?”

“Yes. Seren, your worries might torment you now, but I’m sure this experience is necessary for you. Take care not to be crushed by them, but treasure them all the same.”

“Treasure my worries...? Is it all right to worry like this...? Is that okay for someone who stands above others?”

“Yes. It’s more dangerous to jump at an easy answer. We’re not perfect. We find ourselves worried and lost, but we still have to live on. It’s not embarrassing to rely on others when you’re troubled. Luckily, you have two reliable big sisters, so you should be fine getting lost to your heart’s content.”

Belgrieve placed a gentle hand on her head. Seren blushed bashfully.

“My father said something similar.”

“I see... Then he was a fine man, Count Bordeaux.”

“He really was...” Seren closed her eyes in remembrance. She opened them slowly, looking up at Belgrieve. “Thank you. I feel... a little lighter.”

“Ha ha, pardon this old man’s prying... Now then, it’s getting cold. How about we get back to the manor?”

“No, just a little longer...”

Seren nestled up closer to Angeline and closed her eyes. Angeline rubbed her on the back, while Anessa and Miriam watched over her preciously.

“You’re not alone, okay?”

“Yes... Of course.”

Seren sobbed, pushing her face even harder into her knees.

The light of the moon poured down upon them. Sparks of fire bounded with each crack of the log.

# AFTERWORD

“Mojikakiya” is not a good name—I’ll admit it. In fact, naming is probably what I’m worst at. At times, I get struck by a perfect name like a gift from the heavens, but in most cases, I draw a complete blank. I end up pilfering from various mediums and putting together things that just barely fit. A lot of the names in this work actually come from music, but it would be a pain to list out all of them, so I’ll leave that to your imagination.

The same can be said for my pen name. When I was publishing my works online, I just saw it as a bit of fun, so I didn’t put much thought into my name. “Mojikakiya” means “The Word Writer,” by the way. I’m a person [Ya] who writes [Kaki] words [Moji], so I thought Mojikakiya was good enough, and now I’m starting to regret it. You could say I tried imitating The Band, despite not being even half as skillful, and I wouldn’t even say you’re wrong about that.

There are plenty of people who write words. There are literary masters and plenty of people whose works will have their names remembered throughout history. And yet, here I am, calling myself “The Word Writer” as if I’m the only one on the block. It’s not the best look. It kinda feels like I’m picking a fight with people.

If I continue inviting such enmity, I might just be erased in secret. But even if I am eliminated, there will be a second, a third—countless “Word Writers” shall rise in an unbroken chain. Just like I randomly started putting out books, there’s no telling what could bring about the next Mojikakiya. To everyone reading this, it might even be you.

Putting that aside, the name of our protagonist Belgrieve didn’t come from anywhere in particular. The fact that his name does not overlap with any other characters does help him stand out a bit. I feel I did a good job there, for what it’s worth.

In regards to Belgrieve, he seems to be incredibly tired on the cover. Naturally so, as he has to deal with Angeline who’s on cloud nine from their long-awaited reunion. The photographer actually had to redo the cover illustration over twenty times. A few of them had Belgrieve smiling, but after all the retakes, they ultimately decided his tired face was the most interesting. He has my sympathy. I don’t think I even have to mention that Anessa was relentlessly teased afterward over that cheeky wink she sent

the camera.

Personally speaking, I really love the cover this time. Don't you feel that this single picture tells a whole story? If you don't, please put in a bit of effort until you do.

As always, Master toi8 does magnificent work. This must be what it means to be a professional. The fact that this book is good enough for you to even take a peek into is largely due to the master's illustrations. Thank you toi8!

Now then, this is just a personal matter, but I changed a few of the phrases in the book. To be more precise, "gypsy" was changed to "traveling people." The word "gypsy" always left a good impression on me: I think this came from the Gypsy Kings, and famous songs like The Band's "Acadian Driftwood," Van Morrison's "Caravan" and "Into the Mystic," and Curtis Mayfield's "Gypsy Woman." The word itself has a sort of exotic ring to it, which I am really fond of.

During the proofreading stages, someone actually pointed out the term, but due to my own lack of knowledge, I left it in as "gypsy." After that, I had a few opportunities to read up on them, about their hard fight, and how "gypsy" was used as a derogatory term. I decided against using it. I suddenly swapped it out during the grammar check, so I might have startled my editor M-san. Allow me to hide my apology here.

While "Roma" would be a more appropriate term, I'm sorry to say it isn't as charming to me personally, and after mulling it over, I settled on "traveling people." To be perfectly honest, I wasn't trying to denote a specific race or ethnicity by using "gypsy." I used it in a vague sense to mean "those without a permanent residence who wander the lands, making a living off performance and fortune-telling." "Roma" is used for a specific group of people, and the gypsies who appeared in this story were not Roma.

The reason I had to change this term was not due to the existence of the actual Roma people, but because of the people who persecuted them. Their shortsightedness is making me go through such trouble. What a bothersome bunch they are.

Now then, enough messing around. I just wanted to show that I do put in some serious thought from time to time.

There aren't too many people out there who start reading at volume 2, so thank you everyone for continuing after the first volume. I hope we can meet again in volume 3.

Mojikakiya, April 2018

A black and white illustration of a person with large, expressive eyes and cat ears. The person has a surprised or excited expression, with wide eyes and a slightly open mouth. The style is a mix of manga and digital art, with visible brushstrokes and shading. The background is plain white.

Cat ears  
FTW!!!

2018-

Toi8

# BONUS SHORT STORIES

## ABOUT NICKNAMES

“Can I leave it to you, Anessa?”

“Sure, I’m on it.”

Belgrieve handed Anessa a basket of seed potatoes, which she comfortably tucked under her arm before walking off. The snow had melted, exposing the black soil of the field. It was still damp enough that the soles of her shoes sunk and stuck with each step, but it was good enough for sowing. Anessa planted the potatoes in rows along the tilled dirt. For each potato, she scattered a handful of fertilizer mixed from manure, fallen leaves, and ash, and piled dirt over it. With one mound after the next, the field of Turnera’s second most prevalent staple crop—after wheat—was born.

The sky was blue and perfectly clear, and while the wind caressing her face was still chilly, it was brimming with the essence of spring. She took a deep, refreshing breath, letting it permeate through her body. Had she felt that this labor was imposed on her, then perhaps the farmwork would have seemed more onerous, but she actually quite enjoyed it so long as she took some time to look around and take in the sights.

After every row, she stood up and stretched her back, taking the opportunity to watch the birds fly over the hills as she did so. She would never experience this sense of peace working as an adventurer. It went without saying that Angeline was fully at home doing this, but the same could now be said for Anessa and Miriam as well.

“I’ve finished up over here, Mr. Belgrieve.”

“Oh, thanks... Looks like we’ve got room for some more. Give me a sec.”

Belgrieve took the empty basket and left to replenish it. While Anessa waited there, empty-handed, Miriam came up to her with a puzzled look on her face. Anessa ignored her as long as she could, but it began grating on her, and she eventually turned with a frown.

“What?”

“You’re kinda still acting like strangers, you and Mr. Bell.”

Anessa blinked. “You think so?”

“I totally do. It’s been over a week, right? Why not just call him Mr. Bell like everyone else? Even if he’s still using our full names too.”

“What does it matter what we call each other?”

“That’s not—”

“Wah?!“ Anessa cried out as Angeline suddenly appeared behind her.

“You’re putting up pointless barriers with your needless concerns.”

“I-I’m not really concerned...”

Miriam prodded her, “I got it: you’re embarrassed! Our little Anne’s all grown up.”

“What?! Wrong, fool! Don’t be crazy!”

“That’s right... You will never be my mother...”

“I’m saying you’re wrong!” Anessa yelled, her face a bright red.

Angeline and Miriam chuckled. That was when Belgrieve returned with the basket.

“You sound like you’re having fun.”

“Hey, Mr. Bell. Why do you talk to us like that?”

“Hm...? What do you mean?”

“I mean, it’s like you don’t know us. Just call us by our nicknames. How am I supposed to calm down with you calling me Miriam?”

Belgrieve placed the basket on the ground with an awkward smile. “You think so? I think you’ll get used to it pretty quickly.”

"That's not true, dad..." Angeline hopped onto Belgrieve's back, and he carefully shifted his weight to compensate. "I would feel distant if you called me Angeline..."

"No, you're my daughter..."

"Yes, I am your daughter... Hee hee."

Angeline gleefully buried her face in Belgrieve's hair and took a whiff. With a resigned sigh, Belgrieve adjusted her position so she wouldn't fall off.

"What are you girls trying to do? Good grief..."

"No fair, Ange!" Miriam stamped her foot and pouted with puffed-up cheeks. She quickly circled around Belgrieve, and began tickling Angeline's sides. The girl's wriggling and thrashing only made her struggle to keep holding onto her father, which in turn made it more difficult for Belgrieve to keep his balance.

"Hey, come now, Miriam."

"There you go again!"

"Got it, got it. Give me a break, Merry."

Miriam let out a satisfied laugh, turning to Anessa with a grin.

"How about that, Anne?"

"What's your problem? Quit bothering Mr. Belgrieve..."

"You mean Mr. Bell! Ah, you just don't get it!"

Miriam's cheeks were now fully inflated as she jumped at Anessa this time. She reached a hand for her side.

"Whoa, quit it! Gah!"

"It's my time to shine," said Angeline as she gallantly jumped down from Belgrieve's back and sprung upon Anessa.

"There, how about that?"

“Had enough yet, Anne...?”

“S-Stop! Argh! Ah... Erk...”

The girls raised a ruckus as they tussled left and right. Belgrieve watched them anxiously, muttering to himself, “I just wanted to plant potatoes...”

## GHOST STORIES

As the orphanage was joined with the church, it was situated close to the graveyard. The clergy had a duty of maintaining the graves and chanting daily prayers for the dead. Though it wasn’t directly adjacent, it was well within walking distance.

The children who lived there were often dragged along by one of the sisters to clean the tombstones. They would sweep away fallen leaves, scrub away moss, and replace withered flowers for new ones. As a devout follower, the sister would make sure to be mindful and meticulous with her work, but the kids in their mischievous years would run off to play more often than not, provoking the sister’s pious wrath.

“Enough already! The ghosts will come for naughty children like you!”

“Ghosts?”

“We’re fine, sister. Mighty Vienna protects all.”

“Oh, but you see, the Great Goddess punishes bad little girls who don’t listen. Now hurry up and rake those leaves.”

And like that, they were cleaning the graves yet again. After evening prayers came dinnertime, then bed. There was a rule against staying up late, but it was never so easy for the children to fall asleep. They would gather in secret, whispering stories under their breath.

With her blanket pulled over her head, nine-year-old Miriam giggled.

“A ghost, they say!”

"An undead, right? The adventurers will deal with it."

If these children without relatives were not adopted, they would eventually have to pick up some trade to stand on their own. Most often, they would enter an apprenticeship with a craftsman or merchant, but becoming an adventurer was also quite enticing. After all, they were at that age where they longed for adventure. The sister would make a sour face whenever they brought it up.

In any case, the children recognized adventurers as the people who exterminated bad fiends. Surely they could protect small children from ghosts as well.

One of the older girls cracked a mischievous face. "You really think so? Ghosts aren't the same as undead, you know."

"Huh? Really?"

Nine-year-old Anessa shifted under her blankets. "Yep, I've heard about it before," she said. "You know Mr. Will's house downtown? They heard footsteps in the dead of the night."

The children pricked up their ears and swallowed their breath.

"At first, they thought it was a cat or something, but it sounded too big for that. Even half asleep, Mr. Will knew something had to be up."

"And then? And then?" Miriam leaned in, exhilarated.

"The steps got closer and closer. They stopped right by his bedside, and he could hear breathing in his ear."

"Th-That's just a bandit!" a seven-year-old boy said, putting up a strong front.

"Shh," the surrounding children chided, holding their index fingers to their lips.

Anessa chuckled. "It wasn't a bandit. There was no one there when he looked up. He closed his eyes again, but still heard it. '*Pant... pant...*'"

"Eep!"

"Finally, he leapt to his feet. He jumped up and screamed, 'Who's there?!' and then,

behind him..."

Anessa's words were cut off as Miriam jumped in with a startling "Boo!" sending the rest of the children reeling back.

The kids who had yet to turn five were already teary-eyed before the story reached the scary part, and that was the finishing blow. Their wails put the older kids in a panic.

"Hold on, wait, wait, you can't cry!"

"The sister's gonna come!"

"What are you doing, Merry?!"

But it was already too late. Frenzied footsteps traced the hall before the sister burst through the door in her pajamas. Looking at all the children nestled together, she scowled.

"Ah! It's past your bedtime! What are you doing?!"

"Um, umm, this isn't what it..."

On top of the small kids who wouldn't stop crying, the ones who knew they would be scolded had started sobbing as well, and the situation was getting out of hand. The sister was exhausted by the time everyone had finally calmed down, but she still had enough in her to become enraged once she heard what had happened.

"Anessa," she sighed. "I thought you were a good girl."

"Erk... I-I'm sorry. But Merry, she—"

"No! I did nothing wrong."

"Quiet down. You all told stories when you're supposed to be sleeping, so you're all bad."

The kids were astir.

"I-Is a ghost gonna come?"

“Will it ‘boo’ at me from behind?”

“I’m scared...”

The sister panicked, seeing a few small ones about to cry again. “Calm down! Anessa’s story was completely made up! Those kinds of ghosts don’t exist!”

“Huh? Then what kind of ghosts are coming, sister?”

“Um... Yes, well, you see...”

After much thought and some dithering, the sister told a heartwarming ghost story. This was far more enjoyable than prayers, lectures, and sermons, and the children’s eyes sparkled. This didn’t feel bad at all to the sister, and she began to grow quite invested in spinning her tales. By the time another sister’s curiosity prompted her to drop by, the sister had already begun telling a new one.

## TREADING WHEAT

The white frosted stalks of wheat regained their verdant hues under the light of the sun. The ground was somewhat muddy after the snowmelt, but not bad enough to hold up work.

Belgrieve walked down the path with five-year-old Angeline by his side. The skies had been clear since early morning, but that only made the weather feel even colder—there was nothing to insulate them from the heavy cold air from the atmosphere. The sun wasn’t nearly strong enough to warm their bodies.

Angeline crouched down. Her cheeks were red.

“Are you all right, Ange?”

She thought for a moment. “I’m a little cold.”

She restlessly gripped Belgrieve’s hand.

Early spring work consisted of planting potatoes and treading wheat. There was still

some time to go before the potatoes needed to be planted; treading the wheat was the first job of the year. The seeds suspended in the frost needed to be stomped to the ground, which would cause the stalks to branch off more and produce more kernels.

Turnera sowed wheat in both the fall and the spring, each of which was a different cultivar. In terms of taste, fall wheat was preferred and thus harvested in greater abundance. The spring wheat was mainly grown as feed for livestock during the lean winter months. Though there wasn't a great difference in labor involved for either, it was only the fall wheat that would be tread in the cold.

They headed out to the misty field and saw several people already hard at work. Belgrieve noticed children among them. He made his way to the edge, planting his artificial leg on firm ground. He could not treat wheat with his peg leg.

Breathing a white haze, Angeline stepped on the nearest bundle.

"You can put in more strength. But you can't rub your foot against it, or you'll tear the leaves."

"Okay."

Angeline raised her leg and somewhat awkwardly moved it down the bristle of wheat. Belgrieve chuckled to himself as he got to work on the one next to it. The wind was gentle that day; sometimes, cold wind would bellow against their exposed faces, and when that happened, the simple job became incredibly taxing.

However, Belgrieve quite enjoyed treading the wheat. It was a job consisting of nothing more than walking carefully, but it was strangely relaxing. It put him in a frame of mind similar to meditation.

He lined up next to Angeline as she unsteadily made her way down the line and took her hand. She shifted her weight against him, and her steps became surer and more relaxed.

At times, she would stop to watch her breath waft away. The blue sky made the white puffs stand out all the more, and she could see the distinct shapes they formed.

"Dad, carry me..."

"Hmm? Hey now, we've only just begun."

"It's fine. Carry me..."

Belgrieve begrudgingly hoisted her up. She would plead for pampering at the strangest times. She was young, and sometimes she would grow tired of work halfway through. Belgrieve didn't intend to force her to keep working, so he lifted her up as demanded.

Just like that, he walked a while with her in his arms, with some difficulty, before he had to put her down. "Daddy is having a hard time, Ange. Is a piggyback ride okay?"

"Yeah."

He stooped down, and Angeline hopped onto his back. "You've gotten pretty heavy."

Belgrieve softly chuckled, and began walking again. His steps had grown heavier with Angeline's additional weight. He could feel the wheat leaves being crushed underfoot. Even squished to this degree, the wheat would come back healthier in the end. *How sturdy they are*, Belgrieve reflected with a degree of respect for the crop.

Angeline shifted and squirmed. "Does it hurt...?"

"Hmm?"

"The wheat. When we step on it."

"Right... Maybe it hurts, but they grow up healthier because of it."

"I don't... like pain," Angeline said, reaching her hands around his neck and hugging him tightly. Belgrieve chuckled, getting a better grip on her as she started sliding down.

"Yeah, daddy doesn't want to see you in pain either, Ange."

"But... Do adventurers get hurt?"

"They do... Sometimes, it hurts."

"Then I'll put up with it," she said, after a moment's thought.

Angeline wriggled out from his arms and landed on the ground. She rushed to the next line over and began stomping on the wheat. By now, she already had a vague longing

to be an adventurer. Belgrieve suspected the stories he told to put her to sleep had played a part. He was happy his daughter set her sights on the same goal he had once pursued himself, but worried about the danger that would come with it. He folded his arms contemplatively.

“What should I do...” he wondered to himself.

However, the future was the sort of thing for which no amount of navel-gazing would ever be enough. He could only do what he could do in the present. Belgrieve began shuffling on again.

The sun was high, its rays shining down on the damp earth below.

## PASTRIES

The stately streets of Bordeaux were lined with low structures built out of sturdy stone. They carried the strong will of the old pioneers who had intended to set up the city as their stronghold. Those pragmatic men and women had settled here, cut down the forests, and spread vast fields across the land.

That was in the past, though. Now, there were rows of gaudy, cheerful stalls, with adventurers and merchants energetically coming and going. Stationed at the center of an open plain with sprawling wheat fields surrounding it, Bordeaux was the greatest producer of grain in the north. This wheat, passed down and improved upon generation after generation, was known for its high quality. It traded not only in the northern regions, but in Orphen and Estogal City as well.

Perhaps, then, it was natural that Bordeaux was also famous for its wheat-based cuisine. Their main alcoholic beverage was ale, while their bread took on various forms based on the wheat cultivars, grain types, dough shapes, and baking methods. Their baked pastries ranged from crunchy to soft, and everything in between.

When lunch was over, Sasha led the party to a pastry shop. The smell tickled everyone’s nostrils the moment they had set foot through the door, while the baskets of breads and sweets lining the walls were a sight for sore eyes. Belgrieve could feel saliva welling up despite having just eaten.

The girls' faces lit up, their eyes sparkling.

"Amazing..." said Angeline. "Just what I needed."

"What to do, what to do... I should have skipped lunch if I had known I would come here." Miriam stomped her foot in frustration.

A thin smile formed on Angeline's lips. "It's all right... You can do it, Merry."

"I see... You're right. I need to challenge my own limits! All right, this is nothing!"

"That's why you're gaining weight..." Anessa said, sighing.

However, Miriam was not the only one mesmerized by the sweets. Angeline and Anessa were also shifting their eyes frantically, picking out sweets from the various baskets. The format was the same as Orphen, and they would have to place any items they wanted on wooden trays and take them to the counter. Belgrieve was not as predisposed to sweets as the girls, so he began to space out and gazed distantly into the back of the store.

Soon, a new basket of freshly baked goods was carried in with a sweet, yet astringent scent. The slightly thin bread had been shaped into a cone, each piece dripping with what looked to be melted cheese. Belgrieve plucked one out, thinking it would be nice to have a freshly baked treat.

"Ooh," Sasha cried. "What good eyes you have, master! That's the most popular item in the shop."

"Oh really? That's not why I picked it out."

The girls, having overheard, each picked one out for themselves. Their trays were full, and Belgrieve worried if they would be able to eat everything.

"Will you all be fine with eating that much?"

"I have a second stomach for sweets."

"That's simply common sense for a lady, dad..."

"I see... I think?"

The girls gave one glance back at Belgrieve's puzzled expression before going to pay at the register. The pâtissier was connected to a café where they could bring their sweets to eat.

There, they ordered floral tea and began their onslaught on the pastries. There were hefty ones with chewy consistencies, thin ones as crisp as pie crust, and super sweet ones with dried fruits kneaded into the dough.

Belgrieve nibbled on the pastry he had picked out. It was freshly baked and gave off steam from where he bit into it. He thought he might have burned his mouth if he hadn't taken in a great breath of air with it. It was filled with dried fruit and cheese. It seemed the dough had been stretched thin, then wrapped around its fillings. Sugar was then sprinkled over its surface after it was baked. Belgrieve thought that the way the cheese melted was a big part of why it was so delicious, precisely because it was freshly baked.

"If they switched out the filling, it could be served as a meal..."

It seemed it would make a splendid dish if instead of dried fruits, it was stuffed with meat or fish—though that would be difficult to make without an oven at home.

While Belgrieve was carefully appraising his lone purchase, the girls stuffed their satisfied-looking faces full with pastries. *Do they actually have another stomach?* Belgrieve wondered, amazed.

With a mouthful of tea, Angeline took a deep breath.

"It's delicious... And the dough is playing a big part. I can taste the wheat..."

"I'm glad you noticed! Heh heh, it's nice to hear that from you, Ange."

"The sweets from Orphen were nice, but the taste was all from the sugar and fruit. It might be the first time that the wheat's taste came through so clearly," Miriam happily munched down. Anessa seemed more restrained than the other two, but her hands were not stopping either. She seemed just as enthralled.

Seeing that Belgrieve had finished and was sipping on his tea, Angeline pinched one of her pastries and held it out.

"Here, dad."

"Hmm? Oh, I'm good," he said, to which Angeline puffed up her cheeks.

"You're not. Say 'ahh.'"

"Yeah... Okay, fine."

He let her feed him the offered sweet. Angeline gave a satisfied nod, then without another word opened her mouth in return.

"Ah."

Good grief, Belgrieve shook his head. He picked a random sweet from her pile and placed it in her mouth. His daughter was on cloud nine. Thinking back on it, he would often feed her cowberries like that when she was a child, and he felt a sense of nostalgia.

Once the plates were empty, Angeline stood. He thought she was getting ready to leave, but instead, she took up her tray.

"Round two..."

"Here we go!"

"What?!" Belgrieve stared at the girls in complete disbelief. Just watching them seemed to give him heartburn.



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My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer: Volume 2  
by MOJIKAKIYA

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Edited by Brandon Koepp

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