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9

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

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

- VOLUME 9 -

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[J-NOVEL CLUB]



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CHARACTERS



◆ Belgrieve ◆

Moniker (?) : Red Ogre
A former adventurer whose dreams were shattered long ago. He is now on a quest to confront his past.



◆ Angeline ◆

Moniker: Black-Haired Valkyrie
Belgrieve's daughter, and an adventurer who has reached the highest rank. She loves her father.



◆ Anessa ◆

The mediator, negotiator, and AAA-rank archer of Angeline's party.



◆ Miriam ◆

An AAA-rank member of Angeline's party who specializes in magic.



◆ Kasim ◆

Moniker: Aether Buster
An S-rank adventurer and archmage reunited with his old party member, Belgrieve, by Angeline.



◆ Percival ◆

Moniker: The Exalted Blade
An S-Rank adventurer possessing incredible skill with the sword. He was one of Belgrieve's former comrades, and has finally managed to reconcile with him.



◆ Satie ◆

A former comrade of Belgrieve's, and the only woman in the party. She now fights a secret battle against the empire, and is constantly on the run...



WORLD MAP



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

Estogal City

Imperial Capital

Findale

Hot Springs

Checkpoint

Istafar

Earth Navel

Nyndia Mountains

Tyldes

To Lucrecia

To Dadan

STORY

Upon reuniting with his old comrade Percival, Belgrieve was able to forge a bond with him once more. Despite the joyous reunion, Angeline grew anxious when she saw a side of her father she had never seen before, but Kasim and Percival's words put her at ease.

The party set off for the imperial capital of Rhodesia in search of Satie, the final member of their party, only to hear rumors of an elf launching a rebellion against the empire. Belgrieve and Angeline split up to pursue different leads, but it wasn't long before Angeline coincidentally stumbled upon Satie, who was on the run from her pursuers. With some unexpected assistance from Angeline, Satie managed a lucky escape from danger.

Satie wept as soon as she heard Angeline speak of Belgrieve, and explained why she was on the run as well as the conspiracies afoot in the capital.

Angeline insisted that she—along with her comrades and father—would lend a hand, but, with a sorrowful smile, Satie deployed a teleportation spell.

“Wait! I can’t...”

“I’m glad I got to meet you... But you should forget about me.”

And thus, she disappeared from Angeline's sight.



CHAPTER 111

THE NIGHT SKY AS SEEN FROM THE GARDEN

The night sky as seen from the garden was covered in an array of twinkling stars. They would be momentarily shrouded by drifting clouds only to be revealed again soon after. The garden itself felt detestably cramped thanks to the cold stone walls that boxed it in on all sides, but the trees and the flowers were carefully tended to and bloomed in beautiful colors even when pruned into compact shapes.

The air that descended from the sky was heavy and cold—not enough to induce frost, but enough to coat the leaves in evening dew, which glistened in the flickering light of the shinestones hung on the walls.

At the center of the garden and encircled by shrubbery was a table furnished with a few chairs. A handsome man sat in one of these. He wore a white, well-tailored suit, and his blond hair seemed to glow gold as it caught the light. This was Benjamin, crown prince of the Rhodesian Empire. He had a slightly peeved frown on his face as his finger tapped away at the table.

“Another failure... I must admit, these successive failures have really taken the fun out of it.”

“My deepest apologies. We ran into unanticipated trouble,” said Francois, third son of Archduke Estogal, who had dropped to one knee beside the prince. He kept his head down. He was perfectly still, save for his eyes, which shifted restlessly. It was like he could feel someone watching him from every patch of darkness.

Benjamin roughly scratched his head before sighing and slouching back into his chair. “No, that part was fine. Thanks to that, we managed to lure out the elf. No, the real mishap was the fact that we failed to slay her.”

The plan to hunt down the elf in Findale had failed not once but twice. One failure was understandable, yet even after learning from their mistakes, they were stopped by something completely unexpected the second time around. Right after this botched attack, the elf had appeared in the capital to make a direct attempt on Benjamin’s life. No doubt she had grown impatient upon the realization that her barrier was

imperfect. But Schwartz and Hector had kept her at bay, and they should have been enough to kill this would-be assassin. That's how it was *supposed* to be.

"To think the Black-Haired Valkyrie would show up..."

Francois's brow twitched. "She's involved?" he muttered, raising his head.

"That she is. And thanks to her, the elf got away again—even with Schwartz and Hector working together" Benjamin glanced over his shoulder. "What happened to Maitreya, I wonder? Do you think she's dead already?"

"If she were dealing only with the Exalted Blade, it would be safe to assume so. But the Red Ogre would do no such thing. That is simply the sort of man he is."

This response came from a man in a white robe with the hood pulled down over his eyes—Schwartz, the Blue Flame of Calamity.

Benjamin grinned. "You have quite a high opinion of him. In other words, he's a softy? Is that it?"

"He is soft, indeed—but not *weak*. When it comes to him, his indulgence is also his strength. The Lucrecian noble girl and the failure boy were both taken in by his kindness. There's a possibility the imp will also be enticed to his side."

"Oh, a swindler then, heh heh! Schwartz, you were traveling with him for a while. You haven't been wheedled by him, have you?"

"The false persona took to him. That's precisely why I know how he operates."

"Your betrayal... That's the one thing I'd like to avoid."

"*My* betrayal?" Schwartz's gaze sharpened under his hood. "You took the words out of my mouth. You haven't developed any attachment to the crown prince's position, have you?"

Benjamin averted his eyes, turning his sour gaze skyward. "Don't worry... I'm not going to get in the way of your research or your *curiosity*."

Francois looked between the two men, a bewildered look on his face. Schwartz folded his arms and let out a disgruntled sigh. "Well, so be it. In any case, there's no doubt

they will become a hindrance sooner or later.”

“It’s rare to hear that from you. Well, I understand where you’re coming from. The Black-Haired Valkyrie has already impeded our plans several times before... Is it about time for us to settle the score for good?”

“Whatever you do... be careful. If you’re too flashy, you might garner the attention of the church.”

Benjamin sighed and kicked back. “Just when I thought we could finally get the elf out of the way, another strange ingredient finds its way into the mix. It’s nothing but trouble.” His eyes shifted to Francois. “I should prepare your next job, then. Don’t mess up this time. You may go; stand by and await orders.”

“Yes, sir...” Francois answered, looking distinctly nervous. He stood up and saluted, then turned to leave the garden.

Benjamin propped his head up with one hand. “We have more enemies... which means we’ll need more pieces on *our* side,” he muttered. “Good grief, we’ll need to do something about those troublemakers before they can meet up with the elf.”

“Half measures will not be enough to stop them. You must send your most skilled,” said Schwartz.

Benjamin stood and drew the dagger at his hip. “Or you could just take this seriously. Well, I know you’re not the type.”

“I’ve got no interest in playing politics. Just be thankful I’m playing along with your childish hobbies.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know...”

The prince nicked the tip of his finger against the dagger, drawing a swelling bead of blood from the thin, horizontal slice. He thrust out his palm and muttered something under his breath. The blood trickled to the table, and as he chanted, he began using his bleeding finger to draw something—a magic circle.

From the letters and symbols came a faint red light, which grew in strength the closer the circle came to its completion. Pale, transparent spirits seemed to coil around Benjamin. Eventually, a black swirl of power manifested at the center of the circle,

taking on a humanoid shape in the air.

Benjamin nodded in satisfaction and continued chanting and drawing. A tepid wind brushed the surrounding leaves as it whirled up into the sky. The garden was gradually filled with a peculiar presence.

Watching with folded arms, Schwartz muttered, "Will this battle raise waves in the flow of events...? That remains to be seen."

○

Belgrieve found it a bit dizzying to look up at the ramparts that seemed to reach for the heavens. He nearly staggered and had to brace his foot to catch himself.

In Turnera, he'd often heard of Rhodesia, the capital city of the Rhodesian Empire, from the peddlers, performers, and wanderers who passed through. The empire boasted a long history, and its central city was said to be dazzling and vast. Foreign travelers would find themselves in awe of its size and the magnificence of its architecture.

Belgrieve was essentially a country boy who'd just come to the big city; he was already overwhelmed just by the outer walls that rose so much higher than the ones in Yobem and Istafar. Findale had been a large place, but the imperial capital was incredible.

When he'd glimpsed it from afar, it had been nighttime and he'd only seen black, flat shapes amidst the shadows of the mountains. Now that it was up close and illuminated by numerous torches, he could see all the old scars of battle left in various places, which spoke to the many years these walls had held strong.

I'd have taken my time looking around if I'd come under any other circumstances, Belgrieve thought with a wry smile. He lightly slapped at his cheeks to get himself back on track—he hadn't come to sightsee.

After getting in touch with Angeline's party, Belgrieve had been transported by Maitreya's magic to somewhere near the capital. The imp had insisted: "It's finally time to show you what I can do." Her magic made use of shadows, apparently, and she'd boasted that no one else in the world could imitate her. Belgrieve was quite dim when it came to magic in general and didn't quite get it, but he understood well enough that teleportation was an incredibly advanced technique. Not even Kasim and Maria had managed to learn it.

This was the first time Belgrieve had experienced teleportation. At first, it felt like he had sunk into a pool of water and was drifting through impenetrable pitch-black darkness for some time, during which he couldn't make anything out no matter how hard he strained to see. Then, suddenly, he felt like he was floating, and by the time he realized it, he was standing somewhere unfamiliar.

Maitreya, evidently, didn't want to open a portal anywhere too crowded, so she had formed it a safe distance from their destination. From there, it was less than an hour's walk to reach the city. They were passed by several carriages along the way, which were overtaken by several more in turn.

It was common sense not to travel at night, but soldiers were stationed along the stretch from Findale to the imperial capital, guaranteeing the safety of wayfarers. Thus, there were stagecoaches and peddlers hurrying hither and thither even into the late hours of the night. The way that goods could be moved safely regardless of the hour surely helped to bolster the city's economy.

And Prince Benjamin's pretty amazing, not only for suggesting these measures, but for implementing them himself, Belgrieve observed. They hadn't entered the city yet, but even at twilight there was a flourishing market stretched out before the city walls. Benjamin was undoubtedly a skilled statesman if his policies led to this much prosperity.

"But to think he's a fake..."

That was precisely why it felt a bit unfortunate to have him as an enemy. From the perspective of those ignorant of the truth, he was a great benefactor who had improved everybody's quality of life. Witnessing the results firsthand, Belgrieve was overcome by rather conflicted feelings. *For everyone just doing their best to make ends meet, what would it really matter to them if the prince were real or fake?*

According to Angeline, who had met Satie, he had used innocent women to conduct terrible experiments behind the scenes. That was unforgivable, certainly. However, the prosperity he saw before him was also a reality. Belgrieve heaved a sigh. *I've grown too old to condemn every part of him on pure emotion.*

"What's on your mind?" Maitreya asked from beside him. Not only was she wearing a cloth hat to conceal her imp horns, she even went so far as to wear a hood over that.

"It's nothing. I was just thinking that he's a formidable foe."

"Getting cold feet? Now's your chance to run."

"I'm scared, I admit. But I can't run away." Belgrieve chuckled and patted Maitreya on the head.

She pouted. "Don't treat me like a child."

"Right, sorry, sorry."

Maitreya scoffed, but she seemed a bit nervous, and she kept a tight hold on Belgrieve's cloak. It took around an hour to get to the capital from their teleportation gate. By then, the night had fully descended. The soft air that had filled the streets during the day had suddenly become bitingly cold.

That was when Percival arrived, offering skewered meat and fried bread he had bought from the stalls.

"For you."

"Thanks."

"Looks cheap and tough."

"Ah, quit complaining." Percival prodded at Maitreya, whose face had scrunched up at the sight of the food.

Belgrieve surveyed his surroundings. The streets were boisterous enough that they could have mistaken it for a midday crowd.

"Not used to seeing this?" Percival asked him.

"Yeah. I wouldn't have expected to see any place so lively at night. It hardly ever happened in Orphen." He recalled the drunkards who trudged around the bars at night, but the market stalls would be closed and deserted by sunset. Here, it looked like sleep was a foreign concept. "Though I suppose the Earth Navel was noisy at night too."

"That's just during a big wave," Percival said. He took a bite of meat and grimaced. "Too

tough."

"You've been here before, right?"

"A long time ago. Back then, this area was where the beggars gathered... It wasn't like this."

"This is thanks to the crown prince, right? Honestly, I'm having second thoughts about fighting him."

"Bell... You have to understand. Villains are better than anyone at presenting a fair facade."

"That's... precisely what makes them so hard to deal with."

"Exactly right. You can't just slice 'em up and be done with it. This is more than an adventurer can handle—that's why we need someone who isn't an adventurer." Percival chuckled, patting Belgrieve on the back.

Belgrieve returned him a troubled laugh. "Don't expect too much from me."

"Hey, I'm not passing it all off to you. You've got me, and Kasim, and, more than anything, Angeline."

"You're right." Belgrieve thought of his reliable daughter with a warm smile.

With a polished-off skewer dangling from his lips, Percival called over to Maitreya:
"Hey."

"What?" she answered, looking up from her half-eaten bun with a startled face.

"What're you so antsy for? You'll just draw attention."

"Can you blame me? We're on Benjamin's turf now. We can't be too cautious."

"Hmph... You said Schwartz didn't have too many comrades. But he can hire more, right? Were there any other sellswords like you? You only told us about the Executioner."

Maitreya's eyes wandered in thought. "Probably. There should be more. Schwartz and

Benjamin can't move out in the open, and Hector wouldn't be enough to handle all the necessary work. Nevertheless, he wasn't thoughtlessly recruiting people... More realistically, he should have two or three competent allies. Apart from that, there are a few bodyguards who keep themselves concealed around Benjamin. They're more like assassins, though."

"You didn't have the chance to meet your comrades?" Belgrieve asked her.

Maitreya shook her head. "I've met Hector. But we never had anything you could call a conversation. And I've perceived the guards around Benjamin, but I don't know what sort of people they are."

"I see, so he was wary of people who might betray him like you," Percival gibed cruelly.

Maitreya puffed up her cheeks, then breathed out white fog. "And... whose fault do you think that is?"

"Bell's fault. If it were up to me, you'd have croaked in Findale," Percival said, gesturing towards the hilt of his sword. Maitreya paled and swiftly ducked into Belgrieve's shadow.

Belgrieve flashed a strained smile. "Percy... She's an ally now. Don't bully her."

"Well... Sorry."

A cold wind swooped down, rustling their hair. Belgrieve felt a chill as it breached the slight opening of his collar to run down his back. While the sky was dotted with clouds, they weren't enough to detract from the starry expanse above. But this clear sky was a cold one indeed.

"We've got to meet up with the others... But I don't know where to start looking."

Good grief... The connection had cut off before they could name a meeting place.

When it came to the communication magic, and Angeline and Satie's sudden chance encounter, it was nothing but one unforeseen happening after the next. Thus, there had been little opportunity to make concrete plans. They'd come to the capital all well and good, but Belgrieve had no idea what inn Angeline was lodging at, or where Salazar's laboratory happened to be. To make matters worse, it was almost midnight, and though the city was still very much alive, he did not feel keen on wandering

through the unfamiliar streets in the dark.

"For the time being, if we can just meet Lady Liselotte... Then, we can probably join up with Ange."

"Sounds like a plan. Hey, short stuff—Archduke Estogal's villa has got to be near the royal palace, right?"

"It should be. That's quite far from here."

"Can you do something with your teleportation magic?"

Maitreya fidgeted and looked up at Belgrieve shyly. "I can... But I don't really want to."

"Why not?" Percival glared at her.

Maitreya nervously went on, "If we enter while blending in with the crowd, they might not notice us. But they won't overlook the ripples in space caused by teleportation magic. We'll save time, but we might give our location away... And they'll *know* I joined your side."

"Then what about how you warped us from Findale?"

"Their detection shouldn't extend beyond the capital. Near the palace, though, they've set up measures to detect the elf. Using teleportation around there is suicide."

I can definitely see them setting up defensive measures, especially against a foe who can freely go wherever she wants, thought Belgrieve. Though he was a fake, their foe was still acting as the crown prince of the empire, and his accomplice was one of the greatest magicians on the continent.

Percival's eyes narrowed as he stroked his chin. "Hmm... There aren't many folks who can use teleportation in the first place... I wonder where Satie picked it up."

"Ha ha... I can see that girl picking it up like it's nothing though."

"Sure enough. Which means she decided to hone her magic..."

Percival frowned discontentedly; it didn't sit right with him that his former rival in the sword arts had decided to veer off that track.

Belgrieve closed his eyes. *Satie must have continued her training, just like the others. Like Kasim and Percival, she had gained the strength to try to accomplish something.* He wondered if she might have done so as she looked for a way to restore his leg. And along the way, she had found something she had to protect. Though injured and in pain, she had refused help and fought on her own. That thought greatly pained Belgrieve. Having run away on his own once, he had to wonder if this was how his comrades had felt at the time.

“Percy... I’m sorry,” Belgrieve said, bowing his head to Percival.

Percival looked taken aback. “That came out of nowhere.”

“Knowing someone’s in pain, but they won’t even ask for help... It’s a terrible, alienating feeling. I understand that now.”

“Don’t get sentimental now. Even if she refuses, we’re going to help her. That should make up for it.”

“I see... I guess so.” Belgrieve smiled awkwardly and tugged at his beard. “Sorry about that. Got emotional there.”

“I know how you feel. But now’s the time to look ahead and figure out what to do.”

“Yeah... In any case, we should cut down on teleportation. I don’t know if the cab service is running at this hour... So let’s just find a place to spend the night. We can start moving tomorrow.”

“All right. Not like we’ll get anywhere searching the town at night anyways. Is that fine with you?”

They turned to Maitreya, who nodded.

Thus, the three passed the towering walls. The road was lined with shops and eateries, but most had shuttered their doors and snuffed out their lights, quietly submitting themselves to a good night’s rest.

All that clamor outside had made the inner streets seem far quieter by comparison. And yet, the pubs that were still open had loads of people coming in and out their doors. The streets were teeming with wandering inebriates, who would occasionally be shaken from their stupor by soldiers on patrol. It was undoubtedly one of the

liveliest night cities he'd been in.

There were plenty of inns situated around the city gates. These buildings, big and small, still had their lights on, and most hosted bars of their own. This meant the guest lodgings on the second floors would be dead silent even as the bars on the first floors were bursting with noise. It was a peculiar mismatch.

They chose an inn at random and promptly dropped their bags after climbing up to their lodgings. On Maitreya's strong insistence, they had rented a large room with three beds.

After hanging his cape on the wall, Percival rolled his shoulders and said, "How about a drink, then?"

"One cup won't hurt. I'm pretty sleepy, to be honest."

"Ha ha... I'm not going to have too much tonight. All right, let's go."

"What about you, Maitreya?"

Before Belgrieve had finished asking, Maitreya tugged at his sleeve. "Don't leave me alone."

"How scared are you?" Percival wearily asked her. Maitreya turned away, pretending not to hear him.

They descended to the first floor once more. The bar there was rowdy with guests and regular customers alike, all drinking their fill. In the corner, a traveling minstrel with a lute sang an old epic. It was a tale of heroic triumph dating back to the founding of the empire. The names of heroes Belgrieve had heard of as a child lingered in his ears for a few seconds before fading back into memory.

Weaving their way through the crowd, they found some empty seats to collapse into. No sooner than he had done so, Belgrieve could feel the strength draining from his body. It was midnight, and he would ordinarily have been asleep long before now. "What are you so tired for?" he muttered to himself as he rubbed his eyes. He hadn't even done anything yet.

After ordering some drinks, Percival propped up his head with one hand. "We'll need to be on our toes starting tomorrow, but tonight, we need a proper breather."

"Please don't relax too much, or you'll regret it," Maitreya pleaded.

"It's just nagging and more nagging with you. If you're that scared, you want to sit on my lap or something?" Percival pulled back his chair slightly and patted his knees.

Maitreya discontentedly tapped her fingers against the table. "Don't treat me like a child."

"What are you, then?" Percival reached out and poked the imp on the forehead.

Their banter was interrupted by the arrival of their beer steins. Seeing the white foam overflowing from the rim, Belgrieve gave his beard a troubled tug.

"Ale, huh... It's been a while..."

"No good with ale?"

"I think it's just about getting used to it... I'll gladly take it."

"You're childish in the oddest ways, you know," Percival mused before tossing back half of his Stein in one gulp.

Maitreya sipped at the foam and grimaced. "Tastes cheap."

"Because it *is* cheap. That's about what you'd expect."

"I want to drink something better. You're an S-Rank adventurer, aren't you? How about you order something palatable?"

"Oh, can it. I can't stand the taste of the expensive stuff."

"You've got a poor man's tongue."

"You're acting pretty high and mighty for an imp."

"Now, now, don't fight," Belgrieve interceded before turning to his own brew.

As Belgrieve nursed his beer and snacked on fried fish and potatoes, Percival—who was already on his second ale—leaned in. "So, how does it look?" he asked. "We can talk specifics once we meet up, but you've got to have a rough outline worked out,

right?" Maitreya peered at him too.

Belgrieve laid his hands on the table and spoke in a subtly quieter voice. "The one vulnerability we can take advantage of is the fact that the crown prince isn't who he says he is."

"And what are you gonna do with that information?"

"I'm not sure yet. We need more information."

"I see... And if we find anything unnatural, you're going to use it to crumble his standing."

"Let's hope it works out like that," Belgrieve said with a cynical smile. He sipped some ale as his gaze became distant. "Honestly, I think it's a miracle everything's gone this well so far. If things get dangerous—no, if *Ange* is ever in danger... I might have to give up on Satie."

"I won't blame you... Even if it comes to that." Percival smiled and violently patted Belgrieve on the back. "Hey, don't make that face! It's not your personal problem. It's *our* personal problem."

"Ha ha, thanks..."

"You're weird." Maitreya brought her stein to her lips, but she seemed to be lost in her own thoughts.

Suddenly, they heard a fracas brewing near the bar's entrance. At a glance, it seemed that two drunkards had started to fight. Belgrieve heard the sounds of shattered jugs and steins, bellowing and shouting, and, just as loud, the laughter and goading of other patrons.

"Can't we have some peace and quiet?"

"That's a bar for you."

The combatants started duking it out with their fists, but once they were really worked up, they drew daggers on each other. A palpable tension filled the air.

I should probably stop them, thought Belgrieve. He was just about to stand up when

someone else intruded between the dagger-brandishing men, landing a blow on one of them. The man collapsed to the floor, his eyes already rolled back in his skull. The other man had also been subdued with a submission hold by yet another interloper. It was quite a skillful maneuver, eliciting some cheers from the crowd.

The pair that had quelled the fight wore matching uniforms emblazoned with the crest of the church of Vienna. Belgrieve would have thought them clergymen if that was all there was to them, but the crest was slightly different from the familiar one, and they had swords sheathed at their hips. These were clearly no ordinary priests.

“Knights Templar—that’s rare,” Percival murmured, his eyes narrowing.

“From the church?”

“Yeah. They report directly to the papal court in Lucrecia—in short, they’re elites. Although, there should be a branch in the capital... Maybe that’s where they’re from?” Percival had stopped in Lucrecia before on his travels and had apparently caught sight of the Templars there.

The two Templars looked around the bar before promptly returning to their seats. Belgrieve frowned slightly as he looked at their profiles. The first of the two was a man with a solid physique, while the other seemed to be a beastman—a boy with rabbit ears that swayed above his head.

The owner of the establishment rushed forth in a hurry, bowing his head to them again and again in apology and gratitude. In answer to this prostration, the burly man cockily leaned back and ordered a drink—on the house. For his part, the rabbit boy looked rather apathetic as he stared absently off into space.

Although Belgrieve himself did have a loose belief in Great Vienna, Charlotte’s stories had left him with a sour impression of the church as an institution. *They’re different from the Inquisition, right?* he wondered. He couldn’t help but let his eyes drift towards them, only to catch the gaze of the rabbit-eared boy. Belgrieve hurriedly looked away and, feeling a bit unsettled, drained his stein. He took a deep breath.

Maitreya seemed to want to make herself scarce as she softly tugged at Belgrieve’s sleeve. “The church is bad news... They’ll kill me if they figure out I’m an imp.”

“Why does everything have to be so difficult with you? Hey, one more glass over here. How about you, Bell?”

“I’m good. Looks like Maitreya doesn’t want to stick around, so I’ll return to the room.”

“I see. Well, you take it easy. This is where it all begins.”

“Got it. Don’t drink too much.”

“Ha ha... I know my limits.”

Belgrieve clapped a hand against Percival’s shoulder before leading Maitreya back to their room. Once the door was closed, Maitreya sat on the bed with a relieved look on her face.

“Looks like the capital is full of enemies.”

“Knights Templar, huh...”

The church was Charlotte’s sworn foe, to be sure, but there was no sense in pointlessly starting fights with them. It would be best not to get involved with them.

Belgrieve took off his coat and hung it on the back of a chair. For now, he needed to get some rest.

“Finally, some relaxation...”

“Let me just make one thing clear.”

“Hmm?”

Maitreya looked at him with a serious face. “I know I am a very captivating woman, but you shouldn’t do anything funny. Just because I agreed to cooperate with you, that doesn’t mean *everything* is permissible.”



"Hmm...? Yeah, got it... But... Huh?" Belgrieve hadn't really picked up on her insinuation, but not knowing quite how to respond to her, he settled on a troubled, uncertain nod.

"Hmph," Maitreya scoffed. She pulled the blankets over her head and curled up into a ball.

CHAPTER 112

IN SHORT, THIS IS WHAT DAD MUST BE THINKING

In short, this is what dad must be thinking, Angeline reasoned as she haughtily puffed out her chest. “If that Benjamin is a fake, his standing as the crown prince is illegitimate.”

“Yeah, so?”

“If we can expose that fact, we might be able to stop his schemes.”

“How do you plan to do that?” Marguerite asked, her head tilted inquisitively.

Angeline’s eyes wandered. “Um... Tell the emperor he’s a fake?”

Anessa sighed and shook her head. “Oh, c’mom, how are we supposed to do that? In the first place, the emperor’s not the easiest guy to meet...”

“And let’s not forget—you’re pretty much proclaiming his talented son is a fake. You’re only going to anger him, probably,” Touya added, causing Angeline to pout.

Miriam giggled. “Well, this isn’t the right job for Ange—thinking about these things, I mean.”

“It’s fine. I’m sure dad will do something,” Angeline declared. She sat down and pettishly slumped into the chair.

“But, you know... We never told Bell where to find us. Even if he comes to the capital, how’s that supposed to work out?” Marguerite asked. She rocked back and forth in her chair, its legs grating against the floor.

“He said he wanted to talk to Lize. If he doesn’t know where we are, he’ll start by heading to the archduke’s villa, I think...”

"In any case, we'll have to wait until tomorrow to see him."

"That's right. Though we could have avoided all of this if old Salazar had just put in a bit more effort," Kasim said, twisting at his beard. As soon as their communication with Belgrieve cut off, Salazar had immediately dozed off, sprawling out smack-dab in the center of the magic circle. He'd apparently expended a great deal of magic, and he wouldn't wake no matter how much they shook or tapped him. They eventually gave it up as a lost cause.

Although Angeline's unexpected encounter with Satie had gotten her quite worked up, now that she could sit down and relax at the inn, she had calmed down considerably. Considering that Belgrieve had voiced his desire to meet with Liselotte, Angeline had wanted to head off to the manor of Archduke Estogal as soon as the call cut out, but Kasim had told her to wait. He didn't mind the fact she was so enthusiastic about it, but he didn't want her bringing up unnecessary details and complicating things. It was still too early to request Liselotte's cooperation.

Thus, they set a bit of time aside to discuss it all as a group and returned to the inn. In any case, it would be best to wait until they were reunited with Belgrieve so they'd have someone with a level head to mediate the discussion.

"Good grief... I never thought *I'd* have to be the one keeping you guys in check. It ain't for me," Kasim groused. He let out a great yawn and folded his hands behind his head.

"Well, you're the oldest one here. It stands to reason," said Miriam.

"Sure, I'm the oldest... But nobody but Bell can keep *that one* on a leash."

Marguerite smiled thinly in reply to Kasim's pointed look and poked at him. "Oh, shut it. I'm well aware of that."

Kasim removed his hat and twirled it on his finger. "With that said," he went on, "things are playing out faster than I expected. It's a real bother, honestly. I haven't even fully processed it all yet."

They'd come to the capital hoping to find some information on Satie, only to run into the very woman herself. What's more, there was a high chance they would have to lock blades with the crown prince. Angeline recalled the sad smile she'd seen on Satie's face as they parted—so sad that she couldn't bear to look at it.

"From what I've heard, our enemies are gonna be formidable, right? Heh heh, just when I was getting bored," Marguerite declared, pounding a fist into her open palm.

"Come to think of it, Touya, you said we were up against someone you knew, right? Do you mean the guy in black? The one with the scarred face and broken cutlass?" asked Angeline.

Touya closed his eyes. "Pretty much."

"A scar and a broken cutlass," Kasim pensively repeated. "Sounds familiar... Are you talking about the Executioner?"

Touya nodded. "That's right. Hector, the Executioner."

"The Executioner..." Anessa's eyes widened. "Isn't he an S-Rank adventurer?"

"He's an adventurer...?" said Angeline.

"He is," Kasim said, dipping his head in acknowledgment. "I've heard he's cold and cruel but incredibly skilled too. Adventurers fight monsters, more often than not, but he's rare in that he made a name for himself as a bounty hunter exterminating bandits, and, well, there are loads of bad rumors..."

"Like what?" Marguerite curiously asked.

"He's out for blood, they say. He's the type to slaughter bandits even after they've thrown down their weapons and surrendered. It's only a rumor, but word is he even massacred the hostages one time. The indiscriminate killing's what earned him his reputation as the Executioner. Nasty stuff."

Kasim said all that in a jovial, teasing tone, but Angeline mulled it over with a furrowed brow. She had also wiped out troops of bandits—when she had saved Seren, for instance. However, those bandits had not surrendered but had resisted to the bitter end. She'd had no choice but to kill them. Angeline didn't know what she would have done if they'd thrown themselves upon her mercy, but she had never really enjoyed killing people. Certainly not *defenseless* people—the very thought gave her chills.

Miriam frowned. "We're making an enemy out of someone like that? I guess we'll be fighting him, then..."

"Most likely. I doubt it will be possible to resolve this without any fighting..."

"I'll handle him," said Touya. "Everyone else can focus on something more important."

Angeline gently shook her head. "I don't think you can do it alone... Just back there—"

"I won't lose this time. No matter what," Touya insisted with a terribly desperate look on his face.

Kasim swiftly poked him in the cheek. "You're even less likely to win with such blind determination. Don't underestimate your opponent."

"How are you connected to him, exactly?" Anessa probed. "I mean, you seem fixated on him."

Touya closed his eyes. "Some time ago... he killed someone precious to me."

Angeline held her breath, and Maureen gazed at him with concern.

Touya opened his eyes and smiled. "It's all right. I won't charge at him recklessly. I can promise you that much."

"Touya..."

"I'm fine, Maureen. Don't look at me like that."

For a while, everyone was silent. Angeline had no idea what to say to him, and neither did anyone else.

"Bell... Hurry up. I'm just not cut out for this," Kasim murmured quietly, palming his face.

Marguerite turned her chair around so as to sit backward in it and rested her chin on her folded arms atop the backrest. "Say we leave the finer details to Bell. We still can't avoid battle altogether, right? Then, we'd better know as much as we can about the enemy. Is the Executioner a swordsman?"

"He uses a sword, but he's also well versed in dark magic. He can summon undead from the shadows to fight for him, and give presence to shadows to use them like his

own arms and legs."

"Wow, sounds like a tough opponent..."

"But it's helpful to know what we're up against. It would be dangerous to challenge him otherwise," Anessa said. She picked up her bow and began inspecting it.

This sight was a sudden reminder to Angeline, who reached for her bag and took out her sword maintenance tools. She slathered the bare steel in oil and carefully wiped it with a cloth. The prospect of facing down a powerful opponent made it that much more dangerous to neglect her weapon. She would be putting her life at risk if the cutting edge was too dull at the crucial moment.

Having something else to focus on helped her regain her composure. *I guess I was still keyed up*, Angeline realized. Hearing Touya's story was a potent reminder that everyone seemed to have their own burdens to carry.

For a while, Kasim sat with his arms folded, deep in thought. "Now then, let's get what we know together," he said, finally looking up from his musings. "Setting aside personal grudges, we have a shared objective in helping Satie. Are we all in agreement?"

Everyone nodded. Indeed, though their enemy was formidable, their end goal wasn't actually to overthrow the Rhodesian Empire. A confrontation with Benjamin and Schwartz seemed unavoidable, but that wasn't their objective.

Anessa's eyes wandered, a conflicted look on her face. "From what Ange and Touya said, Satie's been at odds with the crown prince and Schwartz for a long time. Even if we do get her out of the city, they might go after us unless we resolve the underlying problems..."

"I'll bet. We'll have to fight them. But as long as we crush the head honcho, we won't have to waste our time fighting anyone else. Getting there will require a bit of scheming, though."

"Right, just knock down that fake, and Schwartz too, and we can avoid any other unnecessary fights," said Miriam.

Angeline stared at her polished sword blade before sheathing it and setting it aside. "I hope... I can meet Satie again." *Then we can properly work together and fight side by side...* she thought, sighing.

"Another dimension, huh..." Touya crossed his arms, casting his eyes down. "I get the feeling Salazar might be able to do something about that."

"You sure we should rely on that guy? He kept rambling on and on about who knows what. With all his pointless yammering, it took too long before he finally connected us to Bell."

"It's helpful to have him on board, but you can't expect too much from him," Kasim concluded, donning his cap once more.

Even if they were to defeat Benjamin and his cronies, it would be pointless if Satie still refused to meet them. They couldn't let Benjamin get to Satie first either. Angeline held her head, mulling over what she should do. "We'll need to start... by collecting more information," she concluded.

"Sounds about right. Touya, you can get some info at the guild, right?" Anessa said.

Touya nodded. "I don't know if it'll be helpful, but I can gather a bit of intel there. I might have to pay some money for it, though."

"So we'll need to go to the little lady *and* the guild. We might want to split up," Maureen suggested.

Angeline readily assented to this proposition—with so many people to work with, it would be far more efficient to split up. Their foe wouldn't simply sit idly by and wait for them, so now was not the time to take things slow and steady.

"For starters," Kasim said, propping up his cheek, "I'll talk to Salazar a bit more—maybe he can get a direct line to Satie."

"Then we need one team for the archduke's villa, one team for the guild, and... Kasim."

"Uh-huh. You sure you won't be lonely, Kasim? I can tag along if you want," Marguerite taunted.

"Yeah, don't get ahead of yourself, kid."

"We'll need Ange at the archduke's place. She's our best bet for convincing Lize."

"And she'll meet Bell there if everything works out," Miriam added teasingly.

Angeline puffed out her cheeks. "That's just a coincidence. Meeting with Lize is an important task."

"As important as meeting Bell, even."

"Shut it, Maggie!"

"We'll need Touya and Maureen at the guild, so that settles that... How about us, Merry?"

"Let's see. We might want to stick with Ange, seeing as we're party members."

"Don't you think Mr. Percival's enough on that front? Since both teams could run into a combat scenario, we should keep it balanced, I think. And it'll be better to have someone who clearly understands the objective with us," Touya said.

Certainly, the ones with a firm grasp on said objective were Belgrieve, Kasim, and Percival. After all, they were there to meet their old comrade. They would have to wait until they met Belgrieve to discuss the specifics. It seemed like Belgrieve was getting by with a little help from someone, and there was a chance his group might reunite with Ishmael and gain his cooperation as well. There was still no telling how things would pan out.

Angeline indicated her assent before planting her hands on the table. "One thing is clear. We'll have to get serious tomorrow."

"All right! How about a drink to pep us up, then! There's a bar across the street, right?"

"Let's go, let's go. I'm starving," Marguerite declared, jumping up to her feet. Maureen did likewise immediately after. Touya's head wearily drooped, while Angeline and her party members giggled at the display of enthusiasm before joining them.

○

Belgrieve could hardly say he had slept very soundly since he had gone to bed earlier. His body had relaxed, yet it seemed like his mind had been racing the entire time. The slightest sound had been enough to rouse him.

He knew he had shut his eyes quite some time ago, yet now that he had opened them again, it was clear that the world outside was still veiled in darkness. There wasn't the

faintest hint of sunlight outside the thick curtains. Maitreya was mumbling to herself in her sleep, and he could hear the sound of her rolling over. And the moment he began to pay attention to the faint clamor from the first-floor bar that permeated through the floorboards, it was like the distractions had taken hold of his ears and refused to loose their grip.

I know I'm sleepy, no doubt about it, thought Belgrieve, somewhat irritated at his inability to fall asleep. *At this rate, it's going to get in the way of what I have to do tomorrow.*

This was a cheap inn, admittedly, but the blankets were of acceptable quality, the pillow was soft, and the sheets were silky. In fact, it was rather cozy to lie down prone with his face resting in them. Yet all of that evidently wasn't enough for him. It felt like his desperation to sleep was only making it harder for him to actually do so. He was going in circles.

I'm too old to be this restless... Belgrieve thought to himself as he turned onto his side.

The neighboring bed was empty. Apparently, Percival had yet to return. *I told him not to drink too much, but maybe it hasn't been that long. Maybe time's passing far slower than I thought.*

He turned again, face up this time, and stared at the wooden ceiling. The featureless darkness above allowed the wooden crossbeams to stand out distinctly. He closed his eyes once more.

Behind his eyelids, he caught glimpses of Satie. He, Kasim, and Percival—all of them had grown older. But Satie was an elf. As the years passed, her appearance wouldn't have changed as much as the rest of them, surely. She would still have her silky silver hair; her emerald eyes, with their mischievous glint; her lithe arms—as pale as white porcelain—tracing all the way down to her slender fingertips; and her rumbling, innocent laughter... Though these were memories from over twenty years ago, they still came back to him with surprising clarity.

Come to think of it, there was that one time when we heard her screaming when she was bathing in the river. The three of us rushed to her with weapons in hand... Then it turned out she'd just stepped on a frog in the water. We all had a laugh about that. Belgrieve had frantically closed his eyes, so he had only seen for a brief instant, but the image of her glistening wet limbs, fair and beautiful, had been burned into his retinas long after

that moment.

I was so young, he thought with a yawn. He drew his legs in so he could drape the cover back over himself. The memories were warm and comforting; it felt like his consciousness was slowly melting away.

Just as he felt he might finally drift off, however, the greatsword propped against the wall began to audibly growl. Belgrieve jolted back up. He was certain that he sensed something in the dark corner.

Suddenly, he felt a stabbing pain in his right leg. His hand reached out for it instinctively but grasped at nothing—he had already removed his prosthetic peg leg. This was phantom pain. His peg leg, which had been propped against the bed, clattered as it slid to the floor.

“Ugh...” Belgrieve held the stump, gritting his teeth. He had broken into a sweat despite the lingering cold. *Why did it have to happen now, at a time like this?*

“What? What now?” Maitreya, still rolled up under her covers, popped out her head to see what was going on. Her eyes locked onto the corner of the room, a look of shock spreading across her face. “A curse!”

In that same corner, there was a shadowy figure in a tattered cloak sitting on its haunches. At times, the contours of its body would blur like mist, bits of it breaking off in beads of black before rejoining with the rest of its body. It seemed to be muttering something under its breath.

“Cold... Cold...”

Maitreya leaped out of bed and dove under Belgrieve’s covers. She grabbed his sleeve and tugged at it. “What are you loafing around for?! You’re going to die!”

“Wait... What is that...?”

“That is a malediction. A killing curse with physical form... Benjamin or Schwartz, one of them must have sent it to kill me...”

Belgrieve’s face contorted at the phantom pains as he reached out, barely managing to scoop up his peg leg. However, the pain pierced from his leg all the way to the top of his head. He could endure it by squeezing the prosthetic, but he was in no state to

reattach it.

Maitreya stared at him frantically, her eyes occasionally flitting to the malediction. It was inching forward, bit by bit, as it crawled along the floor. The growls of Graham's sword grew ever fiercer, and even through its sheath, it was clear that the blade was glowing.

"The holy sword's influence is slowing it down...?"

"Maitreya..." Belgrieve finally managed to fasten his leg, but the pain hadn't receded. He spoke through the immense pain: "The sword..."

"I-I can't... I'm an imp. I can't touch it."

The greatsword pulsed with an elf's fiend-purifying mana and was ill-suited to Maitreya, apparently. Belgrieve cursed his own inadequacies and his inability to move at such a crucial time.

At that moment, the door burst open, and someone dove into the room. In the blink of an eye, a dazzling white sword stabbed into the malediction. There was a peculiar sound, as though reality itself was warping, before the malediction crumbled away into black dust, which was in turn sucked away into the sword.

Belgrieve felt his phantom pain slowly relenting. He had been holding his breath to endure it, and only now could he supply his lungs with the air they needed. His shoulders were rising and falling with each breath. Though he didn't know what had happened, he was faintly aware that the danger had passed.

"Bell!" Belgrieve glanced over to see Percival striding through the doorway. "A malediction? What happened?"

"Percy...? We were attacked, but... You weren't the one who saved us?"

He'd been certain Percival had been the one who raced in, but it seemed that wasn't the case. Percival looked around curiously.

"He suddenly got up and raced up the stairs to the second floor. Something felt off, so I followed behind him..."

Percival nudged his head towards the boy with the rabbit ears, who was

absentmindedly staring at where the malediction had disappeared. Belgrieve had seen him once before—he was the Templar of Vienna who had been at the bar. He still held the hilt of his sword firmly in his grasp. The blade's metal flickered black a few times before returning to the color of cold steel. Once again, Graham's greatsword growled.

As stealthily as she could, Maitreya hid behind Belgrieve, draping the bedsheet over her head to hide her ears. Belgrieve shifted to help her remain unseen before speaking. “You saved us. How can we thank you?”

The boy said nothing as he turned to look at Belgrieve. His expression was totally blank, as though nothing was of any interest to him.

Belgrieve, too, fell silent, at a loss as to what to say next. After a few moments, the boy blinked, and his ears twitched. Then, he wordlessly sheathed the sword at his hip and walked out of the room. Only after the boy was gone did the greatsword finally fall silent. The only sound that remained was the faint clamor from the bar, which sounded like it came from a world away.

“For a man serving the goddess, he’s got a dangerous sword on him,” Percival muttered, taking a glance at the now-empty doorway.

Steadying his breathing, Belgrieve lifted his head. “Dangerous? How so?”

“That’s a cursed sword if I ever saw one. Presumably, it absorbs the mana of whatever foe it cuts. It’s got a sinister presence—the complete opposite of the Paladin’s sword. I never thought I’d see a Templar carrying something like that around.”

After nervously glancing around, Maitreya ran up to Percival and pulled on his shirt.

“It’s dangerous here,” she said. “We need to leave, or we’ll be attacked again.”

“Don’t be stupid. If they really wanted to erase us, they wouldn’t have sent that small fry. It must have been here for something else. No need to worry about it.”

“You have no evidence for that. We were just coincidentally saved because the Templar came here.”

“If he didn’t come, I would have. Am I not good enough for you? Huh?”

"That's not what I meant... Aw, there's no reasoning with you." Maitreya pursed her lips.

Taking a seat on his bed, Percival looked at Belgrieve. "Is it your leg?"

"Phantom pain. It happens every now and again... It's been a while since it got this bad though."

"I see... Go to sleep. I'm here. You don't need to worry."

"I'm not worried... But I don't think I'll be able to sleep for a while," Belgrieve said, smiling wryly. He scooted over to the edge of the bed so that he could set his foot on the floor. He was wide awake now, and he knew that drowsiness would elude him no matter how long he remained in bed.

"Still, you're better off lying down than sitting," Percival said with a shrug. "Do you want me to sing you a lullaby?"

"Ha ha, not a bad idea... So what's your take on the matter, honestly? Do you think they know where we are?"

"Couldn't say. Maybe they're watching to see what we'll do... Well, I'm not that worried about it. How about you?"

Belgrieve stroked his beard. "We're on their home turf. I don't know if I'm reading too deeply into this, but I think it's safe to assume they will always know where we are. Personally, I think it's dangerous to assume they don't have info on us."

"I see. Well, you're not wrong. You have my vote—let's move. Yes, let's do that. Now, away we go!" Maitreya chimed in.

Percival's eyes narrowed as he directed a sidelong glance at Maitreya. "Oh, I'm not so sure. If they were serious, the attack would have come ages ago. If that was supposed to be an assassin, they're really underestimating us. Whatever it was about, I don't see any reason to be afraid."

"Hmm... Well, I doubt we'll be in too much danger as long as you're around."

"Somebody gets it! Being on edge like that is just an idiotic waste of time and energy. You need to sleep whenever you get the chance."

"Please take this seriously..." Maitreya pleaded. "My life is on the line here!"

"You really raise a stink about everything. Can't you settle down a bit?"

Maitreya's answer was to flail at him with her fists, so Percival replied in kind. He reached out with his large hand, and, grabbing her by the head, held her away at arm's length. The imp could only cry out in frustration.

For his part, Belgrieve wasn't so certain if that had been a targeted attack or not, but now that they were this close to the enemy, it was only a matter of time before their forces collided. There really was no time to loaf around. He quietly sighed. *We need to meet up with Ange, and fast.*

Belgrieve still didn't feel sleepy, but he lay back down and stared at the ceiling. Not wanting a repeat of what had just happened, he left his prosthetic on this time. Meanwhile, Percival got up from the bed and sat down in a chair. He pulled out a bottle of spirits he usually kept on his person and poured himself a small glass, taking sparing sips from it. Maitreya seemed at a loss for a moment, but in the end, she resigned herself to burrowing under the covers of her bed and curled up into a ball once more.

Belgrieve shut his eyes. He could hear his own breath and the beating of his heart. He would hear the grating sound when Percival's chair shifted, the sound of the cup being placed on the table, and the glugging sound from the bottle whenever Percival might refill his glass. He could hear Maitreya tossing and turning for some time, but soon he heard her doze off too.

She's weak-kneed and yet bold in the strangest ways, Belgrieve observed. He found himself relaxing ever so slightly. *Maybe Percival being here is putting me at ease.*

Nevertheless, he was still quite restless, and he couldn't help himself once his mind began pondering all sorts of things. His thoughts raced from one notion to the next, until gradually, the connection from one thought to another went from vague to nonexistent.

How strange... And with that last thought, he was asleep. The next time he woke up, Percival was snoring in his chair, and a faint light was leaking into the room through the curtains.

CHAPTER 113

THE SEPIA-TONED TREES

The sepia-toned trees scattered their leaves, which formed into piles all over the place. The flowers and vegetables in the garden at the end of the yard were losing their vigor, the ends of their stalks drooping. It was nearly time for them all to wilt.

From out of the snug little house came one of the black-haired twins—Hal—in a hurry. She entered the field, heading for the corner where the medicinal herbs grew, and plucked a few before returning just as she'd left.

The house was dark save for whatever light trickled in through the windows. It was strangely dusty and filled with a heavy atmosphere that felt as though the place had suddenly aged several decades. As Satie the elf lay on the bed, the other twin—Mal—stood beside her, wiping her face with a moist towel.

Hal placed the herbs in an earthen pot and asked, “How is she?”

“Not good.”

“Maybe she used too much magic?”

“Maybe.”

As the twins went back and forth, Satie let out a small groan. Her eyelids cracked open ever so slightly. “Did I fall asleep...?”

“It’s okay. Sleep.”

“We’re here. Don’t worry.”

Hal rushed over to join her twin, and they both fixed their concerned gazes directly upon Satie.

Satie smiled and patted their heads. “Thank you. It’s good to have some reliable help around the place.”

The twins puffed out their chests and headed off to the firestone stove to prepare their medicinal concoction. Satie watched them for a short while, though she eventually collapsed back onto the bed and stared at the ceiling. The face of her old comrade's daughter crossed her mind. Her vision was blurring with tears before she knew it.

"Was that... the right thing to do?"

It wasn't wrong—at least, that's what she thought. If she had sincerely asked for help and the gang got back together to fight Benjamin and Schwartz, perhaps they could accomplish far more than what she could do alone.

But she understood full well just how terrifying her enemy really was. Over the many years she had been locked in this struggle with them, there had been several times she found comrades that aided her cause. Not a single one remained. Even the ones she had thought she saved would inevitably end up in an early grave. It happened time and again, and by now the seed of fear had been firmly planted in her—she dreaded losing anyone else.

With that said, she now knew the first comrade she'd thought she'd lost was still alive. This did give her a bit of relief... But that was precisely why she was even more afraid of losing him again. When she imagined his pain, she felt that there could be no joy in their reunion.

"I guess I'm just an idiot, plain and simple," she muttered, grimacing at her wounds. Something unpleasant had wormed its way inside her body, and it throbbed painfully. Evidently, Hector's sword had been clad in some sort of magic. Normally, Satie would have been able to resist it with her own mana, but she had hardly gotten any rest since the battle in Findale. To make matters worse, she had strengthened the barrier and worked out countermeasures as soon as she knew it had been tampered with. All of that was on top of the mana she was constantly investing to maintain this artificial space. When all was said and done, she lacked the strength to make a recovery.

Sure, she had the elixirs she'd made herself, but she lacked the proper ingredients to make them as effective as she needed them to be. It took all she had just to maintain her current state.

It's just going to get worse from here, she thought, gritting her teeth. This realization had come to her several times before now, and each time she was at odds with herself. A part of her would wish she had asked for help; the other couldn't stand to get *them*

involved.

At that moment, a strange, piercing scent wafted into the room. The twins returned with an earthen pot.

“It’s done.”

“Satie, are you okay?”

Satie lifted herself up again. “I’m fine. Thank you.”

What’s fine about this, you liar? she silently cursed at herself. But she had no choice but to smile.

○

Morning seemed to arrive all of a sudden as the cityscape beyond the window went from being barely graced by dawn’s first rays to fully illuminated by the rising sun. Its light beat down through the thin veil of clouds to fill the dim, narrow alleys between the towering buildings, and yet, the early morning pedestrians were chilled by fierce, howling winds.

By the time Belgrieve got all his things together and left the room, the early-rising merchants were already boisterously enjoying breakfast, with only a few inebriates remaining down in the pub from the night before. This was the hour of the day when the number of drink orders would be overtaken by food orders, and apart from the fine ladies and gentlemen who’d managed to drink all through the night—who were now plastered over the tops of their tables—everyone else seemed to be having their fill of bread, soup, porridge, grilled meats, and steamed potatoes.

We’ll have a light breakfast before we head off to the archduke’s villa... Belgrieve thought. But his breakfast plans were put on hold when he heard someone get up from a nearby table and head straight for Belgrieve’s group. Belgrieve turned to see that it was one of the Templars from the night before, boldly sauntering towards them. It seemed like he had been waiting for them. Maitreya swiftly ducked into Percival’s shadow.

“Last night was a mess, huh?” The muscular Templar loomed over Belgrieve with a touch of arrogance. He looked to be about thirty years old. His skin was slightly tanned, and his hair was a shade of deep brown. “The name’s Donovan—Templar of Vienna.”

"It's a pleasure. My name is Belgrieve." Belgrieve reached out to shake the Templar's extended hand.

Donovan then gestured behind him, the corners of his lips curling into a slight smile.
"You're lucky that one was around. You should thank Vienna for that."

The boy with rabbit ears, who had barged into the room the night before, had remained seated at their table, staring listlessly into empty space.



"Yes, you have my thanks," Belgrieve said to the boy, smiling.

"Hey, Falka! The least you could do is answer him!"

At Donovan's urging, the rabbit-eared Falka looked up ever so slightly to meet Belgrieve's gaze and offered a small nod of acknowledgment. That seemed to be the extent of Falka's reply, so Belgrieve amicably nodded back.

"So what do Vienna's Templars want with us?" Percival asked with evident suspicion.

Donovan scoffed. "I heard about what happened... And you piqued my interest. Especially you, Belgrieve. That sword on your back... is quite the weapon," he said, reaching a hand over Belgrieve's shoulder towards the hilt. Belgrieve instinctively sidestepped him.

"Oh, it's nothing special," Belgrieve said, smiling wryly.

"Don't be so humble. I sense something *pure* radiating from that blade... It must be a holy sword, right?" Though he spoke calmly, Donovan had the look of a beast eyeing his prey. Belgrieve knew that nothing good would come of this.

"I'm sorry. We're in a hurry..." Belgrieve said, forcing a smile as he bowed his head.

"No need to be scared—I mean you no harm. I just want to have a look at your sword."

Belgrieve was about to walk off when Donovan caught him by the arm. His grip was hardly forceful, yet Belgrieve could feel his strength ebbing away—this man had precise knowledge of where to apply pressure to maximum effect. *He is quite the warrior, indeed.*

Nevertheless, Donovan in turn found himself caught by Percival, who peeled his hand away from Belgrieve. "We've got no business with you. If you're getting in our way, we'll strike you down, Templars or no."

"Hmm, this is getting interesting..."

"Now hold on, hold on!" Belgrieve exclaimed as he intruded between the bloodthirsty duo. "Percy, what's the point in getting into a fight here... Pardon us, Mr. Donovan."

"Ha ha, you know your manners. But you're only setting yourself up for failure,

wielding a weapon beyond your stature.”

The Templar’s words were clearly meant to be provocative. Percival let out a very audible click of his tongue in response.

The Knights Templar were a privileged class, in a sense. They had the backing of the massively powerful Church of Vienna; even if they might happen to step on the toes of the aristocracy, no one would dare speak out against them.

Belgrieve quietly considered the situation, but in the end, he laughed tiredly and pulled the sword from his back, scabbard and all, and held it out to Donovan. The Templar grinned as he snatched it by the hilt.

“Prudence is a virtue... Huh?”

The moment Belgrieve let go of it, the blade assaulted Donovan’s arms with an absurd level of weight. Donovan immediately mustered all the strength in his body, but this was not enough to keep the blade level—forget holding it, he was dragged straight to the floor. The other customers, who had been taking fleeting glances at their dispute, were now openly staring.

“Gah...” Donovan planted his feet firmly and, gripping the hilt with both hands, attempted to lift it back up. A vein pulsed on his brow, which was oozing with cold sweat, as he growled through gritted teeth. However, the sword refused to budge one inch from its new resting place on the ground. It would not be drawn from its scabbard either.

“What’s wrong, Mr. High-and-Mighty?” Percival cackled. “Going weak at the knees?”

“Dammit... What’s going on?”

After watching Donovan’s struggles for some time, Belgrieve scooped up the sword by its hilt and held it aloft like it was nothing. Donovan stared dumbfounded at the feat, opening and closing his now-empty hands, which seemed to be feeling quite numb.

“My apologies. This is a sword that chooses its wielder.”

“I see... Now I’m convinced.” Donovan looked at Belgrieve coldly. “I hate to admit it, but it’s the real deal.”

Suddenly, without warning, the Templar dodged to the side. Belgrieve felt a chill running down his spine, and before he knew what was going on, he thrust the sheathed sword out in front of him and immediately felt an impact—Falka had walked up without presence or sound, slashing down upon the greatsword with his own blade. Belgrieve could feel mana expelled from the clash of sheathed blades, no different than if it had been naked steel. The collision caused an expulsion of wind from the ground around both fighters resulting in their cloaks and ruffled sleeves billowing in its wake.

Falka had not aimed at Belgrieve, per se; it seemed as though he had been aiming to lock blades with him from the start. He was unrestrained, and the force behind the blow was far greater than what would have been required to slay Belgrieve. The mana which passed through the greatsword and into the hilt numbed Belgrieve's arm like a bolt of electricity.

Belgrieve scowled, and the greatsword let out an enraged roar. It was echoed by Falka's sword, which gave off a sinister, muffled noise of its own. As his mind struggled to keep up, he felt a tug from behind. Belgrieve quickly regained his balance as Percival—who'd pulled him out of the thick of it—stepped up to the plate. Though Belgrieve couldn't see his friend's face, the monstrous intensity emanating from Percival was palpable.

Slowly, Percival reached for the sword at his hip. "If it's a fight you want... I'll have to cut in."

"Don't be so hasty. I'm sure we'll see each other again." With a fearless smile, Donovan turned away. Falka had the same absent expression as ever as he followed his partner out the door. Finally, the tense air that had permeated the bar began to dissipate somewhat.

Clicking his tongue, Percival turned to Belgrieve with a deep crease in his brow. "I could never stand those Templars. You all right, Bell?"

"Yeah, sorry about that..."

He waved his hand to rid it of the slight numbness that still lingered before returning the greatsword, which was growling discontentedly, to his back.

Maitreya popped her head up from behind one of the tables and looked around the

pub. "Are they gone now?"

"Yeah..." Percival grumbled and spat on the floor. "Good grief. It just *had* to be now of all times, huh? They couldn't have picked a worse moment to zero in on us." He slung his bags over his back. "Let's meet up with the others already."

"Right, let's be on our way," Belgrieve said with a sigh. It seemed like the situation was only growing even more complicated, but he didn't have the luxury of waiting around for things to become simpler. He formed his tingling fingers into a fist and raised his head. "What were they after...?"

"Who knows. But they have their eyes on the Paladin's sword, that's for certain. You watch out, okay?"

That's troublesome... Belgrieve scratched his head. He got the feeling they knew something he didn't. Fate's threads were crossing from all sorts of directions, and to him, it felt like they were getting tangled in the weave. But he couldn't buckle under the pressure—not now. Belgrieve took a deep breath. His ears were filled with the whistling of the blowing wind.

○

Angeline, who had awakened before the sun had fully risen, felt rather bored as she sat cross-legged on her bed. The faint light that crept in from beneath the drawn curtains seemed to have a blue tint to it, like she was at the bottom of the sea.

Their room had two bunk beds and was made to house four people. Kasim had said he'd sleep in the communal room, huddled with other travelers, while Touya and Maureen had booked a room for themselves. *I know they're partners or something, but a man and a woman sleeping in the same room together is scandalous,* Angeline thought, her cheeks turning a bit red.

Their party had split up the night before and gone to their respective beds, but Angeline had felt restless for one reason or another, and it had been quite late when she finally nodded off, only to be early to rise as well. She was totally bereft of composure. *This feeling reminds me of when I was just starting out,* Angeline thought, scratching her head. She ran a hand through her black hair to smooth out her minor case of bedhead.

From the bunk above hers, she could hear faint rustling sounds.

"Ange? You awake?"

"Yeah... You too, Maggie?"

Marguerite's inverted face peeked down at Angeline, her smooth, silver hair dangling straight down like drapes.

"We'll meet up with Bell today, right? Heh heh, I can't wait to see what happens. Hey, what was Satie like?"

"Well, I didn't see much of her... But she was pretty, and she had gentle eyes."

Marguerite's own eyes were on the sharper side; by contrast, the gentle curving contours of Satie's eyes had given her a softer first impression—though there had been fire behind them, evincing a strong will. And yet, those same eyes had also been filled with love and affection as she watched over the twins, Hal and Mal.

Putting aside whether she'll be my mother or not, I want to see her again, Angeline thought as she rested her chin on the pillows she had clutched to her chest. I want dad's old party back together, and I want to hear the stories they have to tell. I want to hear them in Turnera, if possible, in front of the hearth at the new house. The cider will be especially delicious by the fire.

While Angeline became lost in her imaginings, Marguerite nimbly clambered down from the top bunk. The elf stared at Angeline for a moment and then poked her. "You sure you slept enough? Your head's in the clouds."

"I'm fine... How about you? You're not sleepy?"

"Not at all. I wanna get out there and go already," Marguerite said, impatiently rubbing her hands together before stretching out her back and legs.

I wish I was as simple as Maggie... Angeline sucked in a deep breath through the pillow, noticing that it smelled just like her own hair.

A while later, Anessa and Miriam were up too. They were making themselves presentable when there was a knocking at the door. Angeline opened it to find Kasim standing there looking sleepy. "Hiya, did you get some sleep?" he asked her.

"A bit... And you?"

"I don't feel like I did... Well, I'm sure I'll wake up while we're walking," Kasim grumbled. He gave a big yawn and wiped the tears from his eyes. "All right, I'll be off to Salazar, then."

"Yeah, good luck."

"I'll do what I can, but... don't expect too much. See ya. You do your best too."

Kasim left with a carefree wave of his hand. The moment he had gone, Touya and Maureen popped in. "Good morning, everyone."

"Morning. How are your wounds, Touya?"

"I'm fine. Maureen's elixir helped."

"Let's hurry so we can have a nice meal with Ms. Satie," Maureen declared, clenching her fist. Touya shook his head, knowing there was no helping her.

For her part, Angeline giggled at the sight, then turned back to their shared room. "Anne, all good?"

"Good to go," Anessa said, slinging her small bag over her shoulder.

"Then we'll be off."

Along with Touya and Maureen, Anessa would be going to the adventurer's guild. At first, they thought they would split up after reuniting with Belgrieve and Percival, but time was a limited resource. There was no telling when they'd actually be able to reunite, so perhaps it was best to gather as much information as possible to share once they were back together.

Miriam grinned and, donning her large hat, poked a finger into Anessa's cheek.

"Will you be okay, Anne? You won't be lonely? Do you need me to go with you?"

"Nah, I'm good. I'm actually more worried about you," Anessa replied, folding her arms in front of her chest with a wry smile on her face.

The party heading off to meet Liselotte consisted of Angeline, Miriam, and Marguerite. Even if they would probably be joined by Belgrieve eventually, this was a somewhat—

or rather, *considerably*—problematic party as far as Anessa was concerned.

Angeline pouted. “It’s fine. Talking to Lize is fun. Anne, you’re more suited to a troublesome place like the guild.”

“That’s not the problem, is it...? Well, in any case, you ought to be the one going to Lize, Ange. Then, that just leaves me. Merry and Maggie wouldn’t be able to gather any decent intel.” Anessa ignored the whining protests of Miriam and Marguerite to directly address Angeline. “I’ll start with asking about any unnatural movements around the crown prince, or if anything about the empire has changed lately. Sound good?”

“Yeah, that should be fine. Good luck, you three.”

“Yes, ma’am. You can count on us!”

“Ms. Angeline, the archduke’s estate is near the palace. Be careful.”

“Yeah. I’ll be on my toes.” And with that, Anessa’s party was on their way.

Angeline exchanged glances with Miriam and Marguerite. “Should we... go too?”

“Sounds about right. No use sitting around here.”

“I’m itching to do anything—I can’t settle down here. Let’s hurry.”

Once that was decided, there was little left for Angeline to say on the matter. Thus, the last of the three teams left the inn.

The imperial capital was a lively place in the morning. Beneath every eave there were rows of food stands filling the air with steam and enticing aromas. Angeline’s party had not found lodging in the residential district; this was a business zone, where large shops and factories were interspersed with inns and bars catering to travelers. There were hordes of people coming and going every which way. *There are places like this in Orphen too. I guess some things stay the same no matter where you go*, Angeline realized.

They bought some food along the way and had breakfast as they walked. Gradually, the hustle and bustle of downtown seemed to fade as their surroundings were replaced with walls freshly painted in pure white and buildings intricately designed

with exteriors of differently colored bricks pieced together like murals. They had found their way to the estates of the capital's nobility. This far from their lodgings, the character of the city shifted from lively to tranquil.

From within a carriage passing them on the road, a young lady in a beautiful dress shot them a suspicious look. Miriam fretfully glanced around them. "We were just here yesterday, but... it really is strange," she muttered. "Why is it so unsettling when it's so quiet?"

Angeline agreed. "I get you... It's impossible to relax here."

"You think so? I think it's rather pretty." Only Marguerite seemed perfectly at ease. *Come to think of it, this tomboy's actually royalty, isn't she?* Angeline mused as she appraised the elf princess walking beside her. *Yeah, I can't see it.*

Now and then, they exchanged some idle banter as they walked up the gently inclining road. After nearly an hour, they stood before the archduke's villa, just as big as it had been the last time they had visited. They were awestruck at the idea of something so vast being a mere villa.

The archduke rarely ever leaves his territory anyways. Isn't it a waste to make it this big? Angeline wondered. But she reflected on what Gilmenja had told her before—it was a means of displaying power and authority.

After knocking at the door, Sooty came out to greet them.

"Hello, Sooty."

"Hello to you too. Is it just the three of you today?"

"It is. Is Lize busy?"

"To be honest, she's never busy. Today she was summoned to a tea party or something... But once she knows you're here, I'm sure she'll just skip it. Well, come on in," Sooty said, beckoning them through the door.

Angeline observed the decor which was still as gaudy as ever. After taking a few turns and ascending a flight of stairs, they were led to a room at the end of the hall.

Sooty knocked at the door. "Milady, Ms. Angeline has come with her friends."

“Huh? Ange?! Hold on, give me a second!”

There was a loud thumping and heavy footsteps from within before the door was thrown open and Liselotte burst out in her undergarments.

“You came again! You don’t know how happy I am to see you, Ange!”

“Lize... Were you in the middle of changing?”

Through the open door, Angeline could see the maids who’d been helping her standing dumbfounded. Sooty placed a weary hand on her brow.

“Now look here, milady... Just because we’re all girls here, that doesn’t mean—”

“Ah, sorry! I was just so happy,” Liselotte gushed, enveloping a blushing Angeline in a hug. One of the maids snapped to attention and raced up to her mistress to drape a blanket over the girl’s shoulders.

“It’s good to be energetic,” Marguerite chuckled. “If you’re dressing up, you must be going somewhere, right?”

“Well, I am—not that I really want to...”

“Do you have to go?” Miriam asked, cocking her head.

Liselotte wrapped the blanket around her body. She bashfully smiled and said, “Well, if I really insisted, I might not have to, but... I am the archduke’s daughter. I need to be proper when it comes to such things.”

“Oh, it looks like you’ve matured a bit. Wonders abound,” Sooty said, looking far too amused.

Liselotte sullenly puffed out her cheeks. “I mean, Ange and all her friends—they’re all so sound and reliable. I need to take a page out of their book.”

“You’re making me blush...” Angeline scratched her cheek, looking a bit happy. She knew very little about noble society, so she didn’t quite understand the importance of a tea party, yet she did find some joy in knowing that Liselotte had matured a bit in her own way. To hear that it was a consequence of her own influence, she couldn’t help but feel a little elated, even if she had never intended to present herself as a

particularly good role model in the first place.

Liselotte, seemingly struck with a sudden realization, looked up to Angeline with apologetic, bashful eyes. “So, well... You know, that means I have to head out today...”

“I see... No, don’t worry about it. I’m here because dad said he wanted to talk to you.”

“Your dad? Is he here?”

“I think he’s on his way here... I know it might be a presumptuous request, but can we wait for him here?”

If Belgrieve hoped to speak with Liselotte, he would be headed for the manor. That was their best bet—there was little else they could do with no means of contacting him.

Liselotte didn’t show the slightest reluctance. In fact, her eyes seemed to light up as she nodded. “Of course, by all means! I should be back by night, so I’d be very happy if you could wait for me too!” She turned to her attendant. “Sooty, we’re going to House Berengaria today. It should be right over there.”

“I know.”

“So you don’t have to go with me. Stay with them, and tend to their needs.”

Angeline hurriedly raised her hands. “I couldn’t ask you to do that...”

“It’s fine! Every now and again, I want to be rid of my annoying watchdog and spread my wings,” Liselotte said with a mischievous smile. She turned to Sooty again and stuck out her tongue.

“You’ve got quite a mouth on you,” Sooty remarked with a shrug. “Well, once you’ve made up your mind, there’s no use arguing. I’ll do as you say—but you *will* be taking someone else along, won’t you?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Thank you, Sooty. That’s what I like about you,” Liselotte said, giggling. “Well then, Ange, Maggie, Merry—take it easy,” she said. Then, she returned to the room and shut the door behind her.

Angeline and her friends exchanged glances.

Miriam grinned. "She's pretty cute, that Lize."

"Heh heh, I like how she has to stand on tiptoes," Marguerite added.

"I feel soothed..." Angeline said, chortling, before snapping her attention to Sooty. "I'm sorry about this, Ms. Sooty... Thank you."

"It's fine. Truthfully, I'm the one spreading my wings right now." Sooty spread out her arms as far as she could manage. "Now then, no point in standing around in the hallway. Follow me."

Angeline nodded and fell in behind Sooty. She could feel the soft carpet cushioning her steps even through the soles of her shoes. As they passed a window, she glanced out to see gloomy clouds casting down their darkness over the city. It looked like it was about to rain.

CHAPTER 114

THE FAÇADE OF THE LARGE BUILDING

The façade of the large building had heavy iron double doors, which appeared solid and sturdy. One door was engraved with the empire's crest, while the other had the symbol of the guild. The doors were open, and an endless stream of adventurers, young and old, was passing through them. This was the capital's adventurer's guild.

Anessa, who had been led there by Touya and Maureen, was awestruck by its scale. *It's not as grand as I always imagined it to be, though*, she thought.

It was undoubtedly enormous, as was the teeming mass of adventurers. However, this much was no different from the guilds in other large cities.

I mean, shouldn't there be something special? Why does it feel like I'm at the guild in Orphen or Istafar? Anessa groused.

Evidently, she had unconsciously voiced some of her thoughts aloud, as Touya grinned and offered an explanation. "There are more guild buildings all over the city. They're all just about as big as this one. This is the fourth branch."

Owing to the vastness of the capital, there were various different facilities required for managing and issuing requests, and each branch had its own chain of command. The one Touya and Maureen had chosen was simply one among them. Each branch lacked a guild master or any other administrative structure that was common to other guilds. Instead, yet another agency unified the management of the guild branches in the city. Furthermore, the guild managed a marketplace where adventurers could sell materials from dungeons and fiends, a training area, and a great many other such facilities.

I see, so that's what's going on, Anessa realized. *This gargantuan building is only the tip of the iceberg. And if all the others are just as packed...* She sighed in admiration. "Incredible... That's the central guild for you."

"With that said, you rarely ever have to go to the other buildings for anything," Maureen chimed in, stuffing her cheeks with a sugar-coated pastry she'd bought from

a stall.

The three of them hastily made their way into the vast lobby, getting out from under the heavy clouds looming in the sky that seemed poised to rain at any moment.

Although it was packed inside, it wasn't so bad that Anessa couldn't navigate through the crowd. The other guild branches served to spread out all of the city's adventurers, though she was shocked that there were still so many people milling around even considering that.

Anessa noticed the distinct flair of imperial design all around, and despite the crowd, things seemed tidier than Orphen's guild. *Now that I'm at the center of it all, even Orphen—the largest city of the north—seems like a backwater*, Anessa thought with a wry smile.

"I'll go put a word in," Touya said as he went off to the back. Anessa was left with Maureen, so they sat down in some chairs.

"Come to think of it, where's your house? You two live in the capital, right?"

"Yes, it's quite close to here. We've been out for a while, so I need to do a bit of tidying... When I stopped by the other day, I just dropped off my bags. Dealing with all that dust will be dreadful," Maureen complained, producing a small fruit from a paper bag. The round, pale-red fruit was covered in a hard, spiny rind, and was just small enough to conceal in the palm of one's hand. "Here you go."

"Oh, th-thanks. What is it...?"

"Moor fruit. You peel off the rind, like this." Maureen punctured the outer layer with her fingernail before skillfully stripping it away to reveal juicy white flesh completely at odds with its initial scraggly impression.

"I've never seen these in Orphen..."

"Oh, really? They're pretty good, and they have a unique flavor to them." Maureen popped the peeled fruit into her mouth. "Yep, delicious. Ah, be careful—the pit is large."

Anessa tried to imitate Maureen's demonstration to peel the skin, but she ended up with sticky fruit juice all over her finger which she hastily licked off. It was sweet with

a peculiar fragrance. When she bit into the flesh, the smell was more potent, and as her teeth nicked the large seed at the center, it was stronger still.

Her inexperience with this fruit meant she had to carefully peel it each time, and this repetitive act resulted in a kind of trance. Maureen and Anessa silently enjoyed their snacks until Touya arrived.

“Ah, moor fruit. Can I have one?”

“Who’d you end up talking to? Well, first off, did you get anywhere?”

“Yes, you’ll see, and yes.”

Touya peeled the fruit like he’d done it a hundred times before and tossed it into his mouth. After a bit of chewing, he spat the seed back into his hand. “Good stuff. For now, let’s get going.”

The husks scattered on the table were swept into the paper bag before they stood from their seats, and the trio circled around past the reception counter. Unlike the rest of the building, the space through the back door was mainly for staff members and, consequently, wasn’t nearly as loud. There were several doors lining both sides of the hall, each seeming to lead to a small office. Their path took them past one person carrying a stack of forms and another hoisting around a basket full of what looked like dragon scales, and from inside one of the offices, they could hear someone being dressed down by a voice through a communication crystal.

Touya stopped in front of one of the doors, making doubly sure of the nameplate before knocking. “Come in,” a sluggish-sounding voice answered from the other side.

Anessa glanced at the plaque, noting the office’s occupant was titled “Vice Branch-Leader.”

“Pardon me.”

“Long time no see, Touya, darling. Glad to have you back.”

Anessa entered after Touya and Maureen. Right past the door, she found herself standing before an office desk with a woman—perhaps in her late twenties or early thirties—seated behind it. Her hair was a deep shade of seaweed green, which had been left to grow as long and as messy as it liked, even draping over her face and

obscuring one of her eyes. The one that was visible looked barely awake and utterly bereft of motivation.

Touya gave a tired smile. “I came by yesterday, but you were out.”

“Oh dear, did you, now?”

“Um, this is Anessa. She’s part of the Black-Haired Valkyrie Angeline’s party, an AAA-Rank archer... right?” Touya asked, to which Anessa nodded.

The woman whistled, seemingly impressed, and got up, revealing that she wore nothing more than a baggy shirt that extended down to just above her knees. With one great leap, she cleared the desk and landed directly in front of Anessa, then took hold of Anessa’s hand in both of her own.

“I’m honored to meet a party member of the renowned Black-Haired Valkyrie. My name is Aileen. It’s a pleasure.”

“I’m Anessa—and likewise, Ms. Aileen... Are you the vice branch-leader?”

“Something like that. I’m about the second most important person at the fourth branch,” Aileen said with a lazy smile. “Well, come in, come in,” she said, ushering them towards a few chairs kept for visitors.

Maureen rustled her paper bag. “Aileen, do you want some moor fruit?”

“Oh, gimme, gimme. Man, you don’t know how happy I am that you’re finally relying on me.”

“What are you talking about, seriously...” Touya said, before continuing in a quieter voice. “Is this place safe?”

Aileen’s eyes narrowed slightly. “Is it one of *those* topics?” she whispered back.

“Well, it’s not something I’d like made public.”

“I see, I see. Well, it looks like this is going to take a while. How about we take a stroll? The desk work is really getting to me,” Aileen spoke in a deliberately loud voice before shoving one of the fruits in her mouth and donning a coat that had been hanging on the wall.

"Here's no good then?" Anessa asked warily.

"Well, you know how things are. Large organizations tend to have their shackles."

Anessa's eyes raced around the room. *Are we being monitored?* she wondered. Perhaps it was just paranoia, but she did feel a vague sense of being watched by someone.

Thus, the four of them left the room and headed down a hallway to exit the guild. By now, it had begun to lightly drizzle—hardly a full downpour but not typically the kind of weather for a leisurely stroll either. Aileen walked at a relaxed pace nevertheless.

"Did you finish up Salazar's request?"

"Yes, without a hitch... But I met *him*. In the capital, of all places."

"Oh, that's rough, buddy... Is that what this conversation is about?"

"It isn't completely unrelated. It's a bit complicated—I can't sum it up in a few words."

"I see."

The rain seemed to be coming down more heavily, bit by bit. They picked up the pace, following Aileen, and eventually dipped inside a café facing the main thoroughfare.

"Party of four," Aileen said to the maître d'. They were led to the back of the café, past a partitioning screen which made it feel like they had their own private room. Aileen removed her coat and stretched out.

"There we go. There shouldn't be any issue with whatever you say here."

I see, so it's that sort of café... Anessa thought, nodding to herself. She took a seat at the round table, and Aileen sat across from her.

"Anessa, huh? What should I call you?"

"My friends call me Anne."

"Anne, then. That's nice. All the way from Orphen, right? Is Leo doing well?"

"Leo... Oh, the guild master? He's always worked to the bone, but he's doing just fine."

Do you know him?"

"Yeah, he was here in the capital for a bit, a long time ago. More recently, there was that mass fiend outbreak or whatnot, and he dragged Gil and Ed away, leaving me all alone here. Even Yuri's gone... He could have called me too, you know..."

Come to think of it, Gilmenja and Edgar were working in the capital as active adventurers, Anessa recalled. Yuri seemed to be acquainted with Aileen as well. It's a surprisingly small world we live in.

Tea and sweets were brought to the table, much to Maureen's delight.

"The cookies here are to die for."

"Aren't they? I can't live without sweets."

Maureen and Aileen gushed over the pastries.

Touya palmed his brow. "Can I start talking?"

"Go right ahead."

The sounds of the café only faintly leaked through from beyond the screen. Touya cleared his throat before starting. "Ms. Aileen, what do you think about Crown Prince Benjamin?"

"He's pretty cool, isn't he? I want to marry him so he can pamper me for the rest of my life."

"No, that's not what I mean... Don't you think there's anything *unnatural* about him?"

Aileen stirred her tea with spiral motions of her spoon. "Heh heh... Is this about the prince being a fake?" Aileen giggled at Touya and Anessa's wide-eyed shock. "It's written all over your faces. You'd make terrible spies."

"You knew about that?" Anessa asked.

Aileen's gaze wandered a bit. "Yeah... Those rumors have been circulating forever. He changed too much from how he used to be... But there's no evidence, and he's clearly better than he was before, so no one really pursues the matter."

Touya glanced at Anessa. She mulled things over for a bit before mustering her resolve.

"He's a fake, a true imposter," she declared.

"Ah, I knew it."

"That didn't take much convincing," Maureen observed.

Aileen propped up her head with one hand. "Well, it would explain a lot. Either that or he's being manipulated... It's a pain to get involved with that kind of stuff, so I just play dumb."

"Then there are some unnatural things you've noticed, huh?"

"There was a lot of pressure placed on the guild. I was demoted to the fourth branch before it happened, so I don't know very much, but he was definitely up to something behind the scenes."

"I see..." Anessa murmured pensively.

Aileen shrugged. "Are you wavering over something?"

"Well, not 'wavering,' per se... Hmm... It's complicated. He might be a fake, but he's an outstanding ruler to the people."

"Outstanding, huh..." Aileen echoed. She chuckled as she brought her teacup to her lips. "It's true, the capital and its surroundings have prospered, but the divide between social strata is pretty big, you know. The main roads are all well maintained and heavily traveled, but the slums are even worse off than ever before. And you know how he stationed those soldiers along the highway a while back? That cost quite a bit, you see—and the budget's pretty tight."

"But public order improved."

"Yes, it did. Only from Findale to the capital, though. The small villages off the highway are disappearing one by one. I'd wager the fiends and bandits driven from the main thoroughfare went straight for them. Sure, you can call it a capital-first policy, but it's pretty cruel to push all our misfortune onto the countryside."

Aileen said all of that blithely, then had a good laugh about it. Anessa was a bit taken

aback and dumbfounded. For lack of any answer to what she'd heard, she took a sip of tea.

"Oh, sorry, sorry, I ended up bringing up something unrelated. So what's this about the crown prince? Going off some context clues, this is a risky topic."

"Hector's on his side," Touya said.

That seemed to come as a surprise for Aileen. Her cup froze halfway to her mouth.
"Touya, dear... Does that mean you've become the prince's enemy?"

"By association."

"He's even got the Blue Flame of Calamity on his side, apparently. It's pretty amazing," Maureen cackled.

At this, Aileen's flippant attitude seemed to dissipate entirely. Her shoulders dropped and she heaved a deep sigh. "How about you tell me everything in order? Anne here has got something to do with it, am I right?"

"Yes," replied Anessa. "In fact, I'd say we were the ones who dragged these two into our mess."

"Let me order another plate," Maureen chimed in. Anessa and Touya looked down at the now-empty tray of sweets that had been devoured before either of them realized it. Their shoulders slumped.

○

They were led into a different guest room from the day before. This one was a well-kept, tastefully decorated parlor. *It's strange how clean and tidy they keep this room when I doubt it sees regular use*, Angeline mused.

After showing the three of them to the room, Sooty went off to prepare tea. While they waited, Angeline sat on an incredibly cushy sofa, while Miriam walked over to the window, grimacing at the sight beyond. "I knew something was off when my hair started to frizz. It's going to rain."

"That bites. There wasn't a single cloud this morning, so I didn't bring any rain gear. What do we do if it really starts coming down?"

"When that happens, we'll borrow something from Lize... In any case, we'll have to wait here until nighttime anyways."

When's dad going to arrive? Angeline wondered as she sank back into the sofa. She knew nothing about Maitreya and had no inkling that he had already reached the capital via her teleportation.

After some time, Sooty returned with a couple of maids carrying a tea set, who worked briskly and precisely to serve the guests. Angeline found a steaming cup of fragrant tea had been set out before her in no time at all.

Sooty glanced out the window. "Looks like rain."

"Yeah. Will Lize be all right?"

"Oh, I'm sure she will. Today's party is being held just down the road. And one thing about nobles that makes them such a pain—even if you're only going a few blocks, you still have to ride in a fancy carriage as a display of wealth."

"Hmm..." *I see, that sounds plausible,* thought Angeline. Back when she had attended the ball, she had been thoroughly bewildered from start to finish. It was there she learned that power went beyond the might of swords and magic.

Miriam combed her hands through her hair. "But is that really okay? Isn't that even more reason for you to be with her?" she asked.

"Well, that may be so, but I think this is a good time to respect milady's growth as a person. She did bring along a different attendant, for what it's worth. A true specialist, born and bred."

"Then why are you the one who's usually with her?"

"I handle her tomboyish side. A former adventurer like me isn't going to understand noble etiquette and all that intricate stuff, right? Frankly, I'm usually the one learning from her," Sooty said, chuckling.

Once the conversation was rolling, it no longer felt like they were merely waiting out the clock. The four of them talked about all sorts of things while they enjoyed their tea.

Eventually, they could hear a pitter-patter noise from the window. Angeline turned to

see water dripping down the pane. The storm had finally come, and it was being spattered against the glass by the wind. It was coming down more heavily than she had expected.

“Whoa, it’s raining cats and dogs. Bell’s gonna be soaked once he gets here.”

“I hope it’s just a passing drizzle...”

Angeline didn’t mind the rain. Though Turnera’s winters were blessed with bountiful snow, it did not see much rain the rest of the year. Thinking back on it now, those soft drizzles that had sprinkled the land had seemed so beautiful when she was a child.

However, she felt there was something off about this rain. She didn’t know what, exactly, but it made her heart feel oddly restless. Perhaps it was simply the rough drumming of the droplets.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the door. Sooty immediately rose to her feet.

“Mr. Bell, maybe?” Miriam wondered, looking up.

“Isn’t it a bit soon for that?”

Sooty opened the door, and Angeline stood. “Dad?” she called out—only to shut her mouth immediately after.

It was the third son of Archduke Estogal, Francois, who had come in. He had his dark brown hair tied back, and his complexion was strangely pale. His face was the epitome of discontent. “Well, I’m sorry. I’m not your *dad*.”

“What do you want?”

“Hmph... Insolent as ever, I see. You adventurers, the lot of you...” Francois frowned as he took a sweeping glance around the room. “Looks like the Aether Buster isn’t here.”

“If you want to say something, say it. I’m sure you’re not here for tea.”

“His Highness calls for you,” Francois bluntly declared. “Come along.”

Angeline had heard something about Francois becoming the captain of Benjamin’s royal guard. That was why he had gone to the capital and why Liselotte had come with

him. The fact Francois was here meant he had undoubtedly come on a direct order from Benjamin.

Now what to do...? Angeline wondered, racked with uncertainty. This is way too suspicious. Should I go with him for now? Benjamin is a prince, and if I don't follow his commands, it would be easy for him to have me apprehended. That would drastically restrict my movements, and it wouldn't just be me—it'd affect all of us. It might cause trouble for Lize too. Is that what he was aiming for?

Going with him would be dangerous, but disobedience carried the risk of worsening their situation. *Actually, maybe I can turn this to our advantage by braving a bit of danger here. Perhaps I can get something valuable out of going along with this.*

Angeline scoffed. "Just me?"

"Yeah. Just you. Come on."

"Um, Lord Francois, she is Lady Liselotte's guest, for what it's worth," Sooty said.

"Silence. I never gave you permission to speak," Francois snarled in cold reprimand.

Sooty pursed her lips, looking quite troubled. Angeline shot a look to Miriam and Marguerite, who were sullenly lounging on the sofa.

"I'll be right back. If dad comes, tell him not to worry about me."

"Are you sure? I could come with you," Marguerite suggested, immediately standing up.

But Angeline held a hand up to stop her. "I don't want to leave our magician alone. Please, Maggie..."

"Well... I'm sure you can manage," Marguerite conceded before plopping back down and folding her hands behind her head.

Miriam apologetically wrung her hands. "Ange..."

"Don't make that face, Merry... You have to pass the message to dad, okay?"

"Got it... Take care."

Angeline nodded before placing a hand on Sooty's shoulder. "Sorry I have to put you up to this, but could you tell Lize?"

"Understood."

"Is this farce over yet?" Francois stood by the doorway, looking bored out of his mind. "You're truly impudent if you think His Highness would deign to harm *you* of all people."

"And I don't remember giving *you* permission to speak..." Angeline retorted, pointing her finger straight at Francois's nose.

He blinked repeatedly at the jab, looking taken aback for a few moments. But he soon clicked his tongue and turned on his heel. "Come."

Angeline silently left the room. The door shut behind her.

Outside the window, the rain continued to fall. Perhaps it had begun to mix with sleet, as there were pings of something hard and fine tapping away at the windowpane. The howl of the wind was picking up as well.

The corridor felt like it was far longer than before, and Francois's silence only made the journey that much less pleasant. She might have at least had some entertainment if he'd only curse her out so she could answer in kind. Unable to bear the silence any longer, Angeline spoke up: "So, you got promoted."

Francois's shoulders perked up, but his feet did not stop. He continued on wordlessly.

"Do you resent me?" Angeline asked, trying a different tack.

"I thought I did."

She actually received a response this time, but something felt off. Angeline's eyes narrowed as she thought over what that might be. "You don't?"

"No, I hate you. I must hate you. I thought I was only living on to someday get my revenge... But it's strange. I thought I would instantly feel the urge to kill you once I actually met you again, but alas. I honestly feel nothing."

Without warning, Francois stopped and, turning on his heel, grabbed Angeline by the

neck.

His bony fingers were surprisingly cold, yet Angeline stared back at him, keeping as calm as she could. She did not feel a shred of killing intent from him.

Francois was silent for a few moments. Finally, he released her, seemingly resigned, and heaved a deep sigh.

"It's empty. His Highness personally selected me for this position, but I've yet to achieve anything significant. I've failed nearly every job he's left to me. I thought I was an outstanding person. I guess not."

"But Lize was overjoyed, you know. She told me she was proud of her big brother."

"Hmph... Is she trying to win me over now? It's pointless. I tried to kill every member of the archduke's household, her included. There can be no mutual understanding between us."

"You know, I thought this last time we met, but you've got way too much bravado. You're going out of your way to choose a life that you'll definitely never enjoy—not one second of it. What's the point?"

"Silence. You would never understand."

"I don't particularly *want* to understand. But the fact you're going on about these things means you want *someone* to try understanding, right?"

Francois shut his mouth and picked up the pace. Angeline shrugged and continued to follow him. She detested him, but she did feel a strange bit of sympathy when she caught these glimpses of vulnerability. There was also the fact that Liselotte did genuinely adore her brother—a part of Angeline wanted Liselotte's familial affection to be reciprocated.

But what am I supposed to say? That was something Angeline didn't quite know. She was confident she could swing a sword better than most, but she was terrible when it came to picking out the right words to say. *If only dad were around...*

They left the villa and boarded a carriage bound for the royal palace. Throughout their ride, Angeline tried to strike up conversation a few more times, but Francois wouldn't humor her. When they arrived, the carriage went straight past the front gate and

circled around to the back.

With the rain hammering down, they wasted no time racing inside. In contrast to the gaudy and ornamented front entrance, the back area was far less ornate. *It was like this at the archduke's estate too*, Angeline recalled. It had been almost a year already, but the memory was strangely vivid in her head. That mess with Francois back then happened behind the manor too.

As they proceeded down a long, dark passage, Angeline spotted an iron door. It was very austere and heavy looking, and in the surrounding darkness it appeared all the more foreboding.

Francois grabbed the knob and pulled the door open. There was a shrill, earsplitting sound as it turned on its hinges.

"In," he urged. Angeline obliged.

It was a courtyard, yet the high walls that surrounded it on all sides made it seem oppressive. When she looked up, she saw a heavy curtain of clouds right above her, and she could hear the raindrops spattering, yet none of them fell upon this space. *How curious...* Angeline mused. Suddenly, she sensed someone stand up at the center of the courtyard. It was Crown Prince Benjamin, who welcomed her with a wide smile.

"Hey, I'm glad you could make it, Angeline."

"I've answered your summons..." Angeline said, bowing her head in a theatrical display of courtesy.

CHAPTER 115

THOUGH SHE COULD HEAR THE RAIN

Though she could hear the rain, the area around her was not wet. Though it was now midday, the combination of heavy clouds overhead, the narrow walls around her, and the shadows they cast down all contributed to an ominous darkness here below. Each time the flames from the torches on the walls would flicker, the shadows danced across Benjamin's face.

He sat opposite Angeline at the table between them. Benjamin stared long and hard at Angeline's face, his mouth twisted in his customarily flippant half smile. Francois stood in waiting behind him.

For some reason, Angeline felt a bit ill. She sensed several sets of eyes on her from the shadows of the garden. *Benjamin's guards, perhaps?*

Angeline glanced down at her hip. The sword that was her partner through thick and thin was still there, as she had come to always expect it to be. *He must really be underestimating me if he thinks he can let me in armed*, she thought with a slight frown. It was certainly better than having it taken away from her. Not that Angeline couldn't fight empty-handed, but she was still a swordswoman. As long as she had a sword, she was confident she could protect herself no matter what any foe threw at her.

A tea set was abruptly placed on the table. Angeline glanced over to see a lone maid with hollow eyes pouring the tea expressionlessly. Somehow, she had approached without giving away any hint of her presence. The steam escaping from Angeline's cup had a fine fragrance.

Realizing that Angeline had no intention of even sipping from her cup, Benjamin chuckled. "You don't want any? It's not poisoned, you know."

Angeline scoffed. "If you summoned me here, I'm sure you must have some business with me..."

"Don't be so hasty. Who knows? Perhaps I just wanted to have tea with a cute girl."

"I... wouldn't have come if I had known that."

"Oh, how absolutely heartless. But that part of you is also rather charming." Benjamin laughed, reclining back into his chair. He plucked up his cup of tea. "I wanted to have a nice long talk with you. Back in Estogal, our time together was cut short."

"Don't even joke about that. You're the one who incited that idiot behind you... I heard all about it from Kasim."

Francois's face twitched, but Benjamin's high spirits were unchanged. "Well, it was going to be a duel between S-Rank adventurers, right? You don't see that every day—isn't it only natural for me to be interested in that? It was pure curiosity."

"It's pointless to try and cover it up. You're not even the real crown prince."

"Oh?" After taking a sip of tea, Benjamin put an elbow to the table and leaned in with a cheeky grin. "Are you sure? What makes you think so?"

"I heard it from Satie."

"Who's Satie?"

"Playing dumb won't work either. She's the elf that's after you guys."

Benjamin burst into laughter and clapped his hands cheerfully. "Aha ha ha! I see, I see. Yes, her. She managed to shrug off both Schwartz and Hector, did she? But you know, that was legitimate self-defense. If she's after my life, it is only natural that I protect myself."

"Can you say that in front of all the people you've tormented?"

"Hmm, whom exactly did I torment? Just look at how much the capital has flourished. Everyone's happy. Whom have I troubled, exactly?"

"You did experiments. Using innocent people. Satie saved them. That's why she became a hindrance, and you tried to kill her."

Benjamin looked utterly perplexed for a moment before suddenly breaking out into laughter. He held his stomach—it was like whatever she'd said had been so ridiculous he couldn't believe it.

“What’s so funny?” Angeline asked with a frown.

“I see how it is. That woman managed to omit all the important details. This is great.”

“What do you mean?”

“Hey, Angeline. Do you honestly believe that elven woman just happened to suddenly appear out of thin air one day and start opposing us?”

Angeline pursed her lips. She hadn’t heard anything about that. But surely, Satie had caught onto Benjamin’s misdeeds at some point and challenged him to battle. That was what Angeline chose to believe.

With a grin, Benjamin went on, “Certainly, we conducted human experimentation to achieve greater power. But that was for the development of the empire—not for our own selfish desires. It was cruel, yes... But much happiness was to be gained as a result.”

“You can... say whatever you want. Talk is cheap.”

“The same goes for that elf, doesn’t it? What proof do you have that anything she said was true? Are you sure you didn’t simply feel pity after seeing her all battered up like that?”

“You’re wrong.”

“And one more thing. At first, that elf was our comrade, you know?”

Angeline’s eyes widened in shock, and her mouth suddenly felt dry. “You’re lying.”

“I’m not. She participated in our experiments. Then, she betrayed us. If that wasn’t the case, then how could some random elf possibly catch on to what we were doing?”

“But... she turned because what you were doing was wrong.”

“Sacrifice is sometimes essential to progress. That elf simply couldn’t handle the... implications of that. In short, she got cold feet at the last second. It wasn’t a matter of me being right or wrong.”

“I don’t believe you.”

"Ha ha ha! So words are not enough to convince you." Benjamin leaned in and stared at Angeline. "Angeline, do you want to work for me?"

"Huh? Where'd that come from?"

"If you don't believe me, then simply watch what I do from up close. Soon, I'm sure you'll understand that I'm doing the right thing."

"In your dreams. Try asking me again when you're in the middle of a good one." Angeline wearily kicked back in her chair.

"Fine." Benjamin shrugged. "Why don't we talk a bit about history, Angeline? You know about Solomon, don't you?"

"He conquered the continent, then disappeared, leaving the demons behind. But heroes rose to beat the demons, and the continent was at peace."

"That's how the story was passed down. But why do you think Solomon tried to rule the continent? Do you know that?"

"Hmm... I'd imagine he fell into a lust for power."

"Not exactly. The truth is that Solomon fought for humanity's sake."

Angeline found this dubious at best. With a furrowed brow, she glared back at the prince, but his face was serious as could be.

"It was a long, long time ago. The continent was ruled over by what we now call old gods. Superior beings, they were, and possessed of immense power that they used to rule over humans and demihumans. Those old gods, well... They simply could not get along, and there was always some conflict going on here and there. And guess what? It was humans who had to fight these proxy battles for them."

According to Benjamin, the old gods would form armies from their human subjects, sending them to fight and snatch territory and treasures as though it were some sort of game to them. At other times, they would play with their subjects and torment them on a whim. The mortals had no choice but to live in fear of their gods. Though most of the old gods were cruel in nature, some were gentle and would show compassion to humans. This included the goddess worshiped by the church of Vienna.

Angeline was shocked. "I've... never heard about that before."

"Oh, I'm sure you haven't. Right now, those Vienna folks, they only care about their authority, and they're twisting history to suit their needs. But don't you think it's strange? You never hear about the other gods, but Vienna is called their 'Chief.' Doesn't that sound as if there's a whole pantheon, and she should be the representative of them?"

Angeline's eyes were spinning. *Come to think of it, maybe he is right...* She had always been under the impression that this title referred to how Vienna was the chief of all the angels and spirits who served her. As a matter of fact, the greater spirits were treated as if they had some level of divinity, and perhaps this belief was established by assimilating the local faiths from across the land.

Benjamin cackled at Angeline's evident bewilderment.

"You get the point. Humans were ruled by the old gods. But in those turbulent times, a certain magician appeared. With his immense power, he led the seventy-two homunculi he'd created and waged war on the old gods."

"You mean..."

"Yes, that man was Solomon. He rose up for the humans under the boot of their gods."

Angeline felt like the drumming of the rain was growing ever louder. *This is bad... I'm being swept along by him. I'm not good at these mental battles.* She knew his was a story with no evidence whatsoever to back it up, but she was simply dying to know what came next. She knew it would be her undoing if she lent an ear to his rhetoric, but her curiosity was yearning for him to continue. All the while, Francois remained at his post behind Benjamin, idly staring off into space.

"Solomon was strong. Better yet, his homunculi were immortal. Though the battle was fierce, he had the assistance of Vienna, and by the end of it, Solomon managed to rid the continent of its old gods. Would you care for some tea? It might be cold by now, though."

Angeline leaned in, ignoring his question. "Hold on... So Vienna and Solomon were comrades...?"

"That's right. As a result, Vienna was the only one of the gods spared. She did love

humanity, and humans considered her different from the rest. With that said, Vienna was weak—too weak to fight any of the other gods on her own. It was only through working with Solomon that she realized her goals.”

Angeline sighed. This was a somewhat dizzying realization, a real bolt from the blue. *To think, the great god worshipped across the continent had joined hands with the sorcerer who'd given rise to the demons. If any priest of Lucrecia heard of anyone even entertaining the notion, they'd no doubt fly into a rage.*

But for some strange reason, it didn't sound like complete nonsense. Angeline felt her heart racing. She subconsciously placed her left hand over her heart and channeled her strength.

“But... then why did Solomon become a villain?”

“I don't see him as a villain. In short, Solomon lost hope in humanity. He saved the oppressed, but once their rulers were gone, humans gradually discovered their own avarice. They fought one another even without the gods egging them on. They fought and they fought, and Solomon began to wonder if there was any value in having saved them at all.”

Benjamin cackled and spread out his arms. “And finally, he concluded that he would need to rule over humanity with his own two hands. He needed to corral the fools and lead them in the right direction.”

“That can't be...”

“Solomon used his homunculi to rule the continent. Yes, his reign collapsed with his disappearance, but... I understand his feelings all too well. Don't you understand them too, Angeline?”

“No, I...”

“You don't have to deny it. Humans are such incompetent fools they can only rely on those with power. But once those beacons of hope make the slightest failure, they're cursed at and abused, or they'll call you heartless if you don't go out of your way to save them. You must have experienced this, right? They may say they're relying on you as an S-Rank adventurer, but they're just using you because it's convenient.”

“You're wrong!” Angeline's clenched fist slammed into the table. She had done it

without thinking, and she'd startled even herself.

But Benjamin seemed undeterred. "I'm not wrong; you just don't want to admit it. You're *scared* to admit it."

"It's not true..."

"It is. The fact you're so flustered is proof enough."

Angeline bit her lip and glared at Benjamin. He maintained an unruffled expression and spoke as if he knew everything.

"Right now, the world is filled with nothing but fools, don't you think? Commoners who are only interested in their quotidian lives and the prospect of gold before their eyes, on the one hand, and nobles caught up in unsightly power grabs on the other. And the trouble is all passed off onto the adventurers, wouldn't you say? If you want change, then someone has to do it, Angeline. That's what will make everyone happy. You have the strength to do it. You mustn't look away."

She couldn't muster a strong denial. *Is it because a part of me believes it to be true?* Angeline clenched her fist all the more tightly. *It is arrogant to grow irritated at the weak*, she thought. But she had been directly faced with what Benjamin had described far more often than she wanted to admit. She could feel her breathing growing ragged.

Benjamin's hand cupped her chin, pulling her closer to him. The cold touch of Benjamin's fingers gave her goose bumps, and her body stiffened like a spell had been placed over her.

"Work for me, Angeline."

Benjamin now looked like an inky black shadow to her, but for his eyes, which gleamed with light that seemed to penetrate into her soul. Angeline shut her eyes.

"Dad..." she softly murmured to herself.

Suddenly, the tension drained from her shoulders. She opened her eyes and glared back at Benjamin, smacking down the hand that had caressed her chin.

"I refuse. I will never be your ally. If you give up on Satie and the others and stop doing bad things, I'll consider letting you go... Otherwise, I'll give you a thorough beating."

"Aha ha ha! I see, I see." His gaze turned cold. "That's a shame." Benjamin swiped a finger through the air.

In an instant, Angeline was reaching for her sword with wide eyes. But just before she could feel the reassuring metal of its hilt, her body could no longer move.

Benjamin—or rather, the man before her—slowly floated into the air. No, that wasn't it. She was the one sinking. Angeline couldn't comprehend what was going on, but her eyes rapidly flitted about, taking in as much information as she could. She felt she was caught in a swirl of mana. From what she could tell, it was a paralysis spell layered over forced teleportation. *I guess there was no way he would have invited me without preparing any countermeasures*, she sullenly realized.

Benjamin stood. His fingertip glowed with a faint magical light.

"It would be easy to kill you here... Unfortunately, it's not that simple. For the time being, you'll have to twiddle your thumbs as you watch, unable to reach me."

Angeline glared at him sharply. "You'll regret this," she declared.



"Ha ha! I can't wait. *How* will you make me regret it? I'd love to see that."

Finally, Angeline had sunk down all the way past the top of her head. Benjamin sighed and sat in his chair. He reached out for the tea on the table. It was, indeed, already cold.

With a snap of his fingers, Benjamin summoned the hollow-eyed maid and a fresh batch of hot tea with her.

"You look unsatisfied," Benjamin said, looking over his shoulder at Francois, who gazed at him with a frown. "Did you want to kill her?"

The expression on Francois's face vanished at the sudden realization of what he'd been doing. He shook his head. "No, I wouldn't dare."

"Hmm? Well, in any case, Schwartz said not to kill her. No can do. Who knows what's going on in his head?"

There was a sudden loud din as the iron door opened to admit a man wearing a butler's uniform. "Your Highness, the Templars have come for an audience..."

"Yeah, on my way." Benjamin stood up.

The rain showed no sign of relenting.

○

The magic symbols that covered every surface of the room emitted a faint light. Kasim sat cross-legged on the floor, bored as can be, as a maidenly version of Salazar paced back and forth.

"Yes, yes, you see how it is. We observe the world in a truly small scope. It's like we're watching with bated breath as a single leaf drifts down a mighty river! However, the flow of events is something even greater. It is the river itself! Yet even the mightiest stream can be influenced by a large enough boulder dropped in its waters. The beginning and end points might not change, but the surrounding banks can be shaped, and the current can be altered! Such a pity it is that life must be so short! You can take as wide a view as you want, yet it is still so short and constricted..."

"Now see here—I get all that," Kasim interjected, heaving a sigh. "But does that have *anything* to do with what we're trying to accomplish?"

“What are you talking about, my good Aether Buster?! There is *nothing* in the world that’s irrelevant to the point of discussion. All objects and events interact! It’s not rare for these interactions to manifest themselves where you least expect it!”

“That’s not what I’m talking about at all. I don’t want these feeble suppositions—I want something more concrete. All right, just tell me *how* I’m supposed to drop a stone into this river of yours...”

Salazar—now in the form of a young man—chuckled. “What a fitting way to put it! But perhaps it’s already been done. A stone that rolls in from upstream could very well change the current down the river. The flow of events is complex; you must look at it from a bird’s-eye view.”

“That’s all well and good, but can you just connect me to that space where Satie is? By your logic, this event flow is clearly happening around us specifically.”

“Solomon, sorcerer of old, was at the center of a massive flow himself. His immense powers caused greater waves than most and drew whirling eddies along the way. As a result, he pierced through time and space. What phenomenon will emerge this time, I wonder...”

“Hey? Hello? Are you listening...?” Kasim asked, but Salazar had gotten lost in his thoughts once again. Kasim sighed—he was getting absolutely nowhere.

After parting with the others, he had arrived at Salazar’s workshop in the early morning. Salazar had passed out after using communication magic the night before, but luckily, he had recovered since then. Things were fine up to that point. However, he had been like *this* ever since. He was a man whose thirst for knowledge was his sole driving motivation; he cared nothing for right and wrong, and he felt no pangs of conscience, evidently. And he had absolutely no intention of taking Kasim’s situation into consideration.

With that said, Salazar was about the only one who’d be able to connect to Satie’s space. Kasim was an archmage himself, but space manipulation was outside his field of expertise. Teleportation required an especially high degree of specialization and could not even be attempted without the right aptitude. When it came to archmages, there were only a handful who could use the complicated spell. Should someone without the aptitude attempt this magic, sometimes only a portion of the body would be teleported, or at other times, only the mind. The caster might even be teleported

straight inside a wall. When that happened, even an archmage could do nothing to avert certain death.

Salazar was muttering something under his breath and wouldn't respond no matter what Kasim said. Throwing in the towel, Kasim pulled off his cap and pinched a small ball of lint off of it.

"But the event flow can't produce waves large enough to punch a hole straight through time and space, can it...? Sudden and instantaneous points of massive power form spirals, and those spirals penetrate space. As a result, these swirls do influence the surrounding flow, yet are themselves unaffected by their surroundings... In any case, the center of the spiral this time is the black-haired lass."

"You mean Ange? Hey, what's the flow you're looking at, anyways?"

Salazar looked up. His form twisted and shifted, and now he was a middle-aged man. "Hmm? The time-space prison opened up? Must be the crown prince."

"Huh? What was that about the prince?"

"Someone fell in. I see—it was the black-haired lass."

"Ange? In the 'time-space prison'?" Kasim stroked his beard. The words didn't ring any bells, but he could roughly guess what Salazar meant. It had something to do with the time-space continuum, and it was a prison. Kasim's eyes widened. "You mean Benjamin captured Ange?!"

"There's a high chance, yes. Hmm, but it's brought a large change to—"

Before Salazar could finish, Kasim shoved his hat back on and bolted out of the room.

CHAPTER 116

IT WAS LIKE DRIFTING THROUGH WATER

It was like drifting through water. Angeline's surroundings were wrapped in darkness, but when she focused her gaze, she could perceive strange, minuscule symbols faintly emerging through the darkness, only to fade away again. She looked down and saw that she could see her hands perfectly well—yet their outer contours seemed somewhat hazy. She felt a terrible dread at this realization, as though her body would suddenly melt away and disperse like mist the moment she lost focus.

Angeline instinctively knew she was headed downwards. She tensed the muscles in her legs, but this did little to stop her gradual descent. The air had a sticky quality to it when she breathed in through her nose and spat it out forcefully, doing her best to avoid inhaling too deeply. It would be terrible if it was poisonous. Although this was a situation that would send most into a panic, she was an S-Rank adventurer, and she knew how to maintain her composure.

Her sense of time was becoming increasingly vague, but eventually, her surroundings seemed to lighten up ever so slightly. It felt like she was resurfacing.

"Whoa!" Even though she had been sinking feetfirst, she suddenly felt like she was falling upside down, taking her by complete surprise. She immediately stuck out her hands and managed to roll safely.

Angeline spent a few moments assessing her situation. Apparently, she had somehow emerged from out of the ground, which was now solid beneath her. As soon as she had been cast out fully, gravity had begun to work properly once more, which had been the cause of her stumble. She shook her head to clear the still-lingering fog over her mind.

It was quite a strange space that she found herself in. It seemed to be a square room, and its walls, floor, and ceiling were all covered in a black-and-white checkerboard pattern. The material was neither wood nor stone, and though it made a dull sound when she tapped her foot against it, there was absolutely no reverberation of the sound despite the room's considerable vastness.

Close to the ceiling at the center of the room, a perfectly round red sphere floated

without the slightest distortion rippling over its surface. Its red color was quite vivid in contrast to the inorganic black and white all around it.

She looked around keenly. Though she didn't sense any hostility, she felt as though she were being watched. Perhaps Benjamin's lackeys were keeping tabs on her.

Slowly, she gripped the hilt of the sword at her waist.

Angeline walked up to the wall to inspect it. Each square of the checkerboard pattern was about the same size as her head. She placed her hand on it and found it to be neither hot nor cold. When she pushed, she felt the substance had a bit of give to it, so she kicked it. It didn't budge.

She drew her sword and poked the wall with the tip, but she did not mar it with even the slightest scratch. It was quite a sturdy wall, indeed.

The watchful eyes she had sensed before now seemed full of contempt. Wherever they were, they were sneering at her attempts. She could even hear what sounded like muffled laughter, though she couldn't tell from where.

"All right..."

Angeline stood there silently for some time before suddenly acting. Channeling mana into the blade, she launched a diagonal downwards slash at the wall. The sword clove straight through without any difficulty at all.

A rending scream echoed through the room. When Angeline turned, she saw that the red sphere had begun to warp and twist, almost as though it were writhing in pain. "Come out already or I'll do it again," Angeline said, scoffing as she brandished her sword once more. Instantly, a rusted iron door appeared before her. Angeline sheathed her sword and glared at the red sphere.

"This happened because you thought you could trap me... I won't be so lenient next time." The sphere shrunk back fearfully. The iron door soon opened with a grating sound, and Angeline darted through it.

"Hmph..."

The ground beneath her feet had a different feel to it, and a milky white fog lingered in the air. She couldn't tell if there even *was* ground beneath her; each of her steps had

a strange, floaty feeling.

Angeline raised her head and took a look around. The fog was thinner in some place than others, where she could see strange geometric patterns flickering and floating in space. The symbols twisted and turned as if they were alive, never taking on the same arrangement twice. They reminded her a bit of the three-dimensional spell circles used by Byaku.

For the time being, she started walking. Her steps felt unsteady, and she couldn't see the ground below her, but she was surely moving forward nonetheless—albeit much more slowly than she felt like she should have been.

Suddenly, she saw a figure in the distance. The figure was floating upside down, and yet it walked so normally it was as though Angeline were the one who had been inverted. She picked up the pace, rushing towards it, only to discover it had been nothing more than an agglomeration of fog gathered into a human form. Nevertheless, it kept walking with a humanlike gait.

"Hey!" Angeline raised her voice.

The fog-human showed no reaction as it walked over her head. *That's just a doll*, Angeline realized as she watched it go on its way.

Feeling rather irritable, Angeline continued wandering for a while. Eventually, she realized that she didn't even have to physically walk at all—as long as she intended to move, she could go up, down, left, and right without moving her feet.

"I'm getting nowhere..."

She recalled something Belgrieve had told her, once upon a time: "You know how you shouldn't wander aimlessly in the dark? The same goes for dungeons. There are some things you'll only know if you focus your senses on the less obvious."

Angeline closed her eyes and breathed in deeply to calm her heart. Sharpening her senses, she made herself into a mana-detecting antenna. And when she did, she found that mana was surging around her like a turbulent stream. It was pouring in so strongly, she had to wonder how she hadn't noticed it before. But the mana was not flowing from any particular place. One moment, it would seem to come from the right, then from the left, then from above. It would draw senseless spirals all over the place, only to crash straight into another stream of mana that had come from somewhere

else entirely.

Angeline mulled over what she knew and concluded that this strange place was a special zone made by Benjamin. If it was made with magic, it was only normal for there to be mana drifting about. Evidently, the plan was to forcefully teleport her into a different dimension where she'd be sealed away, but Angeline wasn't about to let that happen. She huffed and opened her eyes.

"A fine parlor trick... But you're underestimating me."

She drew her sword. Among the muddled flows of mana, she had perceived a single strand with definite directionality. She followed it, this time moving with certainty before eventually coming to a halt. She was in a place that seemed no different from any other, but the faint mana flow definitely came to a stop there.

Angeline readied her blade and swept at the emptiness.

The milky fog seemed to burst apart, then suddenly condensed into a spiraling vortex—a hole in space that spread out right before her eyes. Without a moment's hesitation, Angeline swiftly dove into the black hole.

After passing through something soft, the soles of her feet landed on solid ground. The remnants of the fog clinging to her melted away. Angeline narrowed her eyes and took in her surroundings. She was in a long corridor now. She looked left and right and saw that both directions seemed to continue infinitely.

The walls and ceiling were bare stone, while the floor was covered in a purple carpet. It was all dimly lit by the lanterns that dotted the walls at regular intervals.

"It's just one mystery space after another..."

This would certainly be a depressing place to be helplessly trapped in—but that was only if she really *was* trapped. *Do you think I'm going to sit down and give up over something like this?*

She irritably stamped her heels against the carpet a couple times before picking a random direction to start walking.

The air was cold and still, and it seemed concentrated around the floor. The mana was the same, but unlike that foggy place from before, she could not feel any significant

flow. The stone walls and floor were uniformly inorganic and cold, and she didn't feel like she would be able to shift them.

Her footsteps were silent thanks to the carpet. She took large, exaggerated strides before suddenly stopping. She looked down with a grimace—the carpet before her had been stamped with a conspicuous footprint. Undoubtedly, it was the very place she had just stamped upon with her heel.

"So that's what's happening..." *One end of the corridor connects to the other*, she realized. That made it a lot easier—a looping space was simpler to overcome than an infinitely expansive one.

Softly putting a hand on the wall, Angeline slowly began walking. She stroked the wall, checking to make sure there weren't any strange points as she went. The size and shape of the stones varied, but the spaces between them were too fine to slip even a single sheet of paper through. The glass lanterns were embedded into the wall, each containing an orb of light.

She slowly investigated until she had returned to her starting point, where she switched to the opposite wall. It was a tedious job, but she was patient. She never dropped the pace.

"It's not the wall, then..."

Neither wall seemed to have any abnormalities. She then checked the floor and ceiling. Angeline stared up, keeping her eyes peeled as she walked.

"That's not it..."

She peeled back the carpet, only to find cold, stone flooring beneath, without anything strange. If there were even the slightest gap, or a draft, or anything of the sort, she would notice immediately. The insight she'd fostered as an S-Rank adventurer was the real deal, but with nothing to direct it towards, it was doing her little good.

As a test, Angeline slashed at the wall just as she'd done in the first room. She managed to leave a mark, but nothing else happened. She folded her arms and fell into thought. She recalled something she'd heard from Miriam about magic—spells that created alternate dimensions like this, if made into perfectly sealed spaces, could no longer receive any interference from the outside. That meant the practitioner wouldn't be able to control it. For this reason, there always had to be some kind of device

connecting it to the outside world. This was simple enough to find, for example, if the space had been created for the practitioner's own use. However, if it was meant to seal someone else, then the key would be as difficult to find as possible—or else set up in such a way that, even if the trick was found, it would be difficult to use to get out.

In short, the key likely wasn't anywhere Angeline might easily think to look. Or otherwise, there was a trick to using it that meant she'd struggle even if she found it.

What would dad do in this situation? Angeline wondered.

"Is it the lanterns...?" She looked at the thin glass covering the nearest lantern. Inside was an orb of light, most likely created with magic. They were the only things casting light into the corridor, and if they were snuffed out, she would be cast into complete darkness.

"You'd usually be too scared to do that. So that's precisely why..." Angeline brandished her sword and shattered the lantern. The orb of light flew out from within, drifting aimlessly through space before bursting into nothingness.

Angeline raced down the corridor, shattering the lanterns on both sides along the way. Each time an orb burst, she would lose a bit more light. It was like the darkness was chasing her from behind. Once she shattered the last one, the orb lingered in the air for one last moment before everything around her turned pitch-black, no matter how hard she focused her gaze. Holding up her sword, she wondered if she had made the wrong move, but a part of her was convinced this was the right course of action.

The absolute darkness messed with her sense of time. Just as it began to feel interminable, she suddenly felt something swaying at her feet. A pale-blue light flooded from the slowly growing cracks between the stones that formed the walls. It seemed like the stones were crumbling away. The ceiling was next, and finally, the ground beneath her collapsed. Angeline fell alongside stones of all sizes.

She bounded from one rock to another, making it to the very top of the falling refuse heap where she wouldn't have to worry about getting struck in the head. Her surroundings were filled with blue light. Mana permeated everything, taking the form of a light mist.

She didn't know how long she had been falling, but soon the stones that had been coming down with her had vanished. The speed of her descent was also becoming

slower, and before she had made any preparations to land, she suddenly felt like she had touched down on a soft surface. She was sent tumbling forward, and she barely managed to catch herself.

“That was a close one.”

The ground was unusually soft, and it was difficult for her to maintain her balance. She managed to stand up, though her feet sank down into the surface of the ground up to her ankles. *This reminds me of my bed back at Archduke Estogal’s house*, Angeline recalled. She took stock of her surroundings, an unsettled frown on her face. She was, indeed, standing on a bed, but this one had to have been made for a giant. Several massive pillows were carelessly piled up to one side.

“The sea...?”

On the distant horizon, she could see the surface of a calm sea which glistened as it reflected the light of a sun with a smiling face. The bed had been carelessly placed right on the sandy shore. When she turned back towards the land, she saw the abundant green shelterbelt, composed of lines upon lines of lush trees. But on closer inspection, they were not trees at all—they were stalks of parsley.

A small peninsula jutted out into the sea. But again, on closer inspection, it was not a peninsula. This was a dish that consisted of rice cooked with tomato sauce, over which a fluffy omelet rested—a portion of omurice jutted out into the sea. Towering like a lighthouse, a massive spoon had been stabbed into the end of it.

She was staring, dumbfounded, when, without warning, bubbles breached the water’s surface, and a large fish poked its head out. The fish had human arms which it used to grab the omurice spoon. It scooped and shoveled and began to devour the delectable meal. All the while, the sun watched with a beaming grin.

There was no way such irrational scenery existed anywhere in the world. It was like a child’s nightmare. In a completely different sense from before, Angeline was rather bewildered, but she knew she couldn’t lose her cool. She took a deep breath, the smell of salt filling her chest. She jumped off the bed and landed on a pillow, eventually reaching the beach where her shoes sank into the sand. *I haven’t walked by the sea since I was in Elvgren...*

The warm temperature put her in a strangely relaxed mood. But she knew she couldn’t

submit to it; she crossed the beach and entered the forest of massive parsley, where the air was filled with a refreshing scent.

What am I supposed to do to escape this time? she wondered. She continued walking, and as soon as she reached the forest, the ground changed again. It was a red and white checkerboard pattern over perfectly flat ground. Beyond it, she saw a wall of white brick.

Cocking her head, Angeline headed towards it, noticing that parts of the wall were covered in iron bars. Indeed, it was like a prison ward. There were small chambers set at regular intervals, each with rows of iron bars sectioning them off from the outside world. But no one was inside. There were chains, a bed, and a toilet in each, but none of them showed any signs of use. It was a cold, still, silent place.

Maybe the key to getting out is in one of them...

Angeline was walking along the wall when suddenly she heard a voice. "Hey! Is someone there?"

Angeline looked around, startled. "Who...?"

"A-A woman? Well, it doesn't matter who. Please, save me!"

She headed towards the voice. Farther along, she found a man locked away in one of the jail cells. His blond hair, which was a nearly golden shade, had grown out wildly, and his face was covered in an unkempt beard. What had once been high-quality clothing had faded and torn, and his feet were shackled.

The man rattled his chains as he clung to the bars, tears streaming from his eyes. "Ah! Sorry, it's just... It's been so long since I've heard a voice that didn't belong to them... Please, get me out of here!"



Angeline stared suspiciously at the man. “That depends... Who are you?”

The man steadied his breath, but he was still panting as he said, “I’m... I’m Benjamin. The eldest son of the emperor... Benjamin Rhodesia.”

“Huh?!” Angeline inadvertently cried out.

○

It was a full downpour. Belgrieve had wanted to head to the archduke’s villa as quickly as possible, but the rain slowed them down. When the rain was this bad, the town’s coaches didn’t run, and so they were forced to abandon the coach that had been headed towards the palace before it was even halfway there. For the time being, they sheltered under the eaves of a closed store.

Percival frustratedly tapped the tip of his shoe against the ground. “Dammit, it just had to happen now...”

Belgrieve squinted his eyes as he tried to see beyond the rain. But great droplets were coming down with no end in sight, so he couldn’t see very far. It was already hard enough to navigate the capital when he was so unfamiliar with it. With such poor visibility, he’d just get lost if he tried to set out on his own.

“Where are we, exactly?”

“Still around the lower areas.”

The wind had picked up as well, and now they were being doused with fine mist even under shelter. Maitreya had been fretfully pacing for a while now, but she now opted to hide behind Percival, using him as a shield against the rain.

“Urgh, how unsightly... To think that I, Maitreya the Black Tapestry, would be reduced to this...”

“If you hate it that much, use teleportation magic or something,” Percival chided.

But Maitreya shook her head—it was out of the question. “What will you do if that tips Schwartz off? I couldn’t do something that dangerous.”

“He already noticed us ages ago, I’m sure. You coward...”

As much as they wanted to be on their way, the downpour simply wouldn't let them. *We'll have to hunker down for a bit*, Belgrieve thought. But suddenly, the rain weakened.

Belgrieve pulled his hood over his head. "Let's go. We need to cover some ground while we can."

"Right."

He and Percival pressed on, with Maitreya trailing slightly behind. But not long after they'd resumed their journey, the rain grew stronger again. It wasn't that Belgrieve minded getting wet, but not being able to make out the streets made navigation impossible. The city was filled with similar sights, and his unfamiliarity made it even harder to distinguish them, nor could he unfurl a map in the rain.

Once again, they sought shelter out of the rain, this time under the eaves of a café with crimson lights flickering through a thick glass window. The place was packed with customers. They were joined by others who were escaping the rain, and they spent their time in that company gazing at the ground until the downpour weakened again. The clouds were a mottling of light and dark, and the rain would change depending on what kind happened to pass directly overhead at the moment.

"It's weakening. Let's go."

"Right. Was this the right direction...?"

They were about to take off again when the café door opened, and someone walked outside. "Huh? Mr. Bell? Oh, and Percy's with you."

Belgrieve turned with a start towards the voice that had suddenly called out to them from behind. It was Anessa, and she was soon followed by Touya and Maureen.

"Anne?" Percival blinked. "Touya and Maureen too. What are you doing here?"

"We were gathering info at the guild..."

"Oh, I see. Are you operating separately from Ange?" Belgrieve asked.

Anessa nodded. "Yes, they're waiting for you at the archduke's place; I never thought we'd be the ones to find you first though... Oh, this is the guild's vice branch-leader,

Aileen."

Anessa stepped aside to introduce a woman with unkempt hair. Belgrieve and his party bowed their heads to introduce themselves.

Aileen gasped excitedly, her eyes widening. "A pleasure to meet you. I'm Aileen. You all look quite skilled... Correct me if I'm wrong, but I imagine *you* must be quite the renowned adventurer," she gushed, eying up Percival.

"That's an understatement, right, Maureen?" said Touya.

"That's right. You might know Percy here better as the Exalted Blade," said Maureen.

Percival scratched his cheek. "You really don't need to spread that around..."

"Huh? What? Th-The Exalted Blade...? Um, are you for real? You're not just someone who shares the same name?"

"Well, for what it's worth..." Percival flashed his S-Rank adventurer plate.

Aileen's cheeks flushed in excitement. "Oh my goodness gracious, the real one?! I-It... It's such an honor to meet you! I'm a huge fan!" Aileen grabbed Percival's hand and swung it around wildly.

"I've never seen her like this," Touya exclaimed, his eyes wide.

"She's quite the fangirl," Maureen remarked, chuckling.

They'd been loitering around in front of the door, and it wasn't long before someone came out to scold them for it. In any case, the rain was coming down heavily again. Belgrieve was troubled by this, yet Maureen was humming a tune, wagging her finger back and forth.

"Now let's go. Ange's waiting for you, isn't she?" she said as she walked out into the downpour. Belgrieve looked up to see that the rain seemed to be deflected by an unseen membrane right above her. She had apparently created a magic shelter. Thus, the party headed out.

"Not bad," Percival remarked, observing the raindrops splattering in the air overhead. "Seems like you'd need some fine mana control to do that."

"Yes, well, this much is nothing."

"You heard her, shorty. Can you do that?"

Percival prodded at Maitreya, who pouted. "Why should I bother with such lowbrow spells?"

"Who's the kid?" Anessa asked, giving Maitreya a curious once-over.

"Huh?" Aileen said, stooping down and peering into Maitreya's face. "Why, it's little Mai. I thought I hadn't seen you around for a while. What have you been up to?"

Maitreya shuddered. She pulled her hood farther down over her face and put a finger over her mouth. "It's a secret."

"Oh? Well, all right," Aileen replied, cupping her hands over her mouth.

Belgrieve chuckled. "She's Maitreya. We met her in Findale and got her to cooperate."

"Maitreya..." Touya gasped. "The rumored Black Tapestry?"

"Huh? You recruited her in such a short span of time? That's Mr. Bell for you, I guess..." Anessa mused as she stared at the imp.

Maitreya flinched and averted her eyes. Percival, for his part, appeared to be thoroughly amused.

Touya and Maureen knew the capital well, so they no longer had to worry about getting lost. The rain was also a nonissue now. Belgrieve placed a hand on his chest in relief. It vexed him greatly when precious time was wasted in vain. The ground was still slippery, but that much was manageable. Even the poorer parts of the capital had well-paved streets, so they would be fine as long as they didn't tread in any grime.

"I heard about what's going on. Looks like you've found yourself in quite the predicament," Aileen observed.

"Yes, troublingly enough... How are things on your end, Anne?"

"She was asking me about any suspicious movements surrounding the empire, and specifically the crown prince. Right, Anne?"

"That's right."

"So how is it, really? Any leads?"

Aileen shrugged. "Nothing blatantly suspicious. Even if he is a fake, most people see it as a change for the better, so no one's actively pursuing the matter. One thing I have heard, though, is that he doesn't let many people get close to him compared to when he was a troublemaker."

"He showed up when we were at the archduke's villa. At the time, the crown prince didn't have a single guard with him. Though maybe they just kept themselves out of sight," Anessa added.

Belgrieve frowned. "I see... Well, what's the best move to make...?"

"Mr. Belgrieve, what are you trying to accomplish by gathering info on the empire?" Touya asked.

Belgrieve folded his arms. "We know for certain the prince is a fake. If we want to knock down his position, we'll need someone in a position where they can proclaim that without reprimand. I wanted to talk to Liselotte in the hopes that she could introduce someone who fit the bill."

"Hmm, so you're going to stir up someone else with succession rights and cause a power struggle? That's pretty nasty, Bell."

"That might be what ultimately happens... In any case, he's definitely plotting inhumane things behind his mask of wise governance. Maybe we can expose him... If we had some ammunition to use against him, we could get someone in a high position to assist us. For now, we can't do anything without information..."

"But will that go over well? He's got some cagey people on his side," said Maureen.

Aileen nodded. "He's good at maneuvering behind the scenes. And he's very popular with the people."

"Right. At least, I don't hear anything bad about him. At worst, some people insult him for being too perfect," added Touya.

"I know, right? I mean, sure, he's not the little angel he used to be, but he's still as much

a looker as ever. He's definitely got the support of the ladies. In fact, I'd say growing up has only increased his sex appeal."

"My, is that all you think about, Aileen?"

"Well, a good face is important. That's one thing that being a fake doesn't change."

Aileen and Maureen were soon off in their own world of gossip, but Belgrieve's brow was furrowed. "Hmm...? Older? Isn't he still quite young?"

"Yes, well, he is young, but the years do go by. He has certainly grown into his features nicely."

"It must have been a few years since his... *personality* changed, right?"

"That's right. It's been four or five, I'd say. He was a pretty boy then, and he's a pretty man now."

"I never considered that."

"What's so strange about that?" Anessa asked, perplexed.

Belgrieve nodded at her question and turned to Maureen. "The crown prince has grown older in appearance. Don't you find that... unnatural for mimicry magic, Maureen?"

"Hmm... Oh, yes, that's certainly strange. Why didn't I pick up on that?" Maureen asked, biting into a dried apple she had furnished from seemingly nowhere.

"How do you figure?" Anessa cocked her head.

"I only have some secondhand knowledge, so I wouldn't call myself an expert. But mimicry magic isn't suited for long-term use, apparently. That's why we've never heard stories of someone ever being completely replaced by a fake. Well, perhaps there's some new and improved spell that can even reproduce the effects of aging..." Belgrieve explained as he looked at Maureen.

Maureen chuckled. "I'm surprised you know that. I nearly forgot myself."

"Oh... I see!" Touya nodded.

Maitreya blinked, and Percival's face turned grim.

"The magicians seem to get it, but what's going on?"

"Well, you see, there are several forms of mimicry magic," Maureen explained. "One of them involves entering the body of the target's corpse. However, the body will decompose if too much time passes, so not many people use it. In fact, most users would prefer to remotely puppet the body with necromancy."

Maureen stuck up one finger and continued her lecture "There's also one where you enter the body of a living person, but you have to constantly grapple with your target's consciousness, so it's not reliable. Your movements will be stilted, so people rarely use it. You can use a drug to change your body, but you'll be back once the drug wears off—and you'll need the right reagents, not to mention the burden this method places on the body. The most popular mimicry involves tracing the target's physical properties and reproducing them. However, you can only use the form from when the trace was performed."

"What's the problem there?" Percival asked.

"In short, you can't change it. Your hair and beard and nails won't grow, and you can't get any older. You really don't get that?" Maitreya explained condescendingly.

"Did you say something?" Percival asked, glaring.

"Eep!" Maitreya cowered behind Belgrieve.

Aileen chuckled. "What are you tensing up for, Mai...? So you're saying the real prince might be alive?"

Belgrieve nodded. Yet Percival looked like he understood even less now.

"What are you on about? Why does the real one have to be alive?"

"Magic can often be more effective if you're willing to undergo a bit of risk. Say you kept the target alive—then, you can constantly keep tracing their information. The quality of the mimicry goes up by leaps and bounds," Maureen explained.

Percival furrowed his brow. "I see... So if they kept the real one somewhere where he couldn't see the light of day, they could invoke a contract of sorts to increase the spell's

effectiveness. Having a constant supply of information would make the transformation seem more organic.”

“Yeah. Which means he can’t kill the real prince... Percy, we might be able to find a way through this yet,” Belgrieve said, tousling his beard.

“Who could have seen that coming?” Percival said jovially, patting Belgrieve on the shoulder. “Where could you have learned something like that?”

“It was in a book I read a while back. It left a strong impression, so it stuck with me.”

“Still, you did well to remember that...” Anessa said with a weak smile that Belgrieve wryly returned.

“Anyways... We’re still at the hypothesis stage. But, well, I’m getting some idea of the direction we’re headed. We might not have to stir up a power struggle at this rate.”

“You got that much just from knowing he’s grown older...?” Aileen marveled. “Not bad, Mr. Belgrieve.”

“I wouldn’t have noticed if the topic never came up. It’s thanks to you...”

“Things are starting to get interesting. I’ll do a bit of digging on my end.”

“No, I couldn’t ask you to do that.”

“Oh it’s fine, really. I’m doing it because that’s what I like doing. And I’m happy to be of assistance to the Exalted Blade...” Aileen gushed, winking at Percival, who simply shrugged.

Belgrieve cackled. “You lady-killer, you.”

“What are you on about? Anyways, you’ve been a big help, Aileen. Thanks.”

“Oh my!” Aileen clapped her hands over her blushing cheeks and shook her head.

Aileen parted from their company to return to the guild. Meanwhile, Belgrieve and the rest of the party headed for the archduke’s villa. Thanks to the inclement weather stalling their progress, it was already evening by the time they arrived. The sun had yet to set, but it was already dark outside owing to the storm clouds still lingering

above.

They were stuck waiting at the front door of the estate for some time before Sooty rushed to greet them. "Sorry to keep you waiting."

"Oh, Sooty. Sorry we're all drenched."

"It's fine, just come in already," she urged them, a grim expression on her face. Her demeanor took them aback as they followed her into the manor. When they entered the room she'd led them to, they found Miriam sitting on the sofa, restlessly wringing her hands. Kasim sat across from her, his face buried in his palms, while Marguerite paced back and forth.

Kasim looked up. "Ah, Bell..."

Anessa looked around the room, perplexed. "Where's Ange? Looks like Lize isn't here either..."

"Yeah, about that..."

Miriam dejectedly explained the situation, with Marguerite and Kasim chiming in at times, and related how Francois had appeared to deliver Angeline to the crown prince. This, along with what Kasim had learned from Salazar, made it clear that Angeline had been captured by the enemy.

Percival's brow rose as he prodded Kasim. "I told you to keep an eye on her! How did this happen while you were around?!"

"I'm sorry, I was careless..." Kasim shrunk back, hanging his head.

Marguerite clicked her tongue. "Good grief, how pathetic of her. I shoulda tagged along."

"No crying over spilled milk. Now, Kasim, how long are you going to stay down?" Belgrieve matter-of-factly asked as he carefully rolled up his damp cloak. He took out a towel from his bag to dry his head before handing it to Percival. "Percy, dry off. You'll catch a cold."

"You're awfully calm about all this. Aren't you worried about Ange?"

"Of course I am. But she wouldn't let herself be done in like that without a plan. She's strong."

Percival burst into laughter and plopped down onto one of the sofas. "Point taken! Then we need to get a grip on ourselves. Well, that settles it—our clash with Benjamin is unavoidable."

"That makes things nice and simple, doesn't it?" Marguerite said. "Hee hee, my arms are aching for a good battle..." She pounded her fist into the palm of her hand.

Belgrieve folded his arms. "But we can't face him head-on. We'll just be branded as criminals."

"It depends on what move he opens with. Will he bide his time, or will he attack without delay?" Touya wondered.

Belgrieve nodded. "Now that he's targeted Angeline, his side should be coming at us in full... Did you find anything out at the guild? It doesn't have to be about the prince—is there anything suspicious happening in the empire?"

Anessa thought it over, folding her arms. "I don't know if it has anything to do with this, but... lately, it seems like fiends have been spotted around the capital."

"In the capital? You mean like, in the city itself?" asked Percival.

Touya nodded. "It's not so common, and we've never had to deal with it. The ones that have appeared have all been low-ranking ones, and they've hardly done any damage."

Like most other settlements, the capital was surrounded by a barrier to ward off fiends, and given that it was the heart of the vast empire, it was surely stronger than most. And yet, there were low-ranking fiends popping up within the city walls. This was certainly strange.

"That *is* suspicious," Kasim spoke up. "Benjamin and Schwartz have been researching demons, right? Well, demons can give rise to fiends."

"Yes, but does that mean he's got a lab in the capital?" Miriam's eyes widened.

"The best place to hide a tree is in the forest," said Percival. "Hmm... All right, I'll look into it."

"Are you going to the guild?"

"Yeah. I'm sure Aileen will help out. Touya, Maureen, lend me a hand for a bit. It'll just get complicated if I go alone," Percival said, standing up.

Touya and Maureen looked at one another. "Are you sure? Can't we talk it out together?"

"Not while Ange's captured. We can leave the finer details to Bell. It's not like me to passively wait for something to happen. I've got to take action myself. Is that okay with you, Bell?"

"Well, sure. Since they've made the first move, we can't just sit back any longer. I'm counting on you, Percy."

Kasim got up too. "I'll meet up with Salazar again. He immediately picked upon the fact that Ange was captured—I'm sure he knows something."

"But can you even get a message across to him? We haven't gotten anything useful out of him since we've been here," Marguerite said with a laugh.

Kasim looked sullen. "Oh, shut it. I'm well aware of that. But what else can I do?"

"Kasim... Take her with you," Belgrieve urged, nudging Maitreya towards him.

"Hmm? Who's this shorty?" Kasim asked, looking puzzled.

"Oh, I noticed her when we had that communication thing going. Who is she?" Marguerite asked, examining her curiously. Maitreya fidgeted awkwardly.

"Her name's Maitreya. I met her in Findale and got her to cooperate with us. She's a very talented magician."

Maitreya looked up at Belgrieve with surprise and smiled delightedly.

"And she can use teleportation magic," Belgrieve explained. "With Salazar's assistance, we might just find some way out of this."

"Who's this guy?" Maitreya tugged on Belgrieve's sleeve as she anxiously looked up at Kasim.

"This is Kasim, a friend of ours... Well, he's also known as the Aether Buster, if that helps."

"Aether Buster... The real one? You're lying."

"Oh, it's no lie. I'm the real deal—do you want to test me?" Kasim jokingly waved his hands beside his face.

"A first-rate magician knows a first-rate magician when she sees one..." she nervously answered. "I am Maitreya, the Black Tapestry. It's a pleasure."

"Oh... The Black Tapestry? Hmm, I've heard the rumors. I never expected you to be this short, though."

"She's excellent with magic. Don't worry."

Maitreya, basking in Belgrieve's praise and the knowledge that her name had spread far and wide, proudly puffed out her chest.

Percival poked her head, chuckling. "Here's your chance to redeem yourself. Break a leg."

She pouted and rushed over to Kasim's side. "That savage can be ignored. Now let's hurry up."

"Oh, well said!" Kasim burst out laughing. "'Ignore the savage,' she says! Heh heh heh! Well, then, we'll be off."

Kasim had seemingly regained some of his good cheer by the time he left with Maitreya in tow.

Miriam muttered, "The Aether Buster, Snake-Eyes... and now, the Black Tapestry too... That's an all-star team."

"We should head out too. We've got to hit Benjamin where it hurts."

Percival's cape fluttered behind him as he strode out of the room. Touya and Maureen rushed after him.

"Phew." Belgrieve, who had been left behind, gingerly sat down on the sofa. For their

part, Anessa and Miriam seemed restless—they were clearly worried for their missing party member.

Sooty, who had silently watched it all, heaved a sigh. “Things are really getting out of hand...”

“Sorry about that, Sooty.”

“Oh, don’t mind me. I’m something of an adventurer myself. I’m worried about what milady might do, but... Well, I’ll prepare some tea for now.” And with that, Sooty left the room.

Marguerite flopped into a chair and crossed her legs. “So what about you, Bell?”

“I want to talk to Liselotte for a bit. If all goes well... we might get a chance to talk to the prince directly.”

The three girls looked at him in surprise.

“D-Directly? That sounds dangerous.”

“That’s right. I mean, Ange was captured... I’m sure even you, Mr. Bell...”

“Listen to them! You can’t even match Ange or me with your swordsmanship. That’d just be suicide!”

“I know that. But I am still Ange’s father... I’m not kind enough to smile and wait while my daughter’s been kidnapped.” Belgrieve clenched his fists, and his face looked a bit fiercer than usual. Although he had spoken so calmly and rationally only moments before, perhaps his wrath had been boiling inside all along. The way he kept it all contained gave him the air of a well-sharpened blade in its scabbard.

They’d never seen his gentle demeanor crumble, but Belgrieve was clearly angry now, and the girls swallowed their breath at the sight.



CHAPTER 117

THE RAIN WAS STRONGER NOW

The rain was stronger now, filling the air with a drumming noise as it collided with something unseen overhead. Donovan the Templar sat down in the same seat Angeline had been in moments before while a maid with hollow eyes briskly set the table with tea and treats. Francois stood expressionlessly behind Benjamin, while Falka occupied the same position behind Donovan, the same vacant look as ever on his face. At times, his rabbit ears would perk up before flopping down again.

Benjamin smiled fearlessly. "I see the Templars have fallen on hard times."

"Ha ha ha! Compared to Your Highness, even the greatest nobles of the empire would look destitute," Donovan answered, grinning, as he reached for the cup on the table.

Benjamin planted his elbows on the table and laced his fingers together, resting his chin on top. "Now then, how can I help you today?"

"Shameful as it may be to admit, we do have our operating costs—so we have come to kowtow to you in the hope that you might have some funds to spare."

Benjamin cackled. "That's simple enough. You have been quite good to me... But, Donovan, my boy, how long are you going to be satisfied in a position where you're merely used by others?"

"I am but the Goddess's loyal manservant... Though I do hope to maintain our friendly relationship."

Donovan flashed a cryptic smile before taking a sip of his tea. Although Falka's expression remained vacant, his eyes homed in on a dark corner of the garden. His hand reached for the hilt of the sword at his hip. He could have his blade at the ready with only the slightest motion.

Benjamin took notice of Falka. "Has he been useful?"

"Yes. He is truly a fine sword." Donovan glanced sidelong at Falka with a thin smile.

"Splendid. But do make sure he doesn't cut down my guards."

"Be a bit lenient with him. I'm practically breaking my back keeping the Inquisition at bay for you."

"Yes, you have my gratitude there. You have made this past year a very pleasant one. If you could just take the seat at the head of this capital's church, I'd have nothing more to ask for."

"Ha ha! That depends on the will of Almighty Vienna."

"I'll leave it at that. In any case, you will have the assistance you seek. Let's both do our best, Donovan," Benjamin said, his words seeming to contain some hidden implication. He shrugged, and Donovan laughed. On the surface, it looked like a friendly exchange, yet beneath the surface, both were scheming to tear a hole through the other.

For a while, they wordlessly snacked on sweets, but eventually, Donovan broke his silence. "My country is run by the hardheaded sorts. There are still some who want to send in the Inquisition, despite my reports. I need to convince them somehow."

"Hmm... Do you need a sacrificial lamb?"

"Indeed." Donovan lowered his voice, bringing his face closer to Benjamin. "The Inquisition has it out for the Blue Flame of Calamity... They've suffered considerable damage from him. In fact, one might say he is the *only* one they are after. Perhaps we can come to an arrangement?"

Benjamin lifted the corners of his lips. "You want me to hand him over?"

"I'm not telling you to do it right now. However, as long as you are his collaborator, I fear you will never find peace."

"Well... I'll consider it."

"I await a favorable response, Your Highness... Take care not to mistake who your allies are." Donovan stood. He looked at Francois behind Benjamin and scoffed. "Some nasty things you've gotten up to."

Then, he walked off with long strides, Falka following alongside him.

Benjamin leaned back in his chair, looking at his hand back to front, inspecting it. “Now then... What to do?”

“Your Highness...”

“Hmm? Oh, sure. You can go get some rest.”

Francois left with a bow.

Benjamin watched him go from the corner of his eye and muttered to no one in particular, “I guess he won’t last long. I’ve still got some time to go...”

It was then that a humanoid figure emerged from the shadow that Falka had been so fixated on. He was tall and wore a black coat, and his white-speckled hair had been tied back behind his head. It was Hector the Executioner.

Hector smiled ominously as he stood beside Benjamin. “That whelp was itching to cut me down. I never thought I’d see a rabbit with the eyes of a mad dog.”

“Hmm? Oh, you mean Donovan’s sword? That’s just his nature.”

“He was wielding the Sword of Starvation, huh? He could have just come at me, but he’s awfully restrained. Perhaps he has another target in mind...”

“You sound disappointed.”

“I’m wasting my time fighting tepid foes. My sword is rusting. I’d love to face the Exalted Blade if I could.”

“The time will come. Still, that elf really gets around. She seems to know the most unexpected people... Where’s Schwartz?”

“How would I know if you don’t?”

“Good grief, he sure loves doing his own thing. What goes through that head of his?”

“What happened to the imp girl?”

“I don’t know where Maitreya is either. I get the feeling Schwartz might be able to figure that one out... It’s troublesome how lacking in coordination this organization

is," Benjamin groused with a shrug.

Hector's eyes narrowed disinterestedly as he boredly gazed around the garden. "Quit shoving all the trivial jobs onto me."

"You'll have your chance to rampage to your heart's content. Just be patient."

Without a word of reply, Hector disappeared into the darkness once more. Benjamin kicked back and looked up. The square sliver of sky visible to him was enveloped in darkness.

○

Leaving the archduke's villa, Percival's group headed straight for the guild's fourth branch. It wasn't too far, but it was hardly a leisurely stroll either. Maureen's magic blocked the rain falling from above but not the splashing of water from the street with every step. Furthermore, there were dips in the stone pavement where water would collect; since they were in a hurry, they hadn't the time to evade every puddle, and when a foot stomped straight into one, it would result in a forceful scattering of water all over.

The sun had set and darkness had descended by the time they walked through the doorway. The guild was lively even with the downpour outside, but many had entered with wet feet, and the floor had become a slipping hazard. A staff member was there, pacing back and forth with a mop.

"Man, it soaked straight through." Maureen let out a troubled laugh as she looked down at her boots that had turned a darker brown in the rain.

"Well, we were in quite a hurry. It's not going to kill you—*cough, hack*." Percival pulled out his sachet as he turned to Touya. "Touya, where's Aileen?"

"She should be in her office. This way."

They gave a few words to the lady stationed at the desk before entering the backrooms. After passing through the corridor, they knocked on the door with a nameplate reading "Vice Branch-Leader," then entered without waiting for an answer.

Aileen, who had been sitting at her desk poring over documents, looked up from her work in surprise. "Oh dear, is something wrong?"

"Well, there's a little something we need your help with..."

"Pardon me."

"Oh, even Percival... Ugh, sorry it's such a mess." Aileen hurriedly and violently gathered up the papers that had been scattered over the desk.

"No need for that. It's good to be enthusiastic about your job."

"Oh, much obliged... Well, come in, then." Aileen's cheeks were flushed as she ushered them to the guest sofa.

"Um, is it all right to talk here?" Touya asked, looking around the room.

"Hmm? Is it one of *those* topics again?"

"It's about the fiends that are appearing around the capital. How's that working out, anyways?" Maureen asked.

Aileen furrowed her brow in thought. "That, huh... No, we have things under control. The requests do come in every so often. Well, lower your voice a bit."

The four of them were seated. For some reason, the room seemed to fill with a deathly silence before Aileen began to speak.

The fiends that appeared in the capital were D-Rank at most, and ignoring the fact that they were emerging inside of a city, they were not particularly troublesome. These were jobs beneath the pay grade of any high-ranking adventurer. Thus, Touya and Maureen had little knowledge of them.

Percival folded his arms, a doubtful expression on his face. "Did you never send anyone to investigate what was causing it? This is clearly unnatural. You can't just kill the fiends and say that's the end of it."

"Well, about that. At the start, we had a few jobs to figure out the root cause, but after a while, they just started to fizzle out naturally. The fiends weren't appearing that frequently anyways."

"The requests weren't being suppressed from some force up top?"

"Well, I don't know. I wasn't in charge of them..."

"In any case, we know for a fact the guild's not putting much effort into this issue. This reeks—Aileen, do you know where the fiends appeared?"

"Yes, I could pull up the relevant documents... Give me a second, okay?" Aileen then got up and left the room to fetch the documents.

Touya leaned in close to Percival. "If that fake prince is colluding with the guild's top brass," he whispered, "there's a chance he's the one snuffing out those requests when they come, right?"

"Yeah. Naturally, he'd think it would be inconvenient for him if anyone ever looked into the matter. There woulda been a bigger ruckus if it were high-ranking fiends coming out, but since it's just weak ones, they get forgotten in time."

"Sounds like a conspiracy's afoot, like something out of a clichéd novel."

"It's too stupid to even put in a book."

Some time later, Aileen returned. "Sorry to keep you waiting," she apologized, spreading a map of the capital on the table.

There were circles drawn here and there, each with a number written beside it. These seemed to be the spots where the fiends had been exterminated.

"The numbers are for the detailed case files."

"Hmm... They're roughly concentrated around this area."

The circles were mainly clustered around a point on the eastern side of the capital. Not that there weren't any elsewhere, but according to the documents, these were mostly the consequence of adventurers chasing down a fleeing fiend. The outliers were merely the final spots where the hunts took place, not where the fiends originated.

Touya inspected the documents. "There were even grayhunds..." he muttered. "They may only be E-Rank, but I'm surprised we haven't had *any* civilian casualties."

"Public order's not the best around those parts. They've got plenty of ruffians, and a

few nasty adventurers have set up camp there.”

“I see. Even if fiends appear, they can handle it.”

“That’s right. Sometimes, they’d send in an accident report. There were a few quarrels over whether they were telling the truth or not.”

“Anyways, it’s clear this area’s shady—so it’s strange that the investigations just died out. There’s definitely something there. Let’s go.” Percival folded the map and stuffed it into his breast pocket as he stood.

“Huh? Going so soon?” Aileen blinked in surprise. “I already asked them to bring some tea in.”

“Sorry, but we can’t take our time here. Once it’s over, I’ll join you for a tea party or drinking bout or whatever you want. Please, let us go for today.”

“Huh? Really? Oh, what do I do?”

Glancing back at Aileen as she turned red and fidgeted, Percival rushed out of the room with Touya and Maureen hurrying to keep up.

Without turning back, he asked Touya, “Touya, you ever been to those parts before?”

“No, but I know the general route to get there.”

“Good enough. How long will it take?”

“On foot... Quite a while. Even longer in the dark.”

“Tsk... That’s a pain.”

It was still raining when they left. The sun had set, and the darkness made visibility even worse. Under a lantern hanging from the eaves, Percival spread out the map. “That way is north... Yeah, this is gonna take a while.”

He closed the map again and was about to leave when Maureen poked at him. “We’ll get wet, but do you want to fly there?”

“What?”

"I'm saying I can use flight magic. But the rain cover will be thinner, so you might get soaked."

"You're pretty versatile."

Maureen circled around behind Touya and Percival, placing a hand on their shoulders. She began to chant something under her breath. Then, all of a sudden, it felt like their bodies had grown lighter—much lighter, and lighter still, until they were quite literally floating away from the ground. They paid an immediate price for this as the raindrops that had previously been repelled were now pelting them all over.

Percival scowled as he pulled his hood over his head. "It's coming down hard."

"Eek, it's sooo f-fweezing! Touya, guide me."

"Got it. That way."

They flew eastward through the capital's skies. Through eyes half closed to ward off the freezing torrents, Percival could see the city's lights as misty blurs below.

By the time their fingers had become numb from the cold rain, they began to slowly descend, then finally touched down. They were surrounded by rows upon rows of old buildings. The streets were not paved here, and they were completely riddled with puddles which reflected the light from the windows all around.

Percival squinted and surveyed the area. No one was out in the rain; the temperature seemed to be slowly dropping, and there was now a bit of sleet amidst the rain.

Maureen quietly sneezed. "Urgh... It's really cold..."

"Good work. Let's find some shelter."

They ducked under the nearest eaves. This place was not the slums, *per se*, but it wasn't as bright and lively as the city's main streets either. The shop they were sheltering in front of was shuttered up and dead silent.

Percival removed his cloak and waved it around. The waterproof fabric expelled any droplets clinging to its surface, and it didn't seem like any water had soaked through its inner lining either.

"That's a nice cloak you've got there. Looks like it's completely dry," Maureen observed as she wrung out the sleeves of her robe.

"I had it made from the tanned stomach of a dragon. It's sturdier than armor—it'll take more than a bit of water or fire to get through it. Looks like you got pretty drenched, though... So how about it? Do you sense any suspicious mana?"

"I'm so famished, I don't even know where to start. The flight magic wore me out."

"There's got to be a restaurant that's still open. Let's get looking. How about you, Touya?"

"I'm perfectly fine. Good to go." Touya turned his back as he worked on wringing the water out of his own clothes.

They stepped out into the rain once more in search of some place that could supply them with something to eat. Down the road they went, treading through puddles along the way until they found a still-illuminated bar. There weren't too many people inside, and as soon as the three of them entered, all eyes were on them. It seemed that outsiders weren't too welcome here. A few ruffians leered at Maureen and the drenched clothing that clung to her body and accentuated her curves. One glaring look from Percival dissuaded their attention, and they all turned back to their cups or meals.

Percival walked to the counter and called out to the barkeep. "Get us something to eat. I'd really appreciate it if you could lend us a towel or something too."

"You'll have to pay up front."

Percival plucked a few silver coins from his wallet and tossed them onto the counter. "Keep the change."

"Oh, much appreciated." The hitherto-unsociable barkeeper suddenly became rather agreeable. He spoke some words to a waitress who went off and returned with some towels from the back room. Percival handed them to Touya.

"We can't offer a change of clothes, unfortunately."

"You've done enough. Thanks."

“*Nom, nom...*” Maureen was already stuffing her cheeks with bread and melted cheese.

Touya sighed. “Towel off or you’ll catch a cold, Maureen.”

“Being hungry is what’s going to make me sick, *nom, nom.*”

“Oh c’mon...” Touya complained before draping a towel over Maureen’s hair and ruffling it dry for her.

The flames burning red in the fireplace offered a bit of warmth, and their clothes would dry faster here than they would outside. Percival threw back a shot of liquor and immediately felt a good deal warmer. He pushed the empty glass across the counter again. “Pour me another.”

“Right away.”

“I hear there’ve been fiends around these parts.”

The barkeeper’s brow twitched. “Sir, were you sent by the guild?”

“Something like that.”

The barkeeper inspected Percival suspiciously. The information seemed to finally click with him, and he nodded. “I see, so the guild’s finally decided to do something.”

“How’s it been so far?”

“We brought requests to them, and they didn’t do squat. I thought maybe the jobs weren’t worth the risk—that no one was taking them and they were just sitting in a drawer somewhere. The soldiers wrapped up their investigation early on, even when we’re so anxious here.”

“Hmm... When’s the last time the fiends appeared?”

“Around half a year ago. Well, the folks wandering around these parts can take care of them just fine, but I dunno what’ll happen if they go after kids.”

“I see. Well, I’m here—no need to worry. Can you catch me up on the specifics?” Percival asked as he picked up his refilled glass.

According to the barkeeper, the fiends had appeared several times in the area. It wasn't clear where exactly they were coming from, and since the area never had the best public safety to begin with, no one was actively investigating the matter. What's more, the fiends that did appear were all weak ones, so few people considered them much of a threat—most saw the area's scoundrels and crooks as the bigger danger. Even so, those who did not have the power to fight were anxious.

Percival took out the map and spread it over the counter. "Where's this bar located?"

"Oh, um... Right here," the barkeeper said, pointing.

There were some circles indicating fiends very close by, though the marks were still concentrated a bit farther to the east.

"There's no doubt it's around this area," Touya said.

"Right. And there's definitely some element of magic involved... Hey, Maureen. Is your stomach satisfied yet?"

"I need one more bowl of warm soup." There were already six plates stacked in front of her.

"Where do you fit all of that...? Hey, a bowl of soup, please." Percival sighed as he plucked out a copper coin and placed it on the counter.

Staring at the map, Touya cocked his head. "If I rightly recollect it, there are a lot of abandoned buildings in this area."

"Yes, I'm surprised you know. It used to be pretty prosperous here, but we're too far from the main streets, so the area gradually withered on the vine. Now, there are a lot of empty houses and abandoned buildings. That's what makes it easy for hoodlums to gather."

"So it's a place that decent folks stay away from. Pretty convenient if you want to hide something."

With her final bowl of soup gulped down, Maureen patted a hand against her stomach. "I'm full of energy. Let's get going."

"Oh, are you satisfied?"

"I'm around eight-tenths full, but we're going to be moving around, so this should do just fine."

"Hey, after eating that much..."

"It's normal... Don't worry about her." Touya smiled wryly and got up. Percival simply shrugged.

The rain was still coming down as heavily as ever, and the portion of sleet had increased a bit as well. The splatting sound it made as it struck the ground had a greater weight to it. When Percival brushed the droplets from his shoulders, his hand was met with small shards of ice.

They quickly trudged down the sodden road and came to an area where there was no light, not even from a single window.

The buildings around were all two or three stories tall, giving the impression that this had once been a splendid place. But now the walls were peeling, and windows were broken and boarded up all around. A foreboding mood permeated the air.

Percival looked around with a grimace. "I see... I've got a bad feeling about this place. Can you put out some kind of magic detection net?"

"Um, wait a second..." Maureen answered.

Touya drew his sword and closed his eyes in concentration while Maureen got to work, directing her palms together in front of her chest as she chanted something. Eventually, a wave of mana surged from their bodies, weaving around the buildings as it covered the entire area. This was a search spell—if the spreading mana came across anything strange, they would be alerted.

Percival stood with folded arms and waited until eventually, he felt a strange presence.

Touya opened his eyes. "Something's coming."

"Hmph..." Percival quickly stepped out in front of Touya and Maureen and launched a draw-cut at whatever was racing through the darkness towards them. He severed the shadow, feeling little resistance against the blade. It went on to forcefully collapse to the ground behind him.

Touya narrowed his eyes. "A fiend...? Not a formidable one, though."

"Don't worry about it. Continue," said Percival, his sharp eyes glaring at their surroundings. The second and third shadows to approach were sliced through in the blink of an eye.

He let out a bored sigh. "They're underestimating me."

Maureen's eyes opened and she frowned. "There's something like a distortion in space. What do we do, Mr. Percy?"

"Lead the way. Don't worry about anything around you."

The two of them nodded, and they all raced off even as the shadows crept from the surrounding buildings and gave chase. Any that got within the range of Percival's blade were immediately bisected. Touya couldn't stop himself from chuckling, which drew Maureen's attention.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing... He's just truly amazing. It makes me want to laugh."

They rounded a number of corners before coming to a stop in front of a certain building. The door was shut and boarded several times over, making for quite the sturdy seal.

"What now?" Maureen asked.

"That's a stupid question. We're breaking through!" Touya swiftly raised his sword. The blade was wrapped in a swirl of mana with a pale-blue glow. Just like that, he swung it at the door. The slash shot out like a mass of pure physical force, slamming into the planks and bursting straight through the door. The three of them raced through the breach. The windows had been sealed, rendering the interior pitch-black. Even the sound of rain was muted, and it seemed that constant, cold pitter-patter was a world away from them.

Percival cut down the last of the dark shadows that had been dogging them. With one last swing of his blade to send any gore flying away, he sheathed it. "I took up the rearguard, huh...? I never thought that role would ever fall to me."

"I felt a real sense of security. That's the Exalted Blade for you."

"Ha ha..." Percival laughed. *I'm getting old...*

Maureen produced an orb of light and inspected the bisected shadow. She swallowed audibly. "Whoa... This is..."

What remained was a bundle of black cloth with human bones jutting out from beneath. A faint dark mist seemed to be emanating from beneath the cloth and dissipating into the air above—an undead, evidently.

"Necromancy? No wonder I felt such a strange presence..." Percival mused. "What's wrong?"

"It... It's nothing." Touya had been glaring daggers at the undead remains, and it was only Percival's voice that had snapped him back to reality.

"Touya... You said we were facing someone you held a grudge against. Who did you mean?"

Touya's mouth worked silently as he struggled to find the right words, Percival's sharp eyes boring into him all the while. Finally, he shut his eyes, seemingly resigned. "I'm sorry. We shouldn't have any secrets between us, at this point..."

"I'm not as kind as Bell. I can't have your grudges dragging me down."

"Of course, you're right." For a short while, Touya hung his head in silence, before finally looking up. "I had a brother—a splendid, kind brother who excelled in magic and swordsmanship... The one who killed him was Hector the Executioner."

"So he's your brother's enemy."

"Yes. I really did love my brother, you see... I can't help but be a little emotional."

"I get how you feel. I've got a few people I'd love to kill too... But you won't win if you let the blood go to your head."

"I know that. And yet..."

"You're young... Not that I'm one to speak," Percival said with a bitter smile. "Well, if

you want to settle the score, I don't mind pitching in a bit. But I'm not going to save someone who's intent on fighting a losing battle. You get what I'm saying?"

"Yes..." Touya bit his lip.

Maureen seemed tense as she looked between the two of them. "Um, uh..." she stammered.

"Don't make that face. I'm not about to abandon you. I'm just saying someone needs to get a grip." Percival chuckled and gazed into the depths of the building. A dark hole lay in the center of a crumbling wall. "It's back there, I reckon." Percival walked briskly towards it.

CHAPTER 118

THE HOLE HAD BEEN ON THE OUTER WALL

The hole had been on the outer wall, so it should have led outside. And yet the darkness seemed to continue forever. Maureen's ball of light reflected against the black stone floor below, which was strangely smooth.

Percival led the way, with Maureen behind him and Touya at the back. He did not sense any foes, but something wasn't quite right, and his heart was troubled. Eventually, the ground began to slope gently downhill; still, there were no enemies to be found. Though the air was still, it was bone-chillingly cold and seemed to stab at his exposed face.

Maureen shuddered. "It's even frostier now."

"And I guess being soaked doesn't help. You all right?"

"I just need to get used to it. I'm sure I'd be fine with it after some time, but... I want to eat something spicy."

"I'll treat you to whatever you want when this is over."

"Really? Hooray!"

It was like Maureen had no sense of danger. Percival laughed tiredly—the elf made it feel like it was all right for him to relax. Meanwhile, Touya's face remained set in grim determination as he walked on silently, seemingly thinking about something. For a while, Percival said nothing, but he finally turned back and spoke up. "Hey, Touya."

"Ah! Um, yes?"

"Don't get too lost in thought. You're going to trip over something."

"I'm sorry," Touya apologized, shamefacedly scratching his head.

Percival cackled. "Well, I get how you feel. But are you up against someone you can

beat if your thoughts dull your movements?"

"No, I don't think I can win, period. I need to get a grip," Touya said, smacking his face with both hands.

Judging by the undead they'd met outside and the mana controlling them, the person waiting at the end of this passage had to be Hector the Executioner. It seemed the man employed the bodies of the bandits and bounties he'd hunted down as undead soldiers. Hector had apparently worked with Schwartz to fight off Satie when she tried to launch a surprise attack on Benjamin. He was an S-Rank adventurer and a formidable foe.

In any case, this was a godsend—this was their chance to take hold of a thread that would connect them to Benjamin. *I guess my instincts haven't gone stale just yet,* Percival thought.

They proceeded carefully, making sure of each step ahead while still moving as fast as they could. The sound of tapping echoed around them each time one of their heavy soles struck the hard floor. There were walls on both sides; the passage was wide enough for two people to walk side by side, but it would be rather cramped if they had to fight here. Percival sharpened his senses.

Suddenly, the orb that was their source of light seemed to flicker unstably.

"What's wrong?"

"It looks like the mana's turbulent here. There's a chance this entire space was constructed with magic."

As Maureen started a faint chant to stabilize her orb of light, they began to hear the tapping of footsteps that weren't theirs. Touya turned around, drawing his sword.

"Mr. Percival."

"Here he comes... Don't panic. This narrow space puts him at a disadvantage as well."

Something swayed in the distant dark, and in the next moment, several figures cloaked in black mantles rushed them. The creatures not only raced along the floor, but they were also running sideways along the walls. The swords in their skeletal hands gleamed with a dull light.

"You handle the ones behind us! We're breaking through!" Percival's cape flared behind him as he charged at the skeletons bearing down on them from ahead. In the time it took for the creatures to prepare an attack with their weapons, Percival had already swung his blade two or three times apiece. The skeletons were torn to shreds, mantles and all, their parts crushed underfoot as Percival's party advanced.

"Come!"

More skeletons emerged from the depths. But Percival did not shy back in the slightest, racing forth with his sword in one hand. Maureen followed behind him, while Touya dealt with the skeletons chasing after them. He managed to cut each of them down the moment any of them was close enough.

They were running down a gentle slope, so they gradually sped up. The skeletons outnumbered them, but their greater numbers made it more difficult for any of the creatures to maneuver around the narrow corridors. Percival beat them down one after another before they could put up any meaningful resistance.

After running for a while, the ground began to level out again beneath their feet. A light was now visible in the distance. Percival mustered his strength and picked up the pace, slicing through three skeletons as he bounded towards the light.

The passage suddenly widened, albeit marginally. They were now in a rectangular space about the size of a small hut. A lantern glowed with faint light from the wall, casting its light over a small table with broken legs and a few chairs carelessly strewn about.

Having cut down the last skeleton, Percival took in his surroundings with an uncertain squint. "Something feels strange... Can you sense anything, Maureen?"

"Hmm..." Maureen extinguished her light. She closed her eyes and concentrated. She didn't have to search for long. "This is the presence of fiends—no doubt about it. And Calamity-Class ones too... A whole load of them."

"Oh really?" Percival sheathed his blade, an amused look on his face. "Are they farming them or something?"

The hut had a door which had been left wide open. The path seemed to continue from there, so Percival quickly pressed on. They were in another corridor-like space, though wider than the last one. The walls on both sides were lined with cells barricaded by

iron prison bars. Most of the cells were empty or littered with cloth and bones, but some were occupied by what appeared to be fiends. In these rooms, the ceilings, walls, and floors would be entirely covered with magic symbols, binding the fiends to their prisons.

Percival gazed at them curiously and tapped at the bars to intimidate the fiends. "This is interesting. What do you think he's trying to accomplish by capturing these things?"

"You're quite bold, Mr. Percy. They're all quite high-ranking fiends."

"I won't lose to the likes of these things. Well, it doesn't look like they can move anyway... Do you think this is Schwartz's research facility?"

"I can't say anything for certain... But if Hector's here, it's quite likely," Touya reasoned, his wary eyes gazing down into the depths of the corridor.

Percival folded his arms. "Was this space created with magic too?"

"Yes, presumably. A sort of time-space magic, I'd wager... But it's incredible. I can't even imagine the spell sequence you'd have to put together to construct and maintain this place..."

"Must be something revolutionary, then. Well, if it's a villain who developed it, I guess they're not going to share the knowledge with the rest of the world."

Teleportation magic was incredibly difficult compared to most other spells. What's more, not just anyone could use it—a natural aptitude was necessary. And never mind aptitude, Percival was not even a magician. Yet somehow, even he could pass through this nonexistent space. Magic that linked one space to another, allowing for free passage like this, had not been developed yet—at least, it *shouldn't* have been. Bending the space-time continuum to create an entirely new location was undoubtedly even more difficult than that. However, their enemy had obtained this art and had applied it to the extent they were now witnessing.

"Space-time magic, huh..." Percival mulled over the revelation with a furrowed brow but gave it up as a lost cause.

Now and then, they would come across a door between the jail cells which would lead to a small room. Each of these rooms were uninhabited, furnished with beds, desks, and chairs showing no signs of recent use. Each time they would peer inside to espy

any clues, only to inevitably shrug and continue on their way.

"Hmm... Doesn't look like this place is used too often. Is this facility even operational?"

"Yeah, I don't know."

"But if it was abandoned, it's strange that the fiends were left in their cells... And there wouldn't even be any reason to maintain this space."

"It hasn't been abandoned." The interjection had come from an unknown voice. Percival turned to see a man in a black coat with his dark-brown hair bound in a tight knot, his right eye scarred by an old blade wound.

Touya's hackles raised at the sight of him. "Hector!"

Percival strode forward with a grin. "Ha ha! Finally decided to show yourself? Don't keep your guests waiting."

"Not many people make it this far... I'm surprised *that* failure made it..."

"Hector..."

"It's been a while, Maureen. But I have no business with you." Hector stared straight at Percival. "You're no ordinary swordsman. State your name."

"Percival. The Exalted Blade, if that helps."

Hector's eyes widened, but his surprise was quickly replaced by a merry laugh. "I see... So you're the Exalted Blade. To think such a fine trophy would come directly to me!"

"You've got some nerve, calling me a trophy. The Executioner, I take it?"

"I'm honored that you know me. I take it that failure has been blathering all kinds of nonsense about me?" Hector asked, tipping his head towards Touya, who was biting his lip and reaching for his sword. He felt an overwhelming urge to pounce at any moment. But Percival held up a hand to him.

"I told you to calm down. Take a deep breath."

"Ah... Sorry."

Touya breathed in deeply and exhaled forcefully. Percival grinned and patted Touya on the back, pushing him forward.

“Now, go on and settle this.”

“Okay!”

“Huh...?” Maureen looked at Touya with concern before turning to Percival. “Um, Mr. Percy? You’re sending Touya in alone?”

Percival folded his arms and leaned his weight on one foot. “I’ll help him out if it starts to look dangerous, okay? But, you see, Maureen—there are times when men just have to take a stand even if we know it’s hard.”

“Men’...? Uh, I think you... Um...” Maureen seemed to have something to say, but after chewing over her words, she fell into resigned silence.

“What are you doing, Exalted Blade?” Hector scowled sullenly. “I have no business with small fries.”

“Funny you should say that—neither do I.” Percival yawned.

The crease in Hector’s brow only grew deeper. “Don’t get cocky.”

In an instant, he drew his sword. It had the shape of a cutlass, but the blade was longer and lacked a tip. Hector held it in a reverse grip, stabbing it at the ground. Despite the hard stone they were standing on, his blade seemed to sink in quite easily. At the same time, Hector’s shadow seemed to ripple like the surface of a pond.

Touya drew his sword. “Here they come, Mr. Percival!” he yelled.

Several skeletons burst forth from Hector’s shadow, each wielding a sword, spear, or battle-axe.

“It must be nice, being able to use magic,” Percival mused, a hand on his chin.

“Eep! Those ones look even stronger than the skeletons from before! Their mana is on another level.”

“I see, I see...” A few of the skeletons slipped past Touya and descended upon Percival,

brandishing their weapons. But Percival, dropping into a low stance, drew his sword and cut them down all at once. "Well, they all look the same to me. Get a hold of yourself, Touya! You're going to avenge your brother, aren't you?" Percival called out to Touya, who seemed to be troubled by the skeletons surrounding him.

Touya, with gritted teeth, knocked back the swarm and raced towards Hector with nimble steps. He used all his momentum to thrust his sword—but Hector only needed to shift his body slightly to evade the blow, and Touya's momentum left him charging past his enemy. Hector plucked his sword from the ground even as Touya instantly turned to attack the Executioner from his blind spot.

"Boring." Without even turning around, Hector easily parried Touya's strike with his cutlass, sending the boy reeling back. "Who do you think taught you how to do that?"

"Damn you!" Touya retreated some distance and drew his sword back. He held out his left hand and gathered his mana into a swift bolt.

Hector lazily turned to face him, swatting down the missile with his blade. He pointed the end of his sword at Touya and fired a bolt back in return, which Touya barely managed to evade. Hector continued to fire his bolt unrelentingly, closing the distance between them one step at a time. "How irritating... Maybe I should take care of you first. Then I can enjoy my time with the Exalted Blade."

"Grr..." Touya could hardly be considered weak, but he had been forced onto the defensive.

Still, something was strange about their duel. *He's all over the place... I thought Touya's movements were a bit more refined than that,* Percival thought as he watched over the battle.

Maureen impatiently stamped her feet. "Mr. Percy... Let's save Touya already."

"I don't want to interfere in a revenge match."

"Be that as it may... Touya's going to die at this rate."

"Touya's not moving as nimbly as he should be. Can the Executioner use that sort of magic?"

"Ugh... I-I'm not sure if I should be the one to tell you... Ah!"

Touya was inevitably driven into a corner. A well-placed bolt of magic staggered him, and Hector's sword was ready for the opening. Though Touya did his best to block the strike, Hector reached out and grabbed him by the collar in an attempt to pull him down. Touya managed to brace his feet to resist. There was a sound of torn fabric as both sides lost their balance and backed off.

Maureen couldn't bear it any longer. She concentrated mana in her feet and bounded forth, practically sliding along the ground past Hector. She scooped up Touya without stopping and ferried him to safety.

Hector had an intrigued look on his face as he tapped his sword against his shoulder. "Right, you're here too. I don't mind if it's two-on-one, Maureen. That would make things more interesting."

"Just stop this already... Deep down, Touya still idolizes you!"

"That's not true! Maureen, back off..."

"Oh, for crying out loud! Quit being stubborn! Why must a parent and child fight to the death?!" Maureen cried out. Though she was usually mild mannered, the elf was enraged now.

Percival frowned. "What? What's the meaning of this?"

"Oh, um..." Maureen hurriedly shut her mouth.

"What? You mean they didn't tell you *anything*?" said Hector.

Touya bit his lip. From beneath the tattered cloth of his robes, Percival could see that rolls of cloth were wrapped tightly around his chest, but even in the darkness, there almost seemed to be a conspicuous plumpness to Touya's fair skin.

Percival placed a hand on his forehead and sighed. "Hey, let's have a bit of a talk, Executioner. What's the relationship between you and Touya?"

"Father and daughter, master and apprentice."

"Daughter, huh... Touya, you're quite the actor."

It seemed he—or rather, *she*—was no man. "I'm... sorry." Touya hung her head.

Come to think of it, I never saw her change clothes on the way to the capital, and when we stopped by that hot spring, she refused to enter the bath, Percival recalled. I'm surprised she did such a good job of hiding it.

"Well, whatever. I did hear you killed her brother, though. Did you really slay your own child?"

"A weakling who dies from that much is no child of mine."

"How stoic of you. I'm going to cry. So that's how you earned your daughter's resentment."

"Sowing such an incompetent seed was my mistake... Hinano, you should have died back then. You wouldn't be so miserable now if you had," Hector said, looking at Touya.

Percival had to cock his head at that one. "Hinano? Who's that?"

"I see she really did tell you nothing. Touya was the elder brother's name. This girl here is Hinano."

"Oh really... I see. Right, she was a girl." She had changed both her name and appearance to match her brother, traveling as a man to redeem his name. Percival had no way of truly knowing her mental state, but it all felt a bit dreary to him. He scratched his head. "I'm guessing that you killed him with your harsh training. You must suck at teaching people."

"It was his own fault that he could not follow along. You would never understand, Exalted Blade. True power can only rise from the abyss of death... Power is what you gain to survive. If he couldn't learn that, there was no worth to his life."

"Right. I thought the same way too... Until recently."

"What...?"

Percival chuckled and walked past Hector, who stood on guard, until he stood before Touya—rather, Hinano—and Maureen. "But, you know. I went and met a girl who got ridiculously strong from kindness and love. She learned how to use her sword from her old man. Yeah, he had to be strict, but it was strictness that came from fatherly love. I felt so tiny and insignificant, having gained power only from hatred... For whose sake did you put your children through suffering? To me, it just sounds like an

overinflated ego."

Percival removed his cape and draped it over Hinano's shoulders. "Wear it. I can't just leave a girl sitting there in torn robes. Look after her, Maureen."

"Y-Yes."

"Um..."

"I'm going to give your old man a harsh scolding. That okay with you?"

Hinano closed her eyes and hung her head.

Percival grinned and turned back to face Hector. He rolled his shoulders, drew his sword—and then, the air around him instantly changed. The cold air seemed to quake under the pressure of the fighting spirit that exuded from every pore on his body.



Sorry for that drawn-out introduction. Let's get to the killing, okay?"

"This is finally getting interesting." Hector didn't seem cowed by his aura in the slightest. He took a stance, his sharp eyes piercing straight through Percival.

For a while, they simply stared each other down like that, until Percival made the first move. With a stomp so mighty Hinano and Maureen feared it might shatter the ground beneath him, he closed the distance like an arrow shot from a bow that had been drawn to its limit. The pressure emanating from him made him seem much larger than he actually was.

But Hector was no run-of-the-mill sellsword. He stood confidently before Percival's monstrous aura and parried Percival's strike head-on. The air resounded with the sharp sound of mana-clad steel colliding. Both men's hands quivered from the impact.

Hector's face filled with glee. "Wonderful... This is why I can never stop fighting!"

Despite his giant stature, Hector leaped with the nimbleness of a master acrobat. He landed behind Percival and unleashed a horizontal swing. Percival swiftly bounded off to dodge out of the way, but he was a moment too late as the sword just barely grazed his arm, drawing a trail of blood.

"Oh right... I don't have my cape." Indeed, the cape he had loaned to Hinano usually served as armor for him. *Looks like I've let my fighting style become sloppy with something as convenient as that cape to rely on*, he thought with a wry smile as he took up his stance once more.

"Your name isn't just for show, Executioner. But do you have what it takes to execute me?"

"Ha ha! Don't let me down, Exalted Blade!" Hector thrust his sword into the stone below. All of a sudden, his shadow stretched along the ground and tangled itself around Percival's feet. It was like someone had grabbed him by the ankles.

"So this is the darkness magic I've heard all about."

Hector closed in, his sword at the ready. But Percival intercepted him calmly. Although Hector's arm flailed with the force of a whip to unleash a powerful flurry of attacks, Percival had managed to dodge, parry, and push him back while only shifting his upper body.

The exchange was so intense that Hinano and Maureen had no idea how they might possibly intervene. They could only sit back and watch with bated breath.

“I heard you were conspiring with Schwartz and the fake prince.”

“What about it?”

Hector let loose with another powerful slash, and Percival warded it off without breaking a sweat. But it seemed the cutlass itself was imbued with a magic of some sort. Percival hadn’t been hit again, but sometimes a slight pain would run down his cheek and arm in the wake of an attack.

“What are you people plotting?”

“You still have the leisure to idly banter with me? You’re quite something.” Hector backed off to escape a blow from Percival. He opened and closed his numb hand before pointing the end of his blade at his foe. “Whatever Schwartz and Benjamin are plotting, that has nothing to do with me. I faithfully carry out the job my client gives me. That’s all.”

“Ha ha! And that job involves protecting this dingy little facility? Oh, how the mighty have fallen.”

“*That* job is what brought you to me, Exalted Blade.” Hector channeled mana into his cutlass and fired a magic bolt from it. Percival sliced through the magic, but Hector had hidden behind the projectile to close in and launched another fierce assault.

“Is this facility connected to the main one?”

“What if it is? Enough prattling.”

Hector’s strikes increased in speed. Percival’s legs were still bound, and he had been forced on the defensive, but eventually, he managed to parry Hector’s sword and knock him off-balance. At the same time, the shadow on the floor seemed to relinquish its hold. With nothing to restrain him, Percival took a mighty leap. “Don’t think you can beat me with cheap tricks.”

With the added force of his descent, his attack was devastatingly powerful. Hector was already unsteady, and though he immediately held his sword out to block, the immense impact dropped him to his knees. Percival continued to push down upon

him. The pressure from his immense physical might caused Hector's arms to quiver, and his brow oozed cold sweat.

"What's wrong? Is that it?"

"I expected no less... But don't think you've won just yet." Hector chanted something under his breath.

Immediately, Percival could feel goose bumps rising on his skin and he beat a hasty retreat with one great leap. Several swords and spears had burst out of Hector's shadow like a trap. Had he continued to press Hector, he would have been impaled.

Percival regained his stance. "Hmm... You're a jack-of-all-trades, then..."

"This sense of tension... *This* is the thrill of the hunt!"

After the weapons came the skeletons. Their jawbones clattered together as more and more of them emerged to surround Percival and overwhelm him. Percival rested his sword on his shoulder, pleasantly entertained.

"These are the skeletons of all the people you've killed, right? You've certainly done your share of killing."

"Spare me the compliments."

A fiend cried out from one of the cells. Percival continued to tap the back of his blade against his shoulder. "Raising fiends is a pretty interesting hobby. Is the master out at the moment? I'd love to have a chat with him."

"He has changed his base of operations. He won't come here again."

"Oh, I see. Did you know that Benjamin was a fake?"

"That makes little difference to me. You will die here regardless." Hector brandished his sword, his mana swirling. "A waning moon, grains of swallowed sun, of nightmares, fantasies, shadow, and light."

This was grand magic. Percival frowned and steeled himself for it.

Behind Hector, a massive shadow seemed to be swelling up, looming over his head as

though it were going to come crashing down. All of a sudden, Percival felt a weight pressing down on his body. The sword he treated as an extension of his own body was unpleasantly heavy now.

The skeletal soldiers all marched towards him in unison and lunged with their weapons with a cacophony of rattling metal as they all rushed to deliver the death blow.

That should have been the end of it—but Hector didn’t look convinced. “That’s... odd. I felt no resistance.” And then he heard Percival shout.

“Touya!”

Hector glanced back absently. Hinano, her cape fluttering out behind her, had lunged with her sword. Without noticing, Hector had found himself encircled, with Percival in front of him while Hinano and Maureen had maneuvered behind.

“Grah!” The blade pierced his left arm. Hector immediately lifted his sword to strike down Hinano in return, but his raised cutlass was intercepted by a blast of magic from Maureen, the force of the impact ringing down his hand.

“Curse you!” Hector’s eyes blazed with anger. He kicked Hinano away before she could launch another attack. But Hinano clung to his foot stubbornly—she was not going to release it no matter what. Again, Hector made to strike, but he suddenly felt no strength in his arm this time. He glanced over to see that his right arm had been lopped off at the shoulder. It was a splendid slice, so clean that the pain didn’t register until several moments later.

“You little—”

“I told you. Cheap tricks don’t work on me.” Having managed to slip out from the skeletal encirclement, Percival was ready with another diagonal slash to the Executioner’s back. Hector immediately toppled forward and lay flat on the floor. Only his face turned to look at Percival. His foe was not unharmed—blood oozed from wounds on Percival’s cheek and forehead, while his clothes and armor were riddled with damage. Looking past Percival’s feet, Hector could see the skeletal soldiers who had fallen to the ground after their legs had been cloven through.

“Ha ha! You could still swing your sword under the effects of my magic... Since your body was heavy, you just went prone.”

"Yeah, and I cut their feet from that position to carve my way out. Does that sound cowardly to you?"

"Don't be daft. This is not a duel between knights. I overestimated my grand magic and failed to notice the rats behind me... Kill me."

"I'm not the one who gets to decide that." Percival sheathed his sword and turned his back.

Hinano steadied her erratic breathing as she looked down over Hector. The man managed to muster the last of his strength to turn himself face up. His blood was pooling across the floor and had already seeped into his clothes and hair.

"What a farce... To think the day would come... when a failure looked down on me."

"My brother and I—we were not failures." Hinano looked like she would cry at any moment. Her cheeks were flushed as she glared at Hector. "I hate you from the depths of my soul. I want to run my blade through your heart this instant. And yet... and yet..."

Hinano fell to her knees as the tears began pouring from her eyes.

Hector coldly laughed. "That's why you're a failure."

"You're wrong! We were human, that's all... You... should be too... So why..."

"Quit behaving like a spoiled child... This is why your brother died. I killed him. If only he'd had the resolve to kill me... he wouldn't have had to die. That's all there is to it."

Hinano bit her lip. She drew a dagger and held it high, yet when it came time for her to finally deliver the coup de grâce, her arms slumped down helplessly. The dagger slipped from her fingers with a loud clanging noise as it hit the ground.

"Ha ha... Pray that this naivete... does not come back to kill you... someday..."

With all the blood flowing relentlessly from his right shoulder, Hector finally fell still, a sinister smile on his face. The light had left his eyes, and the air was filled with the piercing stench of blood and the cold presence of death.

Maureen rushed over to Hinano, who wept unceasingly as she kneeled there.

"Are you all right...?"

"I'm sorry... In the end, I couldn't..." Hinano buried her face in her hands. "I... came to yearn for something like what Mr. Belgrieve and Angeline had. Why did it turn out like this...? Why couldn't we be like them...? I swore I'd kill him, but when he was there before me, my body wouldn't listen to me..."

Percival heaved a deep sigh as he stooped down beside Hector. He reached out and closed his eyes. "You're not naive. You're just kind. That's nothing to be ashamed of."

Hinano gave no reply. Her hands covered her eyes as though to contain her overflowing tears.

"Well, it won't be easy, coming to terms with this. I get how you feel, but we can't stick around here much longer. I know it's cruel, but we have to go."

"Yeah... I'm sorry..." She rubbed her eyes and stood. Then, she took off the cape. "Thank you for this."

"Yeah, just wear it. Your clothes are still torn," Percival said as he urgently ruffled up her hair.

Hinano draped the garment over her shoulders once again, burying her face in it.

Percival looked around. "Maureen, do you feel the flow of mana somewhere?"

"Right, I think there's something that way."

"Let's go."

Hinano's steps were hurried as she tried to distract herself. But she was sniffling regardless.

"Mr. Percy..." Maureen softly whispered. "Sorry—about everything, really."

"I'm sorry I couldn't do much to help. It's just not in my nature."

"No... I'm sorry for staying quiet this whole time. That girl has a lot going on."

"I'm not worried about any of that. You've got it rough, Maureen. Were you protecting

her all this time?"

"Yes, though it didn't come naturally to me... Oh, look how far she's gotten. Hey, Tou—I mean, Hina, wait for us!"

Maureen chased after Hinano, trying to act as cheerfully as she could.

"If only I could say something tactful... Good grief, I'm really feeling my age," Percival derided himself once more as he walked after the two of them.

CHAPTER 119

THE PAVEMENT WAS DAMP

The pavement was damp with thin rivulets of water flowing across its lower parts, and the air was filled with a loud rumbling noise as one droplet after another crashed down, pooling in the ditches at the side of the streets. Each time Donovan's thick soles stamped the ground, he could feel the icy slush mixed with the water below sloshing around his feet.

"Looks like it's not going to be that easy," the Templar muttered.

Although Donovan hailed from one of the empire's lower-tier noble houses, he'd been sent at an early age to study in Lucrecia in accordance with his parents' wishes, where he'd served a long time as a Templar's chamberlain. Much later, he had become a Templar himself.

He was devoted to Vienna—at least, as much as the average man—but he was an upstart whose ambition trumped his own loyalties. His tireless work finally was rewarded with the chance to become the head of a church branch in the imperial capital, though this would ultimately result in him getting dragged into more power struggles.

But he was an ambitious man who was talented enough to back up his claims, and nothing proved too difficult for him. In fact, by that time, he had already managed to form connections with those who pulled the strings in his own land of Lucrecia. Compared to what he had faced before, it was simple enough for him to remain a step ahead of everyone else in the capital's power struggles. After all, he was the only one with ties to the crown prince himself—and having a powerful person on his side was always a mighty boon.

Yet still, Donovan grew anxious. Certainly, behind the church's pure and pious facade, there raged a war that was anything but pure. Even so, they still had to superficially provide just guidance to the believers and punish the cruel and wicked. And Schwartz, the Blue Flame of Calamity, was the church's sworn foe.

The demons of Solomon—his primary research focus—were great foes that had once

been sealed by Vienna's chosen heroes. Naturally, these demons were still regarded as abominations to be dealt with on sight. And it was not just the clergy who believed so; the common folk treated the demons as a plague as well. When it came to Schwartz's research and the incidents he had caused in the past, there was no possibility of reconciliation with the church, and he had already fought with the Inquisition numerous times.

But Schwartz was in cahoots with the crown prince. Benjamin had been the one who first reached out to Donovan with talks of an alliance, which, at the time, was surprising even to Donovan. But he wouldn't hesitate to take dangerous risks to further his ambitions. Surely Benjamin had reached out to Donovan precisely because he knew how the Templar would react.

Donovan had ties to the Inquisition, and just as Benjamin had hoped, he kept their movements in check. Since he—a Templar of renown—was already stationed in the capital, he was able to convince the higher-ups that no additional help was necessary, and he continued to climb up the ranks thanks to Benjamin's generous backing.

But there was no telling how long this would last. As was common sense to anyone who understood power struggles, power was *never* stable. There would always be those waiting for the right moment to snatch it all away. To prevent this, he needed more and more cards to play, more means and more chances to kick down upstarts before they could get very far. Donovan needed to prove his strength, and to prove his legitimacy, he needed the head of a heretical traitor and the holy sword held by the man with red hair. He had never expected to come across such a formidable sword at a bar on the city outskirts. Even within Lucrecia's curia, a sword that contained such pure mana would undoubtedly be revered as one of Vienna's miracles.

Donovan glanced back at Falka, who walked a few paces behind him. As he'd come to expect, the boy followed with the same vacant gaze as ever. He had first obtained the rabbit beastman as a slave; though the slavery system had been outlawed, such dealings were still conducted in secret behind closed doors. As far as anyone else was concerned, Falka was merely his attendant.

The boy moved with a beastman's grace and possessed startling skill with the blade. Perhaps he couldn't talk, or perhaps he simply didn't want to—he never spoke a word either way. He seemed to understand what was said to him, but his head was always in the clouds whenever he wasn't fighting. Donovan suspected this was why he had been so easily captured by the slave trader, as he hadn't put up a lick of resistance. In

any case, he was an attendant with first-class skills and who never acted out of turn, and he was the best guard Donovan could have hoped for.

And now, the boy wielded a cursed sword the crown prince had bestowed upon him. As he used it to cut down numerous fiends and siphon their mana away, the blade gradually took on a dark luster. Though Falka seemed to be getting stronger, the look in his eyes was also beginning to warm. Sure, he was still completely deadpan, but it was like he was always itching for a fight.

"If I could obtain that holy blade... my position would be more stable," Donovan muttered.

He was a Templar—a knight of *Vienna*, after all. It would be rather unsightly if he were to wield a cursed sword forever. Killing fiends was garnering him some public support, but it would take only the slightest fumble for his standing to crumble beneath his feet. That was the simple nature of authority, and he could not keep his weakness on proud display.

If he had a holy sword, simply wielding it would lend him some legitimacy and earn him more support. But if the sword picked its wielder and he could not use it at all, the answer was simple—the cursed sword would just have to absorb its holy light.

The light from shinstone lanterns reflected off the damp sheen of the pavement before Donovan. As he irritably brushed the sleet from his shoulders, he stopped and turned around at the sudden realization that Falka was no longer following him. "What are you doing? Hurry up."

But Falka stood stock-still, staring off in a certain direction. It seemed like he would stay frozen there forever until suddenly, he began sprinting in the same direction he had been looking.

"Hey! Where are you going? Falka!"

Falka neither responded nor even looked in Donovan's direction at the sound of his frustrated shouting. Thus, Donovan had little choice but to pursue him.

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About an hour had elapsed since Percival and Kasim had both set off, but Liselotte was still yet to return. Marguerite restlessly paced back and forth by the wall.

"Settle down some, Maggie," Anessa tiredly said.

"How do ya expect me to do that, huh? Dammit, waiting's just not my style... I shoulda gone with Percy..."

"Well, growing impatient isn't going to do anything for you," Miriam gently told her.
"How about some tea?"

"How many cups have I already had?! Hey, Bell, instead of waiting for Lize, how about we go crash that crown prince's party?"

Belgrieve shook his head. "We can't. They won't even let us into the palace."

"What are you waiting for permission for? He's just a fake—we catch him, and it's all over. His gig's up. Those palace guards are nothing to us, I tell you."

Anessa sighed. "Yeah, no. That's stupid. I've heard that the royal guards are all just as skilled as high-ranking adventurers, if not more so. We might be able to deal with one or two, but there will be dozens of them."

"Sounds like fun to me..."

"Oh c'mon, Maggie. Have some sweets and calm down already." Miriam hopped up and dashed over to stuff sugar candies into Marguerite's mouth until the elf's eyes were spinning and she was crying out for mercy.

Meanwhile, Belgrieve stared down at his interlaced fingers. *I'd meet the crown prince, and then what?* Belgrieve had been so indignant he'd startled even himself, but simply thrusting that anger at the prince would not resolve anything. From what they knew about this imposter, discussion wouldn't get them very far either.

There was a chance that the real prince was still alive. *I should start considering how I can work with that fact,* Belgrieve thought. But that was as far as he'd gotten. *I know it's because my daughter is involved, but I let the blood rush to my head...* He closed his eyes.

Anessa noticed Belgrieve stewing in his thoughts. "Mr. Bell? Are you all right?" she asked with evident concern in her voice.

"Hm?" Belgrieve looked up at her and smiled. "I'm fine. Thanks for asking."

"Ange will be just fine," Miriam insisted, taking a seat on the sofa. "She won't lose no matter who she's up against."

"You're right... I think so too." It was hard to imagine Angeline would enter enemy territory without having something in mind. There was a chance her hand had been forced—turning down the invitation would have only made their situation worse—but even if that were the case, she would not simply let her foe one-sidedly get the drop on her. In any case, she had set out because she was confident she would be all right. There was even a chance she had purposely allowed herself to be captured in the hopes of gaining something. After all, she was an S-Rank Adventurer. Belgrieve knew it was a mistake for someone of his measly level to worry about someone like her. At least, that was what he *wanted* to believe.

But of course, a parent's worry defied such logic. The fact they didn't know who exactly their foe truly was only made the feeling worse.

"How much do you intend to tell Lize?" Anessa asked as she brewed another pot of tea.

"I don't want to get her too involved. She's a good girl, and very sincere..."

Everyone in Belgrieve's party knew of the animosity that existed between Francois and Angeline. Francois was now Benjamin's henchman; it was quite unlikely that he would listen to a word from Angeline's comrades or her father, but perhaps they could pull something off by speaking to him through Liselotte.

But though Belgrieve had considered this, he detested the idea of getting her involved. He was even hesitant to bring her in on the fact that Prince Benjamin was a fake. It would certainly not be pleasant to find out the man her brother served was an imposter who was plotting nefarious deeds. She sincerely adored her brother, and he did not want to bring sadness to this innocent girl.

In the first place, does Francois know that Benjamin is an imposter? He had only been appointed to that position recently, and that was after the prince had been replaced. If he had been serving that man oblivious of his true nature, perhaps he would be willing to cooperate with them once he knew the truth. Francois had sworn loyalty to the prince and the empire—he had no obligation to serve some unknown entity. It was clear as day though that if they simply said all that to him directly, Francois would laugh in their faces.

Then what do we say to convince him...? Belgrieve was still pondering the matter when the door opened. Sooty entered with Liselotte by her side.

As soon as she saw Belgrieve, her face lit up. “You came to see me, Bell!”

“Pardon the intrusion, Liselotte.” Belgrieve smiled and bowed his head.

Oswald entered the room after Liselotte; he stared at all the gathered adventurers, seemingly petrified. “Oh, h-hi...”

“Ozzie, what are you freezing up for? They’re all good people, don’t worry.”

“I’m n-not scared, Lize... No, just a bit surprised... I’ve never seen an elf before.”

“Really? Very well, then. This is my fiancé, Oswald.”

Belgrieve stood and greeted him respectfully. “It is a pleasure to meet you; my name is Belgrieve. Allow me to apologize for my shabby attire.”

“That’s very polite of you—*ahem*, you don’t need to be so formal with me.”

“Much obliged, Oswald. You helped my daughter out in Estogal City. Thank you.”

“Hmm? Daughter...?”

“Ozzie, Bell is Ange’s dad!”

“Huh? Th-The Black-Haired Valkyrie’s dad?”

“Ha ha... Unbelievable as it may be... Oh, and these are her friends.” Belgrieve introduced Anessa and the others. Oswald looked over the unusual guests with a blank look on his face, which Liselotte observed with amused giggling until she noticed that Angeline herself wasn’t around.

She looked around the room curiously. “Oh? Where’s Ange?”

“Well, the prince—His Highness summoned her,” Miriam explained, stumbling over her words.

Liselotte’s eyes widened, but she laughed pleasantly and raced over to the sofa where

she plopped right down. “His Highness is infatuated with Ange, then! But I get it. She’s beautiful. What shall we do if Ange ends up becoming a princess?” she innocently asked, laughing again. She looked at Belgrieve. “That would be amazing, right, Bell?”

“Yes, it would be an honor... If that actually happened, that is.” Belgrieve shrugged.

For a moment, nobody said anything, and Oswald rushed to sit down beside Liselotte. “Sh-She was summoned by Prince Benjamin?” he asked. “That’s amazing... But they did dance together at the ball...”

“A beautiful man for a beautiful lady. They were perfectly matched, hee hee... I wonder what they’re talking about now. Hey, the sweets weren’t enough to fill you up, right? Sooty, could you start preparing a meal? Tell them to bring it here, not the dining room.”

“The head chef will be bothered.”

“Tell him it can be something simple. One of those stiff, ceremonious meals would just tire everyone out,” Liselotte said, winking.

Sooty simply bowed and left the room.

“Hey, Lize. The crown prince isn’t the sort of guy you can easily meet, right?” Anessa asked.

“That’s right. He is certainly up there... But once you do meet him, he is very easy to talk to. Sometimes, he just suddenly shows up at parties to surprise people. That was quite a surprise yesterday, right?” Liselotte giggled.

Come to think of it, Benjamin’s appearance had been rather sudden yesterday, Miriam recalled. Her eyes wandered as she thought back to those events. “That’s right, he really *was* handsome.”

“But you never really hear any rumors about his love life, right, Ozzie?”

“Indeed. He used to be quite... *something*, but now, there’s nary a word of such things... That’s why I’m so surprised he’d be interested in Angeline.”

“I mean, Ange’s really beautiful. I think she could stand beside His Highness without paling in comparison! Right, Bell?” Liselotte asked, looking at Belgrieve once more.

Belgrieve returned her smile and closed his eyes. *I would have welcomed it under any other circumstances...* He sighed.

A somewhat disheveled Marguerite, having finally recovered from the deluge of sweets, joined them and violently downed a cup of tea. “Phew, that does it—Merry, I’ll remember this!”

“Huh? But wasn’t it so tasty?”

“Too damn sweet! Urgh, my mouth feels strange... I’m gonna... Hey, pour me another cup!” she demanded, thrusting her cup out in front of Oswald.

“Oh, sure.” Oswald frantically filled it up from the pot. At the same time, he tilted his head, muttering, “Why me?”

“Hee hee,” Lise laughed. “Looks like my hubby falls to pieces in front of Maggie.”

Eventually, Sooty returned with a train of servants carrying food in tow. There were meat and vegetables sandwiched between bread and small pies, bite-size cold cuts and sliced vegetables, and grilled seafood skewers. It was a perfect assortment to snack on in the slight pauses between words, and thus, the conversation went on.

“Hey, hey. Lize, your brother’s the captain of that dandy guy’s guard, right?”

“Merry, dear, you need to call him His Highness—it’s improper otherwise. So, you mean Francois? Yes, he’s been so busy lately that he barely comes home. I did come here to see him, but I haven’t been able to have a nice long talk with him yet.”

“I see. Hmm...” Miriam murmured, frowning even as she continued to drink tea.

If he’s not even seeing family, it’ll be hard for us to talk to him, Belgrieve thought with a furrowed brow.

Oswald shrugged. “Well, I doubt anyone expected him to be chosen for the role—not even him. It’s only natural that he’s busy, then. We only got to have a light meal together the first day we came to the capital, and I haven’t even seen him since then.”

“I mean, that’s because you’re going all over the place too, Ozzie. It’s all tea party this, social gathering that.”

"That is essentially my job. Aren't you the one who's just having fun...? But my brother-in-law did look a bit pale. I'm worried he's overworking himself."

"Is he in poor health?" Belgrieve asked.

Oswald nodded. "Well, I thought so, so I asked. According to him, it's nothing. Well, he wasn't stumbling around or anything, so it could just be my imagination."

"Is his work... going well?" Anessa inquired.

Liselotte smiled cheerfully. "He said it was quite difficult but that it felt worthwhile."

Belgrieve's eyes were shut as he worked through his thoughts, but his focus was shot. He tried his best to keep his composure, but he couldn't help but worry about Angeline. Perhaps that was why he hadn't touched any of the food.

It was at that moment that Graham's greatsword—which had been propped up to the side—suddenly let out a roar. Belgrieve's head snapped towards the corridor, where he heard a strange clamor and voices calling out, "That is very troublesome," and, "Please understand"—and then, a flurry of footsteps, as if someone were racing down the hallway.

"It's quite noisy," Oswald observed with furrowed brow.

Belgrieve's gut told him something terrible was about to happen. He immediately stood up and plucked the greatsword from where it had been resting.

"Milady! Stand back!" Sooty cried out. Even as she got into a defensive stance with her iron club, the door was kicked open, and the Templar with rabbit ears burst in. Falka unswervingly charged directly at Belgrieve, drawing his sword with tremendous speed.

He's fast!

Belgrieve had no time to unsheathe the blade, and he made to block the incoming strike with it still covered. But before the moment of impact, another, more slender sword intercepted Falka's blade.

Marguerite had cut in from behind and, with a tremendous display of brute force, pushed Falka back. With supple movements, Falka jumped back, landing right in front

of the doorway.

"Who are you?" Marguerite demanded as she spat a wooden skewer at the ground. She glared at Falka.

Through the open doorway, the guards and servants were anxiously peering in at the intruder.

Oswald's mouth opened and closed in awe; he was completely astonished. "A-A Templar? Why...?"

"What's the meaning of this?! Even if you are a Templar, that does not mean you can act with such flagrant disrespect!" Liselotte stood in a huff and shouted at Falka. However, Falka maintained the same inscrutable expression as he stood up again. He seemed to be full of openings, yet Belgrieve could instinctively tell nothing good would come of trying to exploit any of them. The boy exuded palpable bloodlust all the while.

Marguerite grinned, her sword at the ready. "Nothing to say for yourself? Fine... I was getting bored anyways. You want a fight? You've got one."

For a brief moment, it seemed as though Falka was overjoyed. He spun his sword in a circle, then nimbly bounded forth. Marguerite did likewise and locked blades with him.

"Do you need any assistance, Ms. Maggie?" Sooty called out, brandishing her iron club.

"Nah, I'm good! Just get Lize out of here, and fast!"

"Just what I'd like to hear! This way, milady!"

"What is this...? What's happening...?" Liselotte sounded scared and confused as she and the likewise bewildered Oswald shuffled along the wall until they reached the door.

Belgrieve watched them go before drawing Graham's sword from its sheath. The blade glimmered dazzlingly, its roaring voice growing stronger. The sword sounded livid.

"Anne, Merry. You two help protect Liselotte."

"Huh? But..."

"Merry, it'll be hard to move around here. We'd better leave."

A narrow parlor was not an advantageous battlefield for archers or magicians. Though Miriam already had her staff raised to back up Marguerite, Anessa's words convinced her to reluctantly follow Liselotte.

Falka, with his powerful legs, was hopping all over the place like a wild hare, sometimes rebounding across the walls as he incessantly assailed Marguerite from every direction imaginable. However Marguerite was no slouch—she splendidly dealt with her foe's unrestricted range of movement, parrying and blocking any encroaching strike and otherwise fighting on an even playing field. Not that she was having an easy time, though; she'd begun the duel with a smile on her face, but now her expression was tense.

The table and sofas had toppled over, scattering food over the floor. Struggling to find where he fit into all of this chaos, Belgrieve called out, "Maggie, are you all right?!"

"Watch out, Bell! There's something strange with this guy's sword!"

In the short time Marguerite had taken her eyes off of him, Falka abruptly changed course and pounced at Belgrieve. Belgrieve caught him with the greatsword. The pure holy mana seemed to burst against the warped energy it had come into contact with; the holy sword angrily roared while Falka's sword let off an ominous groan of its own.

"Grr... It's a cursed sword, as I recall..."

Falka's generally blank face was starting to show his delight as he gleefully unleashed one slash after another. Belgrieve was standing his ground, but it felt like he was growing more fatigued each time they locked blades.

Right, Percival said that sword drains mana from those it cuts, Belgrieve recalled. In fact, he had witnessed the blade absorbing a malediction back at the inn. Evidently, even if the sword did not make contact with his body, it could shave away at the mana he was pouring into his sword.

After a few exchanges, Marguerite leaped in to drag him away. "Stand down, Bell! He's a dangerous foe for you!"

"Sorry about this..." Though Belgrieve was frustrated, he did as she instructed. His technique was an issue, but more importantly, he couldn't swing the massive

greatsword around as easily as he could outside. Belgrieve warily retreated out of the range of their blades.

It was then that he heard a strange, buzzing sound, distinct from the steady beat of the falling rain. *What could it be?* Belgrieve's thoughts were interrupted as another person entered the room with thundering steps—it was Donovan the Templar. A vein throbbed on his forehead, and his face was flushed with rage.

"What have you done, Falka, you fool?!" At the sound of Donovan's displeasure, Falka twitched, then halted completely. Like a child whose mischief had come to light, he timidly turned towards Donovan. Donovan marched briskly towards him, not hesitating even a second to knock him off his feet with a punch. "Was it your thirst for blood...? What shame you've brought upon me—in the manor of the archduke, no less!"

Falka's rabbit ears drooped.

Donovan frustratedly scanned the room, only to widen his eyes as he caught sight of Belgrieve. "So that's what's going on..."

"We meet again. I didn't think we'd run into you like this." Belgrieve's words were courteous, but his eyes remained sharp as he stared directly at Donovan. He could not help letting a hint of cynicism slip into his tone.

All of a sudden, the buzzing sound that he had heard before became significantly louder. It was as though the sounds of people mumbling had been added to it. Now, a portion of empty space nearby seemed to twist and bend, and then, something was projected there. This was transmission magic. "Oh, that does it. Finally got through."

"Kasim?" The image was fuzzy and blurry, but Belgrieve could just make out Kasim.

"Bell? Come over here for a bit. I think we might have a lead. Oh, right. For the time being, it looks like Ange's fine. You don't have to worry about her."

"Really? I see." Immediately, his chest felt lighter, and the tension drained from his shoulders.

Kasim looked around with a questioning frown. "Huh? What's going on over there?"

"No, it's fine. You want us at Salazar's place, right? We'll be there soon."

"Yeah. But, well, it's getting a bit complicated over—" Before Kasim could finish, the image fizzled out, leaving the same vacant space as before.

"Are you going?" Marguerite asked.

"Yeah. If they will let us go without a fight." Belgrieve looked expectantly at the Templars.

Donovan frowned. "I have no cause to detain you here... My apologies for this idiot's disgraceful display."

"You'd be better off apologizing to the archduke's daughter, rather than me," Belgrieve bluntly told him as he sheathed the still-growling greatsword.

Marguerite glanced between the two Templars, looking befuddled. "What, you know them?"

"We just passed by one another yesterday," Belgrieve said, glancing towards the corridor.

It didn't look like anyone had been injured. Liselotte, who had come back to take a peek, stormed in with her shoulders squared. Meanwhile, Anessa and Miriam rushed towards Belgrieve.

"Just because you're a Templar doesn't mean you're allowed to act with impunity! What was your intention here?!" Liselotte demanded as she closed in on them.

Donovan quickly fell to one knee and lowered his head. "We have been incredibly insolent... My name is Donovan, and this is Falka... Kneel, you fool!"

With Donovan howling at him, Falka quickly imitated the same posture.

Folding her arms, puffing out her cheeks, Liselotte continued, "Sir Donovan, do the capital's Templars encourage such senseless violence? These are guests of the archduke!"

"I have no excuse... Please, forgive us."

"What's all this commotion?" a voice called out from down the hall.

Liselotte turned, her face immediately brightening up. “Ah, brother!”

There stood Francois, frowning. Belgrieve examined his face through narrowed eyes—and Francois stared back, a bit startled. “You’re...”

“You... Didn’t I see you in Findale?”

“What are you doing here...? What happened to the little girl!?” Francois entered the room with unfeigned irritation, only for the greatsword to let off an even stronger roar than before. Startled, Francois came to a halt, his face stiff. “Hmm...”

“Brother, do you know Bell? He’s Ange’s dad.”

“The Black-Haired Valkyrie’s...?” Francois glared at Belgrieve, who wordlessly nodded. “So the whole family’s intent on standing in my way. You blasted...”

“Brother, you came at just the right time. These people suddenly broke into the manor and made a mess. They seem to be Templars,” Liselotte explained, angrily pointing towards Donovan and Falka.

Francois took in the two Templars before heaving a sigh. “I am acquainted with both of them. They are both splendid knights. I’m sure they sensed something suspicious and couldn’t spare a moment to explain themselves.”

“Huh? But...”

“Lize, if you consider yourself the daughter of nobility, you should be careful whom you associate with. Between some shady adventurers from who knows where and a pair of noble Templars sanctioned by the church, you do not even have to think about which you should trust.”

“That doesn’t make sense! I mean, *they* messed up the room out of nowhere!”

“I am the master of this estate! I’m telling you not to worry.”

“F-Francois...”

“Come with me, both of you... And, Lize, keep your wild tendencies in check.” And with that, Francois turned on his heel.

"Sir Francois," said Belgrieve, taking a step forward.

Francois stopped and turned again with suspicion in his eyes. "What?"

"Are you proud of the work you do?"

Francois stared at him for a moment, but in the end, he left without a word, taking the two Templars along with him.

Marguerite stamped her feet. "What's with that jackass? First, he takes Ange away, and now he's covering for our enemies!"

"I'm sorry, Maggie. My brother has been quite mean."

"Ah, no, I wasn't angry at you..." Marguerite began to panic a bit as she saw how despondent Liselotte had become.

Miriam hurried over and patted Liselotte on the head. "It's all good, okay? Thank you, Lize."

"That's right, you didn't do anything wrong. You don't have to worry about anything," Anessa added, placing a hand on her shoulder.

Liselotte hung her head. "I'm sorry. Bell, are you going to Kasim?"

"I am. Sorry for leaving right after causing you such trouble..."

"No, it's fine. You didn't do anything. Well, you know... I'm feeling a bit out of it, so I'm going to rest... Please, don't worry about what my brother said. Sooty, can you see them to the door?" Liselotte's good cheer had been thoroughly ruined. With Oswald leading her by the hand, she trudged out of the room.

Feeling awkward, Sooty scratched her cheek. "Should we be off, then? Today's been a busy day," she finally offered.

The servants got to work tidying up the room as the party headed off for the front parlor.

"Mr. Bell," Anessa whispered softly, "you've met with Francois before?"

"Yeah. When we were searching for Satie in Findale... This is unfortunate. He certainly views me as an enemy. Even with Liselotte's intercession, I doubt we'll be able to talk about anything..."

"But Mr. Kasim seems to have found something, right?" Miriam suggested. "I'm sure Mr. Percy will have some kind of lead as well."

"I guess so... For now, let's hurry. Sooty, if Percy comes around..."

"I should direct him to Salazar, correct? I'll pass on the message."

"Thank you for everything... All right, lead the way."

There were all sorts of things plaguing his thoughts, but for the time being, he was too worried about Angeline to do anything else. *I'm useless like this*, he realized. *But I can't help it. I'm her father.* Even to him, that thought seemed like an excuse, but it continued to occupy a corner of his mind.

Outside the front door, the sound of drumming rain still loudly rumbled.

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If Satie stayed lying down for too long, her back would begin to feel itchy—perhaps due to sores she had developed when she had been moving around before. What's more, her right forearm was starting to feel numb and she had hardly any sensation left in her fingertips.

As she stared up at the wooden ceiling, she felt like she was seeing the world from the other side of a thin, hazy curtain. The ceiling was dusty and far dirtier than she remembered.

Satie wriggled around until she was sitting up. The colors of the light streaming in from the window had faded, but unfortunately for her, she wasn't particularly sleepy. The sleep she was getting was brief and shallow, and it only served to make her wearier.

"Ow..." Satie grasped her shoulder. The bleeding had stopped, but it still ached. Her mana had not recovered by much, and she felt ill. Her vision was unfocused, and she had to shut her eyes—yet it was like everything inside her head continued to spin.

Even so, she got up from the bed. She walked on unsteady legs out into the yard where the faded sepia light shone down upon her. In the field at the end of the yard, she could see the twins, Hal and Mal, crawling on the ground as though searching for something among the rows of withered vegetables.

Satie's exhausted mana was definitely having a negative impact on this artificial space. The surrounding trees had begun to shed their leaves, and the nameless grasses and weeds in the yard had begun to wither and die, just like the vegetables in the garden. The air had lost its humidity and was becoming dry and dusty. Even the house must have aged many years at once, judging by the ominous groaning sounds coming from it.

This is bad, Satie thought, gritting her teeth. Perhaps holing up in here had been a fruitless endeavor, but if she left in her current state, she didn't know who else would be able to protect the twins.

As soon as Hal and Mal noticed her leaning against the doorway, they ran to her.

"What are you doing?!"

"You need to sleep!"

They waved their hands, their fists filled with clumps of medicinal herbs they'd barely managed to scrounge up before it was too late. They drove Satie back to her bed.

With a troubled laugh, Satie lay supine once more. Even such a small gesture had filled her with more happiness than she could bear. Thus, she obediently lay there and stared up at the ceiling again. She wasn't sleepy, but it was admittedly less taxing to lie down. But her head was filled with a detestable alertness, and she felt rather restless. When she closed her eyes, she found herself staring at the light patterns projected on her eyelids.

All of a sudden, she recalled the black-haired girl she had come across by chance. The girl, who had introduced herself as Angeline, claimed to be Belgrieve's daughter. Certainly, she could see someone Belgrieve raised growing up with an upstanding personality like that. She was adorable, but she also had a strong light in her eyes.

"Did he heed my words and go home...? Yeah, I doubt it."

The light patterns dancing on her eyelids shifted into images of the boys from her

memories. Despite what she had told Angeline, it was unthinkable for them to obediently go away—not Percival, not Kasim, and not Belgrieve.

“We were really young...” Satie muttered to herself.

They had had their share of quarreling, but even more of laughter. They would have thrown away their lives for one another, and she had been just as serious about doing so. But she wondered how she could face her old friend who had lost a leg. She certainly hadn’t had an answer to that when she was a child.

Once Belgrieve learned of her situation from Angeline, he would know full well how dangerous things were. *But would he give up after that?*

“He would not... I mean, Bell’s always worrying about other people,” Satie muttered. He was more cautious than anyone else, but at the same time, he would always place the safety of others over himself. His caution was for their sake.

He’s usually so meek, but when he decides to do something, he’s more stubborn than all of us combined... Satie chuckled.

Back when they were just starting out, Percival, their leader, would always be asking for the impossible. And Satie, spurred on by her boundless curiosity, would do much the same. Kasim would find it funny and hop aboard without question. They all had talent—Percival, and Kasim of course, and Satie didn’t think she was far behind them. So even if they tried to challenge the impossible, she thought they would come out just fine.

Now, so far removed from that time, she’d laugh and think, *That was pretty crazy of us.*

Whenever they would all charge headlong into something, Belgrieve would flash a troubled smile but would usually tag along anyways. But if he determined that it was too dangerous, it wouldn’t matter how much noise Percival or Satie made. He would not let them go forward no matter what. When his comrades were in danger, he would throw away any regard for his own safety and jump straight into the fire. That was how Percival had been saved.

He survived. That’s already more than enough for me. Why did he have to come all the way here?

Satie felt miserable. Belgrieve was supposed to have found his happiness somewhere

far away, and she felt deplorable that he was once again braving danger for her sake. She hated herself even more for feeling even a little bit happy at the idea.

If she truly had his best interests in mind, she would have given a far more serious rejection. And yet, a piece of her heart was still hoping he would save her. Turning Angeline away like she had was starting to feel like a cowardly excuse. There was no possible way he would turn back just because she had said that—a part of her knew that all too well.

“I’m selfish...” she murmured, rolling over. Her shoulder wound throbbed in pain.

Suddenly, she felt a distortion in space. Satie’s eyes shot open as she instinctively rocketed to her feet. She could hear the twins screaming out in the yard. In an instant, her body was brimming with power, and her wound no longer bothered her. She raced out of the house.

“Hal! Mal!”

Out in the yard, she was confronted with a man in a white robe. Two crows lay at his feet, lying limply and seemingly dead.

“Schwartz!”

“Did you have fun playing house?” Schwartz looked down at the two crows with a scoff.

Her eyes wide open, Satie bounded forth, moving so slickly it was as though she were skating along the ground. These were movements unthinkable for someone who had been so seriously injured. But Schwartz did not so much as flinch—he merely raised his right hand, and unseen blades crossed and locked between the two of them. From beneath his hood, Schwartz’s sharp glare pierced through her.

“Where is the key?”

Satie stayed silent, launching a series of attacks with her own invisible blade. However, not a single strike made it past Schwartz’s guard. A breeze began to blow around them, raising dead leaves into the air.

“What a pointless struggle...” Schwartz painstakingly retreated half a step, moving his fingers ever so slightly. In the next moment, Satie felt an intense blow on her back. She collapsed down as if someone had pinned her to the ground. The withered grass

scraped against her skin, making it terribly itchy. Despite her best attempts to move, it was like something was weighing down upon her.

Once again, Schwartz spoke coldly. “Where is the key?”

“I busted it ages ago. Better than giving it to you people.”

“I see.”

Schwartz swung his arm down. Once again, a tremendous impact rocked her body.

“Gah!”

“Foolish woman!”

Satie’s vision began fading to black. “Urgh... Hal... M... al...”

Standing before her immobile body, Schwartz took in his surroundings. All the leaves that had been just barely clinging to their branches began to scatter all at once as all life seemed to drain away right before his eyes.

Schwartz pointed his hand at Satie, but she was gone—her form faded away like a mirage. He scooped up the two fallen crows and swung his arm, and he, too, faded, just as she had.

And then there were none. With a massive, discordant noise, the house collapsed in on itself.

CHAPTER 120

FALKA CROUCHED IN THE CORNER

Falka crouched in the corner of the room, a fearful look on his face. Donovan, who had just firmly struck Falka with his sheathed blade, gave him a self-satisfied look as he tucked the sword back into his belt. “You fool... This is why you uncultured beastmen are so troublesome.”

“Are you done?” Francois asked Donovan, somewhat taken aback.

“Yes, you were a *big* help,” Donovan scoffed. “Many thanks.”

“I just did what I had to. I can’t have you causing trouble. It will reflect poorly on His Majesty... So what were you doing there? Do you have a grudge against those guys?”

Donovan dropped into a chair with a heavy thud. “It’s his sword. That large sword the red-haired man has—I wish it were mine. But this dunce let his bloodlust get the better of him... It’s gotten a bit complicated.”

Falka, restlessly hugging his knees, twitched as Donovan’s sharp glare fell upon him.

Francois crossed his arms and gathered his thoughts for a while. “Then, you need only request it from His Majesty. The red-haired man is the father of a woman who has wronged the prince.”

“Oh really...? Hmm...” Donovan rubbed his chin, his brow furrowed as he considered his options. For the time being, it seemed their interests aligned. He nodded. “Very well... Then I shall do so. Can you take us to him?”

“They seem to be plotting something, so I need to report to His Majesty regardless. Is there anything else I should be aware of?”

“When I arrived, there was something... strange floating in the air. I heard a voice say something about ‘Salazar.’ This Salazar seems to be their current destination.”

“That is concerning,” Francois said, his eyes narrowed. “I’ll need to make my report at

once, then."

Donning the coat he had only just removed, Francois made a swift exit from the room. The two Templars followed behind him. This was a chance for Francois to rack up some merits to his name, and yet, he wasn't the least bit excited about it. It was like he was moving purely out of obligation; a strange listlessness seemed to have settled over his heart. His ambition, and even the vengeance he felt towards Angeline—whenever he wasn't forcing himself to stew over these things, it all seemed so inconsequential to him.

"Am I proud of the work I do?" Hold your tongue, you lowly adventurer...

Even just remembering Belgrieve's face irritated him. And yet, this irritation might have just been a pretense to feel anything when his heart was otherwise completely stony. Everything he did felt like an excuse. Revenge, advancement—he wondered if these weren't simply just excuses to keep on living at all.

No, that's wrong. It's precisely for that reason that I seek to gain power. Once I'm stronger, I'm sure my perceptions will change. I won't have to be frustrated with my powerless self, and I won't be mocked by mere adventurers any longer.

Francois told himself this as he purposely added some vigor to his steps, further pumping himself up. Donovan followed behind him with a peculiar, thin smile on his face.

○

Angeline sheathed her sword before staring closely at the man clutching the bars—a man who claimed to be Benjamin. He was emaciated and his hair and beard had grown wildly, but underneath the unkempt locks, his face was certainly handsome, with a hint of elegance to it.

"The real one...?"

"I-I'm real... Please, save me," Benjamin pleaded. His breath gave way to pained gasping and then a coughing fit.

Still skeptical, Angeline gently put a hand to the bars, feeling the cold touch of iron. The jail had no entrance—there was no door in the bars, and likewise, she saw nothing on the back wall of the cell. She didn't know how he could have possibly gotten in

there, but in such a nonsensical world, a prison with no entrance was nothing to be surprised about.

"Stand back," Angeline commanded him.

Benjamin quickly scrambled away from the iron bars, pressing himself against the back wall.

Angeline took a deep breath and dropped into a lower stance. "Phew..." she breathed out sharply.

That one breath was all it took—she drew the blade from its sheath, and with all the same momentum of the draw, she flowed directly into a swing. The sharp sound of metal colliding with metal reverberated several times in rapid succession before the severed bars clattered to the floor.

Benjamin's eyes widened. "I-Incredible..."

Angeline entered through the gap and cut through the chains binding the man's legs. His hands reached out and slowly hoisted the chains up, verifying that he was truly free. Tears poured from his eyes.

"It's not... It's not a dream... I never thought the day would come," he muttered as he tried to stand, but his feet were unsteady. He quickly lost his balance and fell to his knees.

Angeline grabbed his arm and pulled him to his feet, lending him a shoulder. "Are you okay...?"

"I'm sorry... You truly are my savior... But how did you cut through those iron bars?"

"I am an S-Rank adventurer," Angeline answered, pulling out her adventurer plate for Benjamin to see.

"Y-You really are... I see, that makes sense... Would you be so kind as to tell me your name?"

"Angeline."

"Angeline... A fine name. Thank you, truly."

It was all well and good that she had managed to extract the teetering man from his cell, but she wasn't sure what to do next. They were still just as trapped if they couldn't find a way to leave this bizarre place.

Now that she had found the real Benjamin, there was no doubt the one she'd met before had been someone (or *something*) else. Of course, there was a chance that *this* Benjamin was yet another fake—perhaps even the very fake that had trapped her here. But Angeline did not even want to consider it. She could think up a whole laundry list of doubts whenever she wanted, but it would never get her anywhere.

For the time being, she sat Benjamin down against the outer wall. That small bit of walking had been enough for him to be quite out of breath and in pain.

“I should have brought some water”

“No, don’t worry about it. I couldn’t ask for any more from you... Ahh...”

“How long have you been here? Who exactly is that imposter?”

Though Benjamin seemed to be in pain, he was evidently willing to speak, so he told his story through labored breaths. It had happened a few years ago, when Benjamin had gone out to play with the girls in whose company he indulged. His carriage got into an accident, and by the time he had his wits about him, he had been shoved into a cell. Presumably, the imposter had swapped in for him in the confusion caused by the crash.

At first, his cell had been elsewhere, but after some time had passed, he was moved here. He was granted enough food and water to keep him alive, but he had not been afforded an iota of freedom. Apparently, he knew nothing of the imposter’s identity or where he might have come from. From time to time, the imposter and his comrades would come by, but apart from that, he never met anyone else. The isolation was maddening—when Angeline finally arrived, he’d feared he’d finally begun to see hallucinations. “But my delight got the better of me... I didn’t care if you were a hallucination at that point.”

“You’re just as much of an idiot as the rumors say”

“I can’t argue with that... They took advantage of that idiocy. Sigh... What is that imposter doing with my face, anyways? Is he making a mess of the nation?”

"Everyone says... it was a change for the better. They see him as an outstanding leader."

Benjamin hung his head, a look of despair on his face. "Ha ha... ha... What's up with that? Then what am I...?"

"But that's probably only on the surface. He's scheming something vile behind the scenes. He's also conducting human experiments involving demons."

"What...? No, I shouldn't be surprised... Where I was previously held, they'd been imprisoning loads of fiends for some reason."

Angeline grabbed Benjamin's shoulder and looked him directly in the eyes. "Hey, I'm going to save you. So promise me—once we defeat the fake and you're the crown prince again, quit messing around all the time. Be a good, considerate person. Otherwise, I can't help you without some feelings of shame."

He closed his eyes for a time. Eventually, he opened them and looked her in the eyes. "Understood. I am an idiot, but I do not believe I am someone who would disregard the request of my savior. I promise I will do the best I can."

"Good. That's a crown prince I can respect." Satisfied, Angeline nodded and patted Benjamin on the head, causing him to stir restlessly. Evidently, his long life in confinement had—unintentionally—beaten his debauched nature out of him. In any case, she'd need to escape before any of that would happen. The problem was, she still had no idea how.

If dad were here... Angeline thought, but she shook that notion from her head. *No, dad won't be happy if I rely on him for everything*, she told herself, slapping her hands against her cheeks to psych herself up. "I don't suppose you'd know how to get out of here?"

"If only," Benjamin said with a sigh.

Well, that sounds about right. She nodded, not particularly disappointed as she took another look around. The ground was still a checkerboard of red and white, and a gentle breeze carried the refreshing scent of the parsley forest.

When she craned her neck up, the white brick wall of the jail seemed to continue for an eternity. Some distance after the bars had given way to the wall, the wall transitioned to bars once again. *Bars, wall, bars, wall...* These cells were spaced at

regular intervals, both up and down and left and right. She couldn't see what was contained in the higher ones though. Perhaps there was something in them, but Angeline did not possess the skill set to clamber up these walls with practically no footholds.

"For starters... I'll go around and get a better idea of the area. You wait here."

"N-No, please wait. I wouldn't want to be left behind... Look, I can walk on my own," Benjamin told her as he braced his quivering legs.

Angeline scratched her head. "Are you really all right? Don't push yourself too hard..."

"It's scarier to be left behind... The jail was protecting me, in a way."

I see... He couldn't leave, but nothing could get to him either. Leaving did give him the perk of freedom, but it also paved the way to danger. Since Angeline knew nothing about what lurked in this space, splitting up did not seem like a wise decision. After thinking it over for a bit, Angeline removed a knife from her belt and placed it in Benjamin's hands.

"You should be fine... But if it comes to it, use this to protect yourself."

"D-Don't expect too much... I'll do my best." Benjamin sighed as he nervously gripped the knife.

Cutting a mark into the ground with her sword, Angeline slowly started on her way. There wasn't much to go off of, so she tried walking along the wall. Its surface seemed to be very slowly curving in on itself. *Maybe it draws a full circle*, she thought.

Opposite from the wall, the green forest of parsley seemed ever present, with the sea presumably beyond it.

Just maybe, this wall is at the very center, and everything else circles around it. It might be an isolated island. I mean, what I thought was a peninsula turned out to be omurice, so there's a chance it's a perfectly circular island. If I just had a clue to go off of... She continued thinking it over as they walked, but it didn't seem like she was going to find anything. The same exact scenery seemed to continue on and on. She didn't feel much of a mana flow, nor did she feel any force interfering with the space she was in. This is going to be a lot more annoying than the previous spaces... She sighed.

After she'd walked a while, she stopped to rest for a bit out of consideration for Benjamin's stamina. She sat down and leaned back against the wall. "Hey... Was the imposter the only one who came here?"

"No, I remember a man in a white robe too. Though I don't know who he is..."

She recalled the robed man who had been chasing after Satie. "Schwartz, maybe..."

"Schwartz...? Y-You don't mean the Blue Flame of Calamity, do you?"

"You know him?"

"I mean, he's a magician whose name is all over the history books. He's famous, and not in a good way... Is he involved with this?" Once again, Benjamin's face was filled with despair.

Angeline sighed. "It doesn't matter who we're up against... Did he come here with teleportation magic?"

"I don't know about that stuff..."

He's pretty useless... Angeline thought, pouting. Not that she really blamed him after he'd been shut away for so long. But it would have been nice if he were just a bit more reliable. "After we take care of that imposter, you'd better start studying."

"Y-Yeah. I'll try..."

The sun was gradually setting. Its soft smile was disappearing past the parsley tree line. Angeline narrowed her eyes and cocked her head. "So there's a day and night cycle here."

"Yeah, there is. I shudder to think how lost I'd be if it were midday forever..."

If he had been locked in an unchanging world with no way to tell the passage of time, perhaps he truly would have gone insane. *Now that I think about it, I'm surprised he held out,* Angeline thought. Her opinion of him improved ever so slightly.

She felt like something had to be done, but she had no idea where to start, so she was hesitant to waste her energy. However, the night would bring a new environment with it. Once the sun set, perhaps this world would show a completely new facet of itself.

According to Benjamin, he had not noticed any particular changes between day and night, but Angeline would not be satisfied until she ascertained that for herself.

Once the last ray of sunlight was gone, up came the faintly smiling side profile of a crescent moon. *First the sun, now the moon—both seem to have very punchable faces.* That said, the light it gave off was quite strong and she could walk without any issues.

“H-Hey,” Benjamin timidly spoke up. “Angeline... Come to think of it, what are you doing here? Did you take on a secret request from the guild—um, about saving me or something?”

“No, your imposter is after one of my dad’s friends. I’m trying to help her out.”

“I-I see... I should have seen that coming,” Benjamin said with a somewhat sad smile.

Angeline looked at him and shrugged. “*I am* happy to see you’re still alive. Since you’re here, it should be fine if we take out the fake.”

“Ha ha, is that so? Then, I gue—*cough, hack...*” Benjamin seemed to choke on something partway through his sentence. Soon, Angeline was beside him rubbing him on the back.

“You don’t have to force yourself to talk.”

“S-Sorry about that. I’m just happy to talk to anyone at all.”

Angeline chuckled softly and patted him on the head.

Benjamin awkwardly scratched his cheek. “You’re a strange kid... Good grief.”

The brick wall of the prison cast a massive shadow over them. Perhaps because of the strong moonlight—or perhaps not, as she couldn’t really tell with this dimension anymore—there were no visible stars in the sky. It felt like the side profile of the smiling moon was watching them.

No, wait... Angeline was sure she had walked quite a distance along the wall, but she had yet to return to the spot she had marked on the floor. What’s more, when the sun had set, it had been directly across the sea as it always had been. Now the moon was occupying its exact location. She wondered if the celestial bodies themselves were following her. *Or is there something else magical at work?*

Whatever it was, the sun, the moon, and the fish were the only entities that seemed to bring any change to the world. *Maybe beating them up will do something*, Angeline reasoned as she climbed to her feet.

Benjamin looked up at her anxiously. "What are you going to do?"

"The moon is suspicious. I'm going towards it."

"I-I see..."

She adjusted the sword on her belt and was about to start walking when she heard something. It was a very faint sound, like someone was hitting the metal bars with a stone.

"Can you hear that?"

"Huh...? Is something striking the bars?" Benjamin asked, a curious look on his face as he focused on listening.

Is someone else here? "Have you ever heard that sound before?"

"N-No, I haven't. This is a first..."

"All right... Let's check it out, then."

The moon could wait. Angeline set her course in the direction of the noise, back in the same direction they had just come from. She hadn't seen anyone in the cells on the way there. *Then it's got to be in one of the upper cells that I can't see.*

Angeline looked around suspiciously as she retraced her own steps, and one of the upper cells was indeed rather noisy. The air echoed incessantly with the clinking of metal, and the moonlight seemed to tremble as a shrill noise reverberated through the night.

There was no way to know if it was an enemy or ally she would find inside. For a while, Angeline stared up silently until, eventually, the noise ceased.

Looking at the shadow that now clung to the bars, Angeline gasped. Her eyes followed the wisps of silver hair that caught the light of the moon.

“Satie!” Angeline cried out.

Satie looked down at her, startled. “A-Angeline? Why...?”

“We can talk later! I’ll get you out!”

Or at least, she wanted to—but the jail cell was quite high up, and even if she wanted to jump up there, it would be grueling without any footholds.

As Angeline wondered what she could do, Satie reached a hand through the bars.

“Do you have a sword? Pass it up!”

Angeline pulled her sheathed sword from her hip and tossed it with all her might. It flew up and landed firmly in Satie’s grasp. Shortly after that, she heard the sound of metal clashing against metal, and then the broken bars came tumbling down.

“Looks like I needed a real one after all... Thanks!” Satie called down. She poked her head out and tossed the sword back.

After catching it and returning it to its place on her belt, Angeline spread out her arms.

Benjamin looked bewildered. “Wh-What are you going to do?”

“Jump! I’ll catch you!”

But Satie, seemingly flustered, stayed put. “N-No, that’s impossible! I’ll get down somehow or another, so stand back...”

“It’s not impossible! I am the Black-Haired Valkyrie Angeline... An S-Rank Adventurer!”

Though Satie hesitated, she eventually stooped over and cast herself into the air. Angeline braced both her legs, watching the woman’s descent. The distance closed moment by moment until Satie had fallen right into Angeline’s chest.

The sudden weight in her arms was shocking, but Angeline mustered her strength to catch her and kept her balance. In fact, the soft, warm body in her arms put her more at ease than anything else.



"Satie... Are you all right?"

Satie did not reply. She silently wrapped her arms around Angeline's back and hugged her. Angeline, hearing the woman sniffling, returned the embrace.

Now that she had a closer look at her, she saw that Satie was in shambles. She was covered in fresh wounds, the faint scent of blood lingering about her, and her beautiful silver hair was disheveled and unkempt. Nevertheless, her body was warm, and it had a strangely nostalgic smell.

"Thank you... once again..." Satie said, her voice congested.

"Where are Hal and Mal...?"

"Schwartz got to them..."

Angeline grimaced. *So the enemy finally found a way into that sepia-colored space.*

Angeline took a deep breath and looked at Satie. She saw herself reflected back in the elf's clear, emerald eyes. "I'm not letting you get away again... Let's go save Hal and Mal. We'll get the fake prince and Schwartz, and then, you're going to meet with my dad and everyone else!"

"Aha ha! Got it... I give up. Let's go together." Satie looked at Angeline's face with a warm smile.

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Although the rain had let up to some degree, it still came down mercilessly, soaking all below.

Salazar's laboratory lay at the end of a convoluted passageway. With all the buildings stacked on top of one another, there were several layers of ceiling over the underground passageway. Once they were down there, they were no longer within the rain's reach, yet the absence of the sun left them in darkness, and if one was careless, it was all too easy to get lost.

Belgrieve was worried they might very well do so in this unfamiliar place, but Anessa and Miriam seemed to know exactly where they were going owing to skills they had picked up as high-ranking adventurers. Marguerite, on the other hand, had not been

an adventurer for long and felt lost anywhere that wasn't a forest, so she seemed utterly baffled.

Miriam, who was just ahead of him, seemed to have a lightness in her steps. "Isn't that nice? It looks like Ange's all right."

"Yeah. But we can't catch our breath just yet. It's not like we've resolved the problem."

"Hey, Bell—how do you reckon Kasim figured out Ange's condition?"

"Well, Sir Salazar was the one who figured out that Ange was thrown into the time-space prison or whatnot, right? I'm sure he has some way of looking into it."

"Oh, I see. Guess that makes sense. Hmm, but Salazar, huh... He's pretty shady," Marguerite said, folding her hands behind her head.

As he walked down the subterranean stone corridor, Belgrieve's prosthetic foot made his steps tap with a different sound than the others. They'd traveled for quite a while before they came across a wooden door tightly packed with what appeared to be some kind of inscribed spell sequence.

"This is the one. Right here."

"That took just under an hour, I'd say..."

Anessa knocked on the door, and soon after, Kasim opened it and popped out his head.

"Oh, there you are. Come in, quick."

"What's going on, Kasim?"

"Well, this will take a bit of explaining. Any developments on your end? Also, what was all the noise over there?"

"It's gotten a bit complicated on our end too."

Belgrieve went on to briefly tell him about the Templars and how he had already met Francois in Findale once before.

"Hmm... Well, I didn't expect him to work with us anyways. Whether he knows

Benjamin's a fake or not... I can't say. But that can wait—for now, just come in."

Kasim beckoned them inside, where Belgrieve was immediately taken aback. The room was filled with a medicinal smell, with every service incessantly flickering with pale-blue light. It all felt dizzying.

Somebody lay sprawled out over a magic circle at the center of the room. The figure seemed to rapidly stretch and shrink, never settling on one specific shape.

Miriam blinked rapidly in astonishment. "Huh? Is that Mr. Salazar? What happened to him?"

"Well, let me explain things in order."

For the time being, Kasim bade everyone enter the room. Maitreya emerged from one of the corners and poked Belgrieve in the leg.

"You're late. What took you?"

"Ha ha, sorry, sorry. We arrived as fast as we could."

"What's going on here? Did Salazar go off and croak or something?" Marguerite asked.

Kasim shrugged. "Not exactly. This right here is Ange's fault."

"Huh? What do you mean by that?" Anessa asked.

"I told you I'd explain, but you really are an impatient bunch. Well, whatever. Cutting straight to the point, Salazar was in league with Schwartz."

"What?"

Everyone's eyes widened at that.

Maitreya, seemingly amused, explained: "They were using one another, to be more precise. The alternate dimension Schwartz and Benjamin used was one created by old Snake-Eyes. Schwartz and his buddies used it to enact their plans, and Snake-Eyes furthered his research by observing the events that came from that."

"But it's pointless to go after him for it. As I told you before, Salazar cannot distinguish

between good and evil. He has no conscience and acts solely for the sake of his own curiosity. In order to observe what he calls the ‘flow of events,’ he constructed an alternate dimension for Schwartz. He’s also the one who made that time-space prison that Ange was shut away in.”

So that's how it happened, Belgrieve thought, folding his arms. That did explain how he had immediately realized that Angeline had been captured.

Looking perplexed, Miriam turned to Salazar, who was now changing forms at a violent rate. “All right, I understand that, but... How did *that* lead to *this*?”

Kasim cackled and pressed his cap down over his head. “Well, that’s the thing. Ange’s off damaging everything willy-nilly, breaking through all the prison’s contraptions holding her in. It’s reflecting back on the practitioner. Heh heh heh... She really is amazing.”

“Salazar’s spatial magic is unique. He is constantly connected to the space materialized from his own mana, and he is constantly maintaining it. For that reason, the space is very stable, but when you break it, the user becomes very unstable.”

“I see... You figured out a lot in that short span of time.”

“That’s nothing to Maitreya, the Black Tapestry. You could praise me more.”

“Okay, I think I get it, but what do we do now? Seeing as Salazar’s in that state,” Marguerite wondered.

At that very moment, Salazar sprung up with a strange cry. He was currently in the form of a young man. Teetering from side to side, he let out a grandiose laugh.

Adjusting his hat, Kasim said, “You got up just at the right time. Hey, Snake-Eyes, get a grip.”

“Bwa ha! Ha ha ha ha! How delightful! How wonderful, Aether Buster! The flow of events is coalescing as we speak!”

“Shut it. I’ve grown sick and tired of your drivel. You led us all around in circles.”

“Kasim—if Salazar created that alternate space, can we enter it from here?”

"Glad you're quick on the uptake, Bell. Well, no, to be honest. This guy maintains the space, but he apparently can't interfere with it. Schwartz and Benjamin are the ones who have the rights to that."

"Then what do we do?" Marguerite angrily inquired.

"That's where this one comes in. Right, Maitreya?"

Maitreya shuddered in response.

Anessa quirked her head questioningly. "What can that kid...? Oh, right, there was something about teleportation magic..."

"That's right! I've heard of the incredible skill of the Black Tapestry!"

Maitreya's expression softened at Miriam's words, but she suddenly snapped out of it and shook her head. "But we shouldn't, really... Schwartz might notice us, you know..."

"It's a bit late for that. At this point, it won't make a difference whether he notices us or not."

"Ummm..." Maitreya murmured, sullenly biting her lip. The sword on Belgrieve's back let out an enraged roar. Maitreya yelped and ducked behind Kasim's back. "I-I won't bend to your threats."

"Why are you putting up a strong front in front of a sword...?" Kasim grumbled. "Now, now, I'm counting on you here. You've definitely got one up on me when it comes to magic."

"Urgh..." Maitreya let out a resigned breath and turned to Belgrieve. "You'll... protect me, right?"

"Yeah, I promised... Please, Maitreya," Belgrieve said, bowing his head to her.

Maitreya pursed her lips and tugged at Kasim's sleeve. "First, we'll need to identify the coordinates. Help me."

"You got it. Merry, you help out too. And with that said, Snake-Eyes... Hmm?"

Until a moment ago, Salazar had been laughing his head off, but he had suddenly gone

quiet. He was an old man now, peering at Belgrieve from behind his monocle.

"This is... Hmm... I see. So it's you."

"What? Is there something wrong with Bell?"

Salazar, now twisted into the form of a young woman, stroked his chin. "This flow... is not going to end here. A turning point. I see, yes—I understand."

"Hey, we're going to pin down the coordinates."

"Very good, very good. Today is a fine day indeed."

Salazar cooperated, all too easily. This came as a complete surprise to Kasim, as he had been expecting another troublesome exchange. The magicians gathered, each mustering their mana to construct their spells. A number of semitransparent magic circles would materialize in the air only to fade away. There was no wind, and yet Belgrieve felt the hairs of his beard and the hem of his clothing rustling.

Marguerite stood beside Belgrieve. "Hey—say we get there, what do we do then? Are we just gonna save Ange?" she whispered into his ear.

"We can't be sure just yet. But I get the feeling that won't be the end of it. At the very least, *they* are going to take some kind of action, for their part."

The flow of events... As a nonmagician, Belgrieve did not fully understand what that meant, but he did feel as though he were being swept along by some powerful force. He didn't yet know what awaited him at whatever terminal point the flow was taking him to. But for some reason, one thing he was certain of was that he was nearing the end point of this journey.

He wondered if this was his best option. Again, a mystery—if there were any better ways to go about it, he could only curse his own incompetence for not thinking of them.

The sword let out a short growl.

We're going to collide with others who are riding the same flow. This premonition was growing more and more certain in his chest.

CHAPTER 121

IT WAS NEAR MIDNIGHT

It was near midnight, and the deep veil of darkness hung heavily overhead. Although the incessant downpour had lost some of its force, all the sleet mixed with the raindrops created a terrible rumbling as it struck the ground.

This room, however, was very bright thanks to the shinestone chandelier; the difference in lighting meant that the windows only reflected back what was inside, leaving the world outside a dark mystery.

Francois bowed his head. "I apologize for intruding so late at night, Your Highness."

"Oh, don't worry about that." Benjamin grinned as he glanced at the two Templars Francois had brought with him. "What brings the two of you here?"

"There is something I wish to discuss in earnest." Donovan reservedly explained the chaos Falka had wrought. Benjamin did not seem surprised in the slightest, and he simply nodded along until the end of the tale.

"I see—that must have been terrible... Perhaps that cursed sword is encroaching on young Falka here."

"Pardon?"

"The sword grows. It holds a will, of sorts. And it seems it thirsts for the blood and mana of others so strongly that it doesn't know what to do with itself. Over time, that sword might exert its will over Falka's mind. After all, it looks like you've made that sword considerably stronger."

Donovan looked at Falka dubiously. The boy, stony as ever, seemed to be trying to hide his presence.

"Is it because we've been cutting down nothing but vile fiends?"

"Perhaps. It takes in the mana of those it cuts, after all. If you let it absorb a different

sort of mana, you might be able to quell those impulses.”

All the more reason I must obtain that greatsword, Donovan thought, rubbing his chin. If he managed to strike through it with the cursed blade, its mana would be absorbed. Not only would the cursed sword become stronger, its desire to cut down others would also be contained. The only other option would be to strike down a powerful clergyman or, perhaps, an elf.

Benjamin looked rather amused. “You look like you have something in mind, dear Donovan.”

“Ha ha! You’ve seen straight through me, Your Highness.”

After hearing of the greatsword owned by the swordsman with red hair, Benjamin made a surprised face—which quickly turned to a grin. “That is quite convenient.”

“Heh heh... Francois already told me about how that man has done you wrong, Your Highness. If you’ll permit me, I would like to offer a bit of assistance.”

“Interesting... Yes, I welcome it. We’ve already captured one of their strongest members, but we still can’t be careless around them.”

Benjamin was about to go into detail when a new presence suddenly manifested within the room.

“Falka!” Donovan shouted.

Without a word, Falka had immediately drawn his sword in response, only to freeze at the shout. Donovan fixed a harsh glare at the beastman. “Have you already forgotten your recent failure, you simpleton?!”

Without a word, Falka despondently hung his head, his eyes glancing at whoever it was that had appeared—a man in a white robe.

“Hey, Schwartz.” Benjamin gave a teasing laugh. “Where have you been?”

From beneath the hood pulled deep over his face, Schwartz coldly glared.

“Why are there Templars here?”

"Ha ha! We happened to find a bit of common ground. 'The enemy of my enemy is my friend,' as they say. Isn't that right, Donovan?"

"In... deed..." Donovan admitted cautiously. They had a shared goal, for the time being. He could put off dealing with Schwartz for now. Frankly, he wasn't quite sure of his chances; Schwartz would probably be too much to deal with when Falka couldn't even control his sword. Donovan was a bona fide Templar, and he was not about to underestimate someone who had single-handedly eluded so many attacks from the Inquisition.

After staring at the Templars for a long moment, Schwartz scoffed and turned back to Benjamin. "So be it. This has nothing to do with me."

With that, he pulled two limp crows from the folds of his robe and carelessly tossed them onto the table. Though the crows were unmoving, it seemed they were not quite dead.

"Oh!" Benjamin exclaimed, standing up. "I knew you could do it. So you managed to pierce through that elf's barrier, I take it."

"It took some time and effort, but her shortage of mana must have weakened her contract with the old god."

"What about the elf? Did you kill her?"

"She still has some value. I tossed her into the prison on the island."

"Ha ha ha! I see. The time-space prison is really hopping today."

"What?" Schwartz narrowed his eyes. "Explain yourself."

"Well, I also happened to throw the Black-Haired Valkyrie in there. She's their strongest member apart from the Exalted Blade, right? But she's still just a little girl inside—it was simple enough."

"You absolute buffoon!"

Schwartz rarely ever raised his voice, and now that he had, even Benjamin was alarmed. He blinked his wide-open eyes a few times in disbelief. "Wh-What are you so angry about? It's fine; I put her in solitary confinement. She can't interact with the

others.”

“You underestimate that girl’s abilities. Why didn’t you wait until I returned?”

“Well, I thought it was a bad idea to let them muster their forces.”

Schwartz frustratedly folded his arms and shook his head. “I was taking the utmost caution... so as not to be swallowed by the flow that surrounds her... and you had to ruin all of it. You useless lout!”

Benjamin took offense at that one and loudly slammed the table. “Now look here. You’re partially at fault too—you always keep your own counsel and never explain so much as a word of your rationale to the rest of us. So what can that soft little girl do? You’re telling me there’s a chance she can break through solitary and reach the island?”

Schwartz sighed in evident disappointment and showered Benjamin with a look of disdain. “So you were the one swallowed by the flow.”

“What was that? Hey, Schwartz. If you’re going to be like that, I’ve got a little idea of my own...”

“That’s enough. You’re at least going to clean up after your own mess. Off with you.”

Schwartz swung his arm, and then all the scenery of the room seemed to bend and twist like a mirage. In the next instant, not a single person remained in the room.

○

“I couldn’t properly treat the wounds. This is just an emergency measure...”

“Thanks anyways. You’re pretty skillful, you know.” Satie smiled as she put her robes back on. Angeline had used the rudimentary first aid supplies she had hanging from a pouch at her hip to treat the wounds that were still open and bleeding. Apart from the sword slashes she had incurred in the previous day’s battle, she had internal bleeding from bludgeoning. It was all painful to look at. “You treated me just yesterday. And here we are again.”

“You’re pushing yourself too hard...”

"Right, it's admittedly quite pathetic of me." Satie smiled bitterly as she scratched her head.

Angeline pouted, and then without warning, she grabbed Satie's cheeks. "Hmm..."

Satie's cheeks were smooth, squishy, and soft—so much so, Angeline was reluctant to let go. But Satie had been covered in wounds from the moment they first met. *She should be much prettier*, Angeline thought, puffing out her own cheeks.

"You're naturally beautiful. It's a waste to see you so beat up."

"Well look who's talking. Look right here—this one's going to leave a mark." Satie reached out and pinched Angeline's cheeks. They were, evidently, just as soft.

"Um... Can I turn around yet?" Benjamin called out from behind as the two of them continued their pinching.

"Ah, sorry. Go ahead." *I completely forgot about him*, Angeline realized, scratching her head. She'd had to strip Satie to treat her wounds, so she had ordered Benjamin to look the other way. It seemed that Benjamin had obediently followed the order. Rumor had it the pervy prince once had beauties waiting on him day in and day out. *This is a step in the right direction...* Angeline nodded.

Satie giggled. "Sorry about that, Your Highness. Still, I'm surprised to see you alive. I'm glad you're all right."

"Y-Yeah. Glad to hear it. I never thought I'd meet an elf here. Satie, was it? You seem to know Angeline..."

"She's the daughter of a good friend of mine. But I just met her yesterday," Satie said with a laugh.

That's right. Come to think of it, I've heard all sorts of stories, but it really was only just yesterday that we met. She must feel so nostalgic because she's one of dad's old friends.

Benjamin twisted his wild beard with a wry smile. "Good grief, I'd have loved to meet you somewhere nicer than this."

"My thoughts exactly. So for starters, let's think about how we're getting out of here." Satie's face turned serious as she scanned the area.

“Ms. Satie, can you use teleportation magic...?”

“It doesn’t seem to work here. I tried it out in the cell, but I was repelled. Well, Schwartz is the one who tossed me in here, so that’s the least he’d do,” Satie said with a sigh. “Angeline, do you have any leads that might help?”

“Um, well...”

“Yeah?”

“You can call me Ange.”

“Hmm?”

“Calling me Angeline makes you feel kind of like a stranger.”

Satie was momentarily stunned before she burst into laughter and ruffled up Angeline’s hair. “Aha ha ha! You really march to the beat of your own drum, huh? Fine—Ange it is. So, did you notice something?”

“I passed through three separate areas before I got here. Each of them had an irregularity that I struck at. In this space, that moon is suspicious,” Angeline said, pointing at the smiling crescent.

Satie nodded. “Certainly, a confinement space needs some key if you want to be able to manage it. You either have to solve a puzzle or defeat a guardian... We’ll have to figure it out.”

“I get the puzzle solving... But a guardian?”

“Yep. A prison warden, in other words. The place will open up if you beat it.”

I see... Maybe that was the red sphere in the first room, Angeline reasoned.

“It’s nice when it’s easy to understand, but it’s usually not that simple. They can be on the same level as S-Rank fiends.”

“Sounds easy. Leave it to me.”

Seeing Angeline stick up her thumb, Satie laughed again. “Oh, what a fun one you are,

Ange! Bell must have raised you right.”

“Yeah! He’s the best dad in the world!” Angeline said, puffing out her chest.

Smiling, Satie let out a deep breath. “All right, let’s get going, then. Can you walk, Your Highness?”

“Walking, yes. Fighting is a bit beyond me, though.”

“I never expected you to be useful, so don’t worry.”

“Well... True enough. But that kinda stings, Angeline,” Benjamin protested, awkwardly scratching his head.

Thus, the three of them went on their way. Turning their backs to the wall, they set off in the direction of the forest. The closer they got, the stronger the bracing smell of parsley was in the air.

Their shadows stretched out long under the moonlight. From time to time, Angeline would lift her face to look at the moon, but the moon was gradually rising higher and higher. Even if she approached it, she doubted it would be anywhere within reach.

“It’s pretty high up,” Benjamin muttered. “Are you going to break that?”

“I don’t know... We have to consider the possibility.”

If they did end up fighting that moon, it would be a bit more than a swordsman like Angeline could handle. When she fought the bahamut at the Earth Navel, she had managed to use its flying fish underlings as footholds to rise into the sky, but there didn’t seem to be anything like that around. *Maybe if it summoned falling stars to fight us...* Angeline thought, gritting her teeth.

“Satie, are you a magic specialist?” she asked, venturing to guess. According to Belgrieve’s old stories, Satie had once been a swordswoman on par with Percival.

“Well, I guess so,” Satie replied, her eyes wandering. “I use magic more often these days, but I generally use a sword.”

“Where’s your sword? Are you hiding it?” asked Benjamin.

Satie laughed and shrugged. "That's one way to put it. Basically, I use magic to create an invisible sword—that's what I've been using lately. It's been quite a while since I carried a real one around with me... But it looks like you need a real one in this space. I'm already regretting my choices."

"Is that why you couldn't cut your way out of jail...?"

"Yeah. It may sound like an excuse, but I used up quite a bit of mana elsewhere, so it looks like that's lowered the quality of my mana blade. That, on top of the fact that these places already boast a high resistance to all things magic... I'm glad you came here, Ange."

Angeline's head was patted again, and her cheeks turned a bit red. She felt a bit happy when Satie did this to her. In any case, Satie could muster up basic magic projectiles, but long-range attacks were not really her expertise. There was no guarantee that the moon was the key, but it was still quite suspicious.

As a child, Angeline had once asked Belgrieve to get the moon for her. *Come to think of it, what did dad do back then?*

The beams of moonlight leaked through the large bundles of leaves above, casting a speckled pattern on the ground. It seemed quite at odds with the systematic checkerboard ground, and she found her eyes spinning the more she looked at it. She was starting to feel a bit dizzy as well.

As the leaves rustled, Satie stopped and narrowed her eyes in suspicion. "The space is... Something's coming... I think."

Angeline felt a chill run down her spine. She drew her sword. "Get close to me!"

Satie hoisted Benjamin up and raced to Angeline's side.

All of a sudden, a black mass was racing between the trees making cawing noises—it was two crows. Their wings beat wildly as they shot directly for the party. Their sharp claws and beaks could easily take out an eye.

Benjamin had no idea what was happening. He cried out shrilly and curled up helplessly.

"Grr, you..."

Angeline made to slash at them only for Satie to stop her, her face pale.

“Wait!”

“Huh? But...”

“That’s Hal and Mal! Why...?”

“Huh?!?” *The crows are the twins?* Angeline looked at them with confusion, but it was too dark, and they were moving all over the place, so she couldn’t tell. For the time being, she decided to use the flat of her sword to swat them down without doing too much harm.

They flew up and perched on the branches, where they began to make a racket. But there was no time for Angeline to catch her breath—now, a different shadow raced through the darkness towards them. Angeline turned to intercept the attack—from a swordsman, evidently.

“Grah!”

Her foe leaped around freely with fearsome agility, as though toying with Angeline. But Angeline managed to fend off the attacks. “Satie! Are you okay?!” she shouted.

“Don’t worry about me!”

Angeline glanced over to see that Satie had defended herself from the same attacks with her invisible sword; she seemed to be protecting Benjamin as well. *She’s something else,* Angeline thought with a touch of delight. But she didn’t let herself be distracted for long.

“You... little...” She intercepted the incoming attack as it swooped down on her from above and used brute force to drive her foe back. The mysterious figure flew back with a great leap up into the safety of the trees. The shadowy figure—a young boy with rabbit ears swaying on top of his head—seemed to be gleefully swinging his sword around.

“What the heck is going on...”

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” another voice called out. She turned to see Prince Benjamin—or rather, his imposter—wearing tidy, well-tailored clothing.

Beside him was a muscular man wearing similar attire to the boy with bunny ears.

The real Benjamin swallowed his breath as soon as he saw him. "You're... And why are the Templars with you...?"

"Ha ha! Let me introduce them. This here is the Templar Sir Donovan, and that is his associate, Falka."

Benjamin hung his head while the imposter shrugged.

"But you really got one over on me. I can't blame Schwartz for being angry... Angeline, you truly are something. It is such a pity that you have to be my enemy."

"Why don't you give up already? You and your cronies will never beat me."

"Are you sure about that? Maybe you'd fare well alone, but those two deadweights put you at a disadvantage, don't you think?" somebody said. The words drew Angeline's attention to another presence behind her. She stole a glance back, and standing there with arms folded in front of him was the man in the white robe, Schwartz. A maid with hollow eyes stood beside him.

Benjamin could hardly be considered a combatant, while Satie was far from her peak condition. This was certainly not the most reliable party to face off against such odds.

At that moment, Benjamin teetered to his feet. "Wait, Sir Donovan! That man is not the crown prince..."

"What?" Donovan already had a hand on his hilt as he inspected Benjamin suspiciously. Though Benjamin seemed to have trouble speaking, he went on. "I am... the real Benjamin. That man confined me and replaced me... He does not have a drop of imperial blood in him. Don't let him fool you."

Donovan took a sidelong glance at the imposter, who stood with a faint smile on his face, not the least bit flustered at the accusation. His eyes shifted back to Benjamin. "Do you have evidence?"

"No... But it's true. He's completely different from the man I once was—you should be aware of that."

"And? I, the imposter, confined the incompetent crown prince for the sake of ensuring

the benevolent governance of our nation—is that what you're trying to say?" the imposter argued.

Benjamin bit his lip as the imposter cackled. "If you were going to prepare a fake, you should have chosen a better man, Angeline. Now then, Sir Donovan. Who do you think the imposter is?"

Donovan shrugged before glaring at the real Benjamin. "It is outrageous that you would assume a name you are so unworthy to bear. In Great Vienna's stead, I must cast judgment on this fraud and all those that hold it up."

"Ugh..." Benjamin fell to his knees, defeated.

"It doesn't matter what anyone says," said Satie as she placed a consoling hand on his shoulder. "You are the real prince." But Benjamin did not reply, simply hanging his head.

Warily, Angeline assessed the situation, tightening her grip on the hilt of her sword. Schwartz was a formidable foe, while Falka was quite skilled too. Donovan hardly seemed like a pushover, to say the least, and she could not ignore the maid either. Although the fake Benjamin did not seem particularly strong, he was an unknown variable. Meanwhile, the crows—Hal and Mal—continued to caw threateningly from their perches above. Worst of all, she did not know what other cards the enemy had to play. Angeline clicked her tongue.

Had she been alone, she was confident that she could have cut her way through and come out alive. However, the fact she had to keep Benjamin and Satie safe complicated things. The moment Angeline strayed too far away, the two of them would become easy pickings for any unoccupied foe. Even if she did manage to take out the fake Benjamin or Schwartz, it would be completely pointless if the real Benjamin or Satie fell in the process.

The false Benjamin chuckled as he spread out his arms. "Now then, now then—I don't get a kick out of bullying the weak, but... Are you ready?"

"Hmph... With all your rambling, you must be convinced you've won."

"Hmm, then you still think you can win this?"

"Naturally. You underestimate us too much... What happened to the one in the black

coat?"

"Hector? I couldn't tell you. I have him busy on another job."

"Hmph..."

Angeline slowly turned to Satie and gave a slight nod. Satie smiled. Then, Angeline looked forward and pointed the tip of her blade at the false Benjamin.



“It’s too late to apologize now.”

“Ha ha! I’m quaking in my boots.”

With a loud crunching sound of shattering tiles beneath his feet, Falka flew like an arrow and lunged at Angeline.

At first, it looked like Angeline would block the blow, but at the last second, she nimbly dodged out of the way, grabbed Falka’s arm, and used his forward momentum to throw him behind her.

Satie was ready to dodge him too, forcefully leaping to one side with Benjamin in her grasp. Once Angeline had confirmed that, she rushed forward with tremendous speed. The false Benjamin’s eyes opened wide in shock. Just like that, her blade would have run him through—if Donovan had not intercepted the attack with his sword.

“Agh! Such power...” Much to his surprise, Donovan staggered and grimaced at the weight of Angeline’s blade.

“Your Highness, stand back!” Francois drew his sword and joined the fray as the false Benjamin retreated a few steps.

In that instant, Angeline had the opportunity to take Francois’s head, but when Liselotte’s face crossed her mind, she stayed her hand. She jumped back, returning to Satie and Benjamin. Not all of their foes could so easily be cut down. *Why must it be so difficult?* Angeline lamented, clicking her tongue.

Falka, who had been thrown all the way across the battlefield, returned with his sword held aloft.

“Ange!” Satie shouted. “Take on the rabbit!”

“Got it!”

Angeline crossed blades with Falka and pushed him back. Meanwhile, Satie intercepted a blow from the hollow-eyed maid who had come running at them.

There was ecstasy exuding from every pore of Falka’s body as he swung his sword. Each time their blades clashed, she would be assailed with a sense of fatigue. Angeline frowned—the next time their blades locked, she forcefully swept his sword to one side

and delivered a kick to his abdomen. It looked like he was going to hit the ground back first, but planting both his hands on the ground, he rolled back and landed, rubbing his stomach with a perplexed look on his face.

“Creepy kid...” Angeline got back in stance, an unpleasant look on her face.

Satie, meanwhile, had pushed the maid back, but her breathing had become heavy.
“Dammit, how am I already worn out...?”

“Satie, don’t push yourself!”

“We can’t win unless I do, Ange. Against Schwartz, especially...”

Angeline looked at the man in white robes standing in the back. Although he did not make any obvious movements, it was clear that he was not letting anything escape his notice.

Suddenly, there was a beating of wings from above. Angeline’s head snapped up, and she defended herself with her sword. As two pairs of sharp talons clashed against the sword, she found her hand shaking. “Ugh...”

“Hal! Mal! It’s me! Don’t you know me?!” Satie cried out in pain. But the two crows merely squawked as they carried on their assault. Falka and the maid used this opportunity to position themselves on opposite sides for a pincer attack.

“Satie! Behind you!”

Angeline parried Falka’s sword while Satie intercepted the maid.

Her preemptive strike from before seemed to have been effective, as Donovan and Francois were too wary and wholly focused on protecting the fake Benjamin. However, she would not be able to launch any more attacks at this rate, and the situation was only growing worse and worse.

“Ange!”

Giving barely a warning, Satie turned around, pushed Angeline aside, and used her invisible blade to send Falka flying back. The crows swooping from above seemed to turn their attention on her now.

Angeline swapped out with her to take on the maid's attack this time. She tried to end things quickly by cutting the maid in two with a fierce counter, yet the maid immediately backed out of range.

Once again, Angeline and Satie were back-to-back, albeit with Benjamin in between them.

This is bad... Angeline clicked her tongue. The enemy was waiting for them to wear themselves out. That's why they hadn't been very proactive in their offense. Though Angeline would have loved to go on the offensive herself, if she strayed too far, that would put Satie in danger.

Falka's heels hammered against the ground as he approached again. With a firm step, Angeline met him sword for sword. In the midst of several exchanges, she slowly lowered her stance.

"There!" She weaved her way through one of Falka's larger swings, switching her sword to a reverse grip to tear through his flank at close range. His blood flew through the air and stained his white Templar uniform in red.

Too shallow! The resistance she felt told her that she had failed to land the decisive blow. Falka did not spare a second to move with the same nimble grace as ever, and, lifting his sword up, he hammered its pommel into her shoulder with all his might. It was an immense blow that Angeline felt even through her armor, and she was forced to one knee.

Luckily, Falka retreated and brushed the gash on his side. Perhaps the excitement of the battle was going to his head, as he did not seem to be enduring any pain. He had it far better than Satie—though she managed to barely avoid the maid's fists, all the fatigue and injuries she had accumulated were clearly tormenting her.

Against Angeline's own better judgment, she could not stop herself from worrying about what was happening behind her, causing her to lose focus. *We're done for at this rate...* And the moment she thought that, she felt a massive torrent of mana.

"May the sharply honed winds of disease carry grounds soaked in red and scatter the dreams of fools with the breeze." It was coming from Schwartz—a heavy and cold mana that flowed like the north wind.

Whoa, he's using grand magic now? Angeline realized bitterly. She'd given her foe far

too much time to prepare, and now the mana was prickling across her skin as though she were being stabbed with countless fine needles. If this was how it was going to be, she needed to protect Satie at the very least. And so, Angeline turned and grabbed Satie's shoulder. She pushed her to the ground and collapsed over her in the process. The mana formed a great mass, filling the air with a terrible sensation as it hung over their heads.

At that very moment—

“May the threads of power gather into a cord at my fingertips and shatter the jaws of distant oppression.”

All of a sudden, she felt another spiraling mass of mana flying towards them like a loosed crossbow bolt. It collided directly with the mana looming over their heads and burst with an immense noise. That was a type of grand magic she could have sworn she was familiar with.

“Hart Langer’s Spear...?”

“Hey, outta the way, you blasted rabbit!”

That was also a voice she knew. And she heard the sounds of swords clashing with swords. She heard arrows tearing through the air, and thunder rumbling.

Angeline lifted her face. Satie, who lay on her back beneath her, was completely taken aback and without a clue as to what was happening. Benjamin was cowering with both hands over his head, but he did not seem injured.

“Ange! You okay?” a new voice called out.

But when Angeline heard this one, she was filled with joy and cheer from the very depths of her soul. She jumped up without a shred of hesitation. “Dad! Everyone!”

There was a battle raging around them. Marguerite was exchanging attacks with Falka, while Anessa and Miriam were driving back the hollow-eyed maid. Kasim stood before Schwartz, and interposed between her and the false prince, she saw the back she loved so much. Angeline helped Satie to her feet, and Satie stared blankly at the back of the red-haired man who stood before her. The man looked back.

“Sorry, it took so long... I’m glad you’re all right.”

"Um, uh..." Satie's mouth worked silently in vain. It was only after the tears were pouring out of her eyes that she finally found her words. "Aha... Aha ha... You really grew up, Bell..."

"And you haven't changed in the slightest, Satie." Belgrieve gave a somewhat bashful laugh as he adjusted the greatsword in his hands.

CHAPTER 122

THE ROARING OF THE SWORD

The roaring of the sword reverberated through the blade's hilt, into his hand, and ultimately through his entire body. As it passed through his core, he felt a strange calm spread over him.

Before this moment, it had been like he could only glean vague memories through a thick veil, but now those images had grown sharp, vivid, and lustrous.

As an elf, Satie had not changed one bit from those days. Her hair was still silky, silver, and beautiful, and though she had a gentle-looking face, she had a fierce look in her eyes beneath her bushy eyebrows. Though her features were unchanged, there was something more mature about the way she carried herself.

He wanted to keep looking at her, but now was not the time for that. Belgrieve had to concentrate on the foes standing before them.

"Bell, don't kill those crows," Satie warned.

Belgrieve took a quick glance up at the two birds perched atop the massive branches of parsley, peering down at them. His expression softened. "Got it."

"I'm really sorry. I wish we had time to catch up," Satie said with a sad smile.

Belgrieve beamed back at her. "Let's have a nice long talk, once it's all over."

"Aha ha! There are loads of things I want to hear. And things I want to say too."

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes as he took a sweeping glance at the battlefield. He saw the same Templars he'd met only moments before, and the man behind Francois had to be that notorious crown prince.

The man facing Kasim seemed to be quite the master of his craft, and even considering that fighting at close quarters put Anessa and Miriam at a disadvantage, the maid who could take on both of them at once was no slouch either.

The man with the appearance of the crown prince chuckled softly, but his eyes were not jovial in the slightest. “He’s a bit too rustic to be your Prince Charming, don’t you think? How bothersome indeed,” he said before noticing the small figure hiding unsuccessfully behind Belgrieve. “Maitreya. What are you doing there?” he asked, frowning.

Maitreya let out a faint “Eep,” but after mustering a bit of courage, she just barely poked her head out from Belgrieve’s shadow and stuck out her tongue. “I only bet on the winning horse. Too bad.”

“Who are you?” Angeline asked, looking at her curiously.

“I am Maitreya, the Black Tapestry, the great and powerful—”

Her words were cut short by a deafening boom, the result of the clashing of Kasim and Schwartz’s magic.

Benjamin shook his head. “I’m disappointed in you. But very well, I’ll take all of you out at once.”

Benjamin closed his eyes and began to chant something under his breath. Meanwhile, Donovan stood before him protectively, readying his sword with a frown.

“My word, you surprised me...” Donovan said. “But I’m glad I get to fight you here.”

“I have no quarrel with you, Sir Donovan.”

“Hmph, that’s rich, coming from you traitors to the empire. Your daughter called His Highness a fraud and pointed her sword at him. And if that wasn’t enough, she had the gall to claim that vagabond as the true prince. That should be enough to cast judgment, right?”

Belgrieve’s eyes widened as he looked back. Beside Angeline and Satie, a man in shabby rags crouched and cowered. When Belgrieve looked at Angeline, she nodded.

“He’s the real one. He was imprisoned here.”

“I see...” It was just as he’d suspected. The imposter couldn’t kill the real Prince Benjamin. Although Belgrieve wanted to persuade Donovan if possible, the situation did not seem like it would allow it. Fighting was the only option.

Donovan seemed quite skilled himself, and rather than charging in blindly, he observed Belgrieve closely as he cautiously measured out the distance between them. Perhaps he was attempting to suss out the scope of the reinforcements that had suddenly arrived out of nowhere. He noted that Belgrieve, who stared back at him attentively, made very small movements in response to every little action he took.

All of a sudden, Angeline blurted out, “Dad! I’ll be off for a second!”

She bounded away and kicked back the maid who had been just about to thrust a knife at Miriam.

“Thanks, Ange... I thought I was dead,” said a pale and shaking Miriam.

“I’ll handle her. You two support dad.”

“Got it. Yeah, us backline fighters shouldn’t be taking on a frontliner,” Anessa said with a wry smile, returning her dagger to the sheath at her hip as she retreated with Miriam.

Belgrieve stood at the ready once more. “I’d love to settle this with words, but it doesn’t seem like that’s going to happen.”

“Hmm... Is that man with the leonine bearing not with you? Your sword is splendid, but I won’t fall to someone of your measly level... Falka!”

Falka, heeding the call, returned from his furious exchange with Marguerite. The bleeding had already stopped from the wound Angeline had inflicted on his flank.

“This is our chance. Kill him and destroy his sword. I will handle the elf for you.” And with that, Donovan intercepted Marguerite, who had been hot on Falka’s heels.

As he looked at Belgrieve, Falka’s face seemed to light up. He gleefully readied his blade—in the next instant, he was flying straight at him with a downward strike from a high stance. Belgrieve intercepted the strike with the greatsword and let his mana clash with the mana of Falka’s blade. Fragments of magical energy scattered like sparks as the greatsword roared its heart out.

“Satie!” Belgrieve shouted. “Can you run?”

“Huh? Yeah, I can!”

"This is a dangerous place for the prince! Take His Majesty out of these woods! Merry, Anne—I'm counting on you! Maitreya, you follow them!"

With that, Belgrieve took a horizontal swing with his greatsword, forcing Falka to evade by jumping back. But the blade easily passed straight through a great trunk of parsley that had been right beside him. The tree fell with a sound like thunder, blocking Falka off before he could charge again.

"Run!"

He could hear wings flapping overhead—the crows were chasing Satie. Regardless, Belgrieve focused his senses to make sure Satie and the others had safely retreated before grabbing a flash bomb from his tool pouch and tossing it at Falka, who had just managed to cut through the foliage in his way.

Falka gasped as it exploded right in front of him. It was night, and the sudden blinding flash of light disoriented the boy, staggering him.

Not one to let such an opportunity slip by, Belgrieve rushed forth and hammered the flat of his sword into Falka's arm. Falka let out a ragged breath as he fell to his knees. It should have been a considerable impact, yet his pride as a swordsman seemed to keep the blade in his grasp.

"Sorry, but I don't plan on exchanging blows with that sword of yours. I'm going to put you down for a nap." Belgrieve knelt down and plunged the heel of his palm into Falka's solar plexus. The air was forced from the beastman's lungs. Falka's eyes rolled back in their sockets, and he fell forward to the ground.

Meanwhile, grand magic constructs collided once more in the distance, the massive impact rattling the entire forest of green stalks. The vestiges of failed spells scattered in the air as trails of light, twinkling and writhing as though blessed with lives of their own before dissipating into nothingness.

As the leaves were jostled by the clashing of magical energies, the bracing scent of parsley filled the air. It was such a mismatch for the tense scene that Kasim simply had to smile as he pressed down his cap to keep it from flying off his head. "Heh heh heh... This is making me hungry, thank you very much."

Schwartz stood against him with a grimace, keeping his distance while glaring back. Then, Kasim twiddled his fingers. The exploded scraps of mana swirled and gathered

back to him, and he was soon ready to fire again.

"What a troublesome man."

"You took the words out of my mouth," Kasim said, pointing his fingers. The gathered mana took on the shape of many spears. "I'd really rather be talking to my friend instead of you."

"I see."

"So what's the ultimate goal you guys are even plotting for? Gonna conquer the world or something?"

A cold smile crossed Schwartz's face. "Do you think this world is even worth enough to conquer?"

"I didn't, until recently. But lately, I've gotten to loving all sorts of things. If you're gonna mess it all up, then I'm willing to put my life on the line to stop you."

Kasim's fingers shifted ever so slightly, and several sharp spears of mana flew at Schwartz. Yet Schwartz managed to manifest a hemisphere of mana around himself to intercept them. Just like that, his translucent wall continued to expand outward in an attempt to swallow Kasim.

Jumping back, Kasim raised his arms and then swung them down. A mass of mana he had accumulated above came crashing down like a hammer, colliding with his foe's wall. Schwartz, who had been caught in the thick of it, had to furrow his brow at the intense vibrations.

"What's wrong? Are you just going to keep defending?" Kasim taunted as he placed his hands on the ground. The mana circulating through his body passed through his hands, flowed into the soil below, and shot towards Schwartz's feet with tremendous speed.

As soon as he noticed the attack, Schwartz twitched and then covered the span of ten paces in one leap. The space he had occupied moments before had been impaled by a great many of those spear-like mana constructs.

"You're not going to make this easy, are you?" Kasim asked, grinning.

Schwartz did not deign to answer except by silently moving his fingers. Then, the space ahead of and behind Kasim seemed to gain mass to crush him flat.

Kasim perked up, leaping to one side to avoid it. There was only a slight distortion as the two spaces clashed, and then it was as if nothing had happened at all. But Kasim did not have time to catch his breath—next, the ground pulsed and stretched up to grab his leg. He sensed something ominous looming directly above him.

“Not good...” Swiftly amassing mana at his fingertips and rattling off a rapid incantation, Kasim brushed a hand against the dirt entangling his feet. “Crumble!”

All of a sudden, the dirt simply fell apart like smashed pottery and released him. Kasim tumbled backward, out of the way, just as an unseen force cratered the ground where he had just been.

Kasim’s face twisted in discontent. Now that he had the leisure, he adopted a fighting stance, but Schwartz simply stood there, not raising a finger.

Kasim clicked his tongue. “I can’t shake this sickening feeling that you’re just playing with me. Look, I’m not gonna tell you to go all out, but if you’re not taking this seriously, could you just get lost? I’m a busy man.”

“So even the slightest obstacle can accelerate the flow...”

“Huh?”

“Very well.”

Without warning, Schwartz’s left arm ignited in pale-blue flames. The sparks from his arm turned into floating orbs of fire that gracefully swirled about as they burned with terrifying intensity.

“I see,” Kasim murmured, adjusting his hat. “That must be the Blue Flame of Calamity everyone talks about...”

The levitating flames arranged themselves into something like a serpentine chain before slithering high into the air and shooting down at Kasim. Whatever leaves of parsley they happened to touch caught fire, illuminating everything in pale-blue flames.

"Hey now, are you trying to start a forest fire?" Kasim dodged out of the way as he concentrated his mana. "Pierce the earth, the air, the soul," he swiftly chanted before unleashing his grand magic and producing fangs of mana, which began to consume the fiery serpent.

However, the inferno freely spread and grew until it completely engulfed the fangs. Kasim tried investing more mana to maintain the construct, but the blaze was simply too strong, and sweat was starting to drip from his brow. Evidently, the spell that had earned Schwartz his moniker was not just for show.

"Heh heh... You're pretty impressive, pushing me back with magic like that..."

Their spells locked, pushing against each other, as Kasim prepared a spear in his free hand. The moment he noticed the flaming serpent growing in intensity, he unleashed it. The thin, strong spear of mana was cast through a tiny gap in the flames and pierced into Schwartz's shoulder.

"Huh?!" Schwartz grimaced and faltered slightly, and the flames lost some of their intensity.

Kasim, seeking to capitalize on this opening, poured his strength into his mana fangs until the mouth of a mighty beast had manifested around them to bite down on the snake. "That's not all!" Simultaneously, he manifested magic bullets in the air. These were not the normal, spherical shots, reminiscent of cannon shells, that were used by most magicians. His were sharp spiraling arrows—not as strong or as long as the spears, but they took practically no time at all to produce. Indeed, in the blink of an eye, there were dozens of arrows shooting at Schwartz all at once, and the weakened flames were not enough to stop all of them.

Schwartz clicked his tongue and extinguished his serpentine flames. The sudden loss of any resisting force caused Kasim to lose his balance and stumble forward before he managed to catch himself.

In place of the serpent, the flames on Schwartz's left arm grew in intensity. The blue fire enveloped the man like a cloak, and with a wave of the fiery garment, he managed to intercept all the magic arrows flying at him. As soon as the arrows touched the blue flames, they reverted back to pure mana and dissipated into the air.

"Splendid work, Aether Buster..." Schwartz, with his body hidden beneath the layer of

flames, spread out his infernal cloak even wider. The fire transferred to the massive parsley stalks crowding around them and spread from branch to branch, soon igniting the entire battlefield. With the blindingly bright conflagration encircling them, fighting would soon become the least of their worries.

"You got him too fired up, Kasim..." Angeline complained, frowning, as she weaved through the trees that had become pillars of fire. Even though the heat was immense, the light these flames let off remained a cool, pale-blue, making for quite an uncanny sight.

Suddenly feeling a chill down her spine, Angeline readied her sword and swatted down a small-bladed knife. She glared in the direction it had flown from, but the shadow had moved swiftly and blended in with the fire. "Give it a rest already..."

Tagging in for Anessa and Miriam, Angeline had challenged the hollow-eyed maid, but the moment Angeline had become her foe, the maid refrained from attempting any close-quarter combat whatsoever. She maintained a safe distance, moving stealthily to aim at Angeline's blind spots with her concealed weapons with the splendid movements of a veteran assassin. Even if Angeline wanted to give chase, there was little she could do when her foe could so easily become one with the darkness of night. All the trees around them also lent an advantage to her enemy. To make matters worse, the flames were now making it hard for her to maneuver at all.

"I'd absolutely never lose in an honest fight..." Angeline grumbled as her blade swatted down another projectile—a slender needle this time. She certainly did not want to risk getting struck by any of these attacks, but staying on the defensive like this just rubbed her the wrong way. It was truly difficult to deal with enemies that refused to engage in an up-front confrontation.

The flames gradually picked up momentum, spreading across the endless tree line. But this was also her chance—if she could just make it out to an open space, her foe would be left with nowhere to hide. A vast battlefield with no obstacles was just what Angeline needed.

"Whoa there," she muttered, dodging a rain of needles from above. Burnt cinders of parsley leaves sprinkled down over her. "So she's up there now."

She could clearly see the maid jumping from branch to branch with the deftness of a monkey. *I can pretty much see everything if you climb that high up in a skirt,* Angeline

thought, somewhat inappropriately. Granted, under these circumstances it was too dark to actually see anything within the folds of her skirt.

In any case, the maid seemed to have gotten ahead of her—she was not planning to let Angeline leave the forest.

In that case... Angeline took a quick look around. As soon as she spotted a stalk that had yet to catch fire, she placed a foot on it and jumped up. Using a low branch as a foothold, she reached the canopy in no time at all, smacking down the knives and needles that came at her on the way up.

The rising heat meant it was hotter up there than it had been on the ground, but she had a clear line of sight, and she could clearly see where the maid was.

“That’s enough playing tag!” Angeline kicked off from the nearest branch and closed in on the maid. She anticipated that her foe would flee once again, yet to her surprise, the maid blocked her sword with a knife. Nevertheless, her foe still had absolutely no intention of fighting fairly now. In the same instant their blades locked, the maid delivered a strong kick to the branch Angeline stood upon, causing it to swing wildly to the sides. Angeline momentarily lost her balance—time enough for the maid to stab down at her with a dagger.

“Grah!” Angeline reached out to grab the maid’s wrist, just barely avoiding the knife’s pointed tip. She could see her own face reflected back in the maid’s lifeless eyes. The spot where Falka had struck her ached, and Angeline gritted her teeth.

Taking advantage of that moment, the maid swept at her feet, but Angeline kept a firm grasp of her wrist, sending them tumbling down from the treetops together.

“Take this!”

Angeline dragged her, forcefully positioning the maid beneath her to serve as a landing pad. The maid hit the ground back-first but managed to slightly mitigate some of the force with a roll. She teetered to her feet. Angeline had also managed to dampen the force of their impact and landed safely. Without hesitation, she approached with her sword drawn.

“Mercy...”

“Huh?”

Tears were pouring from the maid's eyes. She had an expression on her face that would have invited pity from anyone who saw it, and in that moment, Angeline hesitated. Without her expression changing, the maid thrust with her dagger.

"Agh!" Angeline managed to twist out of the way, though not without suffering a thin red line sliced across her thigh. This time, Angeline's resolve didn't falter—she adjusted her grip on her sword and swung without mercy.

The maid's head flew through the air, trailing blood. Angeline confirmed that the crumpled body would move no more before sheathing her sword away.

"What a terrible foe..."

She had presumably been a first-rate assassin. Those tears at the end had completely fooled her. But there was no time to idly stand around, so Angeline turned and raced out of the blazing forest.

○

Beyond the inferno, the crows circled overhead, swooping down numerous times to capture their prey below. Satie stood before Benjamin protectively while Anessa and Miriam fixed their glares at the crows with their weapons at the ready.

"They're fast..."

"What do we do? Capturing magic isn't my specialty."

"I'm sorry, you two," Satie apologized, "to ask for the impossible like this."

"What are you talking about? We don't want to kill manipulated children either!"

"Right, right! Hey, quit being rebellious and come home already! Whoa!"

One of the crows swooped down like an arrow, passing right by Miriam's side. The girls had both been grazed by the crows' beaks and talons, with fine line-like scratches marring their clothes and skin.

"Hal! Mal!" Satie shouted. "Enough of this! I didn't raise you to be such weak children that you'd just let someone order you around like that!"

Taking back to the sky, the crows cawed amongst themselves.

Anessa tutted. "If we could just... stun them for a second."

"You didn't bring any of your birdlime, Anne?"

"Well, I didn't expect this situation... Ah, what a bother."

Anessa usually carried around arrows dipped in birdlime, but for the sake of traveling lightly and nimbly, she had left them at the inn along with many other devices she had thought wouldn't be needed. Miriam's lightning magic would have been able to strike the birds, surely, but it would be pointless if she ended up killing them.

Anessa turned around. "Maitreya, can you do anything?"

Maitreya, hiding beside Benjamin, squinted up at the sky. "Are those crows that important?"

"Hey, now's not the time to argue about that—wah!"

One of the crows had knocked Miriam's hat off her head with its beak. Anessa shot an arrow to ward it off, but after avoiding it, the crow turned its attention to her—and she was defenseless while she nocked her next arrow. "Oh crap!"

But before its beak could pierce her, it was like something invisible had struck it. It cawed piteously as it fluttered away. Anessa, shocked by the turn of events, turned to see that Satie had thrust out one hand, having clearly done something with her magic to block the attack.

Satie took a deep breath and stepped forth. "I'm sorry..." she said. "But it's all right. Let's beat them down." She glared at the crows.

"Aren't they important to you...?" Maitreya asked her.

"They're like daughters to me. But I don't know what else to do."

"I see." Maitreya stood and lightly lifted her hand. Her mana swirled, causing the hem of her robe to flutter as it might in a gentle breeze. "If you can ground them, I can capture them. I'll bill you later."

"You coulda said that sooner! Merry! You can do it, right?"

"Leave it to me!" Miriam swung her staff and fired off several low-power magic bullets, which the crows frantically evaded. "All right!"

Meanwhile, Anessa had removed the arrowhead from one of her projectiles and wrapped cloth around its tip. She quickly nocked it and fired. The arrow flew where she had predicted one of the crows would end up after evading the magic bullets and firmly struck the base of the bird's wing. With a squawking cry, the crow spun in the air before crashing down to the ground, where a shadow twisted from the earth to form a chain to bind it. The second crow followed shortly after, both of them bound by their own shadows.

Satie blinked, taken aback. "Ha ha... I shouldn't have expected anything less from Ange's party members... Thank you!"

"It's an honor to hear that from you, Ms. Satie."

"Hee hee, I'm just happy that one of Mr. Bell's old comrades is praising me. Is that a wrap, then?" Miriam asked, taking stock of their surroundings as she plopped her hat back on her head. The area was illuminated by the blue flames that were spreading across the forest.

○

Near the edge of the woods, the sounds of clashing blades rang out. A thin rapier was rapidly striking at a broader knight's blade in a one-sided assault.

While Donovan was forced on the defensive, Marguerite smiled serenely. "There, there, what's wrong? Is your back giving out on you, old man?"

"Grr, you little..." Donovan violently brushed the rapier aside for a counterattack, but Marguerite nonchalantly dodged and kicked him in the gut. Donovan retreated a few paces, holding his stomach and gritting his teeth.

"Boring as hell. The rabbit was a whole lot stronger than you."

"What a coarse tongue... Aren't elves supposed to be a noble race?" Donovan asked, frowning.

Marguerite's personality was the opposite of the elegant elves he'd heard about in faerie tales, though her features, illuminated by the blazing blue fire all around, were certainly as dignified and beautiful as those legends told. But more importantly, she was far too strong. Donovan had many years of experience as a Templar, and he certainly wasn't weak, but he couldn't do anything to put her on the defensive.

Marguerite bounced to and fro, lightly swinging her rapier. She looked around at the flames that were rapidly spreading with a frown. "We should end this already. It would be stupid to burn to death here."

"Don't... underestimate me!"

Suddenly, at that moment, a chilling presence manifested behind Donovan. The two of them looked at it in shock. It was a strange figure clad in a black robe. Though it had a human form, it did not betray any signs of life. The monster in black stared at Marguerite with two red eyes where a face should have been, completely ignoring Donovan.

"A malediction...? No, this is..."

"Ha ha! The Templars are from that church of Vienna, right? That's quite a sinister thing you have with you."

"If... this entity has decided to be my ally, then it is undoubtedly the will of Almighty Vienna!"

"What a convenient goddess you've got there. Wait, let me guess—you're not actually all that pious." Marguerite readied her sword once more.

The figure in black groaned like a rumbling from the depths of the earth as it pounced upon Marguerite. Its long, shriveled arms emerged from its robe, and its crooked claws scrabbled at her sword.

"You're creeping me out here!" Marguerite tried to fend it off with brute force, but she couldn't slice through its hand. The monster crawled along the ground, pursuing her as she retreated. With a forceful twist of her whole body, she thrust her rapier at the being. But it didn't feel like her weapon had made contact until she felt a terrible sensation of something formless wrapping itself around her blade, prompting her to hastily pull back.

"Dammit, this is annoying..."

Marguerite observed the creature by the blue light of the flames. While it did possess a humanoid form, there was no guarantee it shared all the same vital points. Frankly, she had a feeling that stabbing it anywhere would be risky.

Marguerite had fought even demons before, but this thing in black was something else—something twisted. She felt hesitant to face off against it. It suddenly occurred to her that she wouldn't have hesitated for a second to fight this thing in the past. The irony brought a smile to her lips.

Donovan, approaching from the being's shadow, struck at her. Although Marguerite managed to parry his attack at the last second, the monster was upon her not a moment later. It carried no weapons, but the thought of what would happen if she were touched by its hands made her break out in goose bumps. She dodged while pushing Donovan back, backing up to create some distance between herself and them while she caught her breath. Donovan stood at the ready with a fiendish smile on his face. It was like the strength of this curious being had possessed him.

"Well, I'm glad you're the best of friends now. How about you start calling yourself the black knight or something? Forget this whole Vienna shtick; it ain't for you."

"I'll shut that annoying mouth of yours soon enough!" Once more, Donovan attacked in tandem with the monster. Had there been two of him, Marguerite could have still held her own easily enough, but this shadowy being was trouble. With her attention commanded by it, even Donovan's weak swordsmanship could be a threat to her. On top of that, the flames were growing stronger. If she couldn't break this stalemate, immolation would become the real danger.

Marguerite hesitated for a moment before turning and taking flight.

"You're running away?!" Donovan barked at her. "You coward!"

"Hmph! If I stubbornly fought you here, Bell and granduncle would be mad at me!" She stuck out her tongue teasingly before racing for the edge of the forest.

As she made her way past the crackling, burning parsley trunks, the scenery suddenly opened up. The light of the moon reflected off of the distant sea, its calm surface exuding a gentle white glow. She looked around, hoping to reunite with her comrades, only for Donovan to burst out of the forest.

"You're not getting away!" And maintaining that forward momentum, he charged at her. Marguerite blocked his swing while quickly getting her bearings. That entity was nowhere to be seen now. She seized the opportunity and immediately went on the attack, forcing Donovan to defend his life.

After a few quick exchanges, their swords were locked against each other. Donovan, unable to hold his ground, was soon overpowered by Marguerite in spite of her daintier physique.

"Curse you..."

"As long as that thing's not around, I'm not afraid of you. I'll take you out while I can!"

"Don't screw with me, you vulgar elf!"

Suddenly, she heard Belgrieve yell, "Maggie! Dodge!" She immediately leaped away.

Donovan's eyes widened. He looked down—the blade of a sword sprouted from his stomach. His mouth worked soundlessly, and then, he spat up a mouthful of blood.

"Gah... Wh-What just..." Donovan fell to his knees. He turned his head, and—there stood Falka, as expressionless as ever, his sword stabbed through Donovan's back.
"Falka, you..."

Falka withdrew the blade and kicked Donovan aside like he was trash, an obstacle in his way.

"D-Did you have a falling out...?" Marguerite was dumbfounded, only to suddenly feel an aching pain in her side. In shock, she placed a hand over it and felt oozing blood. She looked down and saw that her flank had been torn open.

I see. Falka wasn't trying to kill Donovan. He tried to take me by surprise—and he used Donovan to do it. But though Marguerite's mind had caught up to the situation, she couldn't feel any strength in her legs, and she fell to her knees.

CHAPTER 123

UNDER THE PALE-BLUE LIGHT

Under the pale-blue light of the flames and the white light of the moon, blood that should have been red looked a horrific black instead. She had managed to leap out of the way with Belgrieve's warning, yet Falka's sword had still wounded her. All of a sudden, she was overcome by burning pain.

"It... hurts..." Marguerite gasped out. Falka sauntered up to her with his sword raised. The sword's swollen hilt seemed to be eating into his arm as if to merge man and blade into one being. Belgrieve jumped in as soon as Falka swung down, parrying the coup de grâce with his greatsword. The holy blade clashed with the cursed one, and both roared as mana filled the air. Falka leaped away with a frown on his face.

Belgrieve stooped over to hold Marguerite by the shoulder. "Maggie, get a grip!"

"Bell... Am I... going to die?"

"You're fine. You managed to dodge in time, so it wasn't a fatal hit. Keep your guard up."

"But there's so much blood... and I can't feel any strength in my body..."

"That sword steals the strength of whoever it cuts. That's why you feel weak. Stay strong—you must stay strong!"

Marguerite bit her lip and glared at Falka. Because she was strong, she wasn't used to being wounded, and this made her far more anxious than she should have been.

This is pathetic, Marguerite thought as she finally managed to collect herself enough to stand again. True, she was still a bit unsteady, but she was on her feet. Once Belgrieve had pointed out the nature of the attack, she seemed to have an epiphany. *Like hell I'm going to die from this measly cut.* "What's gotten into him?"

"I don't know. But one thing's for sure—that sword is no good," Belgrieve answered. He stood in front of Marguerite, the greatsword at the ready. "Keep applying pressure

to the wound. You'll find Satie off in that direction. Regroup with her and get treated."

"I'll... I'll be back as soon as I can!" With both hands clasped over the gash, Marguerite made off as fast as she could.

Belgrieve took a deep breath before turning to face Falka again. The boy—whom he was certain he'd knocked out with that blow to his vitals—was now like a fiend that had taken on human form. The sword assimilated with his right arm glistened with black light.

Belgrieve couldn't shake the feeling he'd faced something like this before. When he had faced off against Charlotte at the Bordeaux estate, her ring had engorged itself and covered her arm. Perhaps Falka's sword was something of a similar nature.

Earlier, after he had supposedly taken Falka out of the fight, Belgrieve had made a beeline for the imposter prince to destroy the enemy's line of command, but in the scant moment he had paused to recoil from the clash of Kasim and Schwartz's magic, the fake Benjamin had simply disappeared. After that there had been the burning forest to deal with, and the situation was chaotic, to put it lightly. In the midst of all that, the unconscious Falka had climbed to his feet, but he still appeared to be unconscious. It was like something else altogether was moving his body. They had traded blows then, but the boy had seemed to have other priorities and suddenly ran off in the middle of their duel. Belgrieve had given chase only to watch as Falka cut through and absorbed a figure in a black cloak. It was then that the sword had grown into his arm.

"If I'd stopped him back then..."

Belgrieve gritted his teeth. *I misjudged the situation...* His slow reaction was responsible for Marguerite's injury and Donovan's death. As he faced Falka once more, the boy still had the same expressionless face as ever, but the light in his eyes was far colder and bereft of life—like a sword.

"A sword, huh... Are you really Sir Falka?"

Graham's sword growled. In the next moment, Falka was bounding towards him. Belgrieve advanced to meet him blade for blade.

Falka, ever silent, tried to push him back with brute force. He had a much smaller build than Belgrieve, but perhaps due to the cursed sword's influence, his physical might

was abnormal. Belgrieve had to brace his left leg.

“Grr...”

He had clearly grown stronger. He’d absorbed that thing in the black robes, and perhaps he’d taken Donovan’s mana too. Simply crossing blades for a second with the boy made Belgrieve feel fatigue wash over his body.

Belgrieve pushed off with his left leg and used the peg on his right leg as a pivot to turn. This left Falka with more forward momentum than he could manage, and he was sent tumbling to the ground with Belgrieve pursuing right after him. Belgrieve immediately slashed down with all his might.

“What?”

But Falka had managed to roll onto his back and intercepted the strike with his bare right arm. Belgrieve knew he had swung with all his might, yet Falka was matching him with just one arm. Belgrieve gritted his teeth as he broke into a cold sweat and tried to muster even more power.

Suddenly, without any warning, Falka relented and rolled to the side. The edge of the greatsword smashed into the ground where he had been lying, which exploded with the sword’s holy might. Belgrieve was knocked off-balance—the perfect opportunity for Falka to take a swing at him.

“Dad!”

It was at that moment that Angeline joined the fray. She blocked the strike and kicked Falka away. The beastman flipped in the air before landing on unsteady, teetering feet.

“Dad, are you okay?!”

“Ange... Thanks for saving me.”

“Hee hee... I heard from Maggie—the bunny boy went crazy?”

“Yeah. Be careful, Ange. I’ve got a bad feeling about him.”

Father and daughter stood side by side, their swords at the ready. Falka swayed back and forth as he gazed back at them before flying at them like an arrow without any

warning.

Belgrieve deflected the incoming blade while sliding to the side. Angeline positioned herself on the opposite side of Falka and rushed forth to strike him.

Falka had been attempting to counter Belgrieve, and he was forced to frantically turn around once Angeline attacked him from behind. Using that opportunity, Belgrieve delivered a kick to his back, and he was knocked off-balance.

“Yah!” Angeline slashed down at him with her sword. Belgrieve and Angeline both thought the attack would connect, but with maneuvering well beyond human limitations, Falka somehow managed to dodge by a paper-thin margin and retreated to a safe distance, where he fell to one knee.

Though the two of them hadn’t exchanged a single word the whole time, Angeline moved just as Belgrieve thought she would. He could instantly understand her intentions. *I didn’t think we’d be fighting together like this...* Belgrieve was unable to contain his smile, and Angeline was clearly delighted as well.

Falka shambled back to his feet. His left arm was turned in a ghastly direction, and his ankles seemed sprained as well. In order to evade their joint assault, he had twisted himself in ways his body shouldn’t have allowed. Belgrieve could even hear the sound of dislocated joints.

“What do we do, dad?” Angeline asked, raising her sword.

“That sword must be controlling him. He wouldn’t be able to move like that otherwise.”

The way Falka continued to expressionlessly brandish his sword despite being so battered was painful to look at. The greatsword growled.

Angeline frowned. “Are you sure?”

“What’s wrong?” Belgrieve asked.

“The greatsword just spoke to me. That filthy mass of mana... It’s probably the sword the rabbit boy’s holding. She wants us to break it,” Angeline explained.

“I see... All right,” Belgrieve agreed. Certainly, if the cursed sword had taken over Falka’s mind, then breaking the sword did seem like the obvious solution. Belgrieve

stood at the ready, gazing at Falka. “We’re aiming for his sword, then, Ange.”

“We’re not going to kill him?”

“We wouldn’t otherwise have any reason for hostility with him... But if your life is in the balance, then don’t hesitate.”

“Hey, dad?”

“Hmm?”

Angeline was beaming from ear to ear as she gazed into Belgrieve’s eyes. “Are you happy to see Satie again?”

“What are you talking about? This is hardly the time... But yeah, I’m happy. Very much so.”

“Heh heh... I want to hear all those old stories, and soon.” With that, Angeline took off towards Falka. Belgrieve followed after with a wry smile.

Though Falka was staggering, he duly intercepted Angeline’s strike, and with ungainly, disjointed movements that could no longer even be called swordplay, he launched a counterstrike.

“Grr...” Angeline barely dodged out of the way. As Falka made to pursue her, Belgrieve sent him reeling back, then swung for the base of the boy’s sword. But Falka seemed to sense his intentions and pulled his arm back. He wasn’t about to let their blades clash again.

“Drat, he’s on to us...” Belgrieve clicked his tongue before continuing to push forward. Taking on a defensive stance, Falka remained undaunted by his masterful combo of blows.

Without warning, Belgrieve’s phantom pain began to act up out of nowhere. It wasn’t very sharp, but it had taken him by surprise and caused him to pause for a brief moment. Falka took advantage of his distraction and quickly went on the offensive.

While Belgrieve barely managed to ward off Falka’s attacks, Angeline leaped over her father and swung down with her sword from on high. This forced Falka to give up on attacking and to dodge to one side. Angeline made to pursue him only for Belgrieve to

call her to a halt.

"Don't be overeager, Ange! There's something strange..."

Retreating once more, Falka seemed just as unsteady as he was before, but it appeared as though the flesh of his right arm—the one that had become a sword—had begun to writhe. The blade itself continued to emit the same sharp, dark light, but the fusion of flesh and steel beneath it twisted about like a snake or a tentacle.

Angeline couldn't help from letting her revulsion show on her face. "Creepy..."

"Has the corruption gotten worse...?" Belgrieve wondered.

Whatever it was, they needed to settle this bout fast. His phantom pain had abated, but there was no telling when it would flare up again. Belgrieve tightened his grip on the greatsword and, with Angeline at his side, advanced on their opponent once again.

Falka's arm began to stretch, and it swung at them like a whip. Even just deflecting the blade now made Belgrieve's hand numb from the powerful impact.

Belgrieve and Angeline exchanged a brief look and nodded. They immediately separated and moved to surround Falka on both sides to slash at him in tandem. Belgrieve's blade was blocked by Falka's right arm, while Angeline's attack was barely dodged.

But when Belgrieve tried to draw his sword back, he found he couldn't budge it. That wriggling pliability had finally extended to the tip of Falka's sword, and he had used its shifting form to wrap around the greatsword. Both blades growled and glowed as their powers competed to no avail.

On a whim, Belgrieve switched to a one-handed grip on the greatsword and reached his right hand to his waist. Graham's sword had taken the lead during this journey, but, right where he knew it always would be was his own sword, which had been his constant companion over many long years. Grabbing its hilt, he swung up from below. Its sharply honed blade bisected Falka at the right shoulder just beyond the corruption of his flesh. The boy let out an indescribable scream as Angeline grabbed his body and pulled him away.

Belgrieve jumped back and gave the greatsword a powerful swing, sending the cursed blade that had entangled it sliding to the ground, where it squirmed and flopped like

a fish out of water.

The greatsword glimmered blindingly and roared. Belgrieve could have sworn he heard a voice—*DESTROY IT!*

Belgrieve pooled all the strength and mana in his body before swinging down with one sword in each hand at the writhing metallic mass. With a blow powerful enough to make the ground beneath them quake, the cursed sword was pulverized.

“Ha...” Belgrieve breathed out. His strength was quickly leaving him. It felt like energy had flowed from every pore in his body.

What remained of the cursed sword let off a gurgling, simmering sound as it melted into a viscous, black liquid.

Once Belgrieve was sure it could move no more, he tucked each of his swords away into their respective scabbards. Angeline raced to his side and wrapped her arms around his neck.

“You did it! I knew you were amazing, dad!”

“I couldn’t have done it without your help, Ange... Thanks.” Belgrieve softly laughed as he patted her on the head. His eyes shifted to Falka, who was lying prone some distance away.

“What about him...?” Angeline asked.

“No idea. I don’t know if he’s unconscious or dead...” Belgrieve approached him and held his hand over the boy’s mouth. He was faintly breathing, but he was bleeding copiously from his severed arm. For the time being, Belgrieve used a rope to bind up the stump and staunch the bleeding. He cut off a piece of his own cloak to wrap around the wound like a bandage.

“You’re saving him?” Angeline asked, shocked.

“He’s lost his sword. There’s no need to kill him... Or do you want to?”

“No, I don’t really like killing people.”

“That’s settled, then.”

Graham's sword had ceased its roaring—perhaps it didn't see Falka himself as particularly dangerous. Just in case, Belgrieve tied the boy's legs to stop him from moving.

When he had finished, Kasim raced over to them. "Hey—are you two all right?"

"Ah, Mr. Kasim. It's your fault we have this huge forest fire on our hands..."

"Heh heh... Sorry, sorry, but Schwartz was the one who did that... What happened to the bunny boy?"

"We incapacitated him. He was formidable... But thanks to Ange, we handled it one way or another."

"How's Maggie?" Angeline asked.

"Oh, she's fine. With a bit of salve and some bandages, a wound like that will heal up in no time. Good grief, that princess just isn't used to seeing her own blood, heh heh... Oh, speak of the devil."

Marguerite came from the same direction as Kasim. She was followed by Anessa and Miriam, then Maitreya, and finally, Satie and Benjamin.

Belgrieve allowed his shoulders to relax a bit. "That's good... Everyone's all right, looks like."

"Bell! Where's the rabbit bastard?!"

"We handled him, somehow. Is your wound all right, Maggie?"

"Yeah, wasn't too deep. Satie treated me," Marguerite said, placing a hand on the cloth wrapped around her stomach.

Belgrieve looked at Satie, who was carefully carrying two crows—seemingly asleep. She had evidently managed to capture them. He got a better look at her now. By the light of the moon and the flames, she looked like the same energetic girl from his memories.

Satie returned his gaze with a delighted smile. "You've grown stronger, Bell. You really surprised me."

"Y-You think so?"

"Ah, Mr. Bell's embarrassed."

"He sure is. Hee hee! How cute."

Anessa and Miriam giggled as Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his head.

"Hey, I got stronger too. You're not going to point that out?" Kasim teased as he amusedly twisted his own beard.

"Whenever you get complimented, Kasim, it goes straight to your head."

"You wanna try me? Heh heh... Ah, how should I put it? You really haven't changed..." Kasim laughed as he rubbed his head. Despite everything, his eyes were a bit bleary.

"If only Mr. Percy were here too..." Angeline lamented with a bit of a pout.

"I know, right?" Marguerite concurred. "What's he gotten up to?"

But though there was a peaceful mood dawning about them, Belgrieve shook his head. "I'd love to stick around and chat, but this isn't the time. We need to make one more push."

"Right, yeah." Kasim nodded. "We managed to do away with the enemies at hand... Well, except Schwartz."

"What do we do, dad?"

"We can't just let the fake prince get away. Now that we have the real one, he can't be allowed to do as he pleases. Isn't that right, Your Highness?"

"Y-Yeah... But are you sure? If someone like me returns at this point... I heard that the fake is an incredible leader. Even if I become the crown prince again... no one will be happy about it," Benjamin said tearfully.

Smiling, Belgrieve placed a hand on his shoulder. "With those words, I'm convinced that you have to return, Your Highness. If you have an understanding of yourself, then you should be able to change yourself too. Simply correct your mistakes. As long as you can comprehend your own immaturity, you can put in the effort. It's not too late

to start on your journey now.”

Benjamin bit his lip, but he eventually wiped away his tears and nodded. “Yes... And I made a promise to your daughter to become a splendid prince... Right, Angeline?”

Angeline chuckled and patted him gently. “Good boy. Heh heh... Now, let’s go get that fake!”

“Right. Nothing good will come from giving him time. Anyways, you know, even if he put on a good public face, no decent guy does that while lurking around in the shadows. Seriously, go make things right, okay?” Kasim patted the prince on the back.

Snapping and popping noises filled the air as the roaring flames consumed the parsley forest. The flickering flames cast shifting shadows from their feet, and the hot air wafted in their direction. For the time being, Belgrieve thought it best to get well away from the burning woods. He hoisted Falka over his shoulder and was about to start walking when he was halted by a strange presence. The greatsword let out an enraged howl as if to affirm his intuition.

A number of figures emerged from the flames. Angeline drew her sword, facing them with a frown. “That’s...”

“Necromancy,” Maitreya explained as she hid behind Belgrieve. “The fake prince’s forte.” The beings shambling towards them certainly seemed like undead. “I get the feeling there could be more maledictions too. We need to watch out.”

“Maledictions...? Oh, like that shadowy thing.”

Maledictions were not fiends—they were monsters created from curses and sent to kill. It was plausible that the one that had appeared at the capital inn had been birthed by Benjamin’s magic as well. Perhaps maledictions were made to exploit the weaknesses of their foes, just like the last one had caused Belgrieve’s phantom pain to act up. He didn’t want to deal with them if he could avoid it.

“Mr. Bell!” Anessa cried out.

Belgrieve looked back—and saw that there were undead emerging from the sea behind them as well. They were surrounded.

“Good grief, you’ve really made a right mess,” said a voice.

After scanning the area, Belgrieve found the fake Benjamin with Francois by his side, standing only a short distance away. He was flanked by undead soldiers in heavy armor and was waited upon by a maid without a head.

Angeline's eyes widened. "That maid..."

"You're a menace, Angeline," the false prince replied with a theatrical shrug. "She had such a cute face, and now it's gone."

"Who's the real menace here?!"

"Heh heh... *I'm* not the one beheading my maids."

He lifted a hand and gestured with his fingers. Behind him, a dark figure manifested, twice as tall as he was. Belgrieve's nonexistent right leg throbbed with faint pain, but then the sword on his back began to howl wildly, and the pain subsided. He lowered Falka to the ground and drew the greatsword. Its roaring and glow caused all the encroaching undead to falter before coming to a complete stop.

"The Paladin's holy sword," fake Benjamin said with a scowl. "That's troubling."

"What are you scheming...? What do you hope to accomplish by taking over the empire?" Belgrieve asked.

This was answered with mocking laughter. "Why, I'm going to bring happiness to the people, of course. Don't you know what I've done? Ask anyone, and they'll tell you just how good things have become under my rule compared to how they were before."

"But I've heard the class divide has grown worse," Anessa angrily cut in. "Aren't you just putting on the appearance of goodness with your actions?"

Fake Benjamin grinned. "Sure, you'll find detractors. They see one little thing, and they blow it completely out of proportion. But those folks, you see—they're the sort that will do nothing but complain regardless of the real situation. Do all in your power, and they'll make a ruckus about how it isn't enough. Do nothing, and they will gloat about your utter incompetence. It is a waste of time to take them into consideration."

"But the empire's people aren't seeing any change. Those who choose only a select few to save will be soft on those that support them and cruel to those that criticize them," Belgrieve argued. "They'll curry favor with their closest supporters, only widening the

divide. I do not consider you to be a wise ruler. You discard the weak and use demons and fiends. What exactly lies at the end of all of this?"

"Peace. Peace is what we'll find. A strong power is needed to silence those who desire otherwise. Be they fiends or demons, they're simply weapons to me—no different from your sword. It's all about how you use it, correct?"

"Those words are only for those who have hardened their hearts. A weak hand cannot escape its insecurities no matter how much power it holds. Ultimately, you'll keep pursuing greater and greater power until you destroy yourself. Isn't the courage to reach out a hand what we really need for peace?"

"That's childish idealism. Such naive notions are simply not realistic."

"But 'reality' isn't something you can simply force upon others against their will. It's something constructed by people with ideals. The 'reality' spoken of by those who've thrown away their ideals is an illusion, as far as I'm concerned," Belgrieve said before biting his lip.

There was a time when he'd thrown away his dreams, a time when he'd continued to make excuses, cynically telling himself that his situation was simply reality and that he had to accept it. But now he'd achieved his dream of meeting his old comrades. That dreaded reality—a reality of dying alone of old age in Turnera—had been the true illusion.

He looked at his daughter who stood beside him. She had been the one who'd brought this opportunity to him. Angeline would never give up. She was always doggedly pursuing her own dreams and ideals. At this juncture, he now knew that by raising Angeline, he had grown as well.

The false Benjamin shrugged. "Ha ha... It looks like we're not going to reach an understanding... So what now? I don't believe your ideals are enough to stand against me. How about you give up?"

"Well, setting aside the state of the empire and whatnot—I am very angry at you for kidnapping my little girl. I'd at least like to have the satisfaction of punching you in the face, so what say you?"

The man broke into laughter. "Good grief, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree! Well... So be it. You won't be able to kill me, in any case."

And with a brief chant by the imposter, the undead were on the move once more. An apparition in black robes appeared alongside them, crawling on the ground towards the party. Stamping her feet angrily, Marguerite raced forth and sliced through several of the closest undead in the blink of an eye before returning.

“Bell’s not the only one here, you smiley prick! I’ll destroy you!”

“You’re injured, Maggie... Don’t push yourself too hard!” Anessa said before firing an arrow, which exploded and disintegrated the moment it pierced through its mark.

Likewise, Miriam summoned lightning which crashed down over the battlefield. The ground was soon littered with scorched corpses. That took care of the nearest ones, but more and more undead appeared, clambering over their fallen comrades.

“These are some nasty numbers...” Anessa clicked her tongue. “I might not have enough arrows for this.”

“Don’t waste your shots! Just leave the small fries to me!” Miriam deployed spells one after another, immolating hordes of the undead. But the enemy was so numerous that they were simply replacing themselves faster than she could destroy them. This was on a completely different level from the battle they had fought in Bordeaux.

“Merry, out of the way!” Kasim yelled.

“Huh? Oh—whoo?!” Miriam immediately ducked out of the way of a dagger which grazed her robes. The headless maid had appeared, weaving through the ranks of the undead. In addition to her, armored undead had joined the legion, maneuvering as deftly as any living warriors. “They’ve got some fast ones!”

“Marguerite!” Satie deflected the sword of an undead, which was aimed at Marguerite’s back. She swung her arm like she was wielding a blade—first, a slash through the shoulder and chest; then, a prompt slice through the neck.

“M-My bad.”

“Don’t worry about it! Ange—the maid’s all yours!”

Angeline faced off against the headless maid, giving her party’s backline fighters as much time to retreat as possible. Satie moved so slickly it was hard to believe she was even injured, dispatching one undead foe after another with her invisible blades. Even

the malediction was easily sent flying back with one swing. Anessa and Miriam looked on at her feats in awe.

“A-Amazing...”

“Ms. Satie really is strong...”

After mopping up their immediate surroundings, Satie turned back with a slightly fatigued expression. “Kasim, are you good to go?”

“Heh heh... I used a bit too much mana against Schwartz, but I’ve got some fight left in me,” Kasim declared before unleashing a bolt of magic.

But the situation was only growing more dire. There were still far too many undead to go, and their nauseating stench of decay was starting to become overpowering. Cutting a path through to the false Benjamin and striking him down seemed to be their best option.

As Belgrieve held the greatsword aloft, its radiance grew stronger, and its roar more fearsome. He gathered his strength and swung it down, sending a burst of mana shooting from the blade and erasing the undead in a straight line ahead of the blade.

Benjamin’s eyes widened. “He’s a terrible matchup for me. Good grief, what is Hector doing...? Francois.”

Francois, who had been standing beside him with a doubtful look on his face, snapped into a salute. “Yes, sir.”

“Could you get out there for me?”

“But, sir...” Francois stared back at the fake Benjamin skeptically. “Your Highness... Pardon me, but *are* you the real prince?”

“Will you trust the words of a traitor over me?”

Francois did not answer, and seeing his eyes wander hesitantly, the fake Benjamin sighed. “It’s a bit late to start questioning your loyalties, don’t you think? Where else could you return to, but to me?”

With that, he pressed a finger to Francois’s chest. Suddenly, Francois’s body seemed

to fill with peculiar power. His vision grew clearer, and strangely ferocious emotions seemed to rise from the pit of his stomach. Francois found himself gasping for air, wide-eyed. Francois stared at the imposter. “What... are you...?”

“You died a long time ago. Now, get out there and fight.”

He could not defy this man’s words. Francois raced forth with his sword in one hand and struck at Belgrieve, who looked at him with surprise.

“Sir Francois! I have no reason to fight you!”

“Grr... agh...”

Belgrieve’s greatsword growled angrily, which seemed to cause Francois pain.

“I... I’m...”

“Stow your blade! If I hurt you, Liselotte will be sad!”

“Grrrrr... Gaaaaaaah!” With bloodshot eyes, Francois kicked Belgrieve away. Belgrieve retreated to resume his fighting stance.

With misery etched upon his face, Francois bellowed with laughter. “So! In the end, I’m just as pathetic as I’ve always been! It’s silly! Absurd! I knew I was just being used, but this... How idiotic!”

Ever since Angeline had stopped him from staging a coup at the archduke’s estate, Francois had felt that some part of him had fallen out of its place—like his gears had stopped meshing. But until now, he had never seen it as a bad thing. As a matter of fact, somewhere in his heart, he now realized that her stopping him could have possibly put him on a better path in life.

Even so, his stubbornness and fixations had caused him to maintain his hatred of Angeline, until he thought that was his very reason for being. Otherwise, it would have felt like he was denying who he’d been all his life. *Maybe I was just scared of becoming a completely new person after all I did.*

But as it turned out, he had died a long time ago. *Right, that night—my memories ever since I was shoved into the river... They’re vague... What happened to all of my subordinates who should have been with me? In the first place, why did His Highness*

even appoint me to lead his guard?

Once he thought back on it, his recent path in life was riddled with suspicious happenings. He had even seen the prince working his necromancy right before his eyes—perhaps it was the prince's magic that prevented him from suspecting a thing. Suddenly, it was like all the puzzle pieces were coming together.

His body was no longer his own. His own will was now irrelevant as his blade was swung as though by a complete stranger. That swing was fated to be effortlessly blocked by Belgrieve's holy blade.

"Grr... Haaah!"

Seeing an opening, Belgrieve riposted with all his might, sending Francois reeling back. His shoulders heaved with each labored breath as he gazed at Francois. "Francois... Please."

"Ha ha... Ha ha ha... I was nothing more than a clown..." Once again, his body acted against his will and attacked. Francois desperately tried to hold himself back—and by doing so, he managed to make his movements the slightest bit disjointed. "Please... just... kill me... I want to do something right at the very end... at least..."

"Grr..." Belgrieve drew back his sword and retreated, giving up on slaying the false Benjamin for the moment. The fatigue of fighting Falka still weighed heavily upon him. But the number of undead had dwindled—evidently, they did not come in unlimited supply. When he looked back, he saw fatigue on the faces of his comrades as well, but it seemed as though they'd weathered the storm.

After putting down the headless maid once more, Angeline heaved a deep sigh. "Dad... Are you okay?"

"Yeah—just a little farther to go." Belgrieve glared at the false Benjamin. He wanted to save Francois if he could, but even as he was thinking that, he felt a strange presence appear around them. He looked around to see masses of darkness emerge from the surrounding undead, which flew towards Benjamin and gathered into one agglomeration of power. It amassed into an increasingly larger form, until finally, whatever it was had assumed human shape.

Maitreya shrieked. "What is that malediction?! It's way too big! This is bad..."

"I have to ask, Kasim... Can you muster some grand magic?"

"With my current mana... It'll take a while."

"Do it... Don't give up until the end." Belgrieve tightened his grip on the greatsword, which was emitting a powerful light now.

"It's over!" the false Benjamin boasted, laughing. "Well, I will admit you did well until now."

The massive malediction spread itself out, its upheld arms completely covering the sky above. *Here it comes...* they all thought, preparing themselves.

Suddenly, the malediction's movements stopped. Its form seemed to quiver, and in the next instant, it split in two right down the center. With a rumbling sound, it dissipated into black mist and dispersed. Everybody—Belgrieve, his party, and even the false prince himself—was dumbfounded.

"Huh? Uh... What just happened?"

From where the vanished malediction had been, a figure could be glimpsed in the fading darkness, and they could hear the distinctive sounds of somebody coughing and wheezing.

"Mr. Percy!" Angeline happily called out.

"I'm here," Percival answered, waving at her as he tucked his sachet away. Touya and Maureen were behind him.

"Seriously..." Satie said with a tired smile. "Another old man on the scene. You look well, Percy!"

"Hmm? Oh... Satie?! You had your little reunion without me, dammit!"

"You're just late, dummy!" Kasim called out with a laugh.

Percival grinned. "Well, sorry. Cut me some slack though, I was taking care of the Executioner."

"What...? Hector? That's absurd... But... that's the only way you could have made it

here..." The false Benjamin looked at Percival in dismay.

Percival frowned and pointed at the imposter with his sword. "Hmm, I take it you're the ringleader here. Hey, Hin—Touya," he said, correcting himself, "there's no need to hold back against him, right?"

"Right."

"Very well, then let's wrap this up and go for drinks."

The imposter's face stiffened. "Don't be absurd... A few more warriors can't make a difference for you at this point!" With a hasty chant, the crescent moon in the sky began to spin rapidly as it descended, and then flew straight at Percival like a flat, sharp blade. But without even attempting to avoid it, Percival stepped forth and shredded the moon to pieces as it crossed paths with him.

"Huh...?" the imposter gasped.

"Hey, what's wrong? Is that all you've got?"

"This is getting ridiculous! Schwartz! Hey! Where are you?! Get me out of here!"

But he received no answer. Percival, looking utterly serene, advanced on him one step at a time, briskly clearing away any undead that made to block his path.

"You've got to be joking... I'm not going to let it end here..." The fake Benjamin grinned as he placed a hand on his chest.

Percival, taking notice of his move, raced forth. "You're not getting away!" he bellowed.

"I should have done this from the beginning. Farewell! May you be trapped here for all eternity!"

His form began to sway like a mirage, fading—but before it disappeared, a sword pierced through his chest. "Gah?!"

The sword belonged not to Belgrieve, or Angeline, or even Percival—it was Francois's. Dumbfounded, the false Benjamin turned his head as blood trickled from his mouth. "You..."

His eyes bloodshot, he raised his arm—but Francois gritted his teeth and twisted the blade. With no chance to swing his arm and invoke his spell, the imposter let out a final pained gasp and collapsed forward. At the same moment, Francois crumpled down beside him, completely powerless.

Percival approached slowly with palpable suspicion. “Hey now, what happened here?”

“Francois!” Belgrieve raced over and lifted up his body.

Faint laughter issued from Francois’s pale lips. “Ha ha... Serves him right. He was so desperate, he forgot to control me for a second.”

“Keep it together! You don’t have any injuries!”

“This isn’t an injury. I’m undead... Ha ha! And no one noticed. This guy must have been an amazing necromancer.”

“That’s not it. You’re not undead,” said Satie as she swiftly made her way to his side. She stooped down and gently placed a hand on his head. “Go to sleep. Once you wake up, I’m sure this terrible nightmare will be over.”

Francois’s mouth worked silently over words he didn’t have the strength to speak, but his eyes slowly closed until consciousness left him. Belgrieve gently laid him down. “Is it over?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Satie said before wrapping her arms around Belgrieve’s head. He could feel her weight leaning against him as the strength drained from her body. “Aha ha... Looks like I overdid it...” She began to sniffle. “Thank you for coming to save me. You don’t know how happy I am that you’re still alive, Bell.”

“Yeah...” Belgrieve smiled softly. He reached up to place a hand on her head. “I’m happy I got to see you again, Satie. It must have been painful. Thank you.”

Satie clenched her tearful eyes shut. Angeline, overcome with emotion, embraced the both of them. Anessa, Miriam, and Marguerite looked on with weepy eyes of their own, while Touya and Maureen observed the tableau warmly, and the real Benjamin fixed his gaze at the ground, deeply moved. Kasim covered his face with his cap—evidently crying—while a bleary-eyed Percival grinned widely.

“Now we’re all together! Let’s get out of this nasty place already! Shorty, use your

teleportation magic."

"Yeah, yeah. What a slave driver... You're getting a hefty bill for this later." Maitreya pouted as she chanted, and then everyone began to sink into their own shadows. After just a brief moment, they were suddenly enveloped in the frigid outside air.

Miriam shuddered. "Yipes, that's cold..."

"Yeah, but at least the sky is clear."

"Hee hee... We won! Let's toast to that!" Angeline happily slipped between Belgrieve and Satie, grabbing them both by the arm.

The rain finally let up after falling for so long, and the stars were now twinkling in the clear night sky.

CHAPTER 124

BEAMS OF LIGHT

"So many souls with the makings of heroes had gathered, yet the flow of events did not grow in any significant way. That means *that* point was not the *terminal* point."

"But it *was* a waypoint, to be sure! Indeed! Oh, Blue Flame, what flow do you see with those eyes? Is the path to Solomon still too far to see, or is it closer than we know? Regardless, I have no doubt that girl is at the center of this vortex."

"The method Solomon used to punch a hole through space was not magical in nature. Presumably, the biggest factor was an explosion of strong emotion not unlike madness... His battle with evil was nothing more than a single factor. If so, that would explain why nothing came of this incident."

"The path leading up to it is also important! A vortex is but a spiraling flow, and though its motions might look like they carry things in the same place eternally, the speed can be increased by changes both downstream and upstream. A breach in space, through explosion and intensification! Solomon's incredible powers and the lament of his soul must have become a critical juncture in grand events!"

"Perhaps... We can recreate it on a smaller scale with lesser beings. Far smaller, just with interpersonal relations..."

"What do you intend to do now?"

"I'll have to continue observing the flow. What we need is a push at just the right moment. I'll need to judge when that is."

"You need the key too. It hasn't been lost yet. She may have the makings of a hero, but a single elf wouldn't be able to break it! Don't let the flow swallow you, Blue Flame—my friend!"

"Who are you calling a *friend*? I'm leaving. Stay here acting like an observer forever, for all I care."

○

Beams of light pierced through the veil of morning mist, causing the damp ground below to glisten. Though the puddles were murky and brown, their surfaces glimmered like pristine mirrors once they were illuminated.

Leaving his dead-tired comrades behind in their room, Belgrieve walked out into the inn's yard. He sat on a barrel under the eaves and took in a lungful of morning air. He watched the early-rising travelers heading out, having finished their preparations. He could hear the wagons jostling and the hooves of the horses clattering against the stone pavement.

Belgrieve gazed out at this in a dreamy state of mind. For today, at least, he felt he could forgo his morning training—and yet, he still woke at the same time out of habit. His body felt haggard, and he was terribly sleepy, but he also thought it would be a waste to simply go back to sleep.

I need to act my age, he mused, twisting at his beard, only to feel somebody prodding his shoulder.

“You’re an early riser, Mr. Red Ogre.”

“And what about you? Are you sure you shouldn’t be sleeping?”

Satie chuckled as she sat down beside Belgrieve. “I just felt a bit worked up. I know I’m supposed to be really tired, but—you know.”

“Ha ha ha! I feel the same way. It just doesn’t feel right to be up before all the young’uns, though.”

“Hee hee... You make it sound like Percy and Kasim are young too.”

“They might be... They’re still children at heart.”

“So you’ve got two oversized sons, huh? That sounds strange, coming from an actual father.”

The two of them exchanged a look and burst into laughter.

After the long battle the night before, the party had returned to the inn before heading

off to celebrate at a pub that was still lively. The reunion of the four old friends had been toasted to, not only by the old adventurers themselves, but by Angeline and her comrades who had rejoiced as if it were their own reunion.

There had been plenty to talk about and they had felt like they could stay up forever, but they had just been through a life-and-death struggle, so once the alcohol had entered their systems, everyone had soon been out like a light. Even these adventurers of the highest caliber could not win against the temptations of sleep.

The night came and went, and now Belgrieve was sitting beside Satie in front of the rain-soaked yard. He leaned his back against the wall behind him.

“Is Francois going to be all right?”

“He seems to believe he’s an undead, but if he really were one, he couldn’t possibly have maintained that level of consciousness. He must have been corrupted with necromancy while placed in a state of near death, or something like that. I think it will work out.”

“I see... That’s good.” *So Liselotte won’t have to be sad...* He smiled faintly.

“But he won’t be back to how he was before. It wasn’t mind control but necromancy moving him. That means a large majority of the flesh on his body must be dead. There’s a high chance a few of his limbs have lost all their life energy, and it won’t be surprising if they have to be amputated.”

“Hmm... As long as he’s still alive, it will work out. Even without a leg.”

Satie giggled. “Coming from you, that’s pretty persuasive... You managed to regain so much mobility with that prosthetic of yours.”

“Ha ha! I feel a bit more confident, hearing you say that.”

“Your daughter Ange is an S-Rank adventurer; Maggie is the princess of the Western Forest; and you’ve studied the sword under the Paladin in your hometown. My word, you’ve been having all sorts of adventures while I wasn’t looking, Bell.”

“No, I’ve mostly just been tending my fields back home... You haven’t changed much. You look the same as you did back then.”

Satie's cheeks puffed out. "Hmm? Are you saying I'm childish?"

"No, not at all. I'm just talking about your appearance..."

Satie burst into laughter at the sight of Belgrieve's panic and ruffled up his hair. "Seriously, you're as earnest as ever, Bell. Good boy, good boy..."

"Please don't tease me..."

"You've changed for the better, Bell. That beard looks good on you." Satie grinned as she pinched and tugged at his beard.

His laughter was a bit strained. "You think so?"

"I do. It gives you some gravitas. Kasim's got one too, but he's got to tend to it a bit more—it just makes him look scruffy." After saying that, Satie pointed at her own chin. "What's a beard like, anyways? Does it feel any different to have one?"

"Well, how should I put it? Once you get into the habit of fiddling with it, you can't go back. Sure, you can shave it off, but something just feels off without it."

"I see, I see..." she murmured, smiling brightly even as she started to tear up. She brushed at her tears with the backs of her fingers, but they simply kept coming until, finally, she had begun to sob.

Belgrieve was startled, but he patted her back. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah... Well, you know—I'm just happy we get to talk about these trivial things again... Percy and Kasim can smile again... It really is all I could have asked for..."

Her words made Belgrieve feel a suffocating feeling in his chest. He closed his eyes and stroked her back. "You've had it rough. You've been fighting those guys this whole time, right?"

"I... guess so..."

"Is it still hard to talk about...? It might be painful, but I want to know what happened to you."

Satie sniffled, rubbing the backs of her hands against her eyes incessantly. "No, no

worries. I think it's something I have to say—something I need to settle for myself too.” Satie took in a deep breath and let it out. “Back then... It was around the time I became A-Rank, I think. Percy had finally driven himself around the bend, and we were fighting day in and day out. Tit for tat, as they say. Anyways, it finally got to be too much for me, and I ran away. Nothing good would ever come of sticking around any longer, I thought... He apologized last night, actually. It didn't even bother me anymore, but he can be strangely fair and up-front with these things.”

Satie let out a slight chuckle and went on. “Thinking back on it now, we were all children then. Just kids, living in a small world...”

“Well if we trace it all back, it's all because I left without a word...”

“Hey there, buddy. Let's just keep it at that, okay? Are you trying to get me to scold you or something?”

“Ah... Sorry.”

“The point is... We were all honest and earnest. You of course, and Percy, and Kasim, and me too. So all of us convinced ourselves everything was all our own fault, respectively. That was just how much we loved one another.”

“Yeah... That's right. That might just be it.”

“In fact... I think I have to apologize to you, Bell.”

“Why? I don't think you did anything wrong.”

“I developed a sense of guilt all on my own. Apologizing might just be for my self-satisfaction... I'll continue the story, okay? Anyways, I left the party, but I just couldn't give up on your leg.”

After Satie had left Orphen, she first passed through eastern Tyldes to reach Keatai. The countries to the east possessed magic completely different from the west, and she had reasoned that she might find a hint there. But ultimately, it had been a dead end.

Little by little, she had made her way back westward—through Khalifa, Istafar, and around to all the other major cities in Tyldes. Then she headed south to Bhagwan, the central hub of Dadan, and to Lucrecia as well. Ultimately, she had ended up in the imperial capital of Rhodesia. She'd braved a fair bit of danger in her travels and had

advanced her skill in swordsmanship and magic along the way.

"I often fought against fiends, but I barely did any work as an adventurer. I didn't try to advance through the ranks, and I only ever worked when my money ran thin. I mean, just being an elf was enough to make me stand out, and it would be a pain if I got any unnecessary eyes on me... In the end, I even went and returned my license."

Satie placed her heels on the rim of the barrel and hugged her knees against her chest.

"Do you remember? There was a time when we talked about why we wanted to be adventurers."

"Yeah... Because we couldn't think of anything else to do. That's what we both said."

"Well, after that big failure... it felt like I'd just lost all the dreams I had of being an adventurer. But that didn't mean I wanted to return to my homeland. In any case, I wanted to find something that I ought to be doing. Perhaps fixing your leg was the only thing I had to cling onto."

"I get it. I don't think any worse of you."

"That's when... I met Schwartz at the capital."

"Schwartz...?" Belgrieve furrowed his brow.

He was the Blue Flame of Calamity, one of the ringleaders of this incident alongside the false prince. Although he'd apparently disappeared while fighting Kasim, it was hard to imagine anyone else had managed to take him down.

Satie hugged her knees and let out a whistling breath. "Back then, I didn't know a thing about how dangerous he was. We elves don't study up much on what goes on in the human world. I'd heard of his moniker—the Blue Flame of Calamity—but I didn't take him seriously. I mean, how scary could he really be?"

"What brought you two together...?"

Satie's smile was self-deprecating. "He's the one who reached out to me. He asked if I wanted to work for him."

"Then..."

"That's right. It was temporary, but I did lend a hand in their research for a time." Satie closed her eyes, like she was weary of everything. Belgrieve silently waited for her to go on.

"It's ironic, but it's thanks to that partnership that I learned to do all sorts of things. I found out about the lingering remnants of the old gods and how to use them to formulate my own space, how to teleport, how to create a pseudo persona—I picked it all up from them."

"Remnants of the old gods?"

"Yeah. They're the ones who ruled this land before Solomon. Solomon destroyed them, but remnants of their power still linger with no will to guide them. You can use them by offering up a bit of mana."

"That sounds dangerous."

"It's fine if you only use a little, like I did. It's just like the harmless dregs of their being—once you stop supplying mana, they'll just stop lending power. That's all there is to it."

According to Satie, if she left the area around the capital for too long, she would no longer be able to teleport or maintain her alternate space. "Ever since I turned against Schwartz, I had to go around getting in the way of his experiments. I couldn't leave the area anyways. So, I made use of that."

"I see... So have you been alone all this time?"

"I had allies from time to time. For the most part, they were people I rescued. But I only ever got to them after the experiments, and they never survived for long..." she said, sniffling. "Schwartz was a cautious man. He would hardly show himself even to those helping out with his research and experiments. Those who cooperated with him all seemed to have different objectives too. Some were plotting world domination, while others were just trying to work their way up through the world. There was one who was trying to carry out a personal vendetta too."

"So a lot of people jumped aboard Schwartz's schemes for their own personal goals?"

"That's right. And Schwartz let them do whatever they pleased. All those individual interests crossed and clashed and were a muddled mess. Ultimately, all of us only had

a vague idea of what the entire organization was trying to accomplish. That's why I don't know the full scope of the experiments, and I don't know who it was that was impersonating the prince. To begin with, I thought we were researching Solomon's demons purely for the advancement of magic. Researching Solomon and his demons is completely taboo as far as the church of Vienna is concerned, so we couldn't do it publicly. That's why I thought we were working in the shadows—not because of anything nefarious."

Satie caught her breath. She wiped away the tears in the corners of her eyes. "Hey, Bell. You've heard a bit about the experiments they were conducting, haven't you?"

"As I recall... He was trying to get demons to be reborn as humans." Belgrieve had learned that a year ago from Byaku. Byaku himself was a child born through that process. However, for the experiment to be considered a success, the demon's presence would have to have completely faded from the child's consciousness. The child's mind would be in full control while they held the demon's powers, and thus, it would be possible to control the demons who had fallen into madness at the loss of their master, Solomon.

"But demons can take on all sorts of forms, right? I know of a demon that turned into a ring, and Falka's sword was probably one too. Is there really a point in making them human?" Belgrieve asked.

Satie nodded. "That's true. As a matter of fact, even some of the children that were rejected as failures had their own true, independent wills. Not as demons, but as new individuals—even if those individuals were not quite human."

"Hal and Mal, right?"

"Yeah. Aren't they cute?"

The twins Satie looked after were also children born with the souls of demons. However, their bodies were even more unstable than Byaku's. Rather than being born as humans, they took on the original forms of their demons—namely, that of crows. It was more precise to say they were crows that had learned to take on a human form. Although Schwartz had temporarily put the two of them under his control, they were now soundly asleep up in the room.

"I know they went through a painful experience, but I did always want to show those

kids the outside world... I guess it worked out..." Satie's expression softened only to quickly tense up once again. "I don't know if Schwartz's goal is to perfectly create a human from a demon. Presumably, that man holds a completely different viewpoint on magic research than anyone in the world..." Satie buried her face in her held knees.

"Are you... okay?" Belgrieve placed a hand on her shoulder and gently patted her. She quivered for a while before finally lifting her head.

"There were all sorts of people there. People from the west, east, and south. Beastmen too. Every good experiment has plenty of test cases."

"Satie?"

"And I... was their elf subject, Bell." Satie looked at Belgrieve in tears. "I gave birth to a demon too."

Before Belgrieve could think of anything to say, Satie went on, the words spilling from her mouth. "By the time I noticed it, my belly was feeling strange. But I didn't know why it was like that. I was scared. I didn't know what to do, but my stomach was swelling up..."

"Satie, it's fine. If it's painful to keep going—"

"No, now that we've gotten this far, I'm going to say everything. I resolved to give birth no matter what came of it, but I hated the thought of giving that child to them more than anything. The failures were killed and reverted to demon cores. So I thought it over—they had no way to tell if it was a failure or success right after birth, and it wasn't like they were keeping a close watch over anything and everything I did either. So I used that time to make a contract with the remnants of the old god. That's how I got the power of teleportation."

Teleportation could take the user to any place they knew of. Although it wasn't completely impossible to teleport to places unknown, there was a risk of warping into walls, trees, or people, or into deep gorges or high places. It was incredibly dangerous to attempt, and thus, it was rare for anyone to use it to go anywhere they did not know very well.

"But I thought they wouldn't be able to find the child if even I didn't know where it was. They had me on a tight leash, and there was a chance they could trace my mana. So as much as it frustrated me, I couldn't go with my child. I'd also lose my power if I

strayed too far from the capital for long. I took a gamble—luckily, the teleportation was a success. It was a forest. The autumn leaves were beautiful, and I could see chimney smoke rising in the distance, so I was sure there were people around. But I was on the cusp of losing the ability to teleport back, and I was terrified of arousing their suspicions, so I jumped back to the lab immediately..."

Satie hung her head. "And I haven't been back there ever since. I didn't want them to find out, and even if I wanted to seek out my child, it would have only taken a few minutes for me to lose the old god's powers—teleportation and space construction. Perhaps I could have just run away, but I couldn't just abandon all the others being experimented on. Even now, I don't know what became of all of them... I'm sorry, Bell—for a long time now, I've been so focused on fighting Schwartz that I didn't even have the time to think about you."

"An autumnal forest..." Belgrieve murmured.

Seeing him fall into silent thought, Satie let out a powerless laugh. "You hate me now, don't you? I'm sorry, after you came here to save me, that's just the kind of person I am..."

"No, you're wrong," Belgrieve said, looking her in the eyes. "Do you think I'm someone who would despise you for something like that?"

"Hmm... No, I don't."

"Did the baby have pointed ears like an elf?"

"Huh? No—perhaps it was the demon's influence, but the baby looked like a normal human..."

"Was the basket woven out of wisteria vines?"

"What...?"

"Was it placed in the shadow of a thicket? And did you wrap the child in cloth... with a rosemary wreath, dried hazel sprigs, and a bundle of nettles?"

"That... How did you—?" Satie's eyes widened in surprise. Belgrieve had an exhausted look on his face, but he smiled as he rested a palm on Satie's cheek and gently caressed it.

“I’m the one who picked up the child, Satie. Ange is your daughter.”

“Sh-She definitely had black hair, but... Huh? But, but that...”

Her mouth worked wordlessly until she fell into stunned, silent stillness—and then she burst into tears that rolled down her face in large droplets. She clung to Belgrieve, burying her face in his chest.

“So miracles really do exist, Bell...”

“Yeah... they do.”

Belgrieve brushed his hand through her silver hair.

○

In a gaudy, ornamented room of the palace, which happened to belong to the crown prince, Benjamin had shaved his beard and gotten his appearance in order. He lay on the bed as he scanned through the mountain of paperwork that towered beside him. His body had become emaciated during his long years of confinement, but he had regained a bit of vigor over the past few days of recuperation.

There was a knock on the door, which he answered, and Francois entered using a walking stick as his aid. He had the same bitter expression as ever, but his unnaturally pale and waxy complexion had gotten a bit of color back into it. “Don’t overdo it, Your Highness.”

“I’m not overdoing anything. See how I’m lying down? Still, it looks like all sorts of things go into this business of governance,” Benjamin mused as he set the document in his hand down on a rather hefty stack of finished papers on the other side of the bed. “I’ve already fallen behind; I need to catch up, don’t I? But that imposter—he certainly produced some easy-to-see results, but his methods were quite forceful. The way things are going now, we’re bound to see some blowback in a couple years.”

“It’s not too late to course-correct. Things will be getting busy, though... But you should start by regaining your health.”

“I’m counting on you to put in some work too. How is your leg holding up?”

At Benjamin’s inquiry, Francois stroked his left leg, which had been firmly fixed in

place with wood braces.

"It's strange—it's here, yet I feel absolutely no sensation from it... But after I've seen someone move to *that* extent on a peg leg, I can't really complain."

"Ha ha ha—true! The Red Ogre, huh... A strange group, they were. I'd have loved it if they'd stuck around the capital to help me out."

"You cannot rely on lowly adventurers forever. Show some dignity as a noble."

"What a dishonest man, my word! I know you're actually grateful. If you put up a front like that, Angeline will be angry at you. Didn't she beat you into shape too?"

"No... Come to think of it, I heard you proposed marriage to the Black-Haired Valkyrie."

There could not have been a more blatant attempt to change the topic, but it was effective enough. Benjamin awkwardly averted his eyes, a bitter smile on his face. "I've never seen a face of such heartfelt disgust before. She completely shattered my fighting spirit, that girl. My status as crown prince and my devilish good looks have absolutely no value to her."

"Well, she's nothing more than an adventurer. Don't let it get to you."

"What would have happened without that adventurer, though?" another voice answered.

Maitreya sat arrogantly on the sofa. Beside her was a pile of papers that she had already finished doing the calculations on.

"You..." Francois said, frowning.

"Do you have some complaint with me?"

Francois sighed and closed his eyes. "No..."

Benjamin cackled. "Are you sure you don't regret staying behind, Maitreya?"

Maitreya plucked a piece of sugary candy off the table and tossed it into her mouth. "I am a city girl. Why would I want to play with dirt out in the countryside? I'm here helping you, so I should expect a bit of gratitude. That's what the rabbit says too."

In a chair by Benjamin's bedside sat Falka, having lost one of his arms. His Templar's uniform had been traded for the garb of an imperial guard. Now that Donovan was dead and the cursed sword no longer exerted its influence over him, Falka was obedient indeed. Even without one arm, he was still stronger in swordsmanship than the average soldier, so Benjamin had appointed him as a guard. The boy was still prone to flights of distraction and kept his peace, but he didn't seem reluctant to do the work.

"Yes, yes, I'm grateful." Benjamin laughed and stretched out. "They must have set off by now. I didn't think they'd refuse a send-off."

"There would be a huge uproar if Your Highness put together such a send-off. For now, just remember we'll be mocked if we don't grow enough to surprise them by the time we meet again. This is no time to lament our parting."

"Hmm, so you intend to see them again, huh?"

"No... Not really..."

Francois looked away as Benjamin picked up another document.

"But you do have a point. If I do that, perhaps Angeline will accept my proposal next time."

"Are you confident you can be a better man than the Red Ogre?" asked Maitreya.

Benjamin's eyes wandered fretfully. "Probably... Maybe..."

"What a laugh." Maitreya picked up another sugar candy. She tossed it in the air, and Falka skillfully caught it in his mouth. "Forget about that squirt. How about me? Empress Maitreya the Great—that has a nice ring to it."

"Francois, can you hand me that note from branch-leader Aileen?"

"Don't just ignore me!"

At that moment, there was a knock at the door. "Your Highness! I'm here to visit!" came Liselotte's energetic voice from the other side.

Benjamin quickly corrected his posture and patted down his bedhead.

○

Nearly two weeks after the battle, after their wounds had been treated and various other matters had been attended to, the members of the party set off for their respective destinations. Their stay in the capital hadn't been long, but they'd enjoyed a bit of sightseeing while they could. For their part, Belgrieve and the other members of his party did not intend to stay there any longer.

Angeline and Satie held hands as they jumped up and down.

"Mom! Mom!"

"Oh, Ange, my daughter!"

Kasim watched with a curious look on his face. "They do this every chance they get, but I'm glad they're having fun. What's even happening anymore?"

"Well, it's a daughter who found a mother, and a mother who found a daughter... But it's shocking that that's actually what happened here. Hey, Bell. You're quite the charmer, you know," Percival teased.

"Hey, now, quit pulling on my hair... Huh? Did you say something?"

Hal and Mal had hitched a ride on both of Belgrieve's shoulders. The twins were both dressed in heavy winter coats.

"Daaad..."

"This is a beard."

They happily tugged at Belgrieve's hair and beard.

"Good grief..." Percival shrugged. "You've turned into a father again in no time flat. There's no use in teasing you."

"Well, it doesn't feel like they're newlyweds at this point. They've both grown up and, well... What do we do, Percy? You and me, we're the only brats left."

"Don't be stupid. It's just you."

"Huh? You sure?" Kasim gave a teasing laugh as he folded his hands behind his head. "Now then, it's time to say goodbye to the capital. With all that's happened here, I'm exhausted, I am. Let's take it nice and easy for a while."

Percival nodded. "Yes... It feels like some weight has been taken off my shoulders."

Their four separate courses in life had all returned to a single path. Not that there weren't some curious loose ends remaining, but their long days of battle were finally coming to an end.

"I'm concerned about Schwartz, but... What do you think? Do you expect he'll attack us again?"

"Who knows? If he comes for us, it'll save us the trouble of looking for him."

"Heh heh heh... I like that part of you."

"And Turnera has the Paladin, right? It's far safer there than in the capital... I can't wait to meet him," Percival said, laughing.

Kasim's expression became a bit strained. "I'm begging you, don't blow the village away."

"Are you mistaking me for a fiend or something?"

Kasim casually averted his eyes.

As Belgrieve was engaged in a close fight against the twins' offensive, Satie finished jumping around with Angeline. She seemed to recall his presence, coming over and lifting Hal and Mal from his shoulders.

"Hey, no bullying dad, okay?"

Belgrieve, relieved of the twins, rolled his shoulders. "Thanks."

"Good grief, you really are adored by children, Bell... Hmm? Would you prefer I call you darling?"

"No, don't worry about it. You feel restless when you call me that, right?"

"Aha ha! Right—natural is best. Now, bigger child, take care of this smaller child for me."

"Okay, hee hee. It's your big sis..." Angeline, who had been cleaving fast to Satie, took Mal off her hands.

As she watched from the sidelines, Miriam giggled. "Your family grew again, Ange."

"This is too much happiness for me... Right now, I am invincible!" Angeline declared as she rubbed her cheek against Mal's.

"Wah!" Mal cried out, twisting as though the caress tickled.

Anessa folded her arms. "But this *is* incredible. What we thought were two completely different events came together as one."

"Right? I'm a bit envious here," Marguerite said with a laugh. To the elf princess who didn't get along with her family, such sights were evidently somewhat envy-inducing to behold.

"But rather than parent and child, they look more like sisters..."

"Sure enough. Satie is young."

Naturally, it had come as quite a surprise to find out that Angeline really was Satie's biological daughter, but Angeline had accepted this fact with great delight. She understood she hadn't been thrown away out of resentment, and it was a joy to know that her real mother had been one of Belgrieve's old comrades. And more than anything, she had a good impression of Satie herself. That nostalgic feeling she felt when she had embraced Satie before—she realized it was most likely her body remembering her mother's warmth.

Of course, this meant that Angeline really was a demon. However, they were already looking after Mit and Byaku, who were both demonic in nature, so Belgrieve and Angeline seemed to take the revelation in stride—which, in turn, left Satie as the only one taken aback by any of this.

When all was said and done, Belgrieve and Satie ended up a married couple. They were both over forty years old, had each raised children on their own, and had both settled down mentally. In spite of being newlyweds, there was no fiery passion—

rather, theirs was the calm air of a couple that had been married for many long years.

"Hey, looks like everyone's here," somebody said. Belgrieve turned to see Maureen leading Touya along. The two had come to see them off.

Belgrieve smiled. "Oh, glad you could make it... You've really helped us out. Thank you, truly."

"I should be the one saying that. I think I can change a bit now," Touya said.

Percival narrowed his eyes. "So, what are you going to do? Are you going to stay like that?"

"I think I'll go visit my mother's grave. And *his* grave, while I'm at it... I intend to return his name personally."

"I see. Well, I guess that's your way of setting things right."

"It is."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" Angeline asked, a rather confused look on her face.

Touya looked at Angeline before turning to Belgrieve with a sad smile. "I'm glad I got to meet all of you."

"We'll come to Orphen one of these days. Please show us all the good places to eat, okay?"

"Maureen, look here..." Touya grumbled, placing a hand to "his" brow.

Everyone laughed as they exchanged parting words.

Angeline placed a hand on Touya's shoulder and held it tight. "Stay well. We'll meet again, definitely."

"Yes, likewise. Treasure your mother and father, okay?"

"You don't have to tell me twice..." Angeline bragged, puffing out her chest.

Leaning against her staff, Miriam said, “In the end, we never got to see Ishmael, I guess.”

“Maybe he got busy.” Anessa nodded. “But I’m sure he’s doing all right.”

“Hey, Touya—if you ever see Ishmael, tell him I said hi, okay?”

“Aha ha! Got it—I’ll pass on the message.”

The sunlight was warm, but the breeze was already bearing the tides of winter. A lone black kite cawed as it drew a circle in the air.

Satie rolled up her sleeves. “All right, this is going to be my last teleportation. Come close, everyone.”

“Will you really be all right, Satie?”

“I’ll be fine. That scene is still burned vividly into my mind.” Satie smiled and softly chanted a short spell. All the world around them shifted and swayed. Touya and Maureen blurred and faded, and then they, too, were gone. There was a strange, floating sensation before everything was dyed pure white and they were snugly buried in something cold.

“Whoa! What’s this?!” Percival cried out in alarm as something fell on him with a soft crunching sound.

Angeline laughed. “It’s just snow, Mr. Percy.” A large pile of it had fallen from a tree overhead, crashing straight down upon his head.

As Percival brushed it off, Kasim chuckled. “Wow, this is amazing. Wouldn’t want to be stranded out here.”

“No need to worry about that. I know the way.” Belgrieve trudged through the snow that went all the way up to his knees. He could see a madder sky through the gaps in the trees which had become nothing but bundles of bare branches. Despite all the snow that had fallen, it wasn’t coming down at the moment. A wind far colder than any that blew in the capital city caressed his skin, but this coldness filled him with thoughts of home.

The snow was deep, and Belgrieve made slow headway due to his lack of snowshoes,

but that just gave him more time to ascertain their path.

When he turned, his family and companions smiled at him through the cold and followed his lead. It was quite a peculiar feeling, but he felt it was only natural when his expression relaxed.

They gradually approached the village. Beyond a plain of pure white, familiar houses were huddled closely together. It was like the rising pillars of smoke from the chimneys welcomed him back.

The journey was over. He was home.

EXTRA

FOOTSTEPS

This was the first time he had ever spent so long on a rickety wagon. Although a cloth had been spread out over the hard, wooden floor, his behind still ached. Each time a break came around, the red-haired boy would step down to stretch his body and work the stiffness out of his legs and hips. The boy had long yearned to go on such a journey, but he was already having second thoughts. Yet when he imagined the unknown world that awaited him ahead, it felt like his fatigue was all blown away.

The trees had fully turned yellow and red on the path leading away from Turnera, and they had already begun to scatter their leaves. Turnera was always one of the first places in the dukedom to see winter, and since there were already flurries in Turnera, perhaps these autumn sights were only natural farther south. Perhaps the snow in Turnera had already begun to stick. It felt like he was traveling south alongside the winter.

In Rodina, the neighboring town, he was hit by the strongest pig stench that he had ever smelled before. Then, in Bordeaux, he saw wheat fields far more expansive than all the ones back home. The sight of the wheat that had just begun to sprout its stalks made the boy feel homesick once more, but he shook his head. It was too soon for that.

He had hitched a ride with a caravan of four wagons, each driven by a merchant. The merchants' five apprentices also scurried about, and there were six adventurers hired as guards. Three of the adventurers rode with the wagons while the others scouted their surroundings on horseback.

The boy was not yet an adventurer, so he did not count himself amongst their number. Even so, he was asked to sit closest to the head of the caravan. *Maybe I'm expected to guard the merchant if it comes to it*, he reasoned. If so, he would serve as more of a decoy than a guard. Not that anyone had spoken to him of any of this, but the boy understood well enough. It was likely how he'd managed to get a hefty discount on his ride fare.

A man—presumably the leader of the adventurers—was also seated near the boy. He, too, was tasked with guarding the head of the caravan. He was a middle-aged man with

one eye and a beard, and his rank was apparently AA. He spoke little and had a sharp glint in his eye that sent people running, but after he learned that the boy longed to become an adventurer, he shared some tales of all he'd experienced in his days.

The wagon noisily bounced with a loud clunk after one of the wheels presumably hit a large stone. The boy grimaced and rubbed his lower back.

The man chuckled. "Not used to it yet?"

"N-No, not yet."

"You will be, eventually."

The ruddy-faced head merchant laughed. "You're young; it'll grow on you in no time. If you're going to be an adventurer, then you can hardly do any work if you get worn out by every wagon ride," he said drily.

The boy fidgeted, but he nodded.

The merchant grinned, then tossed a dried fruit into his mouth. "Are you planning to swap that sword of yours out for a better one?"

"I don't know yet."

"Well, I guess you've got some time to think about it. But you're entrusting your life to that sword, and I'm certain the ones you'll find in Orphen will outperform any you could get in Turnera. Actually, I could pick one out for you if you want."

"No, um..."

"Quit teasing the young'un," the adventurer said tiredly.

"I know, I know," the merchant said, cackling. "But you must be thinking the same thing. Do you think he can rise up the ranks with *that* sword?"

"We all have our own path. He needs to figure it out for himself as he gains experience. It's not just something you change because someone tells you to."

"You're such a stick in the mud—but, whatever."

"Um, if the time does come, I'll look for you before anyone else," the boy said earnestly, bowing his head.

Both the merchant and the adventurer seemed taken aback by this, but the merchant immediately burst into laughter.

"Are you sure you want to be an adventurer? An honest lad like you? Hey, why don't you give up on that and work for me? Being a merchant's not all bad."

"No, uh, I..."

"Aha ha ha ha! It's a joke, a joke! Well, go on and rise through the ranks. When you've hit the big time, you can become a regular at my shop, why don't you?"

"Y-Yes, of course." The boy was on the cusp of diving into a world completely unknown to him. Until today, the small village had been his entire world, and now he was entirely amongst strangers. And yet, he felt an odd sense of exhilaration as he headed for something he had never experienced in his fifteen years of life.

One of the apprentices leaned out of the wagon ahead of them. "Almost there, boss," he loudly called back.

"I see. Get ready, kid," the leader of the adventurers said. The merchant got to work too, leaning out the front of the wagon and issuing several orders. The boy checked over his bags and adjusted the sword at his waist.

"Take your time," the man whispered to him.

"Huh?"

"You can rise from E-Rank to D-Rank in a relatively short span of time. But don't be in a rush. Those folks who push themselves too far and run ahead too fast—they're the ones who die quickly. If you're gonna get up there eventually regardless, then you should first gain everything you possibly can at your current rank."

The boy nodded. "Yes, sir"

The man closed his one remaining eye. "I lost the other eye back when I was D-Rank. I was a bit reckless. Luckily, I survived, but sometimes I find myself missing all the sights I'd see with two eyes. If you don't want to experience those same regrets, then

you ought to take your time."

These words weighed heavily on the boy, and the elation in his heart calmed a bit. He graciously thanked the adventurer.

Eventually, the caravan passed through the city gates, and the boy was immediately overwhelmed by the sights—tall buildings, a startling number of people, and the overwhelming noise that came with them. The dusty air mingled with bizarre scents that were foreign to him. People dressed in styles he never knew existed. Each and every little thing was brand-new to his eyes and left a striking impression on him.

At the square where all the wagons and carriages gathered, the boy disembarked. This was where they parted ways—the caravan would proceed south without him.

The merchant gave a cheery laugh and smacked the boy on the shoulder. "Off you go then. Good luck! If fate wills it, we shall meet again."

The boy bowed his head. "Thank you for everything." He looked sidelong at the leader of the adventurers. The man was having a discussion with the other adventurers under his command and wasn't looking his way.

Not wanting to get in his way, the boy turned to leave, only to hear the one-eyed man's voice call out from behind. "Don't die," he said.

The city was a confusing jumble of people. Turnera was never this crowded, not even for festivals. Awkwardly slipping his way through these people, the boy felt overwhelmed by the ever-changing cityscape as he made his way for the adventurer's guild.

The guild was a large building; its white walls gleamed in the light of the westerling sun. Although it looked so pristine and radiant from afar, once he was closer, he could see the walls bore scrapes, gashes, and chips of all sizes—yet these only added to the place's solemn dignity somehow.

It was just as crowded inside as out, and no one paid him any mind as he entered. After all, there was an endless stream of people coming and going. The boy felt grateful for the anonymity—he didn't really like drawing attention to himself.

There were plenty of people who were probably adventurers milling about in the lobby. Some wore armor and wielded swords and spears, while others were instead

adorned in heavy robes. It wasn't anything he hadn't seen before—adventurers would pass through Turnera now and again—but seeing so many of them crammed together set the boy's heart racing as he realized he was going to be one of them from now on.

Unconsciously, his stride became cautious and wary as he made his way to the counter. A receptionist woman welcomed him with a soft smile. "Hello. How can I help you today?"

"Um, I want to become an adventurer."

For a moment, the receptionist's gaze was sharp as she appraised him, but soon enough she was smiling again. Producing a sheet of paper, she set it down on the counter alongside a quill pen. "Please fill out this form then."

The boy could read and write, but he did not use these skills on a daily basis, and it was a bit nerve-racking. With a careful, deliberate hand, he filled out every entry. "Is that good enough...?"

"Let me have a look." The receptionist scanned through the form, confirming each box one by one. "Yes, that should just about do it. You will be starting at E-Rank. Although you are restricted in the difficulty level of the requests you can take, as long as you keep working at it, you will eventually raise your rank. In the interests of safety and efficiency, we highly recommend joining a party, though we will not require you to do so. If you want, you can receive some basic training from a guild-certified instructor for a nominal fee. Please don't hesitate to use our services."

The receptionist went on to explain various other things, and the boy listened to it all, his face as serious as could be. Once the explanation was done, the receptionist giggled. "You're very earnest."

"Pardon?"

"For most, this talk goes in one ear and out the other."

"R-Really?" *Is that how adventurers are supposed to be?* he wondered, scratching his cheek. He felt a bit embarrassed as he feared he was exposing himself as a country boy.

The receptionist looked him over as she continued giggling. "Break a leg, uh..." she glanced down at the paperwork. "Mr. Belgrieve."

The boy—Belgrieve—bashfully nodded.

○

“Hey, what do you think you’re doing?!” the man yelled as Belgrieve grabbed him from behind. He turned, breaking free of Belgrieve’s grasp and grabbing him in turn by the lapels. “Why did you stop me?!” the man demanded. “I was so close to taking it down!”

“That was a trap! If you thrust your sword out, it would have shot its poison needles!”

“Shut it! If I just took down that thing, I’d have all the materials I needed. Now I’m back to square one!”

“But you’d be dead, then.”

“Dead? Please! You brought some antidotes, didn’t you?!”

“For a different poison. *Those* needles have a neurotoxin. I told you to stock up on the medicine, but you said it was a waste of money...”

“I’ve had it with you!”

Belgrieve was jolted by sudden pain in his cheek and the gradual heat that followed being struck in the face.

“Enough. It’s just frustrating, sticking around with a coward like you. Everyone else thinks the same. This is your last day with us—you got that?!”

The man shoved Belgrieve and stormed off with the rest of his party. The others glanced at Belgrieve, but their eyes held no pity for him. In fact, they looked a bit relieved.

Life in the big city was completely different from what Belgrieve had known in Turnera. For starters, whatever he wanted to do, money was an absolute necessity. He needed money if he wanted to sleep on a proper bed, and he needed it to eat too. As Belgrieve did not have enough to rent a house, he hunkered down at a cheap inn and focused on jobs that mainly involved gathering herbs to earn his keep.

He struggled to find any hunting requests he could take. There weren’t many hunts for E-Rank adventurers in the first place. From what he’d heard, taking those jobs was a

quick way to rise to D-Rank, but Belgrieve, recalling the advice of the one-eyed man, couldn't bring himself to take one whenever it did come around. Back home, he'd had a bit of pride in his sword arm, but once he began to live in Orphen, he quickly realized there were countless people better than him. This was no time to be hasty; he needed to learn everything he could.

Even so, as he saw young adventurers no older than himself vigorously taking on those hunting jobs, a part of him couldn't help but feel just a little bit impatient. *I should be able to do that much*, he'd think. But his rational side counseled patience, and these parts of him clashed, leading to many days of restlessness.

There was a bulletin board in the guild that parties would use to recruit new members. It was plastered with plenty of flyers filled with names and contact information—or rather, usually just the address of whatever inn the given party was staying at. Those either seeking to join a party or searching for someone to join their existing party would take a name from the board and start from there. With that said, the recruiting parties all had certain conditions for whom they would accept. For instance, they specified that applicants be of a certain rank or that they be backline fighters like magicians or archers. In uncommon cases, some of these even specified age and sex.

It turned out that many of these parties consisted of groups of friends that had left home together though. Joining these groups after the fact took a bit of courage, but Belgrieve knew he wasn't in a position to be concerned with such things. He did his best to reach out to a party seeking a vanguard fighter and finally obtained his opportunity to go up against fiends.

But while he had been welcomed at first, his cautious nature and the behavior and knowledge he had picked up in a desperate attempt to be useful had backfired on him. Gradually, they had begun to ostracize him, and in the end, he had been driven out of the group.

"But if he had died... that would be the end," Belgrieve muttered.

He wondered how everyone else had so much confidence that they would come out unharmed regardless of the situation. It was far too easy to kick the bucket—even in the safety of Turnera, someone who was happily working alongside you one day could be killed by a falling tree the next. Belgrieve recalled that very thing happening to someone he knew. *Life is fleeting—why is everyone so certain they'll always come out on top?*

The fledgling adventurers were all hasty. There were three types of adventurers—those who went with the flow, those who needed money, and those who dreamed of reaching the higher ranks. None of them were fond of sticking around the bottom of the ladder for long. Belgrieve felt the same, but the words of the one-eyed man had been carved into his heart. Moreover, he could temper his ambitions—and it was this, perhaps, that had stoked the discord between himself and these other adventurers.

They had traveled to a mountain range about an hour out from Orphen. It wasn't too dangerous, but it was still a habitat for fiends, and civilians generally stayed well away. The sun was setting, and the wind was piercingly cold; spending the night here would be unwise. Belgrieve stood up and brushed the dirt from his clothes. He knew he had a cut somewhere inside his mouth when he spit on the ground and his saliva was striped with red.

"Ah..." *What do I do from tomorrow on?* Belgrieve wondered. He had already learned the limits of what he could do on his own, so he would have to find another party. But if it was his behavior and personality that were driving people away, perhaps he would have to start by changing that. *Yes—I could go along with the others and rush forth into battle without a second thought, not balking at the fear of injury, putting my life on the line...*

Belgrieve shook his head. "No, I can't. That just won't cut it."

Amongst the upper echelons of adventurers—those who were up to fighting dragons and archdevils—perhaps that would work out. Against such foes, there was no choice but to risk death if there were to be any chance of victory. *But what does an E-Rank adventurer accomplish by risking his life against low-ranking fiends? It would be a different story if he were protecting a town or village. But what's the point of risking an arm, a leg, an eye, or even one's life for a bit of loot?*

"I'm not cut out for this job... Good grief..." Belgrieve said self-deprecatingly, and laughed. This was his dream; he should have been smiling. Instead, the sights around him seemed strangely bleary.

○

The boy's flaxen hair swayed in the wind. He had let it grow long out of mere indolence, and he had no particular attachment to it. At first, it had tickled when it brushed against his forehead and nape, but he had already grown used to it.

The boy was sharpening a dirt-cheap blade. If he couldn't afford a good cutting edge, he just had to make one himself. Not that he had a good quality whetstone, but if he invested enough time, even a cheap sword would amount to something. Unfortunately, it also meant he had to resharpen it after every engagement.

The boy had been born to the headsman of a small village. Everyone there worked the fields, reared livestock, and occasionally hunted for a living. It had been a peaceful life, aside from the occasional fiends that cropped up. Though the town was small, it had an inn and a pub patronized by any adventurers passing through, and for the right price, they would reliably handle these fiends.

The land was fertile, and as long as one was willing to do the work, the soil would yield them rewards in turn. In their daily lives, they tended their fields, wrangled livestock, and gave prayers to Almighty Vienna over every meal. It was the sort of small, tranquil village one might find anywhere.

But the boy hadn't been content with that life. He wasn't scornful of such peaceful living, but he resented that everyone treated this way of life as a matter of course, and how they would foist it upon him as well as a matter of course. As he was the son of the headsman, he was treated as such, and his parents believed with all their heart that he should inherit the position. They would harshly scold him whenever he voiced his longing for the outside world.

His parents and the other villagers would tell him, "You will live here and die here. That is your fate. A farmer should not aim too high." *But who decided that?* the boy lamented. *My life is my own. It doesn't belong to anyone else.* The flame of rebellion smoldered in his heart, fanned by every scolding and lecture, until the night he finally grabbed all his things and left.

After traveling for a few days, he arrived in Orphen, a place he had only ever heard of in stories. When he first beheld the city, it was so large he felt dizzy, yet his heart jumped for joy. Everything seemed practically radiant to him.

The boy looked over his sharpened sword front to back. The blade glistened and reflected the lamplight.

"All right." He sheathed the blade, then lay down on his bed and stared up at the ceiling. Each time the lamp flickered, the shadows it cast would set about in their twisting dance.

Tomorrow would be a joint hunting request. A few adventurers and parties below C-Rank had been cobbled together to subjugate an abnormal outbreak of humanoid fiends. Even now, the fiends were mobbing around a dungeon, hemmed in by high-ranking adventurers keeping a close watch on them. The guild had organized the joint hunt in order to give the lower-ranking adventurers a bit of combat experience, so the high-ranking adventurers wouldn't participate in the action. It was a bit irritating to know that the opportunity had been presented to him on a silver platter, but there was really no use in looking a gift horse in the mouth.

The boy knew he had some skill to boast of. When he looked at other swordsmen his age, he was confident he could beat them all handily. But he knew he could be willful and that he tended to get tunnel vision when he focused too hard on one thing. These traits had caused conflict in all the parties he'd been in before—which, inevitably, left him with no way to raise his rank. He was one of the few solo adventurers to be joining the hunt.

“Isn’t there anyone half decent?” The boy crossed one leg over the other as he lay there. Setting aside his own personality defects, nobody in any of the parties he’d been in before had caught his eye. Sure, they were all inexperienced, but that wasn’t the issue. They all generally were aiming for the top, but they were either charging forth in a headlong rush or just treating it as a game of sorts. The boy wanted to climb even higher. He dreamed of the tales of heroes he’d heard from the roaming folk, minstrels, and wayfaring adventurers. He wanted to lock blades with dragons and demons and all manner of terrors.

If only there was someone who could guide me there. He closed his eyes—though he was confident with his sword, he was well aware of his own flaws. However, he considered his strength to be directly connected to his flaws. When the time came to overcome the odds, he knew he could go forth without a shred of hesitation. To put it kindly, he was unwavering—but less kindly, he was lacking in judgment.

If I had a comrade who could analyze the situation and grasp the right timing... the boy thought. He was aware of his tunnel vision and knew it would be difficult to fix it now. He needed someone who could make good use of his strengths, and then he’d be able to cut loose without worry. *Am I hoping for too much...?* That worry lingered in his mind unanswered as he drifted off to sleep.

The next day was immediately upon him, and with his honed blade in hand, the boy set off for the rendezvous point. Plenty of adventurers had already gathered there by

the time he arrived. Soon enough, a guild-affiliated high-ranker took command and began directing them around.

Although the low-ranking adventurers were out for blood, the high-ranking ones on standby around them (on the off chance that something went drastically wrong) were calm as could be. They looked over the neophytes, their faces the picture of composure—that alone was enough to show the difference in class.

Just you watch. I'll be standing where you are someday.

The flaxen-haired boy looked around. They were on the plains and there was generally fine visibility to be had, but it wasn't perfectly flat terrain—there were hillocks and hollows in places too. Off in the distance, he could hear the growling and snarling of a great many fiends—and they could hear the adventurers too.

Eventually, the battle commenced. The adventurers rushed forth, scrambling to be the first to have at the fiends. For their part, the fiends pressed forward, just as bloodthirsty as their hunters. It was only moments after the vanguard fighters of each side collided that the battlefield became a chaotic melee. The air was filled with shrieking and yelling, chanting, and the sound of metal striking metal.

The boy took it all in a tad wearily as he kept his distance from the fray, dispatching only the fiends that managed to slip past the berserkers. *They're even worse than me*, he thought. He understood their desire to make names for themselves, but once it descended into this kind of mayhem, there was no way of knowing what was going on anymore. The formation the commander had put them in at the start had been completely wasted.

“Is this what I look like in others' eyes...?”

It was like the newbies were going on a rampage as they pressed on. It was a little depressing to think about with the realization that he wasn't much better than them. He took on an approaching goblin and grimaced after his third strike. He'd spent so much time sharpening the blade, but the cutting edge was quickly lost.

“No... Not good!” Suddenly, a nearby boy with red hair cried out and dashed off to the other side of the unit. “This way! They're coming!”

The blond boy looked after him blankly, only to then notice a contingent of fiends that had broken off from the main force and taken a wide detour. The adventurer army that

only knew how to push forward was about to take a sharp blow to the flank.

The nearby adventurers cried out and hurriedly took on a defensive formation. They were a step behind, sure, but they weren't about to be taken by surprise.

So that red-haired boy noticed the sneak attack in the middle of this chaotic free-for-all...
The boy smiled. *I can't let him get away.*

Soon, the battle was over. They had the support of the high-ranking adventurers, so it was an overwhelming victory. Weaving through the crowd as everybody headed back to the guild, the boy with straw-colored hair searched out the boy with red hair.

"Shut up! We don't need any useless members! Get lost!" somebody angrily shouted.

When he turned to look at the commotion, he saw the red-haired boy wearily shrugging his shoulders. The red-haired boy adjusted the bags on his back and made to go on his way, so the flaxen-haired boy made a beeline for him. "Hey!" he called out.

The red-haired boy stopped and turned, but he didn't seem certain that he was the one being spoken to. After looking about himself curiously, his eyes turned back to the boy with straw-colored hair. "Are you talking to me?"

"Yeah. You're really something."

"I... am? What do you mean?"

"What do I mean? Well... that sneak attack. I'm surprised you noticed it."

"Yes... Well..." The red-haired boy awkwardly stumbled over his words.

There's no doubt about it. He's a good guy, and he's ridiculously skilled. We'll definitely reach the top if I team up with him. The blond-haired boy grinned cheerfully. "I like you! How about joining my party?"

"Huh? Um, your party?"

"That's right! I saw what just happened—my apologies—but you're on your own, right?"

"That's true..." The red-haired boy scratched his head. "But I've been in several parties

so far, and they've all kicked me out. I don't know if I can meet your expectations."

"What are you talking about?! There'd definitely have been more casualties if you hadn't noticed that ambush! I was watching. You're pretty impressive! Team up with me, would you?"

For a short while, the red-haired boy's eyes wandered in bewilderment, but eventually, he nodded, an awkward smile on his face. The blond boy laughed aloud before holding out a hand.

"The name's Percival," he said. "Percy, if you'd like. I won't lose to anyone in swordsmanship. Nice to meet you."

"I'm Belgrieve. It's a pleasure, Percy."

Belgrieve timidly offered his hand, but when Percival took it, his grip was firm.

○

The streets of Orphen were packed with loud, exuberant crowds coming and going, while wagons and carriages rattled along the larger roads. The stone pavement reflected the sunlight above on this dry, dusty day.

After joining Percival's party, Belgrieve's first surprise was learning that the other boy had also been alone. Belgrieve assumed there would be others given how the blond had called it his "party." "We're going to start forming the party now. You're the first one," Percival had explained without a hint of shame.

Percival was different from anyone in any of the parties Belgrieve had been in until now. After all, he had been the one to reach out to Belgrieve, having seen some value in his abilities. It was a bit of a strange feeling to start off with such a high evaluation, and it made Belgrieve feel a bit uneasy overall.

The day after they'd formed their party, Percival moved his things to a room in the inn Belgrieve was staying at. As a frugal lad, Belgrieve had chosen an inn that was as cheap as possible while still having acceptable amenities. Upon seeing it, Percival was delighted to have found what he considered an upgrade.

Now they were living close to one another as well, and Belgrieve was a bit antsy. But Percival was an open book; he was cheerful and full of laughter, and it was always fun

to talk to him. It wasn't long before Belgrieve opened his heart and got to thinking it was a blessing that they had formed a party after all.

After they'd discussed a few things, they quickly got to locking blades. Belgrieve found himself completely outmatched, taken aback by Percival's capabilities. "You're strong..."

"Didn't I tell you? I'm not gonna lose to anyone with a sword." Percival grinned as he twirled his wooden sword again. "You've got the basics down, but you lack confidence. There's no vigor in your sword."

"Yeah, I knew that..." Belgrieve smiled wryly as he retrieved his wooden sword, which had tumbled across the floor.

Percival yawned. "Now then, how about we head to the guild? It's time for this party to make its debut."

"It's just the two of us... And we're both swordsmen."

"Hey, no worries. You watch my back, I watch yours. And that's that." With that, Percival was off. *Is this really going to be all right?* Belgrieve wondered as he followed along.

Considering the end result, their first request would have gotten an absolutely dreadful score. They'd gone on a fiend hunt at Percival's request, but they had run across more fiends than they'd bargained for. Though they had managed to defeat them, the battle had gotten so desperate that by the end of it, hardly any usable materials could be taken from the corpses. To add insult to injury, some of the fiends had rather hard carapaces, and Percival's cheap sword ended up snapped right in two.

Percival's skills were splendid. He had pressed forward without a hint of hesitation and handled himself brilliantly as he dispatched one fiend after another. However, they had been after the fiends' pelts, and Percival had deftly hacked them to pieces. Ultimately, the request couldn't receive a passing grade, and with the destruction of his sword, it was no exaggeration to say this was a massive failure.

"The edge was awful. Always has been. That's why I had to put in extra strength and hack and slash 'em several times to get the kill," Percival offered as an excuse once they'd returned to the inn.

Belgrieve sighed. “Do you want to complete the job, or do you just want to beat up fiends? Which is it?”

“The job, of course. We’re still at the very bottom, and we can’t go up if we don’t work.”

“Then it’s not going to happen like this. You’re skilled enough. If we’re supposed to collect pelts, aim to take their heads in one strike, or do something else that leaves them a bit cleaner. With that said, let’s buy you a better sword. It’s a waste if your tools are holding you back from using your skills.”

“Right, the next one will go just fine, mark my words. How about a drink to pep us up?”

“Not until we replace your sword. And no hunting requests for the time being—we have to earn some money first.”

“Huh? Can’t you just lend me your sword?”

“Then... what am I supposed to do?”

“Oh... Right. Got it. No choice, then.”

They were stuck saving up the needed funds, but with Belgrieve taking charge, they managed to diligently complete a decent amount of work—though it consisted entirely of collecting herbs and other relatively safe materials. Percival would grumble under his breath, but he had no sword to use anyways, and he knew Belgrieve had a point. Despite his complaints, he did his part diligently.

They spent some time doing that, and there was only a little longer until Percival could afford a new sword. The duo went around to various smithies to do some preliminary inspections.

“I’ll finally have my weapon back. Good grief, I’ve gotten bored of all the gathering jobs.”

“But you’ve gotten pretty skilled at it. I’m honestly surprised. I was convinced you’d be terrible at gathering.”

“Yeah, well, you know. You’re quite something yourself. Is that what you were doing before you came here?”

"Well... It was a small village. Everyone learned to gather herbs there... You too?"

"Pretty much. I left because I hated it, though."

There was a moment of silence. It was clear neither of them really wanted to talk much about home. But just before the mood could turn awkward, a loud shriek broke the silence.

"Wait! You damn brat!"

When Belgrieve turned to look, he saw a boy dressed in dirty rags burst from a nearby alley, his brown hair billowing behind him. A middle-aged man in an apron chased after him, gasping for breath.

"S-Someone catch that brat! He dined and dashed!"

"Hmm, interesting. You think we'll get a reward?" Percival said as he courageously stood in the boy's path. He had no sword, but Percival was decently skilled with hand-to-hand combat as well.

"C'mon, shorty! Give up if you don't want to get hurt!"

The brown-haired boy's eyes widened for a brief moment, but he quickly formed a smile close to a sneer. He swung his arm as though he were clumsily throwing a ball.

"Whoa?!"

All of a sudden, a pale-blue mass of mana assailed Percival. He was caught off guard and took it head-on, and was blasted to the side of the road. As the brown-haired boy raced by, he glanced at Percival with a scoff and stuck his tongue out at Belgrieve, who had stood by and watched, stunned. And then he was gone.

"Magic Bullet... at that age..." Belgrieve muttered to himself before he came to his senses and rushed over to Percival's side. "You okay, Percy?"

"Ow, ow... Never would have guessed he'd be a magician." Percival rubbed his head as he slowly got up. "He's pretty skilled if he can knock me away like that. I like him. Hey, let's look for that kid. He's joining the party."

"Huh?"

"A slum brat, from what I could see. He'd have looked a bit tidier if he was from an orphanage, and he didn't look like an adventurer either. If he can use magic that strong at his age, he's definitely going to be a big shot. We've got to nab him before anyone else can."

"No, uh, wait a second..."

"What? You're the one who said we need a backline fighter?"

"We do, but... Are you serious? You don't even know what sort of person he is."

"Oh, quit complaining. *You* joined my party before you knew the sort of person *I* was, right? It's all the same. Trust me."

Belgrieve sighed sardonically and scratched his head. He knew there was no stopping Percival once he got like this. "Fine. Well, you're a good judge of people, so I'll leave it to you."

"All right. Now that that's settled, we've got to start by tracking him down!"

○

The boy had never seen the faces of his parents. His earliest memory was of lying in a ramshackle hut amidst all the trash that ended up in the slums. There were plenty of adults in the slums, but there were just as many children. Some had been abandoned there as babies, while others had been left destitute once they'd lost their parents.

There were all sorts of adults there too. Some of them couldn't work after suffering a grave injury; others were former adventurers with no home to return to. There were criminals eluding the law, magicians lying low, servants banished by their former masters, and prostitutes who took customers in small, unsanitary tents. All sorts of lives intersected in that place.

The boy assumed his dark brown hair came from one of his parents, but no one around had any clue who they were. Back when the old man who had picked him up was still alive, he would always open his toothless mouth wide and laugh when the topic was brought up.

"You were thrown away, plain and simple," he would say. "On a winter night. It was snowing hard, you know—you would have frozen to death if I hadn't found you."

"Yeah, I heard that already. Can't you tell me something new?" The boy looked up from the grimoire he was reading and frustratedly slumped back against the wall.

The old man was a drunkard who had a habit of fishing through the city's trash for anything that caught his eye. He made a living by selling his haul to pawn shops, or failing that, he begged. The man had raised him, but the boy didn't like the man very much. So when the old man died, the boy wasn't particularly saddened. He hated dumpster diving, and he hated begging. Rather than taking someone's leftovers, he wanted to earn something with his own strength.

There were many criminals in the slums. Most committed petty crimes to survive, but the kids around his age had a sort of romantic view of crime. They would steal or skip out on bills as though it were some sort of competition. Naturally, this boy did likewise. The other kids had built their own groups, as children do, but the boy was shy by nature and did not join any of them. Even in the society of children those that stood out were ostracized. Since he didn't have any friends among the other kids, he was sure he would live his entire life alone.

What changed his fate was a single tome he had pilfered from a stall at the side of the road. He would have usually sold off a book like this, but the boy found himself flipping through the pages, drawn to it. Reading and writing was one thing he'd learned from the adults living in the slums, so he could decipher the pages, somehow or another. And the more he read, the more he was entranced by the profoundly mysterious world of magic. He read it front to back again and again, engaged in self-directed practice sessions, and finally learned to use simple spells. Once that happened, the world began to look different to him.

The boy closed the grimoire and stepped outside. The bare dirt ground was uneven, marred with pools of mud in some places. It was dirty, smelly, and dusty, so much so that it dragged him back to reality from the world of fantastical magic he had just been wandering through.

This was where he was born and raised, but it wasn't home to him. That said, he had no idea how to live anywhere else. Immersing himself in magic was the one diversion he had, and he furthered his misdeeds to put his spells to the test. This was something he found rather interesting—it was fun to tease the stupid adults with magic.

"Adventurers, huh?" the boy muttered.

He thought back to the boys—both only two or three years older than him—who had tried to waylay him the other day. One of them had a sword, so they were probably adventurers.

He had been to the guild before. There were no restrictions on adventurer registration, and it wasn't that rare for orphans in the slums to pick up some work that way. The boy had reached the point where he could do so himself.

But even if the slum kids did register with the guild, there wasn't much work for children who lacked proper weapons. In the lower ranks, even the adult adventurers were scrambling to find work. The competition among the kids was fiercer with their more limited options. Many days, they would fail to find any work at all. Thus, he had never once considered himself an adventurer.

Sure, the boy didn't want to live a life of crime if he could avoid it, but considering his upbringing and personality, he was just as indifferent towards herb gathering and city cleanup jobs. His shyness prevented him from asking for instruction from anyone either. In the end, he felt he couldn't live without thieving and bilking.

Who does he think he is, standing out there like he's some hero of justice? The boy's expression relaxed, and he found himself bursting into laughter. *With my magic, even an adventurer with a sword is no match for me.*

But there was a limit to what he could do with a single grimoire. The more he dove into the world of magic, the more his curiosity blossomed—to the point that continuing to live this way now felt terribly unsatisfying.

“Found you!”

The boy flinched at the sudden booming voice. He glanced over to see a boy with flaxen hair racing for him with a gleeful look on his face.

“Agh!” *It’s that kid from yesterday! I didn’t think he’d chase me here!* The boy was caught off guard, but he wasn't just going to let himself be nabbed. He began to run away frantically.

“Don’t run! Just come with me!”

“D-Don’t come any closer!” He ran as fast as his feet would take him, but the boy chasing him was going at an unnatural pace. It was like the boy was the embodiment

of the will to pursue and capture him.

I mean, I just knocked him off his feet once. It's very immature of him to hold a grudge this strong, the brown-haired boy thought as he gritted his teeth. He wondered what was in store for him if he was captured—a thrashing from the adventurers, getting turned over to the soldiery, or both, perhaps. Whatever it was, he knew it wouldn't be anything good. Sure, he could use magic, but he wasn't optimistic enough to believe he would come out unharmed in a fight against an active adventurer—a swordsman, no less.

Using his extensive knowledge of the back alleys, the brown-haired boy darted left and right, occasionally firing off magic bullets until finally, he had shaken off the blond-haired boy. Once he realized he was safe, he fell to his knees. He listened to the hammering of his heart as he steadied his breath.

“Huff, huff... Goddammit, what a guy...”

After he collected himself, he kept on his toes as he made his way back to his hut.

Two days went by, and erring on the side of caution, the boy kept a low profile the whole time. He didn't pick any pockets or do any dining-and-dashing. Truthfully, he couldn't bring himself to even try. He got the feeling that blond boy would pop up the moment he got up to anything, and this kept him very anxious.

It was rare for the brown-haired boy to be so well-behaved, and the kids of the slums began to whisper amongst themselves. Rumors of the chase had already spread far and wide.

“He lost his nerve, he did.”

“Hmph! He was all high and mighty before, just because he could use a bit of magic. Someone ought to catch him and hand him over to the soldiers.”

Malicious gossip tended to make its way to its target. Provoked by all the unfounded whisperings, the boy finally set foot outside. *Who's lost his nerve, huh?*

Now that he was outside again, the slums were the same as they had ever been. There wasn't anyone lying in wait for him, nor were there any soldiers on patrol. The boy scoffed, feeling like an idiot for ever being scared at all. *What mischief should I do to make up for lost time?*

He headed for the market. As per usual, the city market was teeming with people. This made it far easier to operate.

As he strolled around, weaving his way between the stalls, his eyes locked onto a stand that sold enchanted items. They seemed to have several grimoires in stock. Though he was certainly hungry, his curiosity won out over his stomach. The boy looked through the merchandise, taking several fleeting glances at the stout fellow running the place. The man was drowsily nodding off, his eyelids fighting a losing battle. *How careless*, the boy thought as he picked up a grimoire and pretended to continue perusing the other merchandise while stealthily slipping into the shadow of another customer. Bit by bit, he was distancing himself from the stall. Now, all that was left was to run.

Easy pickings. Now I can finally learn some new spells, he thought, a slight smile spreading across his face. His elation immediately turned to surprise as the grimoire in his hands suddenly glowed with purple light, which then took on the shape of a rope to bind his legs. He toppled over to the ground, and the rope stretched to bind the rest of him.

"This is very troublesome, dear customer. You need to pay for the merchandise." The shopkeeper from before was approaching him with a smile. But his eyes were not jovial in the slightest. "Only idiots steal magical items. Did you not consider there might be a spell to catch thieves put in place?"

The boy twisted and writhed. "W-Wait, hold up! I wasn't trying to steal it or anything!"

"That's what all thieves say." Looking down over the boy with cold eyes, the shopkeeper gestured with his finger. The boy cried out as the magical rope constricted. "Now what to do with you? I could turn you over to the soldiers like this."

"I-I'm sorry, really! I'll give it back! In fact, just take it!"

"No can do, no can do. That's a very expensive tome you've taken. I can't stand the thought of your grubby hands even touching it."

The boy could see a soldier on patrol coming his way at that very moment. His face clouded over with despair at the thought that he would be captured for something so stupid. As the shopkeeper was about to call for the guard, the boy heard a flurry of footsteps, and then—the flaxen-haired boy burst onto the scene.

"Hey, hold that thought! I can't have you dragging that kid away!"

“Urgh... You!”

“Finally found you. What are you even doing, stupid?”

The blond boy looked down at the brown-haired boy wearily. He desperately writhed about trying to escape, but that was looking increasingly unlikely now. He was stuck between a rock and a hard place.

“How persistent can you be?! I just knocked you around a bit...”

“That’s exactly why! You’re not getting away this time!”

“Whoa, stop! Stop!”

Still on the ground, the boy tried to bend and contort his body like a shrimp to get away, yet his efforts were futile.

The keeper of the magic shop looked at the blond dubiously. “Who are you? A friend of his?”

“Nah, that isn’t it. Look, does it really matter who I am? Just forgive him, please. If it helps, I’ll even buy that book there.”

“Huh? Why...?”

Seeing the brown-haired boy taken aback, the shopkeeper looked back at the straw-haired boy and stroked his chin.

“If you’re going to buy it, so be it. I don’t want any trouble either. But it’s pretty expensive.”

“How much are we talking?” When the shopkeeper whispered the price to him, the boy turned pale. “That much...?”

“Too much for you? Well, then he’s going in the slammer. Hey, guard!”

When the shopkeeper began calling down the law again, the red-haired boy stepped in. “Here.”

“Hmm? Oh... oh!” The shopkeeper’s expression changed as he counted the money

handed to him. He was put in quite a swell mood with his business smile on full display.
“This is more than what the grimoire costs. Are you sure?”

“Consider it compensation for the trouble you’ve gone through. In exchange, please forgive this guy and forget this ever happened.”

“Oh, I will, I will indeed. Oh, what a good day it is!” With a swish of the shopkeeper’s finger, the purple light dissipated. He returned to his stall with a skip in his step.

The brown-haired boy sat stunned for some time before hugging the grimoire to his chest. “Um, why...?”

“You buffoon. I can’t recruit you into my party if you get sent to prison.”

The brown-haired boy’s eyes spun as the straw-haired boy thwacked him on the head.
“Party? What are you talking about? I’m not an adventurer...”

“So become one, then. That’s what I went to talk to you about the other day, but you ran away. Thanks to that, I’ve been doing nothing but searching for you these past few days. Haven’t even gotten any work done.”

“I... I mean, I was sure you were going to catch me and turn me in...”

“Why would I do something that stupid!?” the straw-haired boy asked, incensed.

“Percy,” the red-haired boy chimed in exasperatedly. “Anyone would run if you chased after them that doggedly. I warned you.”

“Oh, shut it. What was I supposed to do? It’s his fault for running.”

“You’re being unreasonable again...”

“Still, I’m surprised you had that sort of money lying around, Bell.”

“That was the budget for your sword.”

“What!?” The blond boy rounded on his friend. “Why did you use it, then!?”

“I mean, you wanted to recruit the kid, right? He’d be in a cell if I didn’t pay it.”

"I mean, I get that... but that doesn't mean... My sword..." All of his zeal from before seemed to vanish, and seeing the straw-haired boy in such low spirits, the boy with brown hair couldn't help but laugh. The object of his mirth frowned before storming up to him and smacking him on the head.

"Ow! What are you doing?!"

"Shut up! When you get down to it, this is your fault, fool! You're gonna be working hard in our party! Don't you run away!"

"G-Got it... But are you okay with me?"

"I wouldn't go this far if I wasn't. You can have that grimoire, so polish up your skills a bit. We'll be high-ranking adventurers someday. If you can't keep up, you'll be left in the dust."

The brown-haired boy looked at the red-haired boy, flustered. "I-Is that true?"

"Ha ha! We might be able to make it there if we have you around," the red-haired boy said, shrugging.

The brown-haired boy looked at them restlessly. "Um... Thanks for saving me and all that. My name's Kasim. Nice to meet you."

"Kasim, huh? I'm Percival. Call me Percy."

"I'm Belgrieve. It's a pleasure, Kasim."

They both patted him on the shoulder, and Kasim laughed bashfully.

Percival raised his arm high. "All right! Now that we've got a new member, let's drink to that!"

"No... As I just told you, our wallet's empty. We won't be able to drink for a while."

"Huh?"

○

Elven territory was vast, spanning the entirety of the continent's northern part from

east coast to west. Most of it consisted of forests, a dense shroud of trees. It was also cold for most of the year, and snow was a very common sight.

As one would expect, this was the home of elves, but as a race, they didn't come together en masse to form countries. Instead, they tended to have smaller settlements that dotted their vast lands, sometimes coming and going between them. Each clan had its own ruler, but there was no king who united the entirety of the territory. As expansive as the land was, there were many different climates and environments, which made for substantially different cultures between settlements.

The settlement the girl was born in lay at the base of a mountain in eastern elven territory. A biting cold would cascade down the mountain slopes, and snow was ever present on the mountainside even in the middle of summer. The settlement was relatively close to the world of humans, and now and then, she would go to the humans' marketplace to peddle wares.

Though elves gave much credence to spirituality, they weren't ascetics. They were physical beings with material needs; if they didn't eat, they would starve, and they needed clothes to survive the elements. They could mostly provide for themselves through hunting, gathering, and farming, but some things could only be obtained from others. With that said, their trade was mostly with other elves.

Humans would salivate for all the materials found in elven territory. Indeed, in human lands, these rare materials could only be found in the unexplored wilds or in the deepest depths of dungeons. But they were easy enough to come by in the elven north; there were plenty of rumel leaves for medicine, and even dense groves of ohma trees, from which elixirs were derived. The elves would harvest leaves and sap and trade with humans for salt, iron, cloth, wheat, and vegetables.

The market was on the border. The spacious square was lined with several stalls manned by peddlers and caravans of roaming folk, selling goods from all over the land. There was music, and song and dance, and it was always as lively as a festival whenever the girl was there. The stalls of the elves were just as lively—human peddlers were all keen on buying products that only elves could obtain, and the elves wearily dealt with them all day.

Amidst all this hustle and bustle, the girl pulled a hood over her head and stealthily slipped away from her elven troupe. She slipped into the crowd, taking each step cautiously as she headed for the checkpoint. The girl had grown sick and tired of her

life in elven territory. Day after day, she would confront her inner self in meditation before modestly endeavoring in her work. It was a life no other elf would even question, but to her, it was too dull and boring to bear.

From the very start, she had harbored in her heart a vague discontentment with this traditional lifestyle. She did not understand why being an elf should determine how she lived her life. Such thoughts had constantly smoldered within her and cast long shadows over her daily life. The last straw that convinced her to leave had been the heroic tales of one of her brethren. From the elves, a hero known as the Paladin had appeared, earning fame and glory far and wide. The moment she had learned of him, a longing for far-distant lands sprouted within her. It was small at first. But each time she saw all the many kinds of people at the marketplace, the sprout grew and grew.

She had had her reservations, of course, but her longing and curiosity ultimately won out. Surely the snow-covered trees couldn't be all there was to the world. She wanted to go somewhere far away and simply be somewhere else. The girl was confident in her skills with swords and sorcery that she had developed as a huntress. Bolstered by the recklessness that came from her youth, she had finally set off.

Beyond the checkpoint, she traversed the Keatai mountain road, and as her eyes reflected the endless, emerald plains of Tyldes, her heart was racing in her chest. *I want to go even farther*, she realized.

She didn't have any particular reason—it was just what she desired. *That's right... Where did the Paladin go on his adventures? It was a Western country, I think. The world there is completely different than it is in the East. If I make it there, maybe it'll finally feel like I've gone far enough.*

The girl continued her journey westward, sometimes by wagon and at others by foot. She learned to make money with her sword, then learned the taste of alcohol soon after that. Every day was filled to the brim with new experiences, and for better or worse, her heart never knew rest.

The fact she was an elf naturally drew attention to her, and she often found herself being picked on by peculiar people, but she always managed to fight her way through any trouble. This, too, was a new experience, to be sure, but by the time she reached the border of Tyldes and Estogal, she was already tired of dealing with humans.

"Ow ow ow! Hey, I give, I give!" the man cried out as his arm was twisted in an

unnatural direction. His body squirmed to get away. *This all happened because you kept following me when I told you not to*, the elf girl thought.

“Stop whining, seriously,” she said, scoffing.

Elves had once been described as Vienna’s beloved, and nearly all of them possessed beautiful features. And because they rarely ever appeared before humans, they were the object of excessive adoration amongst humans and had excess expectations placed on them. Conversely, some people instead looked down on elves and would arrogantly challenge them. Either way, it was a nuisance for the girl. *They only see me as some elf, after all.*

It irritated her. Her swordsmanship and spellcasting were first-rate. The skills that had got her across the eastern country were no joke. And yet, every single person whom she met would approach her without showing any interest in her abilities. Those men all had clear ulterior motives. She wondered if they really thought she wouldn’t notice.

“This is stupid.”

She’d come all the way to the western edge of the continent, but it was all the same. *Just how far do I have to go before it finally feels like I’ve actually gone anywhere at all?* The girl heaved a sigh before looking up and returning her attention to her surroundings. For the time being, she had to keep taking on jobs to support herself.

Though she was fed up with all the people she met, the cities and towns those same humans had built were so large they were awe-inspiring to the girl. Elven settlements were quite small unless the king of the clan resided there, and the population was very small in any case. By contrast, many humans came together to live in their cities. The buildings were tall and sturdy, and their designs were multifarious. Orphen was the biggest city she had ever been to. Her eyes spun at the sheer amount of people around, and the convoluted cityscape was labyrinthine for an elf.

Somehow, she made her way to the guild, and like the city itself, it was larger than any guild she had been to before. Her heart was hammering as she stepped through the doorway. Immediately, all eyes were glued on her—elves were rare, of course. She’d gotten used to it, but that didn’t mean she liked it.

Now, to the desk... she thought, before the way was blocked by a tall man.

“Hey, you’re an elf, right? Are you an adventurer?”

“I am. What’s it to you?”

The man exchanged some whispers with the folks behind him—his comrades, perhaps—before turning back to her. “You’re alone, from what I can see. If you wanna be an adventurer in this city, you’re better off being in a party. How about it, wanna—”

“Hold up.” Before the man had finished, another man intruded from the side. “Nothing good comes from getting involved with *this* guy. You’ll be safer with us.”

“The hell you say?!”

“Madam, you should not take these guys at face value. Our party is best.” Before she knew what was happening, a young man was beside her, casually taking her hand.

The girl immediately brushed him off and stuck out her tongue. “I refuse! Try someone else!”

“What, is that how you respond to my kindness?”

“No one called for you. Outta the way!”

“What was that, huh?”

The situation was gradually growing worse and worse until finally, it devolved into a brawl.

How did it come to this? she wondered, a little bewildered, as she avoided the swinging fists of rampaging adventurers. She was weaving her way around so they didn’t bump into her when suddenly someone tugged at her arm.

“Huh?”

“This way!”

“Eh? Whoa!”

It was all happening so suddenly that she wasn’t able to process what was going on.

She was tugged along in a serpentine path through the throng, and once she was in the clear, she saw that it was a blond-haired boy that firmly grasped her hand. What's more, the boy was quite strong. She was dragged directly to a wide-eyed boy with red hair and another, brown-haired boy.

"Let's skedaddle! Meeting adjourned, adjourned!"

"R-Right... No, hold on! What are you doing with her?" the red-haired boy cried out in surprise.

The flaxen-haired boy grinned. "It didn't feel right, leaving her in the middle of all that."

"Now look here... No, now's not the time to complain."

The girl was still trying to figure out what was going on. As she blinked confusedly, the brown-haired boy reached out a hand and touched her cheek. He began to pinch it and rub it. "Hmm, that's something. Her skin's as soft as silk."

"Hey, stop it, you. Who the heck are you people?" she finally managed to ask.

But without paying her any mind, the blond boy continued pulling her. "What does it matter? Let's just get out of here."

Like that, she was extricated from the guild. She put up some slight resistance, but she was still too flustered, and the boy was too strong, for her to effect an escape. Eventually, they came to a remote place. It was an empty lot, and though there were buildings around, she had an unobstructed view of the sky and the blazing sun overhead.

They'd run the whole way there, so she was a bit winded. The girl panted, placing a hand to her chest to steady herself. Her shallow breaths gradually regained their steady rhythm.

"Are you all right?" somebody asked.

She looked up to see the red-haired boy looking at her with concern. As her breathing calmed, her mind did as well. From what she could tell, these boys were adventurers. That was obvious enough, seeing as they had been at the guild. *Then, they're trying to get me to join their party too...* The realization instantly put her in a sour mood. "What do you want?" she coldly asked.

The red-haired boy seemed taken aback, but the blond-haired boy was not put off in the slightest. Waving his hand about, he said, “I just saved you. You woulda come out pretty roughed up if you tried taking on all of them.”

“Hmph. I didn’t ask for anyone to save me,” she bluntly retorted before turning the other way. *I would have been just fine on my own...*

The straw-haired boy’s brow slanted into a scowl. “Huh? What’s with your attitude?”

“I can see straight through you—don’t even try to get me in your debt. You just approached me because I’m an elf, right? You’re all so stupid. If you want to recruit me, at least do it after seeing how strong I am.”

“Who the hell wants to recruit you? You barely got any muscle on those lanky arms of yours.”

That instantly got her goat. She indignantly glared at the boy and stammered, “Wh- What did you say?! That’s some big talk when you all look so weak you’d be knocked over by a light breeze!”

“Me? Weak?! Now you’ve said it!” The blond reached for the sword at his waist. The girl immediately grabbed for her own hilt.

“Want to try me? Very well, I’ll wipe that haughty look off your face.”

“Hey, wait, wait! Calm down, both of you!” The red-haired boy frantically got between them, only to be violently shoved aside—not just by the girl, but by the boy too.

The straw-haired boy howled, “Stand back. This stupid girl needs to be taught a lesson.”

“That’s my line. Your buddy here needs a bit of a beating, or he’ll never learn.”

They pulled their still-sheathed swords from their belts and struck at one another in the same breath. Her high strike caught the boy in the head. *My win...* Or so she thought, but a dull pain reverberated through the core of her body. She collapsed to the ground, writhing in pain as the boy held his head.

“Agh...” the boy groaned.

"Ugh..." the girl groaned back.

She lifted her teary-eyed face. The pain was excruciating. This was possibly the first time she'd eaten such a harsh counterattack since leaving elven territory.

The brown-haired boy held his belly in laughter. Meanwhile, the red-haired boy wearily sighed. "What were you even trying to accomplish?" he asked.

"B-Bell, get the lump medicine..." the straw-haired boy moaned.

"You reap what you sow... Good grief."

The red-haired boy took a vial of medicine from his bag. He let some of it seep into a cloth before pressing it against his friend's head. Then, with the vial still in hand, he turned to the girl.

"You too. It hurts, right?"

"D-Does not..."

"Quit acting tough... I'm the one who hit you. It's gotta hurt... Well, you weren't half bad. I thought you were a feeble little thing, but you're quite the sword fighter. Right, Bell?"

"Yeah, that was splendid. From the moment you drew your sword to the moment you struck, it was all one smooth-flowing motion."

"I-I see..." The girl's cheeks flushed slightly as she hung her head. It had been a good long while since anyone praised her for her swordsmanship.

The red-haired boy timidly approached her. "So, uh, I think you should use a bit of medicine. For your own sake."

"I'm fine... This is nothing."

"No, it'll sting for some time if you don't treat it. Percy's strikes are serious business."

The girl fidgeted but ultimately rolled up her shirt a bit to expose the wound. It had already turned into a purple bruise from the blood suffusing beneath her skin. "Can you apply it for me?"

“Huh? Me?”

The girl nodded. “Yeah.”

The red-haired boy’s mouth was agape, but he gathered his resolve. He soaked a cloth with some medicine and nervously pressed it against her skin. The salve was startlingly cold, and it came with a sharp stinging sensation. She failed to contain an “Eep!” which caused the red-haired boy to frantically back off.

“S-Sorry. Did that hurt?”

“No, it’s fine. Can you make a compress out of that?”

“Y-Yeah. That’s probably a better idea.”

The boy swiftly threw together a wet compress and stuck it to her hip. It wasn’t strong enough to make the pain go away completely, but it did take off the edge a little. The girl let out a relieved sigh and took a seat on a nearby log.

“Are you people adventurers?”

“Pretty much. You too? Well, you were at the guild, so that checks out,” the flaxen-haired boy said from where he sat on the ground. The girl nodded.

Folding his arms, the brown-haired boy chimed in, “An elf adventurer? I thought they only existed in faerie tales.”

“You mean the Paladin?”

“That’s the one.”

“So you know about him.” The girl found herself breaking into a smile. A boy who looked younger than her knew about the elven hero. For some reason, this made her incredibly happy.

The brown-haired boy bashfully rubbed his hands together. “Have you met him? Um... The Paladin, I mean.”

“No, never. But I became an adventurer because I looked up to him.”

"Then you're aiming for S-Rank too?" asked the straw-haired boy.

"Too? Looks like we have something in common, then."

"Of course. We're going to climb higher and higher. I'm going to see a whole new world up there."

A new world; a distant sight... The elf girl tried to calm the beating of her heart, but her breathing grew shallow, and she could feel her cheeks heating up. *If I stick with them, then just maybe...*

The red-haired boy looked concerned. "Are you okay? Do you feel sick?"

"No, that's not it." She hesitated a bit before saying, "Um... I'm sorry for jumping to conclusions. If you're all right with it, could I join your party?"

"Huh? You?"

"I want to see a new world too. Is that... all right?"

The boys exchanged a few looks. Finally, the blond boy was ready to answer. He held out a hand, a stilted smile on his face. "Percival. Call me Percy."

"I'm Kasim. N-Nice to meet you," said the brown-haired boy as he bashfully hid behind the red-haired boy's back.

The elf girl smiled and gripped Percival's hand. "Percy and Kasim. Then you're... Oh, thanks for the medicine. It was Bell, right?"

"Yeah. Belgrieve, to be precise. But Bell's fine."

They were talking normally just moments before, yet all of a sudden everyone was acting nervous. *How strange...* The girl giggled. These were her first friends—her first comrades—since leaving home. *Maybe I've managed to get a little farther from there,* she mused.

"My name is Satie. It's a pleasure to meet you."

○

Not so long ago, it had felt like his days in Orphen had settled into a gray regularity, but gradually, his days were colored with all sorts of fresh hues. The new party of four filled Belgrieve with a strange sense of solidarity and trust unlike any party he had joined before it. When it came to Percival the leader, or Kasim the youngest, or Satie the elf, everyone had their quirks that made them hard to deal with. However, when they all got together to do something, it was more fun than anything he could imagine, and he adored sharing this time with them.

That didn't mean everything was easy. Percival was prone to going on rampages, and Satie could be just as reckless. They would compete with one another over this and that, complicating things even more than before. Kasim also loved his mischief, and when Percival and Satie got carried away, he would immediately be at their side, egging on their nonsense.

It was Belgrieve's job to curb, to regulate, and to keep them in check. Some might say there was no one else to do it, but as far as Belgrieve was concerned, he had voluntarily taken on that role. His three comrades were all certainly skilled. Having done a few jobs with them and participated in some light sparring matches, Belgrieve was convinced of that. He had seen all too many people who were more skilled than him since he'd arrived in Orphen, but these three had more promise than all the rest.

That certainty had driven him into a dark place, as he knew he could never hope to catch up to them. But Belgrieve had never had a very high evaluation of himself; he was simply convinced of his lack of potential, as if it were an obvious fact of life. Once he had come to terms with it, he knew he had to find something he could do, and do his best at it. The trust the other three placed in him for those tasks was his saving grace. Indeed, they were the same roles that had once been foisted onto him when he was in his previous parties, but now he actually considered them his duty. It gave him a slight sense of inferiority, but he was also happy to be of assistance.

"Ah snap, one got through! Can you handle it, Bell?"

An eingal was bounding towards him after giving Percival the slip. It was a deerlike fiend around the size of a large dog. Contrary to its delicate appearance, it was a ferocious beast that wouldn't hesitate to impale anyone on its sturdy horns.

Belgrieve readied his sword and intercepted the fiend's charge. He could stop it, but he was incapable of gutting it as it passed by—as Percival and Satie could. He managed to skillfully divert its force, holding it in place as he cried out to Kasim on the back line.

“Kasim!”

“You got it.”

Belgrieve swiftly dodged out of the way as a bolt of magic came flying from behind him. It struck the eingal, sending it toppling over. Without a moment to spare, Belgrieve plunged his sword into its throat. The eingal thrashed but soon fell still.

“Is that the last one?” Belgrieve asked. He scanned the area as he caught his breath. Of the five eingals they had encountered, three had fallen and two had run. Percival and Satie had each managed to take one out on their own.

“Heh heh heh,” Kasim chuckled, coming up to him with a grin. “Nice coordination, right? Aren’t I useful?”

“Of course you are. You really saved me there,” Belgrieve said as he took out a rope. “I’m going to start dressing the bodies. Can you help me hang them up?”

“Uh, physical labor’s a bit out of my wheelhouse... Ah, Percy’s coming over, see?”

“Hmm...” Belgrieve looked over to see Percival approaching while sheathing his sword.

“We let a few get away. Well, we still have enough to complete the request.”

“Yeah. I’ll start taking them apart. Lend me a hand here.”

“Sure thing.”

As they were hanging up the first eingal, Satie returned in a hurry. She seemed rather excited, and even after her feet had stopped moving, her arms were still swinging around.

“Finally something adventurer-like! This is how it ought to be!”

“Don’t be satisfied with this much. This is just the beginning,” Percival said, though he was grinning too. After so many gathering requests, this was their long-awaited chance to fight fiends.

Belgrieve took out his hunting knife. Eingal liver had been the requested item—it was apparently a reagent used in magic potions—and the guild would also buy the pelts,

meat, and horns. The fact that a sum could be earned outside of the request itself was what made fiend hunts so lucrative.

Satie had joined the party just after Percival had bought his new sword, so they were flat broke for a while after. They had been working smaller jobs to save up funds and finish assembling the rest of their equipment bit by bit. Each of them had different gear they needed—even if Kasim could essentially work with just the clothes on his back and Satie didn't need much more than she already had, there was still much to purchase for them. Elixirs might have been beyond their budget, but they scrounged together a lot of medicine as well as smoke bombs and flash bombs, among other miscellaneous tools that would help out in a pinch.

Until everything was in order, Belgrieve kept them from taking on dangerous tasks as best he could, and there was no merry drinking at the bar. Apart from meager get-togethers where they would all share a bottle of cheap ale, there was no celebrating to be had. The other three might complain, but that was the one thing he would not budge on.

After many twists and turns, their equipment was in order, and they finally had their first real battle as a party.

Requests that required battles with fiends generally paid better than others. Rather than saving up bit by bit, nearly all young adventurers dreamed of simply making it big in one shot, and many would take on jobs beyond their abilities and perish as a result. The guild staff, for their part, did try to temper their ambitions somewhat, but adventurers were ultimately responsible for what happened out in the field.

Belgrieve worried that his party could end up a dreadful statistic, so he thoroughly prepared to a degree one might call excessive. When he looked at Percival and Satie, who could both take on an eingal single-handedly, he had to wonder if any of it was even necessary. But carelessness was a dangerous thing. He recalled the words of the one-eyed adventurer and shook his head, squeezing his knife tightly.

As he deftly dismantled the eingal corpse, he noticed his comrades had suddenly gone silent. *Strange*, Belgrieve thought. He looked up to see that the other three were staring straight at him. “What?”

“Uh, well... If we put together the reward and the money we'll get from the other materials, we'll have a bit of surplus, right?”

“Hopefully.”

“We’ll have a surplus, huh...” said Satie.

“Right, we’ll finally have money we can use,” said Kasim.

Belgrieve silently sifted through the eingal’s innards. He carefully wrapped the liver in cloth and wrapped another layer of oiled paper over that. Only after that was done did he open his mouth. “All right. Let’s go to the pub today.”

Their three tense faces immediately broke into smiles.

“All right! We got our party’s wallet’s approval! We’re drinking today!”

“Drink in moderation, okay...” Belgrieve cautioned them, but the three had already become ebullient without him.

“Heh heh heh, I can’t wait! I’ve never even been in a real pub before.”

“Which one should we hit up? I’ll need to ask around for somewhere nice but cheap. You know any, Bell?”

“Well, if you’re fine with somewhere like an eatery that serves drinks too, I know a cheap place.”

“Hee hee! Great to hear it. You know what’s good, Bell! I love you!”

Without warning, Satie hugged him from behind, and Belgrieve nearly lost his balance.

“Hey, I’m holding a knife here!”

“Sorry!” But though she apologized, she continued laughing as she pinched his cheeks. Then, she circled around to the front and drew a knife from her belt. “Let me help you out. I know what I’m doing.”

“Oh, thanks. Percy, Kasim, can you keep a lookout?”

“Got it. Let’s finish up quickly. There are drinks waiting for me.”

“Now that that’s settled, I’ll bring the other corpses over.”

And with that, Kasim and Percival went off. Belgrieve took a sidelong glance at them before shifting his hold on the knife and turning back to the eingal that had been halfway dissected.

○

Just like that, their days had finally begun. They were taking a steady stream of requests and had earned the right to enter dungeons too. Kasim was picking up new spells every day, while Percival and Satie grew stronger through their competition with one another. They were all just a stone's throw away from attaining D-Rank. Belgrieve was often dragged this way and that by the rest, but he liked his party enough that he found it all so very fun. It had only been half a year since they had come together, but it was almost like they were childhood friends.

As the days drew on, they each got a good idea of the others' personalities. But strangely, not a single one of them wanted to speak of their homelands. They had all run away from where they ought to be. Rather than reflecting on the past, they studiously focused on what the future held for them.

At first, Belgrieve thought he would return to Turnera someday. At the very least, once he was earning enough to live comfortably, he thought it wouldn't be so bad to bring a few stories back home. Now that he had such steadfast friends, however, he'd thrown that dream away—the thought no longer even occurred to him. He felt his limits as an adventurer, but he still wanted to live with some connection to his comrades.

In any case, that was all so far off in the distance. He felt inferior, but Belgrieve was just barely sixteen years old. One side of him knew he had no talent, but another part of him still hoped that he might have something that would let him rise higher. He never missed a day of training with his sword, though he never stood a chance against Percival or Satie even so.

“*Achoo!*” Satie sneezed as she walked beside him.

“You okay?”

She sniffled. “Yeah. I’m supposed to be right at home in the cold...”

“It’s warmer here compared to elven territory, right? But maybe that’s precisely it—your body’s not accustomed to the weather here, so you’re prone to getting sick.”

"Maybe so. How should I put it? I let my guard down because it's so warm."

They had gone for a bit of a long journey this time to a town that was two days away from Orphen by carriage. Although it was a small place, it did have a dungeon, and Percival had said he wanted to explore it. But the journey had made them weary, and they couldn't dive right in as soon as they arrived. They had reached the town in the afternoon and agreed to spend the rest of the day recuperating before heading off the next day, which meant they'd get half a day of rest. When lunch was over, Percival fell sound asleep in his rented room, while Kasim immersed himself in the magic grimoire he had brought along. Belgrieve went out for a bit of a walk, and Satie tagged along with him.

Naturally, she attracted a bit of attention as an elf, but Satie was used to it now, and she could handle anyone who tried to pick on her. *As a man, should I be protecting her?* Belgrieve wondered. But Satie was simply stronger than him, so he couldn't bring himself to ask. Even now, Satie was a short distance away, irritably waving off a man—an adventurer, by the looks of him.

"Hey, what's it matter? You could tag along for a bit."

"I have enough on my plate, thank you very much. A word of advice: no one likes a man who's too persistent."

But the man wouldn't back down. "I mean, you're alone, aren't you? It's dangerous for a delicate elf to be on her own."

She looked irked for a second, but her face was soon sporting a mischievous smile. She pranced over to Belgrieve, then returned, dragging him with her. "Too bad, I'm not on my own. I have a companion right here."

"Hey, wait..." Belgrieve was perplexed as she firmly hugged his arm. *Companion? You mean like that?*

"Huh? N-No, that gloomy-looking guy couldn't be..."

"What was that? Don't you go insulting my man. Take this!"

In a burst of clearly staged anger, Satie nimbly jumped up and answered the man with a kick. He recoiled back before scampering away.

"Hee hee!" Satie giggled. "That was fun."

"Satie..." Belgrieve sighed wearily and hung his head. But rather than being truly annoyed, it was more so to hide the redness on his face. Satie smiled as she peered into his eyes. It was like he could see his entirety reflected back in those emerald irises.

"Embarrassed, Bell?"

"Please don't tease me..."

"As cute as ever, I see."

Satie laughed as she stretched, then patted Belgrieve on the head. *I'm no match for her,* Belgrieve mused with a wry smile.

It was a small town, so it didn't take much walking to pass the outskirts. Beyond the town was an open plain dotted with many stones. Boulders of all sizes gleamed in the sunlight, towering above the grass that had already begun to turn brown. When he approached a rock, he found it slightly warm to the touch, having spent the day bathing in the sun's light. The area was oddly warm despite the brisk wind. The two of them sat down, leaning against the stone. The sky was clear and blue, although there were small fleecy clouds in the western sky, gradually flowing towards them.

"I might just go to sleep like this," said Satie.

"Why don't you?"

"Then I won't be able to sleep at night."

She has a point, Belgrieve thought as he pulled out his canteen and poured her a cup of warm tea.

"Thank you. It's quiet here, even though there's a dungeon. It must be on the opposite side of town."

"Yeah. An old burial ground turned into a dungeon, apparently. Do you suppose it's underground?"

"Hmm... We'll mainly be up against undead, then."

"We should be. I packed extra flash bombs, and some holy water too. It's a low-ranking dungeon, so it shouldn't be that difficult."

"But there are no absolutes in adventuring, right?"

Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his cheek. That had become a catchphrase of his as of late. Satie chuckled and sipped her tea, then sighed.

"I love the idea of diving into a dungeon and fighting fiends, but I like moments like these too. I left elven territory because I hated how quiet it was, but it's strange..."

"I think that's perfectly fine. Every place has its good and bad points. There's no need to fixate on it."

"You're very mature, Bell," Satie said, hugging her knees to her body. Her voice grew a bit softer. "I, you see... When I'm obsessed, smack-dab in the middle of running towards something, I'm scared of sitting down and settling like this. When my head is cool and I get to thinking, I start wondering just how long I can keep it up."

"Really?" Belgrieve asked.

Satie looked a bit offended. "Now look here, I'm not noisy all the time because I *want* to be. That's just how I am."

"That doesn't make it any less troublesome for me."

"Hee hee... But despite everything, you always forgive. That's why I like you." Satie gently poked him in the shoulder.

When you say it so easily, it just throws me off, Belgrieve thought with a wry smile. He took a sip of tea for himself. "I like these moments too," he said. "I don't grow anxious. I just hope I can bring this peaceful time into the future with me. Something like that."

After looking at him blankly for a moment, Satie laughed and slumped back against the stone. "Are you really the same age as Percy? You're too settled down. It's kinda like you're our dad."

"Even if you tell me that..." Belgrieve scratched his head. *I doubt I'll ever be a father anyways...*

The sun slowly set, and the wind was getting even colder, so the two of them got up and returned to the inn. Once they were back in the room, they found Kasim playing chess with Percival, who had woken up.

"Welcome back. Did you get a look at the dungeon in advance?" Percival asked.

"No, we were just out for a walk. You brought a chess set with you?"

"The inn lent it out," Kasim explained. "It's a good way to kill time."

"Who's winning?" Satie asked, inspecting the board.

"Me," said Kasim.

"Don't get ahead of yourself. It's me," Percival shot back.

Satie asked, "Who's playing what?"

"I'm black," Kasim replied.

"Then Kasim's going to win. Hey, let me have a go too."

"Once this match is over"

Percival remained firmly seated, but Satie grabbed his shoulder and began to rock him back and forth. "It's pretty much done already. C'mon, Percy, move over."

"That's right—Percy's so weak, it's boring. Take over for him, would you?"

"How about you guys respect your leader a bit? Dammit, just do what you want."

So Percival swapped out with a pout on his face, and Satie took the vacant seat across from Kasim. They began to line up their pieces again. Belgrieve chuckled as he took his tools from his backpack and checked each one carefully.

Percival came up beside him. "Do you have to be so thorough?"

"Sometimes, the bottles are cracked or the pouches are torn. I'd like to keep the tools we use more frequently at the top of the bag. Also, I'll have to distribute the flash bombs and holy water among us."

"You should keep most of the flash bombs. You always use them with the best timing, and you give the best signals. With the others, I can't close my eyes in time."

"I'll do that. It's not like we can use tinted glasses when we're underground."

Percival suddenly smiled. "Good grief, I'm glad I got you on board. There aren't too many guys out there who do their job this properly."

"Y-You think so?" Belgrieve's hands continued to work as he felt a mixture of bashfulness and shame.

The weather was fine the next day. He practiced with his sword in the early morning, then inspected his things. After breakfast, the party left the inn. There was a small guild branch right next to the dungeon, and it was frequented by the adventurers who were set on plumbing its depths. After filling out the forms, they stood at the entrance.

"All right, here we go." Percival placed a hand on the hilt of his sword.

Satie and Kasim both nodded excitedly.

"I'll be out front as usual. Then Satie, Kasim, and finally Bell taking the rearguard. We can change our formation as necessary. Anything you want to say, Bell?"

"It might be narrow, so be careful we don't hit each other. Don't swing too wide with your sword."

"Hey, hey, I want to try out a search spell."

"Go ahead. But if it's just a test run, don't put too much trust in the result."

"Hey, Bell, if wide swings are no good, should I focus on thrusts?"

"If possible. But don't be single-minded about it either. It's pointless if your movements become disjointed as a result. Try to adapt to the situation. Get a good grasp of your surroundings, and you should be fine. I think that's everything. Percy?"

"Okay, here we go."

Percy entered with confident strides. He was followed up by Satie, and then Kasim. Belgrieve watched their backs from behind. Ever since the party had been assembled,

he was always watching their backs. But now, that delighted him.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” His laugh had evidently escaped him. His party members stared back at him curiously before turning forward again.

The dungeon was dark, but the light of his lantern reflected across the walls, illuminating a good distance ahead. Percival was talking about something with Satie. Kasim had his hands behind his head as he walked, taking in their surroundings.

Belgrieve kept his mind on what might be behind them. Many adventurers frequented the place, so there were plenty of footsteps on the ground. The old ones were plastered over by the new. Among all these footsteps, his were clearly discernible.

AFTERWORD

Now that we've gotten to the ninth afterword, I've really begun to run out of things to write.

No, I wanted to hear all about Belgrieve's journeys in the capital, so I headed off to Turnera to see him, but he still wasn't back after half a year. As I was twiddling my thumbs with Graham and the others, the snow sealed me in, and I couldn't even go home anymore. So despite all the enthusiasm I mentioned in the previous book, it took more than half a year for volume nine to come out. It is truly regrettable.

This author here is right at home in Oita Prefecture of Kyushu, Japan, so I simply cannot deal with cold places like Turnera. Although as a child, I lived in Yamanashi Prefecture where the streets froze over in the winter, so I should be able to bear it... Let me explain. The previous volume came out in early summer, so I headed out dressed for summer. I nearly froze to death.

Putting that aside, we've somehow managed to reach volume nine. As the writer, it's a bit of a strange feeling to see it run for this long. How strange it is—one more volume and we'll be in the double digits. If I just had to write, I'd write as much as I wanted, but having it published and sent out into the world ultimately depends on the readers buying it and supporting the work. Thank you for everything.

Last volume, I said I didn't want any short story stuck between that book and this one, so to compensate, I wrote quite a bit for this one. It was entirely about the past, so there is no mention of Angeline or any of the other girls we know and love, but I'll be very thankful if you can enjoy it for what it is. It's a bit interesting to read about the middle-aged people back when they were young themselves.

It took the strength of quite a few fine people to get this book out. While I was buried up in Turnera, apparently, Earthstar Novels was in a bit of a panic, and my presiding editor was swapped out. There was a bit of trouble when it came to taking over. With that as an excuse, I could act pompous around the new one who didn't know a thing about how slow I work, and I think I may have caused some trouble to my new editor I-san. Even so, we managed to arrive at the publication finish line, so three cheers to him.

As always, toi8-san's beautiful illustrations breathe life into the story. The fact that the master stuck around for so long is far more than I deserve. He's a popular illustrator that everyone will pay top dollar for, so I feel a bit sorry for taking up some of his time—and yet, I go around bragging that I'm amazing because of it.

The manga's fourth volume was released just the other day (8/12/2020). Going off the source material, it's still around volume two, and I'm looking forward to all the things to come. It's faithful to the source work while also brimming with the direction only manga can bring. I always look forward to reading it.

The next volume will be volume ten. Next time, I want the book to give off a calm, pastoral feel, unlike the serious developments that led up to it. There's just a bit more until the series's conclusion. If you've made it this far, I would feel very blessed if you could join me for just a little longer.

MOJIKAKIYA, September 2020

There's more trouble
brewing, but...
You're almost there!

Toi 8
2020



BONUS SHORT STORIES

ELF TALK

"I'm also from an eastern settlement, for what it's worth, but I've never met Maureen before," Satie mused.

"That's right," Maureen concurred. "I never thought a senior from the same region as me was living this close by. It's shocking, really."

"If it's a different settlement, you're not going to meet, right? It's not like I know everyone in the west either," Marguerite reasoned.

Satie, Maureen, and Marguerite were currently having a conversation. *For some reason, there's a real stately mood whenever you have three elves together*, thought Angeline. She found herself entranced.

It was rare to see such a sight in the human lands. All three of them had shockingly attractive features, like their silver hair and fair skin. Angeline's eyes were so focused on them, for a moment she had to wonder if she had somehow ended up in elven territory.

But this was a room at an inn. Belgrieve and the other older men had left and taken Touya with them, and so the girls had gotten together. The table was spread with tea and light snacks, while the twins played with wooden toys. It was kind of fun to pack everyone into such a tight space.

"It's a vast place, elven territory. But Maureen, you've met Graham before, haven't you?" Miriam asked.

Maureen nodded. "Right, right. I think I've said it before, but I've actually met Lady Marguerite before too."

"Hey, Satie, did you never consider going to meet Mr. Graham too?" Anessa asked.

"Ugh," Satie groaned before putting a finger to her cheek. "Well, of course, I really

looked up to him... But more than anything, I wanted to see new places. If I went to see Graham, well, I'd still just be in elven territory."

"Hmm, I see."

"But it's just... You know... There were loads of folks who came to see my granduncle because they looked up to him, but I haven't spotted any of them actually working as adventurers out here," said Marguerite.

That's true, come to think of it... Angeline folded her arms. "You're right... I get the feeling there should be a few more adventuring elves out here."

"Oh, there's a surprising number of us. It's just, an adventurer's lifestyle runs counter to elf common sense. Once they get sick and tired of reality, they ultimately return home. That's what happens to most of them. I'd say ninety percent realize it's impossible for them just by mingling with humans on the border," Maureen explained. She went on to describe how the two groups lived and thought about the world in completely different ways. Then there was the matter of some discrimination against elves to dissuade the would-be adventurers. She laughed, then proceeded to stuff her face with sweets.

Is it that different? Angeline wondered. At least from what she had gleaned by sitting down and talking with them, Satie, Maureen, and (especially) Marguerite were hardly any different from humans. Sure, Graham had a somewhat mystical air to him, but it wasn't difficult to get along with him. *If I ever met an elf apart from them, would I be able to talk to that one properly?* Angeline tried to imagine it, but she couldn't even begin to fathom what elves talked about amongst themselves.

But I'm sure dad could manage just fine, Angeline concluded. She just knew he would be polite, listen well, and thoughtfully weigh his answers in turn. Surely his demeanor would be appreciated in elven territory too.

In that case, perhaps they'd have to go to elven territory together sometime. Those forests she'd heard of, the groves of trees dressed all in silver—perhaps they were even more incredible than the forest back in Turnera. If she could walk through them hand in hand with Belgrieve and Satie, it would surely be a lovely time indeed. Angeline giggled at that image in her mind.

"What are you laughing at?" Marguerite asked before taking a bite from a sweet pastry.

"Hmm... I was just thinking I wanted to visit elven territory one of these days."

As soon as Angeline said that, all three of the elves' expressions shifted. Marguerite looked quite unpleasant and Satie stared back blankly while Maureen laughed.

"I don't wanna go home."

"It's not a very interesting place, Ange. I mean, the scenery might be pretty, but..."

"But it might be fun to see how Angeline interacts with the elves back home. I can imagine their conversations not meshing in the slightest."

Apparently, it wasn't all sunshine and rainbows. In any case, all three of them considered elven territory boring. They'd found it so dreary that they'd all run off to become adventurers, so perhaps this response was only natural.

"But I want to see it once in my life. There are loads of ohma trees growing there, right?" Miriam asked.

"I get the feeling there'll be other rare wildlife too," Anessa went on, "though I imagine it's real cold since it's even farther north than Turnera."

Angeline nodded. "It's a land of mystery to us... And it's exciting to head into the unknown."

"Heh heh," Satie chuckled. "I remember Bell saying something like that before—that it was a faraway place to him, so he wanted to visit it. But to us, the human world is far more appealing."

"Do you still think so, even now?" Angeline asked her.

Satie thought for a moment, her eyes wandering. "Well... I've seen loads of terrible things, admittedly. Even so, I like it here. There's Bell, and Percy, and Kasim—and I have my daughter too, heh heh..." Satie prodded at Angeline's cheek.

"Hee hee..." Angeline bashfully scratched her head. There was no way she wouldn't be overjoyed after hearing that.

Suddenly, the hallway was filled with the sound of several footsteps, and there was a knocking at the door. As it swung open, Belgrieve poked his head in.

"Sorry we're so late. Have you eaten breakfast yet?"

"No, not yet. How about you guys?"

"No, we just finished our shopping and returned. I thought it would be good to eat something with everyone... What were you talking about?"

"Heh heh... I'll tell you all about it later. Right, Ange?"

"That's right, mom. Heh heh heh..."

Seeing the two of them smiling ear to ear, Belgrieve cocked his head curiously.

DELINQUENTS IN DROVES

The capital's cityscape could be completely different from one district to the next. Although the area near the imperial palace (lined as it was with the manors of nobles) was clean and orderly, the places where the common folk lived could be squalid, bearing the hallmarks of haphazard extensions slapped onto existing buildings. It was like a maze there. These were the parts of the city that adventurers were most familiar with. Some areas were dangerous, but such trouble was also an adventurer's bread and butter.

"Here, here, look right here! That's young me." Kasim grinned as he pointed at a statue that had been erected in a corner of the square. The figure of the statue had the same beard as Kasim, though its features did look a bit younger. But perhaps it had been too exposed to the elements, as many of its facial features had grown smooth, and even with the man himself standing right next to it, it was hard to tell it was him.

"The Hollow Lord, was it? The world must be ending if they're calling someone like you a hero," Percival cackled, a bottle of ale in one hand.

Some time had passed since their battle in the capital. They'd shared in the joys of reunion but still went on their separate ways to see the sights of the metropolis. Percival and Kasim were trying to be mindful of the newly wedded couple, so for a change, they went out on the town on their own. With that said, it wasn't like they had any particular destination in mind. They walked around randomly, eating and

drinking from the stalls along the street and insulting the selections of shady shops and armories.

"But they just got married, and they've already settled down. It's no fun."

"My thoughts exactly. Even if you try to tease them, they roll with the punches. It's boring."

"Bell's one thing, but to think Satie would end up like that. Good grief, I really am getting old."

"You haven't changed inside, though."

"Hey, same goes for you."

The two of them left the square, continuing with their banter.

Winter had already come; the sky was covered in a dark layer of clouds, and though it wasn't raining, the wind was cold enough to make them shiver. Percival toyed around with the empty bottle in his hand as his gaze swept over their surroundings. "How about we drink something warm?"

"Sounds nice."

They made a beeline for a random pub. It was lit up red inside by the fireplace, and all the people crowded inside made it far warmer than it had been outside. Doffing his cape and hanging it on a chair, Percival looked around. "The drunkards are the same, no matter where you go... Distilled spirits, cut with warm water."

"Heh heh heh—of course they are. I'll take a hot wine, and when I say hot, I mean *hot*."

"You got it," answered the old man across the counter.

At a nearby table, five men were playing poker. By the look of them, most were day laborers. Although each game only saw a small bit of money exchanging hands, eventually one of them—a man dressed differently from the rest of the group—indignantly got up from the table. He was a youth who looked to be a merchant's apprentice. "Dammit, I'm beat," he said before leaving in a huff.

The remaining men began distributing copper coins over the table with a hearty laugh.

Percival grinned. "They're conspiring together to cheat, they are," he observed, lowering his voice. "Looks like it was too much for the young'un."

"Heh heh heh... I love that sort of thing. Looks like fun. How about you get me in on it?" Kasim said loudly.

The men looked surprised for a moment, but they were quickly laughing again, inviting Kasim to their table. The cards were dealt out, and they went around the table making their bets and exchanging cards. Once the exchanges were over, the hands were revealed, and whoever had the strongest hand took the whole pot.

"All right, I win."

Kasim immediately won the first hand. They acted a bit sad, but they played the next hand anyways. Although a different man won the next one, the one after that and the one after that both went to Kasim. Gradually, the copper coins were accumulating on Kasim's side of the table. As he watched from behind, Percival asked for a second serving of spirits with an amused look on his face.

"You're on a roll."

"What did you expect?"

Their ulterior motives were clear enough. The men would purposely let him win at first to get him more absorbed in the game. Soon, the amount of money at stake would surely rise, and that's where the four of them would conspire to strip him of everything he owned.

"One pair. It's my loss," Kasim conceded.

"Huh? Wh-What?" The day laborers seemed perplexed. But they regained their composure and the next hand was dealt.

"Oh, so close. Nearly had a flush."

"Two pairs, but your hand is stronger"

Each game, Kasim would take small losses, returning coin after coin to the other players. They were winning, and yet the men exchanged dissatisfied looks. Eventually, the mountain of coins had disappeared from in front of Kasim.

He stood. "Man, I thought I was lucky at first, but it was no good. Heh heh heh... You got all your money back. Don't complain. Let's go, Percy."

With that, the two of them left the pub. Percival stroked his chin, seemingly amused. "Hey, those were all ridiculous hands. Why did you keep saying stuff like one pair and two pair?" In Percival's eyes, Kasim's hands had been straights and flushes, nothing but winning hands.

Kasim chuckled. "Well, you know how it is. I cast illusion magic on their eyes—every hand I played came out looking exactly like I wanted it to. It was a good way to kill time."

"I guess that just goes to show, you shouldn't cheat a magician. Now we should be getting home."

"Yeah, we should."



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by MOJIKAKIYA

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