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6



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

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

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

**- VOLUME 6 -**

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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 ◆

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



◆ Byaku ◆

Charlotte's follower. Though his words are harsh, he is kind deep down.



◆ Mit ◆

A benevolent entity in the guise of a child, containing the power of a demon.



◆ Graham ◆

Moniker: Paladin  
A living legend of an adventurer. He is concerned for Mit and the powers within him.

# STORY

Thanks to his daughter Angeline, Belgrieve was able to reunite with his former party member Kasim. After so many years since their last meeting, the pair are finally ready to face the past they had left behind.

With new comrades, the party set off for Turnera to welcome the spring, but Belgrieve and Angeline struggled to see eye-to-eye due to their concern for one another. Meanwhile, Byaku struggled to control the demonic power within him, and while trying to make amends for what she had done to Bordeaux, Charlotte is subjected to the schemes of a nobleman attempting to use her for his own ends.

As these issues were resolved, the father and daughter grew to understand one another better. And by the time they returned to their hometown...

“Let’s dance, Dad!”

“Huh? W-Wait, daddy’s not so good at...”

“Don’t worry about it! Just hurry up!”

They were back to being the same old father and daughter as always.

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



# WORLD MAP

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

Elf Territory



Ancient Forest

Rodina

Hazel

Sid

Bordeaux

Elvgren

Garuda

Orphen

Estogal City

Turnera

Haril Checkpoint

Northern Trade Route

Erin

Eastern Trade Route

Tyldes

Yobem Checkpoint

Benares

Asterinos

# CHAPTER 71

## ANGELINE TIGHTLY CLENCHED HER EYELIDS

Angeline tightly clenched her eyelids until, after a time, she drifted off to sleep. What came next was a peculiar dream of sitting alone in a dark room, though she could not even be sure that it *was* a room. She could not see any of the four walls, and everything above and below her seemed to consist of the same empty black void, as though she was floating in space. And yet, she could feel a floor of sorts beneath her feet, albeit one of an uncertain and insubstantial nature. It was all strangely ambiguous, and she couldn't dismiss the possibility that she was simply deluding herself into believing there was anything there.

She stared at her hand, opening and closing it. There were no lamps or candles, and yet, she could distinctly see the tips of her toes and her arms curled around her knees. It was like everything except her had lost all substance. It was neither hot nor cold there, the concept of temperature itself seemingly absent. Though she felt like this should have been comfortable, she was strangely tense and unsettled.

She tried to muster words to call out, yet her mouth could only form each syllable silently. A strange sense of loneliness washed over her. She tried to stand, but felt as though there would be no turning back if she did, and she could not muster the strength in any case.

Before she realized it, the surrounding darkness began to solidify. It suddenly became difficult to breathe as the dark encroached closer and closer. She made to cry out in fear, but was still unable to make a sound and could only feel a tightening in the depths of her throat. It was not long until the pitch-black darkness was crawling over her skin and covering her body.

○

Angeline was catapulted out of her sleep only to be taken aback by a pair of black eyes staring at her.

“Morning, sis.”

“Mit... Good morning.”

Angeline scratched her head and sighed. She knew she had had a terrible dream, but she could hardly remember it now. She had roused in a terrible mood, but those feelings had been swept away once she was fully awake, and soon enough, she had forgotten she had dreamed at all.

The sun was already rising in the fine spring weather, and its light pouring in through the window highlighted every fluttering speck of dust.

There didn't seem to be anyone in the house save for Angeline and Mit. The others must have headed off somewhere.

“I overslept... Where did everyone go?”

“Out...”

“They could have woken me up...”

“You were sleeping soundly, so dad said to let you sleep.”

Angeline pouted as she stretched, her spine cracking in the process. After letting out a deep breath, she saw that Mit was still sitting beside her, and she absentmindedly began combing her fingers through his hair. The boy closed his eyes at the ticklish sensation.

Angeline doted on her enigma of a little brother (who was sometimes a little sister on some days). With his long black hair and black eyes, they looked like real siblings when they stood next to each other—though his expressions were neutral compared to hers. With his apparent age sitting somewhere around ten years by the looks of him, there did not seem to be much of a difference between the two.

She heard the sound of something striking wood from outside—a metal hammer, presumably. With so many new family members, the house had finally begun to feel cramped, so they had opted to extend it lengthwise.

Angeline put on her coat and walked outside, leading Mit by the hand. The warm summer sunlight poured down over the land, which was covered with sprouting greens, and she felt a stinging in the back of her eyes. The yard was lively with flowers of all sizes, some of which were already in bloom, and others soon to follow. Anessa

and Miriam sat on a bench in the corner, watching fondly over the steady progress being made on the house.

"Morning."

"Hmm? Oh, Ange. Morning."

"Morning. You were out like a light," Miriam said with a chuckle.

Angeline sat beside her and lifted Mit onto her lap. "In spring, one sleeps a sleep that... goes on'?"

"Wasn't it 'knows no dawn'?" Anessa suggested.

"Well, something like that... *Yawn.*" Angeline's great yawn proved contagious and spread to Mit, whose mouth opened wide as well.

Nearly two weeks had passed since she had returned to Turnera. The colors of spring grew more vibrant by the day in time with the steadily warming breeze. The villagers' endeavors in their fields worked the winter stiffness out of their bodies while the sheep and goats spent every day eating their fill of the fresh, aromatic foliage.

Angeline was enjoying Turnera's spring to the fullest. She had been wandering the mountains with Anessa and Miriam, gathering mountain plants, driving the sheep with Mit on her back, and taking Charlotte and Byaku around to help with the fieldwork. She enjoyed chatting with her childhood friends and was delighted to see Charlotte so full of life.

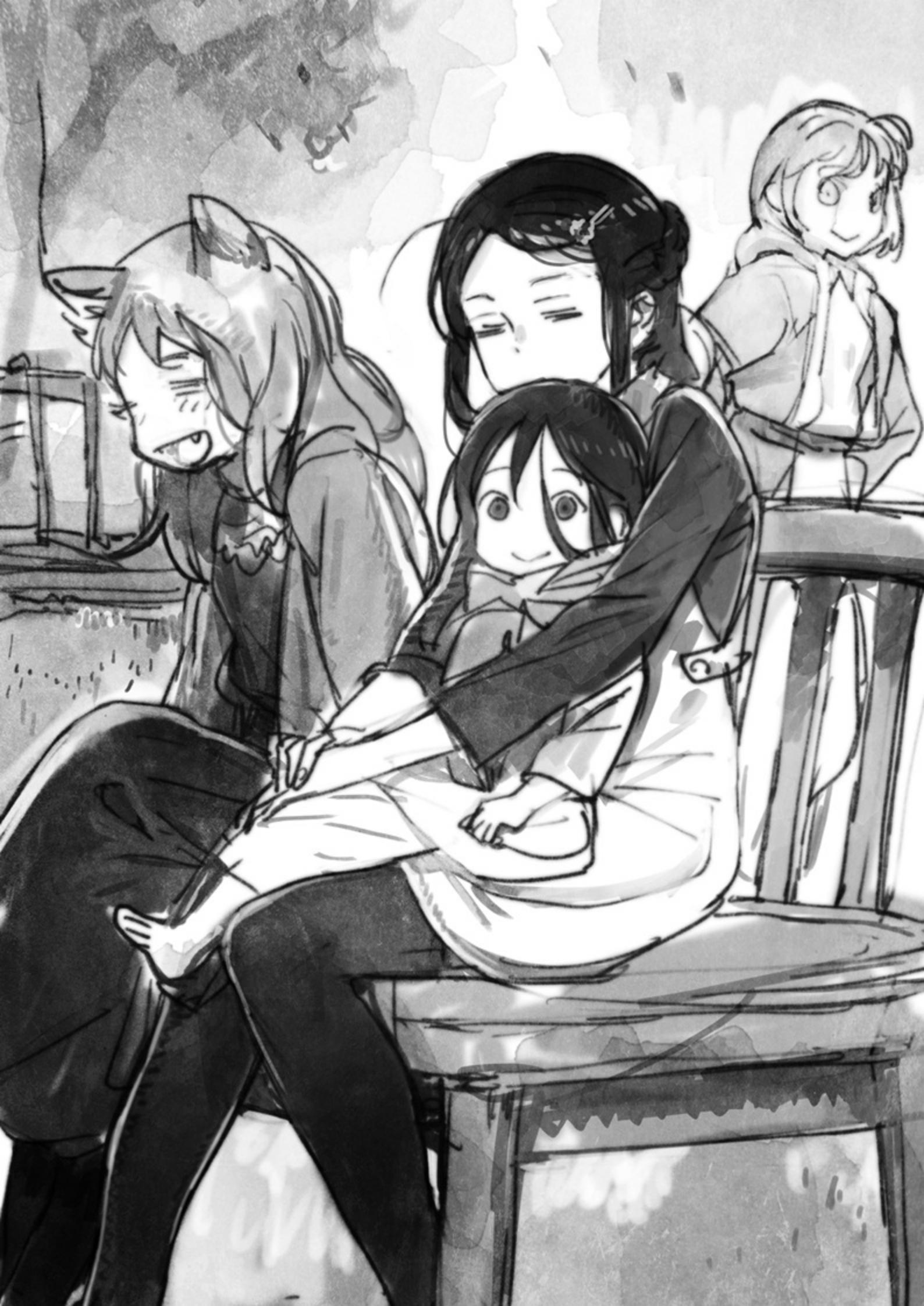
The winter she spent in Orphen with Belgrieve had been fun, but it truly did take a load off her shoulders once she had returned to her hometown. If this was how it was going to be, then maybe it would be better for Belgrieve to await her return in Turnera rather than convincing him to live with her in Orphen. Of course, once it came time for her to head back to Orphen, she would grow lonely once more and wish for him to accompany her then.

"The weather's swell. Really puts you in a good mood, huh?" Anessa mused as she stood and stretched. She inhaled deeply before looking up at the refreshing, piercing blue sky.

Angeline fiddled with Mit's hair as she scanned the area. "Where's everyone else...?"

“Mr. Bell went out with Mr. Kerry, Mr. Graham is looking after the kids, Mr. Kasim is teaching everyone magic, and Char and Byaku are with him.”

“Hmm...” Angeline embraced Mit’s head and rested her chin on his crown. “I feel lazy...”



"Right? Ahh, this really is the best place to relax," said Miriam. She wasn't even wearing the wide-brimmed hat she was usually so obstinate about, and her cat ears comfortably swayed in the breeze. Miriam had stopped hiding them around her comrades and Belgrieve, but she had still been wary around Turnera's villagers. With Angeline's encouragement, she eventually revealed her ears to the villagers, who found them to be cute and fluffy and subjected her to unrestrained hair ruffling. She felt no discrimination or undue consideration and began to feel idiotic for hiding her ears away.

Still feeling a bit sleepy, Angeline mulled over all sorts of things in her drowsy stupor. Much had happened the first time she had tried to return, and this time was no different. It was quite troublesome to her how a problem seemed to break out every time, but it would be a lie to say she didn't think back on those events somewhat fondly after the fact. There had been a bit of a quarrel this time, but no major incident. *All's well that ends well*. She wondered what Yakumo and Lucille were doing now.

Angeline let out a deep breath and began squishing Mit's cheeks, which were soft and delightful to touch. Mit silently let her do as she wanted.

"You never put up any resistance, do you?"

"Resist?" Mit blinked.

With a rather amused look on her face, Miriam began to pat the boy. "Heh heh, you're so cute, Mit."

"Cute?" he parroted again.

"So in the end, what even are demons?" Anessa said with a slight, resigned smile. "When I look at Mit, I just don't know anymore."

"No clue, but... Well, it doesn't matter"

"Right. If they attack you, then you take them down. If they're lovable, then dote on them. Isn't that good enough?"

"*You got that right.*"

"Hey, that was Southernese."

"Heh heh, I learned it from Lucille."

"I wonder where those two are right now."

"They must have passed through Orphen already. Though I doubt they've reached Estogal yet."

There was a clattering as the carpenters climbed down from the roof; evidently, it was break time. The extension was still just a skeletal frame, but it was no less exciting to look at. *What will my new life be like?* Angeline wondered, her heart filled with expectation.

Mit stirred. "Wanna walk," he muttered.

"All right, let's go."

So Mit got up and began on his way to the town square, and Angeline and Miriam took hold of his hands. Sometimes they would pull hard enough to lift him off the ground and send his feet cycling through the air.

When they reached the square, they saw several children and young adults gathered around Kasim, with Charlotte and Byaku among them. At the very front of the crowd, Rita was holding out her hands with a strained look on her face, staring long and hard at her palms. Eventually, there was a slight flicker in the air, and then a flame, eliciting cheers from the onlookers.

"Oh, looks like you're getting it," Kasim said, cackling.

"Yay!" Rita proudly stuck out her chest after extinguishing the fire. Standing a little farther in the back, Barnes opened and closed his mouth, looking less than satisfied.

"Darn it, why is it always you...? I can't get a peep out of it."

"Don't worry, I'll protect you."

"That's not the problem!"

"Oh, sis!" Charlotte waved her hands as she saw the group walking towards them.

"Is everyone doing well?"

"Yeah. Rita is very good."

"I was watching. Not bad, Rita."

"I'm going to protect Barnes. Right?" Rita said, hugging Barnes's arm. Barnes bashfully pouted.

"You two get along," Miriam chuckled.

"We do."

"Grr..." Barnes still seemed unsatisfied.

Angeline looked around and noticed that there was no one else in the square save for this small gathering.

"Didn't you start out with more people?"

"Yeah, some went off with old Graham to practice their swordsmanship outside of town. And color me impressed—they've all got a knack for it. Is it because Bell taught them the fundamentals?"

"Dad is a great teacher, hee hee..."

"I'll give him that," Kasim said. He patted Barnes on the back. "Hey, quit sulking. Even if you're no good at magic, your sword's not half bad. Didn't you hear it from the old man?"

"I know, but..."

"You'll protect me too?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"Thank you." Rita rubbed her cheek against his shoulder.

"Someone loves to put on a show," Kasim observed as he kneaded his beard.

With the spring festival behind them and the most urgent jobs taken care of, the village youth were learning swordsmanship from Graham and Belgrieve, and magic from

Kasim. Having picked up the fundamentals from Belgrieve and experienced combat against fiends several times, these youths steadily absorbed their new teachings. According to Graham and Kasim, though they might not reach the higher ranks, several of them were skilled enough for B-Rank at the very least.

It was never a bad thing to be able to protect oneself. Though uncommon, fiends did appear in Turnera, and there was no guarantee that bandits would never show up. And apart from all these logical reasons, the village youth, brimming with energy, naturally longed for the world of swords and magic.

Kasim clapped his hands together. "Now then, let's give it another go, shall we? You need to keep a proper image in mind."

"Everyone's working hard. Do you think we're seeing a new generation of adventurers?"

"Heh heh, now we won't have to worry about fiends..."

"Still... They learned the basics from the Red Ogre, then built upon that foundation under the Aether Buster and the Paladin... Where exactly is Turnera headed from here?" Anessa muttered wryly as she watched them get back to their magic training.

○

Spring fieldwork took on many forms, but first and foremost was tilling the fields. The winter soil had to be loosened up, and their staple foods of wheat and potatoes needed to be planted.

The mountains around Turnera opened to the east, and there was no scarcity of sunny farmland in that direction. The fields could expand as far as need be, limited only by the extra labor each new plot of land would require. It was a farmer's nature to go as far as they could, but there was no point in having a field beyond one's means.

Farming and livestock were Turnera's primary industries. Their agriculture centered around wheat, potatoes, and beans, and each house would raise its own selection of seasonal vegetables. They took wool from the sheep, milk from the goats, and eggs from the chickens; and in the end, each of these would contribute meat as well. The village did have a communal field and farm, but it was normal for each household to keep its own field and animals on top of this. The tips and tricks they had piled up since the founding of the village had finally borne fruit, and the yields were great enough that no villager ever had to starve, even in the harshest of winters. All of this

was rooted in self-sufficiency. Some produce was set aside for taxes, and any surplus would be traded with peddlers. There was little use for anything beyond that, so hardly anyone in Turnera produced more than was needed.

However, now that the roads would be maintained, there would be more business dealings than before. Rather than seeing trade as a way to off-load their excess, perhaps they would begin to engage in commercial agriculture for the purpose of profit. These roads would not bring immediate success, but that was no different than the fields—nobody expected the greatest yields in the first year they were plowed. The land had to be built up year after year through tilling, weeding, and fertilizing.

Belgrieve had scouted around the village with Kerry and the other farmers through the morning hours in search of prime spots for new fields. Their party was now making their way westward from the village. These plots of land were closer to the mountain, and the sun would be scarcer in the evening hours, but most crops only needed the morning light. Moreover, the lack of tough thatches growing around there meant the soil would be easy to cultivate.

“The eastern parts are close to the pastures. I reckon we’d do good over here.”

“Yeah. Those sheep need their fresh grass.”

One of the farmers tapped the end of their cane against the ground. “Not bad. We could have it soft in two years.”

“We’ll start with scrap wheat. Plow it under around the time the fresh buds come out, and it’ll make for fine fertilizer”

“More rocks than I woulda liked, but it should be fine,” Belgrieve concluded. *We could gather them up and use them as the foundation for a new house.*

“Right. We’re working on Bell’s place right now, but we’ll eventually need a large storehouse.”

“On that note, Bell, your family’s really growing, ain’t it?”

“And he don’t even got a wife! Ha ha ha!”

The farmers’ laughter elicited head scratching from Belgrieve. “It’s a strange circumstance to be sure... But it’s nice and lively.”

"In any case, it looks like all sorts of things are going to change. Once those roads are done, I just know those kids will want to venture out into the world."

"Right... But who could blame them?"

The villagers let out a collective sigh. They were all part of Belgrieve's generation, and they all had families of their own. They thought nothing of working in the village until they died of old age. But in just the past year, the village youth had developed a deep fascination with the world. Angeline, who had played with them in their younger years, had managed to make a name for herself in the big city and returned a hero. She had undoubtedly influenced them greatly, drawing their hearts out of the village. Even now, though it came under the pretense of self-defense, many young villagers were learning swordsmanship from Graham and magic from Kasim. Earlier that very day, they had passed by those young men and women eagerly heading out with their swords. Belgrieve had managed to keep them from growing arrogant in their new skills, but once they were strong enough, the village elders worried they would leave their home behind.

For his part, Belgrieve felt rather conflicted. He idly plucked at his beard.

"What's wrong with that?" Kerry cackled. "It's good to see those young'uns so full of life. And I'm sure Bell will keep dragging in people from the outside!"

The farmers immediately burst into laughter.

"No doubt about that!"

"If he keeps bringing in those cute girls, we'll have no shortage of brides!"

"No, first we need a bride for Bell, don't we?"

"No can do, he's already got a gal in his heart."

"It's not like that, I'm telling you..." Belgrieve said with a troubled laugh.

Kerry patted him on the back. "Don't be so embarrassed. You're going on another journey to find her, aren't you?"

"Ugh... Well, I am, but..."

His desire to lay his past to rest had yet to change. By meeting Kasim, he had managed to face one aspect he had left behind. The other day, he had heard of Percival's whereabouts from Yakumo and Lucille, and there was naturally no choice save for going out to meet him. In all likelihood, he would never feel at peace until he found Satie as well. It felt as though the flow of fate was pushing him forward.

And yet, he was not so youthful as to let whims immediately turn into actions. He hadn't been in the best of health for a while after he returned. It hadn't bothered him while he was in Orphen, but after returning home and relaxing, he had found he could not work properly once the spring festival was over and had to spend several days in bed.

It wouldn't be funny if he pushed himself too hard and ruined his body. Instead of facing his past, that would be akin to letting his past break him. He wanted to live in the present.

"Then when are you heading out?"

"Hey, it doesn't have to be too soon. Summer, at the earliest," Belgrieve answered.

"That sounds pretty soon to me."

"You're a lively fellow, good grief. You don't have to tag along with us today, then. Shouldn't you be busy preparing for your adventure?"

Belgrieve shook his head. "There's not much to prepare; just going to stuff a few things in my bag. And I'm not going out to die in a ditch. Once I'm back from my journey, I'll be tilling the fields just as usual. Naturally, I need to concern myself with our new farmland."

"I guess that's true."

"Don't exclude me like that, good grief," Belgrieve jokingly said, and the villagers awkwardly laughed along.

"Ha ha, we've been relying on you a lot. At the very least, we want you to do what you want to do."

"Right, right."

“Sorry about back then, Bell.”

“No need to bring it back up...”

“Hey, what’s everyone getting sappy for? We saw the place, now let’s go back and set up some plans.”

Kasim’s matter-of-fact words were enough to dispel the downturned atmosphere. Belgrieve didn’t want things to take a maudlin turn either, but he knew they were looking out for him in their own way.

The group headed to Hoffman’s house. Hoffman was inspecting harnesses and hoes in the yard, washing away grime and sharpening the farming implements.

“Hey, chief.”

“Back so soon? So how is it? You find a good spot?”

“There was a fine place to the west. We thought we’d begin planning.”

“Good to know. Hey, honey! Could you get some tea on the stove?” Hoffman yelled into the house, urging everyone to sit around the table in the yard.

Thin, wispy clouds drifted across the sky, turning the piercing blue sky a fainter shade of aqua. The sun reached its zenith and began its westward descent, and gradually the light grew more intense. Opinions were exchanged on what to plant—wheat, potatoes, or maybe a new local specialty.

“For now, let’s get the site ready for anything.”

“Right, we’ll throw in some manure and build up the soil.”

“What about after that?”

“The grapevines are growing nicely. How about some new fruit trees?”

“But trees take time. We won’t know if they’re doing well for a while.”

“We’ll get some good returns if it goes well.”

*"If it goes well. But what do we do if they don't sell and can't be used?"*

"Hey, can't we just use the place to increase our wheat production?"

"That would work, but we'll need more farmhands. No use in having so much wheat that it attracts bugs."

"So we'll need to prepare the plot, fertilize, and plant before harvest. That will take twice our workforce."

"And these northern regions already have Bordeaux for wheat. We won't get a good price if we start growing it here."

"In that case, fruit looks like the best option. How about we plant some acorns and raise pigs, then?"

"Stupid, Rodina has us cornered in that market."

"That's right. In the first place, I hate how smelly those things can be."

"Who cares if you hate them or not?"

"Say that again."

"Hey now. No fighting."

"Say we plant fruit. What would be best, then? Should we grow the vineyards and start some full-blown wine production?"

"Any good ideas, Bell?"

"Hmm..."

As he folded his arms in thought, Mit arrived with Angeline.

"The old men are plotting something nasty..."

"Plotting?"

"Hey, Ange."

"Ha ha ha, so you found us."

After racing over, Mit clambered up Belgrieve's back, and Angeline took a seat beside him.

"What's wrong? Weren't you with the others?"

"Yeah... But everyone's practicing. So I came with Mit to see what you were doing."

"I see. They're all doing their best."

"And for what? They can get as strong as they want, but they'll rot if they can't grow food to put on the table."

"Now, now, it's not like they're slacking on their work."

"Hey, Ange. We're thinking of what to plant as a Turnera specialty. Do you have anything in mind?" Kerry asked.

Angeline tilted her head. "What will a specialty do for you?"

"You know how the roads are going to be maintained, right? If more people come through, we'll get more peddlers than before, and it would be nice to have something to sell then."

"We've been known to make good stuff around here, but we don't have enough to sell more."

"Hmm..." Angeline looked to Belgrieve. "It can't be perishable, right?"

"That's right. It'll be transported long-distance, so something preserved would be nice. There aren't many people equipped with cooling magic out there."

In any case, preserved goods were best for those who peddled their wares all over. Even if they didn't sell, they were a less risky good to keep on hand around the village.

"So either dried, salted, or fermented..."

"It would have to be something along those lines."

"And we wouldn't want to stick our hands into something we're not familiar with."

Angeline thought for a moment before suddenly lifting her head. "What about medicinal herbs?"

"Like what?"

"Well... How about rumel trees?"

Rumel was an evergreen tree that gave off a striking, sinus-piercing scent. Its leaves could be crushed into a salve that worked well on external wounds. If water was then added to this concoction and it was boiled until viscous, it could keep for about a month. Dried leaves could be mixed in hot water to wash wounds as well. The sap was also usable, and the bark and roots could be boiled into a drinkable potion. Low-grade adventurers unable to buy elixirs would often turn to it. Rumel was used in Turnera as well for folk remedies, but they simply picked from wild plants and never cultivated it.

Belgrieve stroked his beard. "That's not a bad idea... Do they still rely on the adventurers to gather rumel leaves?"

"Yes. But the bark and roots make good medicine, so they uprooted all the ones around Orphen, and there aren't many these days. I heard someone say the price has gone up."

"Hmm. It's not rare around these parts."

"But if it's used that much, won't they just plant it over there?"

"True, but I've heard it's higher quality when it grows in cold places... And there were people complaining about how it wasn't as effective as it used to be."

"How about it, Bell?"

"Why are you asking me...? Well, I definitely heard about that. It grows native to these mountains, so maybe it would be more effective if it were grown in this environment."

"I see... We won't have to worry about the saplings then. That makes things simple."

"It would be risky to start on a large scale, but we can do a few tests. The climate and soil should be just right."

"And there's nothing bad about having more medicine around."

Seeing the villagers grow animated over the topic, Angeline whispered, "Was that a good idea...?"

"Yeah, I'm amazed you thought of it. Good job."

"Tee hee..."

Angeline gleefully nuzzled Belgrieve's shoulder, and Mit placed a hand on her head. As if to imitate Belgrieve, the boy said, "Good job."

There was suddenly laughter about, and Angeline pouted with red cheeks.

○

Damp, stagnant air pooled in the shadowy depths of the woods. Perhaps because of this, it felt as though the darkness itself had gained a stifling mass. There were rows of elderly trees here, their branches laden with dark leaves which formed a canopy overhead to cut off the sun. Without light, there was scarcely any vegetation on the forest floor, and apart from the thin vines climbing the trees and dangling from the branches, only a few low ferns persisted.

Someone—a man, judging from his build—trod upon this dark soil. His white robe was a striking contrast to the thick darkness, but his eyes and face were comparatively inscrutable in the darkness of his robe's hood.

Never mind roads—there weren't even any animal paths to be seen, and yet the man walked with no hesitation. The branches would make a rustling sound each time he passed by them, as though they were warning him to leave.

Eventually, the man reached the forest's depths. There, the trees were older and stood even taller than the ones before. They appeared to be dead husks, yet the bumps of new growth on their dry, hollow bark demonstrated their obstinacy.

"Oooo..."

A peculiar groan filled the air. The branches shook as if these corpse-like trees were breathing. There were no other eyes to see here, yet the man felt as though he was being pierced by countless stares.

However, he remained calm and scoffed as if to belittle the foliage. He brandished his hand and chanted with a quiet but clear voice. The longer he chanted, the more mana gathered to him, swirling about like a gale. Pale blue light illuminated the craggy skin of each tree, but in contrast to this illumination, a black shadow oozed from the nooks and crannies of the trees, lingering about the place.

“Do you want to be free? Then snatch your freedom. Head north.”

“*OooOooOooO...*”

The old trees cried out. The shadows oozing out from them gathered into one great swarm, an immense gathering of aggressive, ill intent. It spread throughout the forest, shifting from tree to tree in the blink of an eye, like a brigade of knights galloping off to vanquish their mortal enemy—or perhaps, like a gathering of scoundrels with their ill-gotten prize before their eyes.

Shadows burst from trees along the way, adding more warriors to the legion. The man in white folded his arms as he watched them.

“Now what will you do?” he muttered in amusement.

A raw scent filled the air.

# CHAPTER 72

## THE KINDLING GLEAMED RED LIKE A GEMSTONE

The kindling gleamed red like a gemstone, and though there were no flames rising from it, if someone were to place a hand over the embers, it would have been difficult to keep it there for more than a few seconds. The pot hanging over it contained a stew—or rather, a simmering concoction of miscellaneous odds and ends.

The view out the window was enveloped in night's faint cloak, more a shade of violet than pitch-black. The wind could be heard rustling the leaves on the branches.

"Now eat your fill!" An elf girl placed the pot right in the center of the table, eliciting a faint smile from a brown-haired boy. "Here it is, the elfland specialty—mulligan stew."

Another boy with flaxen hair stared wearily. "Again...?" he complained. "Is that the only thing you know how to make?"

"What's your problem?" the elf girl protested.

The brown-haired boy began to serve the stew. "It's not bad, don't get me wrong. It tastes fine, but... You know."

"You get sick of it if it tastes the same every time," the flaxen-haired boy finished for him.

"Well, what am I supposed to do about that? We're pressed for cash here. If you want to complain, then go take on a job!"

"I get you there, but... Hey, can't you do something about this?"

The conversation suddenly turned to a boy with red hair, who awkwardly scratched his cheek. "Why are you asking me?"

"Is it awful, then?" The elf girl pouted. "Do you think so too?"

“Not particularly... I think it’s great.”

“Isn’t it? Heh heh, now it’s two on two.”

“He’s just taking pity on you, I tell ya... *Sigh*, let’s finish up the next job quickly so we can put something good on the table.”

The flaxen-haired boy resignedly stuck a spoon into his bowl. The red-haired boy followed suit, savoring the vegetables and meat (which were chopped a bit too big), simmered in a broth with salt as its only seasoning. The ingredients contributed their own flavors, and it certainly didn’t taste bad. But it seemed like it was missing something.

The red-haired boy paused for a moment until something occurred to him. He pulled his bags close to him and began to rummage through them.

“Something wrong?”

“Well...” He produced a small box from within.

The elf girl cocked her head. “What’s that?”

“Some spices from the east, a few wild herbs, and a lump of atura sap,” he said as he picked out a few small sacks from within. It seemed the boy made a habit of carrying around seasoning. He measured out some of the powdered spices on his hand and dusted them all together over the pot. Immediately, an appetizing scent began to waft from it.

“Next...” He carved off a chunk of dried atura sap. It was a substance with quite a unique taste and fragrance which was often used in outdoor cooking. The boy had bought some just in case the party would have to camp out on a long-term request. He melted the sap over the heat and added it once it had achieved a silky consistency, carefully testing the flavor all the while. He then tossed in dried aromatic herbs and salt before finishing with hard, dry cheese, which he shaved with a knife and sprinkled over the top.

“To be honest, I was saving those for if we had to camp out, but... How is it?”

The boys were already sipping at it by the time he finished posing the question.

“Delish! I knew you had it in you!”

“Reliable as ever, I see.”

“You’re making such a big deal about it,” the red-haired boy said with a wry smile. He was taken aback to find that the elf girl had suddenly pulled him close to her. He could see his own face reflected clearly in her emerald eyes.

“Hey.”

“Y-Yes?”

“Can you teach me how to cook?”

“S-Sure.”

○

The house wasn’t very spacious to begin with, and now it was rather cramped. Counting both children and adults, there were nine residents. The table, which only sat four, was far from enough, so Belgrieve had borrowed another which completely took up the rest of the space.

“The bread is done, dad,” Charlotte called out, as she began piling the thin loaves high onto a plate.

“All right.”

Meanwhile, Miriam stirred a pot of stew over the hearth. Dinner preparations took a bit longer now—it wasn’t a simple task to feed more than twice the number of mouths they were used to. Luckily, Angeline, Anessa, and Miriam all knew how to cook. Charlotte was doing her best to learn, and the process had become more fun than it was troublesome.

Their meal consisted of thin, pan-fried bread and mutton stew, along with dried grapes and cheese. The smell wafting from the stew put him in a strange mood. The spices had been purchased in Orphen; he felt as though he had smelled them long ago.

Kasim tied back his hair and said, “Oh, now that’s the smell of nostalgia.”

"You think so too? What was it again...? Where did we have it...?"

"It was that time, remember? When you threw those spices into Satie's hodgepodge."

"Oh, right."

*Yes, I remember that.* It had been less than a month since the party had formed. At first, Satie was often asked to cook for the obvious reason that she was the only girl. After that, though, Belgrieve remembered himself being placed in charge of cooking more often.

Kasim tore a piece of bread and reminisced. "I think it was the contrast, but that was a nice one. It really spiced up Satie's bland stew."

Anessa blinked. "Was Satie bad at cooking or something?"

"Not bad, just lacking any variety."

"She'd chop up meat and vegetables, and stew them with salt and nothing else. Boasted about it being an elven specialty or something. Be honest with me, gramps. Was she telling the truth?"

Graham, who had been wiping the sticky stew off of Mit's mouth, lifted his head to reply. "Admittedly, once you get used to the flavors out here, elven territory's cuisine does seem a bit bland. It's not that we don't eat meat, it just rarely graces the dinner table. Although lembas and honey mead are leagues above even the dukedom's greatest delicacies."

"Lembas, huh? I heard Maggie mention it."

"Is lembas your favorite food, uncle?" Charlotte asked.

"It is."

"How do you make it? Do you think we could do it here?"

"I doubt it... You must knead the flour with the sap of the spirit tree, and once baked, it must rest in the spirit tree's leaves... The trees are abundant in elven territory, but they are hard to find here."

“‘Spirit tree’...Do you mean ohma?”

“I do recall it being referred to as such...”

“Wow! So there are loads of ohma trees growing in elven territory? That’s incredible!” Miriam cried out.

The ohma was a rare tree whose sap could be used to produce various medicines—expensive elixirs being one of them. However, they were mostly harvested to the last root in places of human habitation. Now, they could only be found deep in the mountains or in difficult dungeons. Perhaps it was precisely because humans were not welcome in elven territory that their forests were populated with the trees.

Angeline, with her mouth full of stew, asked, “Did Satie ever say anything about lembas?”

“Right, I don’t remember hearing much about that... I got the feeling she didn’t really like her homeland.”

“Whenever she talked about elven territory, it was always about how boring it was.”

“Is it, uncle?”

“Well... It would be boring to an elf who longs for the outside world.”

Graham, Marguerite, and Satie were all heretics by elf standards. All of them left, spurning their traditional way of life. It stood to reason that the elven life was boring to such people; had they been satisfied, they would never have left in the first place.

Anessa crossed her arms. “I don’t really get it... Are elves really that opposed to going outside?”

“It is the same with humans, Anessa. Adventurers see what we do as a self-evident desire, but many humans would rather put down roots in one place, to live and die there.”

“Do you think so?”

It was the same for Turnera’s residents. The rural farmers valued tradition and the local community over all else. The moment someone was born there, it was as though

they were fated to die there as well. Their yearning for the world beyond ended at just that—an unrealized yearning, one that few would ever act upon.

Within such mores, it would be the “heretics” that would make these yearnings a reality—the eccentrics in their midst who were uninhibited by how the village had functioned to that point. Sometimes, this would amount to becoming a traveler, and at other times, it was just a rebellious soul questioning the status quo. In Turnera, that role fell to Belgrieve and Angeline, and in elven territory, it fell to Graham.

Tradition was, in a sense, stagnation. Change could also be called chaos. Wherever it may be, there were those who hated stagnation and others who hated change. This was no less evident in the dukedom than it was in the land of the elves.

They chatted more as they enjoyed their dinner, and by the time the plates were cleaned, the sun had sunk beyond the mountains.

Belgrieve filled a kettle with water and placed it over the fire before leaving the house to get firewood. Spring was in full bloom during the day, but the evening breeze was cold once the sun had set. Cold as it was, the spring dusk was strangely soft, and he did not mind it in the slightest.

His thoughts turned to the neighboring houses. Perhaps one of his neighbors was practicing some craft or other, and maybe others were hosting a small banquet. He could hear the strumming of an untuned fiddle riding on the wind from somewhere in the village.

Belgrieve stared at the dark at the end of the yard until he remembered the wood he had come to retrieve. When he returned, Graham and Byaku were sitting across from one another before the fireplace.

“Hmm... Then once more.”

“Got it.”

Byaku’s expression strained as he seemed to focus on something. It had been Graham’s suggestion to have him converse with the demon within him. The goal was to have the boy better define who he himself was while gaining a deeper understanding of the demon.

From the start, Graham was intrigued by the mystery of what exactly demons were,

and he naturally took a deep interest in the boy. Even Byaku had a hard time going against the old elf's solemn demeanor; he rarely cursed at him as he would with Belgrieve and most others, and Belgrieve found it rather amusing how docile he had become.

As the two of them faced one another, all determination, Charlotte spent the whole time fiddling with Graham's hair. She seemed to be having fun playing with an elf's characteristically silky, silver hair, and her comb never showed any signs of rest. It was also quite amusing to see Graham—with such a serious face—having his hair plaited and done up in ponytails and pigtails by the girls. Belgrieve held his laughter as he added wood to the fire until Byaku was done with his meditation and opened his eyes, at which point Belgrieve burst into guffaws.

"Your hair is so smooth, and at your age! It's amazing," Charlotte gushed.

"You... When I'm trying to be serious here..." Byaku sputtered.

"You don't have to be that angry... Byaku..."

"Are you all right with that, gramps...?" asked Anessa. She was occupied with looking over her bow, oiling the string, and inspecting the fletchings and heads of her arrows.

Angeline sat Mit down on her lap as she played cards with Miriam and Kasim. It was so lively that Belgrieve could hardly believe he had been living alone just one year before.

"Let's play poker, dad."

"Yeah, give me a second. I'll get some tea going."

"Are you boiling water? Let me do it..." Angeline transferred Mit to Miriam and jumped up. "I like floral tea, but I've been missing lent leaves."

"The pot's too small for this many people... Let's hope the peddler brings a big one next time."

"We should have bought one when we had the chance."

"Right... I was scared I'd break it along the way, but that was a mistake."

"Heh heh... So you make mistakes too, dad?"

"Of course I do. You think too highly of me," Belgrieve said with a chuckle, ruffling up Angeline's hair.

When he brought the tea to the table, Mit latched onto him. "Dad, make mistakes?"

"Ha ha, you're a good listener." Belgrieve patted him on the head and took a sip of tea.

"Mr. Bell, you see," Miriam explained, giggling. "He bought so many things, but forgot to get a teapot."

"It's because I bought so many peculiar things..."

"Like the steamer...?"

"Right... And that hot pot. What are we going to do with it...?"

"Heh heh heh, you won't come across eastern ingredients here," Kasim said, stroking his beard. Then, as if only then recalling, he placed his elbow on the table. "So, what's the plan? When are we heading out?"

He was referring to their impending journey to the Earth Navel in search of Percival. Belgrieve lifted Mit up before he could stumble over and placed him on his lap.

"Around summer. We should at least wait until the new house is finished."

"It's pretty incredible. They already did that much, so they should be done before summer, I'd reckon."

"A new house... I can't wait."

"It's getting pretty cramped here."

What's more, Belgrieve could not push aside the feeling there would be more people to come. In any case, his days were spent working the fields while gradually preparing for the trip. He did not have too many things to pack, but they were going to a foreign land and would have to choose their path with care.

The Earth Navel was said to lie in the Nyndia mountains on the border of Tyldes and

Dadan. This was far south of Turnera. There were two options they could take to get there. The first path would entail passing through Lucrecia to the south, while the second would involve heading east from Orphen or Bordeaux and passing through Tyldes.

With her bow maintenance done, Anessa pulled up a chair and joined the circle. “If you’re heading east from Bordeaux, that would mean taking the northern trade route, right? That would be quite a bit of a detour.”

“Yeah, that’s about right. If we’re passing through Tyldes, it would be safer to take the eastern trade route from Orphen.”

“Have you ever been to Tyldes, Mr. Kasim?”

“I have. Well, I stayed in the imperial capital for longer, so I’d feel more at home there, though.”

“Hmm, then that might be better...”

“But I want to see more of Tyldes...”

“Tyldes is a land of open plains, Ange. They’ve got loads of nomads. Will you be all right when you’re that bad at horse riding?”

“Grr...” Angeline folded her arms. For some reason, horse riding was the one thing she could never wrap her head around. Naturally, Angeline had insisted she would tag along for the journey. If the party leader was going, that meant that Anessa and Miriam were added to the count as well. *It will be quite a lavish trip, traveling with two S-Rank adventurers,* Belgrieve thought.

Kasim shifted a bit to look at Graham. “Hey, gramps. You ever been to that hole?”

Graham lifted his head. His braided hair was now fastened into a bun behind his head. “Just once,” he said. “That was more than fifty years ago.”

Belgrieve scratched his cheek. Fifty years—that was before he had been born. It was a dizzying scale of time.

“Well that’s something,” Kasim said, tousling his beard with a smile. “But I doubt you’d remember the path then.”

"Yes... My memories of that time are vague."

"What route did you take back then?" Angeline asked.

"Me? Back then... It was on my way back from the east, as I recall it. It was after obtaining that," Graham said, pointing at his sword leaning against the wall. It was a living blade fabricated from the fruit of the steelwood tree, which only grew at the farthest ends of the east.

Angeline let out a sigh of admiration. "It's a nice sword."

"It might be time for you to find a good sword for yourself."

"Hmm..." Angeline picked up the cards and began to shuffle them masterfully. "For now, let's just play."

"All right, let's do this. We can take our time planning out the trip later."

"Right..."

Belgrieve gazed out the window, patting Mit's head as the boy tugged at his beard. The wind lightly rattled the thin glass panes.

○

West of Bordeaux and Hazel was a deep forest only known as the Ancient Forest. The forest had been there from the days that humans had first cultivated imperial soil, and though many had tried to till the land, the forest exhibited vehement opposition. In the end, they could only erect villages at its edge. The forest would readily offer any its blessings, but it would never let anyone be its *master*.

Few would venture into the forest depths, and this naturally allowed many rumors to fester: of high-ranking fiends that lurked within, and great trees that walked on their own, and witches that led wanderers astray and turned them into animals. It was even said that it was home to old and lost gods from before the time of Solomon.

There were two men stationed there. One was a senior soldier who had been born and raised in Hazel, and the other was a younger soldier deployed from Bordeaux.

"And I'm telling you," said the old man to the young. "Never go too deep. That's what

my mom always told me.”

“Hmm, so not even the adventurers venture too far inside?”

“You got that right. After all, it’s a place that adventurers go and never come back. You don’t have to go too far in to gather fruit and mushrooms, and it’s a plentiful place, all things considered, though.”

“You think Lady Helvetica’s ever thought about cutting the place open?”

“Who knows. All I’ll say is that nothing good ever happened to the folks who tried to do that.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“After they cut down several hundred trees to cultivate the land, I hear that a gaggle of new trees came marching out from the forest’s depths to replace them. But first, they crushed the woodcutters flat and buried them in the ground. Even now, you can hear the groans of those woodcutters who were made into fertilizer...”

The young soldier shuddered. “Hey, enough of that.”

“Ha ha ha, not one for scary stories, are you?”

“That’s not it... Was all of that made up?”

“No, it’s true that the trees you cut down will be back up the next morning. And also that the first village someone tried to set up was swallowed up by the forest. And that no one ever heard from it again.”

“Whoa, that’s terrible. If cutting doesn’t work, then what about burning them?”

“Don’t be daft. A real forest doesn’t just go up in flames like that. There’s too much water in the soil. And if you do that, you’ll end up waking up all sorts of things that shouldn’t be woken up.”

“Ha ha, I’m just joking... So that’s why we have to patrol the forest every night, then?”

“Pretty much. It’s not like it’s overflowing with fiends or anything. Nor has it become a dungeon. The place is just incomprehensible.”

“They’re like a troublesome neighbor?”

“You could say that. But hey, we’re getting along well enough for now, and we should get along in times to come. You just can’t help but be a bit anxious when it’s so mysterious.”

“Huh...? Did you hear something?”

“What?”

The two soldiers honed their ears. Mixed in with the rustling of trees, there was a rumbling sound—a low growl, the sort that resounded in the pit of one’s stomach.

After exchanging a look, they stared stiffly into the forest’s depths. Illuminated by what was nearly a full moon, among the dark silhouettes of the woods, they could see that something large was moving—a tremendous mass of shadows, far larger than the forest itself. It was as if an entire mountain was moving. Strangely, although something so large was in motion, they could not hear any of the trees falling, or even the snapping of branches. It was still just the rustling of leaves that accompanied the low growling sound.

The soldiers readied their bows from atop the lookout tower and swallowed their breath. They considered ringing the bell to wake the others. It would be a dire emergency if that thing made for town. They needed to rouse the residents.

But that large thing—whatever it was—was not headed in their direction. It was slowly but surely on course for the mountains to the north.

“What do we do?”

“Let’s watch to see what it does. If it doesn’t start coming this way, we can put in a report later. No need to ring the bell.”

“I’ll go wake the soldiers.”

“Go ahead.”

There was quite an uproar at Hazel’s soldier station that night, but luckily it did not amount to much. It simply moved slowly, seemingly showing no signs of leaving the woods. At daybreak, it was gone. The soldiers felt as if they had been put under some

sort of spell, and didn't quite know what to report.

# CHAPTER 73

## WITH A HEAVE AND A HO

With a heave and a ho, the bundle of laminate was hoisted up, fastened to ropes, and pulled over the roof. There were already boards over more than half the joists, and it would only take a few more for the roof's undercoat to be completed.

Suddenly, there was a yelp as one of the carpenters pulling the boards slipped and nearly fell. The other carpenters—and of course, the onlookers—turned pale, but the worker managed to catch his leg on the edge and get up unscathed. It was dreadfully easy to slip on fresh roof boards.

The foreman barked out some harsh words before work resumed. The men seemed to be moving more cautiously than before.

The new house was built from stone up to waist height and had white siding up to chest height. From there, the rest of the structure and roof was constructed of logs. There was no second floor, but there would be attic space for storage. There was a dirt floor around the fireplace, but the rest of the floor space would be raised up on boards with a crawl space beneath. The roof was to be gabled with a somewhat steep angle to prevent snow from building.

"You didn't have to make it this big..." Belgrieve muttered as he cleaned up wood chips and garbage.

When he had broached the idea of building a new annex to the carpenters, they had become quite enthused and immediately got to planning. It had been quite some time before a new house had been erected in the village. Usually, their jobs involved fixing broken houses or putting up barns. There were many things they wanted to try out, be it building a large fireplace or setting up a mezzanine floor, and they debated whether it would be a separate building or an extension of the existing house. The planning stage engendered rather heated discussion, and Belgrieve had just barely managed to contain the project to this size. He still found it needlessly large, but Angeline seemed happy, so he decided to let it be.

Construction proceeded at an admirable rate. It seemed it would mostly take shape by

summer. Of course, he didn't want them to rush too much and have a repeat of what had just happened. There had been no injuries, but he could feel his anxiety growing. He was delighted that it would be built before he set off for the Earth Navel, yet it also felt like such a waste to abandon such a large house as soon as it was built. It seemed Graham still intended to stay in Turnera a while longer, and they couldn't take Charlotte and Byaku for their own safety. So in that sense, a comfortable house was best.

Belgrieve apprehended Mit before he could chomp on a wood fragment, then glanced at the yard. Graham was sparring with Byaku, and though it was supposed to have been purely martial arts, it only took a one-handed throw for Byaku to be sent spiraling through the air as if some magic was afoot.

"Let's leave it at that."

"Dammit..." Byaku took in a heavy breath, clearly disappointed.

His fighting style consisted of bombarding enemies with three-dimensional magic circles from a distance, but his range was limited. There could be times when an enemy got near enough for close-quarter combat, so he was training his body. Not that there would be many opportunities to fight in Turnera, but it was important for Byaku to have a good grasp on his own strengths.

"Grampa..."

"Hmm." Graham scooped up Mit, who had come toddling towards him. Mit grabbed the old elf's long hair and began picking out each fine strand as if he was counting them.

After he had collected all the wood scraps, Belgrieve tossed a few into the firewood pile and put the rest with the kindling.

"Let's prepare for lunch, Byaku."

"What do you need me for?"

"Can you knead the dough for me? We'll boil it and serve it with stew on top."

"Hmph..."

Byaku entered the house, wiping the sweat from his brow. The Turnera air seemed to be having some positive impact on him, as the boy's attitude had been tempered considerably.

Lurching down from his spot on Graham's shoulders, Mit mumbled, "Going to help Bucky..."

"All right..."

The child was lowered to the ground, and then he was off. Belgrieve chuckled. "He's growing up to be a good kid."

"Right..." Graham nodded.

Mit wasn't very expressive, but he nevertheless showed plenty of emotion and was quite amusing to look after. Belgrieve felt bad for leaving him behind for another journey, but it would be a bit nerve-racking to take him along. This was more than just a trip to Orphen.

More than anything, Graham had been against the idea. According to him, after observing Mit over the entire winter, he had figured out that the boy was a lump of condensed mana. His body was hardly different from that of a human, but though a human may have mana within them, Mit was made entirely of mana itself. There was no telling what would happen if he were brought to the Earth Navel, where vast swathes of mana were known to pool.

It wasn't as if Graham understood everything about the demons—or rather, Solomon's homunculi. He doted on Mit, but that did not mean he wasn't wary of him.

"A mass of mana, huh... What are the demons, I wonder?"

"I don't know. What was Solomon thinking when he produced them?"

"Wasn't it to rule the continent?"

"Does that not come off as strange to you? If they were mere weapons, they would not need emotion."

"That's... true."

"To me... They give off a sense of loneliness. As if Solomon tried to manufacture for himself that which he could never obtain..." Graham's eyes grew a bit distant as his gaze traced over nothing in particular.

Belgrieve stood silently beside him a while before eventually opening his mouth. "Hey... Are you sure you're okay with staying here so long, Graham? I'm thankful that you're taking me up on my selfish requests, but... you don't have to if you don't want to."

"Worry not, Bell. Retiring in elven territory is not so different from living in Turnera... And I find comfort in being here. It's not a bad place to rest my bones."

"I see..." It felt a bit nice to hear him say that.

Graham narrowed his eyes. "And one more thing..."

"Yes?"

"Whether he wants to or not, Mit's very existence will set something in motion. It is my duty to watch over that."

"Are you sure you want to shoulder that burden?"

"I'm his grandpa," Graham said with a smile.

They had ventured quite a long way. The forests around Turnera grew denser the farther one wandered in, and it became harder for the sunlight to reach the ground. It was brighter farther up the mountain, but in its shadow, the trees grew higher and higher to bask in the sun, generating a deeper darkness below.

They were at the point where flatland changed to mountain, and the land gradually began to slope upwards. However, there were also places where the ground would rapidly shoot up into a sheer cliff face.

Large stones were engulfed by the crawling roots of great trees, and the soft flow of spring water filled the air. The tall stalks of devil's dropwort let off a striking scent, and beneath their feet, the moss spread out like a carpet, pushing back softly with each step. Charlotte walked back and forth on it with her bare feet.

"Wow, it's so nice and fluffy!"

"It feels like it's spread farther than last time..."

Angeline, also standing barefoot on the moss, cocked her head curiously at the sight of it covering the rocks, roots, and fallen trunks. The forest was greener than she remembered it, though that may simply have reflected how long it had been since she last came here.

For their part, Anessa and Miriam were also enjoying the mossy texture.

"Wah! Water comes out if you step here."

"Hey, you sure you're not going to slip like that? Watch where you step! Good grief."

Just before Anessa had finished speaking, there was a rustling in the thicket. She immediately nocked an arrow in her bow, but the leaves merely shook, and nothing emerged.

"A rabbit... Perhaps?"

"There are loads of animals here... You're safe while the sun is up."

Angeline stripped away some of the moss covering a tree and added it to her basket.

They had come to harvest this very moss. When the logs were stacked to form the walls of their expanded house, it would be placed between them to seal the gaps. Otherwise, the wind would blow through and make the house cold. When the logs dried out, they would shrink some, and then plaster would need to be smeared over the new gaps, but that was a little farther down the line.

The house was turning out bigger than expected, so there was no harm in having more material on hand. Any leftover moss could be dried into kindling, and rather than regretting that they picked too much, it would be much more troublesome to have to come back for more. Furthermore, the whole area was covered in it, and while they were here, collecting it was not a difficult task. No matter how much of it they picked, the ground would be covered in the same green come next year.

The girls chatted about this and that as they gathered the moss and enjoyed how it felt against their bare soles. It was not long at all before their baskets were full.

Miriam hoisted her wicker basket under one arm and let out a deep breath. "There are

still places like this in the world with no signs of human influence."

"The people of Turnera rarely enter the forest, right?" Anessa asked.

Angeline nodded. "Until recently, they usually never wandered this close to the mountain... except for dad."

"Dad knows these parts like the back of his hand, doesn't he? That's amazing."

"Yes... And sometimes, the other children and I went with him into the depths. Even now, some of the younger generation still go in..."

Those who had traversed the mountain with Belgrieve since their childhood would now occasionally venture into the forest's depths. They would still never hazard the journey alone, but would sometimes go in groups. Even the shallow parts around Turnera carried plenty of nature's bounty, but those treasures were far more plentiful farther in, albeit with added dangers. These deeper parts were not the domain of mankind. Aside from wild animals, which posed some threat in their own right, there was also a risk of running into fiends.

Near the village, the church's barrier and the fence served to ward off fiends to some extent, but this danger was ever present. Fortunately, the fiends were not very numerous, and there had not been any recent accounts of anyone being injured in a fiend attack.

Usually, the fiends would be more numerous this far from human civilization. That was why adventurers existed and thrived, and why those reckless types could make such a decent living off of hunting fiends and gathering materials in places too dangerous for any other. Many villages and towns on the frontier had their own guilds, and it was not so rare for there to be adventurers working exclusively from those branches.

However, although Turnera was in a remote area, the fiend population was incredibly low. Perhaps there were some factors keeping them away, but no one could say what they were. Of course, it could be said that the village was founded here precisely because of this good fortune. There could never have been such a peaceful settlement if it were prone to fiend attacks.

Picking out a spot that didn't ooze water when she stepped, Anessa sat down and took a good look around. "It's green everywhere I look... Honestly, I don't know what I'd do

if I got lost.”

“Right? And I’d lose my way pretty quickly if I focused too hard on the fruits and mushrooms. Ange, do you know the way back?”

“Don’t worry... Dad taught me how to navigate the forest.”

“That’s good to know.”

“But how do you learn the forest paths?” Charlotte asked nervously. “Everywhere looks the same to me...”

Angeline giggled. “Well, none of the paths are obvious... So you need to find landmarks along the way. If you can’t make those out, you can put down markings yourself... If you’re not careful, you’ll end up walking in circles.”

“Yeah, once you’re lost, it will be hard to recover from that.”

“Indeed. The worst thing you can do is panic...”

Suddenly, someone’s stomach growled, and no one knew who. It was especially loud in the forest’s stillness, and in no time, it had been replaced by laughter.

“Hey, who was that? That was a noisy one.”

“Heh heh... It’s already noon. Let’s head home.”

“Right. Our baskets are full and all.”

Through the gaps in the trees, the sun could be seen nearing its zenith. The girls slipped on their shoes and picked up their moss-filled bags. They walked down the gentle slope together, returning with Angeline leading the way.

In the fields, the farmers were pressing potatoes into the dirt and pulling up weeds with well-honed hoes. The fresh green leaves swayed in the wheat fields, which would soon sprout their stalks. Once that happened, they would be golden-yellow within days. Their journey south would begin once the wheat was harvested. That thought was fresh in their minds when they returned home to find the carpenters and Belgrieve gathered around a bonfire at the end of the yard.

"At this pace, we'll manage before summer is in full swing."

"That's great to know. Thank you."

"Don't mention it. You've helped us out plenty. Now it's time to return the favor."

"And it's been so long since we've had a proper job. Not since we built that schoolhouse, right?"

"Right. Renovations have been getting boring."

Mit shifted from his perch on Graham's shoulders. "Sis..." he said, drawing everyone else's attention.

"We're back."

"You came at just the right time. We're about to have lunch."

"Okay... Here, we gathered some moss."

The foreman peered into Angeline's basket and smiled. "Oh, you got quite a lot. That will speed things up a bit."

"What do you want us to do with it? Leave it here?"

"Nah, spread it out and let it dry a bit. Over there's a good spot..."

"Oh, then I'll get the drying mats," Belgrieve offered. He got up and went to the shed, where he produced several thatch mats. The moss was spread over them and exposed to the sun's glare.

Then, everyone sat in a circle, eating bits of wheat dumplings boiled with rabbit meat. Plenty had been prepared in a large pot, but these hardy carpenters were robust eaters, and there was little left by the time they had their fill.

Gulping down an after-meal cup of water, the foreman said, "Ange, you must have gone pretty far into those woods to get this much moss."

"Hmm... Around the edge of the mountain."

"I knew it. We can't make it that far."

"We usually do our best to collect it in the shadow of the nearby forest, but it takes time and a good bit of trouble. You adventurers are really something," another carpenter said, laughing.

Life in Turnera depended on the forest's blessings; nonetheless, few would ever venture too far. Before Belgrieve had settled in Turnera, there had been an elderly man who would often head into the forest to forage for various things, only to vanish one day without a trace. Perhaps he was injured and never made it home... or perhaps a fiend or wild beast had struck him down.

"I just can't get used to that place. It's our job to deal with the trees, but I can't help but get a little skittish around the thicker trunks. Even with lumber, and especially so for the ones that are still standing."

"Hey, Graham, the elves live in the woods, don't they? Are the elven forests like the one we've got here?"

Graham lifted his gaze. "No... The forest here is a bit calmer. There are many places in elven territory where the forest harbors a will of its own. Perhaps those places are what gave birth to the elves' religious devotion to nature..."

"Hmm. The forest has a will?"

"Is that different from spirits?" Angeline asked.

Graham nodded. "Similar, but slightly different. Spirits happen when nature manifests in some form with a singular sense of self. But the forest's own will has no shape. It is simultaneously a singular great consciousness and also a collection of many individual minds... Do you understand?"

"Not at all..."

Angeline wasn't the only one who didn't get it—Miriam and Charlotte seemed just as confused. Anessa seemed to mull it over for some time before asking a question of her own. "Does every individual tree have its own will?"

"A good question... And naturally, they do. Though each has a will of its own, they are all connected. Should you hurt a single tree, the rest of the forest will know at once..."

"Singular, but at the same time a whole," Belgrieve observed. Graham nodded.

Though Angeline couldn't quite wrap her mind around it, she simply concluded that the forest was quite an amazing place. She was an S-Rank adventurer, but still, she certainly felt an unascertainable anxiety at times, among the trees.

Suddenly, she looked at Belgrieve. Since before he had taken her in, he had spent his days wandering the forest and mountain on his own. *I'm surprised he was never lost or injured*, she thought. "Dad..."

"Yes?"

"Dad, are you ever scared when you're walking in the woods? You were always alone, weren't you?"

"Hmm." Belgrieve stroked his beard. "Right. I was nervous at first. I'd start by deciding on one small plot to explore every day, and I'd spend that day thoroughly investigating and memorizing its every nook and cranny. Then, I'd go a bit farther, and a bit farther after that. That's how I expanded my range."

"Wow. So that's why you have such a good memory of the forest here."

"Something like that. I believe I can make it to the base of the mountain without getting lost... But the forest is a curious place. Sometimes right suddenly becomes left in my head, and my sense of direction is all over the place. I think of it as the spirits and faeries playing tricks on me, so I can stay calm... The scariest times are when you lose your cool," Belgrieve said with a chuckle. After he finished his explanation, he retrieved the kettle hanging over the bonfire and brewed tea.

Kasim unsteadily returned from his walk, his leather sandals slapping against the ground.

"I'm back."

"Welcome. How far did you go?"

"I didn't go to any place in particular. Just wandered around the village. Watched the sheep grazing and stuff. It's nice to take it easy sometimes." Laughing, Kasim took a seat by the fire.

The foreman leaned in. “Hey, Kasim. We’ve got a bit of a heavy one. Can you help us lift it?”

“Sure, but what is it? Lumber?”

“Yeah. We could lift it by hand, but safety first, right?”

The foreman glanced at Belgrieve, who nodded. “That’s right. We wouldn’t want a repeat of *that*.”

“What, did something happen?”

“I almost fell...” one of the carpenters admitted, scratching his head.

“Heh heh heh heh, so even experts can slip up. Well, first, give me food. I’m starving.” Kasim spun his cap on a finger. “So what were you talking about?”

“The forest.”

“Forest? Oh, you went to gather moss, right?”

Kasim took a plate from Belgrieve and looked over the drying moss.

“Yeah...” Angeline nodded. “You should have come with us.”

“Heh heh heh, I’ll go next time. The forest, huh... Whenever we used to go, that would be Satie’s time to shine.”

“Oh, that’s right... Maggie got lost whenever she was outside the forest too. Do elves just feel at home there?” Belgrieve asked, bringing Graham into the conversation.

“Indeed,” the old elf replied. “Elves can naturally know their own location from the arrangement of the trees, the lay of the land, the health of the leaves, and the like. But that is not so in open spaces...”

“But you’re fine, aren’t you...?” asked Angeline.

“I got used to it. When I first left elven territory, my sense of direction constantly failed me in the worst possible ways.”

Angeline found it somewhat amusing, imagining such a great adventurer when he just started out. He was so dignified now, but how had he acted in his youth? Was he a reckless, rascally dreamer like so many other young adventurers? She thought it would have been quite funny if he had been like Marguerite.

Eventually, the carpenters got up for their afternoon work, and Kasim used his magic to lift a bundle of planks.

Angeline could not contain her excitement as she watched. Her new life was about to begin.

"I can't wait, Dad."

"Yeah... Now let's tidy up and help out."

"Right."

Angeline grabbed Belgrieve by the arm. Mit had clambered onto Belgrieve's back, which was usually her special perch. Though he was her little brother and perhaps there was no way around it, she felt a tinge of loneliness.

"What do you want to do in our new house, dad?"

"Hmm? Well let's see... There's nothing I really want to do. It will be the same as before. Is there anything you want?"

"I, um... I want to have Percy and Satie over, and all your other old friends, and we'll have a nice long talk in front of the fireplace. And Grandpa Graham will be there too with Anne, and Merry, and Char and Bucky... We'll invite Maggie too. Then we'll drink cider, make jarlberry stew... and talk about the past. I want to hear stories of when you were young."

"I... see." Belgrieve lovingly patted her hair. "Right. Let's make it happen."

"Yeah!"

Angeline rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, and Mit looked on with a perplexed expression on his face.

# CHAPTER 74

## THE SOUND OF A SWORD BEING HONED

The sound of a sword being honed always made Belgrieve feel like sitting up straight—not that he minded it. The sharper his sword was, the sharper his senses became as well.

The blade slid over the amply soaked whetstone. A few runs were enough to sharpen it now. It was strange how the edge seemed to dull far more slowly than before. It had been like this ever since he became able to imbue mana into his sword, and perhaps the mana itself had coated the surface.

Taking care not to change the sharpening angle, Belgrieve carefully continued to hone the blade's edge. After that was done, he slathered it in melted beeswax and wiped it down with a cloth to polish it.

"All right... That should do it." The blade was gleaming dazzlingly even in the dull light.

Belgrieve had bought his sword in Orphen. It had gone for a good price—at least for a young amateur's blade—but he had chosen it very carefully regardless of the price. His time as an adventurer had been short, but even then, he knew he had made the right purchase. After actively using it for more than twenty-five years, it was still thick and heavy, without a speck of rust.

Of course, he had worn it away with every honing, but that was only by a small amount, and it was still more than up to some practical usage. Moreover, perhaps because its owner had gotten better at maintenance over the years, it might have become even sharper than it had started out. Of course, it could also be said that he did not fight fiends nearly as often as an active adventurer did, and his sword did not have many opportunities to see use.

Compared to his kitchen and hunting knives, his combat sword did not play much of a part in Turnera. Though he never missed a day of training, hardly any of his routines would expend the blade, and lately, his meditation time had increased, further decreasing his sword's role.

Even so, these sharpening sessions were like having a conversation with his trusty partner. It was work like this that made a swordsman feel like his sword was something more than a tool to take lives.

After watching a long time from the side, Angeline pulled out her own sword. "I'll sharpen mine too..."

"Hmm? Sure, go ahead," Belgrieve said, making some space for her.

Angeline unsheathed her sword and drizzled water over it. It was a fine blade—thin and sharp, but sturdy. It seemed to be made of high-quality steel—not just hard, but supple as well. Belgrieve had once told her that she would have to entrust her life to her sword and that she should spare no expense on it. Observing her now, he was satisfied to know she had listened.

Angeline sharpened her sword some, but her blade had no conspicuous stains or chips. It hardly seemed like a weapon that had been used to fight fiends. Of course, she certainly had never failed to maintain it, but it had hardly lost any of its original edge. She likely had a good sense for her sword and made sure to never put any more stress on it than was due.

After meeting Graham upon her return to Turnera, Angeline was instructed on meditation and synergy, and it seemed that her sharpness had been honed even further. She had figured out instinctual mana manipulation, which Belgrieve had only achieved after countless hours of diligent practice, practically from the very start. From there, she climbed to even greater heights, and if she had a limit, Belgrieve could not see where it might be.

*What will she get out of becoming even stronger than she is now?* he thought with a shudder as he yet again glimpsed the extent of his daughter's talent.

Once she had finished her careful sharpening, Angeline likewise polished the weapon with beeswax. She squinted her eyes at it and appraised its edge before handing it to Belgrieve.

"How is it?"

"Yeah, you sharpened it well. Nicely done."

She smirked as she sheathed her blade and stretched. Then, as Belgrieve bent over to

tidy up, she ruffled up his hair.

"It's been a while since we've been alone together..."

"Come to think of it, you're right... Our house has gotten pretty lively."

For once, everyone apart from the two of them had headed out. Graham was now the village babysitter, and he had gone with Mit to do his job. Kasim taught the youngsters magic, with Charlotte and Byaku joining in on his lessons, and Miriam and Anessa were with them as well. Anessa had lately gotten around to teaching archery to the villagers as well, insisting it would be useful for hunting.

For their part, Belgrieve and Angeline had been maintaining their swords at the end of the yard. All the while, they could see the carpenters swinging their mallets at their new home, which now had shingles on its roof. The roof's undercoat was ninety percent complete, and they were already raising the walls.

Belgrieve washed the whetstone, threw out the water from his bucket, and tucked away his tools. Angeline drew her honed sword again and gave it a practice swing before resheathing it. She turned to Belgrieve. "I want to get some exercise... Fight me."

"Okay, okay." Belgrieve rolled his shoulders and faced her. He took his stance, his sword still in its sheath.

Angeline's synergy with her sword was far higher than the last time he had faced her, and he could visibly pick up the weapon's aura overflowing from her. He had thought he had grown a bit under Graham's tutelage, but standing before his daughter, who had shown the talent to rise even higher, he was reminded once again that he was nothing special.

Sliding to close the distance, Angeline made the first strike, which he parried. The moment their swords met, his body shook like a thread stretched taut. It was not just the impact. Angeline's synergy had caused a direct disturbance in the mana of his own body.

Belgrieve's eyes widened, but he immediately allowed the force to flow through his braced back leg into the ground. Making use of this stored power, he pushed back.

She leaped out of range without difficulty. Yet that was only for an instant—kicking off as soon as she landed, she pushed forward and unleashed a horizontal swipe.

Belgrieve barely managed to catch it; the hilt now felt so heavy he could barely hold it. He was a large, middle-aged man fighting against a waifish young woman, yet the difference in physique seemed to offer him no advantage.

He channeled strength into his leg, stepped in with his peg leg, and pivoted off of it into a strike from above. "Hyah!"

Just when he thought she had parried it, Angeline slid into the space beside him, countering with a rapid turn. Belgrieve immediately raised his right leg, blocking with the wooden peg. He felt the impact through his entire body.

As she momentarily froze, he struck her on the head.

"Nyah!" Angeline crouched down, holding her head.

Belgrieve opened and closed his hands, which were numb and very faintly shaking. He took a deep breath. Though it hadn't exactly been a serious match, he was surprised he had managed to win. "Well, I'll be..."

"Urgh..." Angeline jumped into his chest with teary eyes. "You seriously hit me again..."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, that was my bad..." Belgrieve patted her head with a wry smile. She puffed out her cheeks and glared at him with upturned eyes.

It was apparent that Angeline still couldn't fight Belgrieve with her full strength. She was subconsciously holding back against her father, which meant he could yet serve as the ultimate anti-Angeline weapon.

Angeline gingerly raised up her braid, which had become rather disheveled.

"Fix it for me..."

"Oh, your hair... Sure, give me a second."

They entered the house. She sat in front of the fireplace with her back to him. Belgrieve took a seat behind her, straightened her hair, and began to twist it into a large braid. By then, Angeline's mood had completely recovered, and she was humming a tune while idly kicking out her legs.

"Hmm, hmm... Hey, do you want me to braid yours, dad?"

“No, I’m fine...”

“Huh? It would look so good on you... And we’d match. No good?”

“Daddy wouldn’t look good with a braid... My hair isn’t as pretty as yours.”

Her hair was silky to the touch, but when he held it up, it had a reassuring weight. Belgrieve hardly knew anything about women’s hair, yet he knew without a doubt that hers was beautiful.

Angeline pouted but left it at that as she suddenly seemed to realize something. “Dad—during our bout, you managed to synergize with your peg leg.”

“Hm?” His eyes widened at the realization that she was right. He had not done it consciously, but his right foot, which was surely no more than a wooden rod, had felt like a real foot. That intense sensation he felt when he had blocked Angeline’s sword had been no different from the clashing of their blades.

Angeline leaned back until she was looking at Belgrieve upside down.

“Grandpa Graham... See, he said you’re good at handling mana...”

“Ha ha, did he now?”

“I think... Because you’ve used that prosthetic for so long, you developed a high synergy with things outside of your body.”

“That... might be so.”

*How have I been moving like this with a peg leg?* He had always harbored this uncertainty in the corner of his mind. Even if he had worked so diligently in his rehabilitation, and even after his harsh training, it was still just a peg. He had no ankle or toes on that appendage—surely, it should have been impossible to reproduce the finer movements of a human body with a “foot” like that.

However, if this “synergy” allowed him to extend his senses through his sword, that did seem to answer the mystery. Angeline had picked up on it as well. In short, just as he synergized with the sword, his prosthetic limb resonated with his body’s mana and regained some sense as though it was the real thing.

Though it had been accomplished unconsciously, Belgrieve had, through his tenacious training, developed this synergy—and perhaps that largely explained how he had managed to grasp Graham's teachings on mana manipulation after that.

*It's a tad ironic,* he thought bitterly as he tied a ribbon to the end of her braid. "All right, finished."

"Hmm..." Angeline delicately took hold of her braid and stroked it, evidently satisfied. "Hee hee... Now, turn that way!"

"Huh? For what?"

He turned around as she told him to and could feel his bundled hair coming loose. Angeline's slender fingers combed, parted, and folded his red locks. For a while, he had simply tied it up rather than cutting it, and it was more than long enough for a braid.

Belgrieve gave a troubled laugh. "I told you it's not going to look good on me..."

"Don't worry about it!"

Angeline hummed as she braided, and Belgrieve ultimately let her do as she pleased. *I'm no match for my daughter,* he thought.

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Charlotte focused her gaze at a point slightly ahead of her and, moving her small hands, caused a fire to light where she was looking. The young men and women watching burst into cheers. This disrupted her concentration. She took a deep breath as the power left her, and the flame was snuffed out.

Kasim cackled, tugging at his beard. "Not bad. You've gotten a lot better!"

"Have I?" Charlotte, for one, did not seem to think so. She opened and closed her hand. "I meditated so hard, concentrated so much... But I can still only produce such a small fire."

Seeing her dissatisfied face, Kasim tapped her on the head. "No need to sulk, I'm telling you. You've got a lot of mana in that small body of yours. The important part is to control it well. One misstep and you might end up blowing away a whole house."

"Is that how it works...? Samigina's Ring was fine no matter how much mana I poured into it..."

"Oh, that demon crystal? Those things can manage as long as you add a bit of mana and chant the right words. Before you try something like that again, let me just tell you that if you give it your all on a normal magic item, it will probably break. The reason that ring tried to eat you up is probably because you put too much mana into it."

The memories of when the crystal had swelled up and wrapped around her arm caused Charlotte to shake. Her anger and madness had clouded her vision, compelling her to pour everything she had into the ring. Thinking back now, she acknowledged that she might have invested enough mana to cause it to malfunction.

Placing his cap back on his head, Kasim said, "Well, with me and old Graham teaching you, you don't have to worry about a thing."

"Yeah... Thank you, uncle." Charlotte smiled bashfully, holding up the brim of the straw hat on her head with both hands.

Miriam, who had been looking on from the side, had an amused look on her face. "She's amazing. If she learns to control it properly, she might even be able to use grand magic."

"Of course she'll be able to. But for now, there's no need to rush her," Kasim said.

"Hmm, I need to make sure she doesn't leave me in the dust," Miriam muttered, staring at her fingertips.

Meanwhile, Byaku was farther away, facing Graham. There was a violent storm blowing around them, and the ground was gouged in several places. Byaku rotated his transparent magic circles around himself at a fearsome pace. Nevertheless, Graham did not even break a sweat as he shifted his body only ever so slightly to avoid taking every hit.

Byaku winced in pain. The tips of his white hair turned black.

"Let's end it there." Graham held up a hand.

The winds immediately died down. The circles vanished. And Byaku fell to his knees, his shoulders rising and falling with each breath. His hair immediately returned to

white. "Dammit..."

"Not bad. You're holding on a lot longer." Though Graham did not smile in the slightest, he gently and tactfully tapped the boy on the shoulder. Mit burst from the group of children that had been watching, tugging at Byaku's sleeve.

"Bucky..."

"Y-Yeah..." Byaku frowned and stumbled over his words. He wasn't very good at dealing with Mit. It wasn't Mit himself so much as the fact that the child was a demon that tripped him up, and for that reason, Byaku could not help but be wary of him. Mit, however, took quite a liking to Byaku, and Byaku was racking his brain over what to do about that.

Anessa, who had been practicing archery outside the village, returned with her pupils.

"Oh." Miriam waved a hand at the group. "Welcome back. How are they?"

"Not bad. Some of them already do their share of hunting, and Mr. Bell taught them the basics of how to move around. Honestly, there's not much to teach them."

"Heh heh, the Red Ogre's teaching methods work wonders. Turnera is a fearsome place."

"You can say that again." Anessa chuckled, leaning her bow against her shoulder. The youths training with her seemed happy at the compliment, and some bashfully scratched their heads.

From behind them, a wagon rattled down the road—a peddler, it seemed. The children excitedly raced up to it, and the peddler leading the horse looked pleasantly surprised.

"Now, now, give me a moment. I'll have my wares out before you know it."

The tarp was set up in a corner of the square. Three young adventurers, hired as guards, helped him set up.

"Oh, a peddler. What've you got today, sonny boy?" Kasim said as he approached.

The peddler jovially waved at him. "I've got a lot of sea fish. You can't get them around these parts, right?"

"Well, I'd reckon not. But is that all right? It doesn't look like you have a magic cooler on you."

"That's why raw isn't the way to go. They come salted or dried." He opened up a wooden box and a sealed jar, showing what was inside each. A faint, unpleasant stench filled the air. The box contained dried fish that had been sliced down the back, while the salt jar contained palm-sized, unrecognizable things.

Kasim grimaced at the scent. "They stink to high heaven. You sure they ain't rotten?"

"What are you talking about? These are salted fish eggs. Have a taste if you want to, on the house."

"Hmm, what to do..." Kasim scratched his head and, after mulling it over for a moment, gave up with a shrug. "I'd rather not. Let's just leave these things to Bell."

"They're tasty, you know. It's not my fault if they're sold out when you get back." The peddler laughed mischievously as he brought a horn up to his mouth and blew. This was the signal to the village that a peddler had come.

The kids flocked to the various toys that had been laid out on the tarp, and the adventurers hurriedly held them back. The young men and women who had been practicing started browsing to see what he had brought in.

"Char, don't you know a thing or two about fish?"

"Yeah. Hey, mister, are these from Elvgren?"

"Yeah, that's right," the peddler confirmed.

"Hmm... The salted egg sacks should be nice."

"You've got a good eye on you!"

Kasim stood by Graham, watching the bustling stand with a distant gaze. Byaku looked quite bothered as Mit dragged him all around to see the wares, though he offered no resistance.

"They get like this just for a peddler... I guess there's no excitement out here."

"Hmm..." Graham shifted his weight from one foot to the other and folded his arms.  
"Kasim."

"Yeah?"

"How does Mit look to you?"

"He looks like a good kid. But, you know. I'm worried a huge mass of mana like that might attract something strange to it."

"I see..."

"You worried, gramps?"

"Naturally... If he *was* a mass of pure mana, I wouldn't be so worried. But even now, his body continues to produce it, and it's coursing through him. If it gets released for any reason, this whole area might turn into a dungeon."

"Hmm... What to do...? If only there was a good way to use some of it up."

"I've thought of teaching him to control his powers... But though his body has grown, he is still an infant inside."

"Ha ha, so he's too difficult to teach at the moment. We're at a standstill." Kasim fiddled with his hat.

"In any case," Graham continued, closing his eyes, "I don't think any proper methods will work. We will surely need your strength. Can I count on you when the time comes?"

"Do you even need to ask? It won't just be me either. There's Bell, and Ange, and everyone else who'll help out too. Don't take it all on yourself, gramps. That's what did me in pretty bad." Kasim chuckled, and Graham answered with a slight smile of his own.

"Oh, speak of the devil."

Belgrieve and Angeline arrived from down the road. They had come after hearing the peddler's horn.

"Oh, it really is a peddler. Let's hope they have something we can use for dinner."

"I smell fish," Angeline remarked, sniffing at the scent in the air.

Once Belgrieve had approached, Kasim burst into laughter. "Aha ha ha ha! Why, Bell, you've gotten so cute since I last saw you!"

"Hmm, oh, no, well..." Belgrieve awkwardly held up his braided hair. There was even a ribbon at the end.

Angeline had a self-satisfied smile plastered across her face. "We match. How is it?"

"You both look great. Like peas in a pod."

"How about you get one too?"

It was rare to see Belgrieve so sulky, and this only further encouraged Kasim. He was laughing so hard he was holding his stomach. This drew attention and filled the square with a different sort of vigor.



# CHAPTER 75

## THE WIND BRUSHED THE SIDES

The wind brushed the sides of the rocky blue mountain, causing the meager light-green sprouts to sway. There, the sparse plants all grew low, and hardly any trees were taller than human height. The plants sprouted a little later on these mountaintops than they did in the world below, and a faint veil of snow persisted wherever there was shade. A wild goat grazed on the grass, and a bird with a round body darted into the thicket.

However, there seemed to be something gradually creeping upon this tranquil scene from below.

It started with a lush sheet of grass covering the ground, growing over the dry earth and craggy boulders. There was an ominous, gritty susurrus as this growth slowly but certainly ascended the mountain.

Then came the low bushes and shrubs, as if in pursuit of the creeping grass. Their leafy branches swayed as their roots moved like legs. Strangely, though the tips of their roots remained in the ground, each “step” seemed to move them forward without resistance. And, wherever their shadows fell, there was a damp moss forming in their wake.

Finally, the trees came shambling behind. Their gnarled, crooked trunks swayed left and right, and with each shake, their branches and leaves would let out snaps and thuds. Many of these trees were old behemoths, though they were accompanied by a few newer trees as well. Be they tall or short, broadleaf, needleleaf, or evergreen, fruiting or barren, all joined the march.

It seemed as though the entire forest was on the move. Its deep greens were possessed of a strangely desolate mood, as though it would brook no intrusion from outsiders and its blessings had been exiled to distant lands, leaving behind only the cruelty of nature. Despite the sunlight beaming down upon it, a large, dreary shadow seemed to envelop the entire assemblage.

These trees had come from the place known as the Ancient Forest, west of Hazel. It

faced the sea on its west side, but the precarious cliffs there made for a difficult entry. The mountain range to its north did not connect all the way to its western edge, and the northwesternmost portion connected to elven territory—though this point was quite irrelevant to human reckoning, as none of their kind could ever tread there.

This forest, however, was different from the ones the elves called home. There had once been a tribe from the western forest that followed the coasts south in search of new land. They settled in the depths of the Ancient Forest and began their new life. Indeed, forests tolerated all, save for those who would try to rule over them. The elves lived their lives close to nature, and it was thought that this Ancient Forest would have welcomed them as new residents. But though they spent ten years there without incident, they had suddenly vanished.

For all the various creatures that had once resided within the forest, it had now become a chaotic mix of nature's virtue and malice—abundant life counterbalanced by the thick shadow of death. It was unknown what had triggered it, but one day, the forest's ill will against all sentient life manifested and attacked the elven settlement. The gnarled old trees swallowed the elves whole and crushed their houses. Unfortunately, the elves possessed no means of combating this attack from their new neighbors. The settlement was gone within one night.

It was the very same trees that had decimated the elves that were now crossing the dukedom's northern mountain range, headed for a small village surrounded by a forest and mountain.

○

Angeline carried a few hefty books out of the house and opened one on the table in the yard. They were all rather old tomes. The first was laid out like a picture book, the words mixed with illustrations throughout. However, the ink had faded to the color of sepia, and in some places, the old words had been traced over with a new pen to preserve them. But those were not the only additions—there were corrections, clarifications, and underlines, making it clear just how much use this book had seen.

A young adventurer with short, light-brown hair glanced through one of the books and let out a longing sigh. “Amazing... Angeline, is this what you used to study?”

She nodded proudly. “Yes... But dad is the one who wrote all over them.”

"Wow, he went into such detail..." The three young adventurers serving as guards for the peddler flipped through the pages eagerly.

Belgrieve had bought the book when he was just starting out. It detailed the ecology of fiends, the best ways to combat them, their special traits, and the materials that could be harvested from them, among other things.

Ever the cautious man, Belgrieve first bought his sword, then saved money for an encyclopedia. He would read through it thoroughly at night, annotating any details he found out for himself and hammering all the details into his head. This book was the reason he knew much about fiends he had never encountered in his mere two years as an adventurer.

Naturally, Angeline did her share of studying with the book as well. When she left for the big city at the age of twelve, she had stuffed the heavy tome into her bag, and like her father had done, she would read it every night. Belgrieve's annotations made it far easier to digest, and the knowledge contained within had saved her countless times in her early days. By this point, some of the information was a bit outdated, so she brought it back home where it belonged. A brand-new encyclopedia now rested in her room in Orphen.

"This one... is a swordsmanship manual. It's very old..."

The other books were on swordsmanship and martial arts. They covered the fundamentals, but also contained useful information on the body's structure, and how to use it to one's advantage. These volumes, too, showed signs of extensive use.

The swordsmanship manual had been purchased from a peddler once Belgrieve had returned to Turnera. It had significantly refined his training, which, until that point, had been purely a matter of trial and error on his part. Of course, with one of his legs being a prosthetic, he could not imitate its contents exactly, but the book had undoubtedly proved helpful in optimizing his techniques.

One of the adventurers looked up from the book—a short girl with bushy, blonde hair done up in a ponytail.

"Wow! That's really something! It's like I'll become stronger just by reading it!"

"Don't get ahead of yourself, Sola... Please, don't just go charging ahead because you've gotten a bit stronger. Anything but that," said a man with dark-blue hair, looking

terribly tired.

Sola, the girl with the ponytail, puffed out her cheeks indignantly. "How rude! Even I wouldn't be that reckless, Kain! You think so too, right, Jake?"

"Well, who can say?"

"Ouch."

The three of them apparently worked out of Orphen and were all roughly the same age as Angeline. Thanks to all of Angeline's outbursts, it had become common knowledge that she hailed from the village of Turnera. When the peddler's request came in, they had accepted it on the faint hope they might be able to talk to her.

Kain was a B-Rank magician, while Jake and Sola were C-Rank swordsmen. Though they were just a step or two away from reaching the upper echelon, S-Ranks were still in a world of their own. In Orphen, there were always many watchful eyes, and rumors abounded, so it felt far too disrespectful to approach her there.

Kain sighed. "But I never thought we'd run into the Paladin..."

"Yeah, it's incredible. The Black-Haired Valkyrie, the Red Ogre, and the Aether Buster too. Is this some secret village of masters?" Jake marveled, scratching his head.

"Heh heh..." Angeline nodded, pleased by their remarks—not so much by the compliment to her as she was to hear Belgrieve's name spoken so naturally in the company of the other S-Rank adventurers.

*It's about time the world recognized him.* She chuckled quietly. The problem was that Angeline herself did not have a concrete idea of what it meant for the world to recognize someone.

"Hey, I got the chance to see one of the Red Ogre's sparring matches in Orphen. He was really cool!" Sola gushed. "It was inspiring how someone who's not an active adventurer could keep up with Cheborg the Destroyer and Silverhead Dortos!"

"Isn't it? My dad is amazing..." Angeline puffed out her chest.

Sola's hands were shaking in excitement. "Your dad taught you how to use a sword, right?"

“He did.”

“Could I be strong if I got the Red Ogre to teach me?”

“H-Hey, don’t get too...”

Seeing Jake so desperate to reign Sola in, Angeline giggled. “That should be fine... We even have Graham now. Want to try powering up?”

“S-Seriously...? Ah, but if possible, I’d like you to teach me, Angeline...”

Angeline furrowed her brow. “Dad is a better teacher. I’m no good... But if you’re okay with it, I don’t mind...”

“Huh? Are you sure?!”

“I’d give up if I were you.” Anessa and Miriam appeared from down the yard with baskets in hand. They had been helping Belgrieve with the field out back.

Miriam chuckled. “Ange can never find the right words, so she can only teach with endless sparring. You’ll just be beaten up.”

“I’m totally okay with that!” Jake said, a faint hint of eagerness and delight at the prospect evident in his voice.

Sola sulkily prodded at him. “At least make it less obvious.”

“Y-You’ve got it all wrong!”

Kain let out a tired sigh. “We can’t have you injured in a sparring match... You haven’t forgotten that we’re in the middle of a job, have you?”

“I-I know that!”

Miriam grinned and poked Angeline in the side. “What a sinful girl you are, Ange.”

“Huh...? What do you mean?”

“Oh, wow. Should have seen it coming...”

"Hmm?" Angeline cocked her head blankly.

Anessa giggled. "Well, that's just how you are."

"Ah, this is no fun... But whatever," Miriam said, adjusting her basket. It was filled with loads of large bean pods. "He told us to go peel these."

"Oh, so it's beans today..." Angeline looked towards the fledgling adventurers. "Help out..."

"Huh? Oh... Bean peeling, is it?"

"Yes. They're very nice when they're freshly boiled."

The young adventurers shared a look at this S-Rank's peculiar naivete.

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A tomato seedling had snapped at the stalk, and when he dug its roots out by hand, a brown caterpillar popped out. Belgrieve grasped it carefully with his thumb and forefinger and showed it to Charlotte.

"This is a cutworm. They're the bugs breaking the stalks."

"So they live in the roots... Are they some sort of larva?"

"A moth larva, yes. Well, they're just doing their best to live, but we've got to eat too. There's no way around it."

And with that, Belgrieve tossed the bug onto the ground and crushed it underfoot. Charlotte didn't quite know what to say. After her mouth moved inaudibly for a bit, she finally put her words together.

"To eat, to live... It's quite a strange feeling, crushing a bug... I don't think anything of fiends being hunted, and I have no resistance to eating fish or meat, but..."

"That's the strange part about us... Even though in both cases, it's the same. To eat and to live."

"Yeah... if you don't remove them, we won't have any veggies."

"The world revolves around the life and death of all sorts of things... There's no use mulling over it too hard, but then again, maybe it's better for you to treasure that tenderness of yours."

Belgrieve picked up the seedling he had placed to the side. "Let's wrap up here for now. Can you help me take out the broken stalks and dig for me?"

"Yeah!"

Charlotte donned her straw hat and grabbed a small spade. As an albino, she did not fare so well under the beating sun, yet she earnestly went out into the fields every day to help nevertheless.

Belgrieve smiled. Their journey to the Earth Navel would begin once summer was in full swing. And during that time, Charlotte and Byaku would remain in Turnera. Perhaps her efforts to pick up farmwork were proof of her desire to protect this place while the others were away.

Summer vegetables were being planted all around. The seedlings were raised indoors or in boxes until they grew to a good size, when they would be transplanted to the fields. Due to Turnera's cold climate, the vegetables had to be raised like this, or they would not grow in time for the harvest.

These summer vegetables would be consumed as soon as they were ripe, and were never sold or traded. The closest settlement, Rodina, was also a farming village that was self-sufficient with its own vegetables. This made Bordeaux the closest place to sell fresh produce, but it was too far away. By the time a peddler reached there, the vegetables would most certainly have begun to rot in the summer heat. So the peddlers did not want to deal with them either. At most, they would buy some for themselves to eat along the way.

With that being the case, every house in Turnera had its own field. Wheat and other staples were grown communally, but each house had to produce its own vegetables. Belgrieve had expanded his field bit by bit every year. Any excess vegetables would be chopped and stewed to extend their shelf life by a few days, or dried until they could be preserved. He had always racked his brain over what to do with the vegetables he couldn't get rid of, but now that there were more people around, that was no longer an issue. At this point, he had to wonder if he even had enough to get by, and so he had good reason to invest more into the field than usual.

He replanted the stalks that had been decimated by the cutworms and was plucking the blooming cauliflowers when Mit came up to him. He was dragging Byaku by the hand, who did not look too pleased.

“Dad...” Mit said.

“Yes? What’s wrong? Weren’t you with grandpa?”

“One of the babies started crying, so the old man headed to its mother,” Byaku replied.

“So that happened... Then do you want to help out here?”

“Wanna help. Bucky too.”

“Quit dragging me...”

“Come over here, Mit!” Charlotte called to the boy. “Let’s pick some cauliflower.”

“Yeah!” Mit let go of Byaku’s hands and sprinted over to her with an unsteady gait.

Byaku frowned. “You’re gonna trip.”

“I’m okay!”

Belgrieve smiled. “You’ve become quite the big brother.”

“That ain’t it...” Byaku scratched his cheek with a troubled look on his face. “When I look at him, I can’t help but wonder if that’s really a demon... And I can’t get rid of this anxiety I’m feeling.”

“Don’t worry too much. Just leave that to us, okay?”

“Quit treating me like some kid... Before you forget, I’ve survived more battles than you, old man. A few real nasty ones too.”

“That’s what makes you still a kid.” Belgrieve smiled and coarsely ruffled up Byaku’s hair. Though Byaku looked a bit disgruntled, he gave up and walked off towards Charlotte and Mit.

Belgrieve surveyed the field. He had entrusted the harvested beans to Anessa and

Miriam, and the broken stalks had been replanted. Charlotte, Mit, and Byaku were plucking cauliflowers. The sun was reaching its peak, and it was about time to prepare for lunch.

*I'll bake some bread, boil the beans and cauliflower, make a turnip soup, and...* His musings were interrupted as someone came up to the house. Belgrieve could not contain a surprised "Oh?" as he recognized her face. "If it isn't..."

"It has been a while, Sir Belgrieve. I'm glad you look well... Though we did meet just the other day." The third Bordeaux sister, Seren Bordeaux, smiled back.

Belgrieve used the hand towel he had around his neck to wipe the grime off his face. "Glad to see you. Though I'm sorry I'm not better dressed for the occasion..."

"Oh, no. I didn't mean to interrupt your work..." Seren glanced at the field.

"Lady Seren!" Charlotte hurriedly removed her hat and nervously bowed her head. She was dressed like a village girl and was covered in dirt, with mud caked on her cheeks. "Um, um..."

"You're working hard, Char," Seren said with a smile.

"Eep..." Charlotte hung her head and nervously rubbed her hands together. After walking up to her, Seren gently patted her on the head.

Twirling his beard hairs around his fingertips, Belgrieve offered a suggestion. "Let's go inside. Better than standing around here and talking..."

"I'm sorry, it looks like I've inconvenienced you... Is there anything I could carry?"

"No, I couldn't ask you to do that." Belgrieve reservedly waved her off.

Nevertheless, Seren, with a mischievous smile on her face, immediately stacked several empty baskets and hoisted them up. "Despite how I look, I do my share of farmwork."

There were rumors that the Bordeaux sisters would often work alongside the farmers as they went around inspecting the territory. *Looks like I'm no match for her*, Belgrieve thought with a wry smile as he collected his tools.

"Still, you surely didn't come alone, did you?"

"Most certainly not. It would be quite troubling if I were kidnapped again." Seren giggled.

*She's a strong girl... Belgrieve couldn't help but smile back at her. Surely, she's brought quite a few guards along with her. Looks like it's going to get lively again.* Sure enough, once he had walked to the edge of the yard and scanned about for her entourage, he heard a spirited cry.

"Master!" Sasha bounded towards him and grabbed him by the hand. "It has been too long! I'm glad you're in good health!"

"R-Right, Sasha... Though I'd say it hasn't been long at all since we visited..."

Her guard was presumably Sasha, who was stronger than ten soldiers. Belgrieve blinked, overwhelmed for a moment, though his stuporous expression quickly turned to an awkward smile.

"So you had Sasha accompany you? What a reliable guard you have here."

"Yes, and we could travel lightly because of that," Seren said, holding up the baskets. "Where do you want these?"

"Oh, those go over... Char, can you show her?"

"Yes, please follow me." Charlotte happily led Seren to the shed.

Once tools were put away and hands were washed, they reveled in their long-awaited reunion once more. With that said, Belgrieve had stopped by Bordeaux on the way back to Turnera, and it had not actually been very long at all.

It was a comfortable spring day, so the tables and chairs were carried to the yard, while Angeline had brought out a pot of tea. "So many guests... Do you want another cup, Seren?"

"Oh, please don't mind me, Angeline... We're the ones who came without warning."

"No need to hold back... You should learn from Sasha."

Sasha sipped at her tea like it was the best thing in the world, and she was already on her third cup.

“Oh come on, Sash!” Seren exclaimed.

“What is it, Seren? If she’s offering, it would be rude to put her efforts to waste.”

“Here you go, Seren.”

“R-Really now... In that case, I’ll take another.” Seren held her cup out, somewhat shamefacedly, and accepted a refill.

Meanwhile, the young adventurers had returned to the peddler. Kasim was off somewhere again, wandering one place or another, and Graham had yet to return.

Placing down her teacup, Sasha stared long and hard at Mit. “Come to think of it, who is this child? I don’t think he was here on my last visit.”

“My little brother...” Angeline proudly declared before Belgrieve could get a word in.

“Huh? You had a little brother? You do certainly look alike...” Sasha seemed to arrive at an understanding.

Seren giggled as she reached out and ruffled up Mit’s hair. The boy, for his part, stared back at them blankly.

Belgrieve hadn’t been able to decide on how to introduce the boy, so he couldn’t help but smile at this outcome. Angeline’s approach wasn’t wrong. Earnest as he was, Belgrieve had considered explaining about demons and whatnot, but perhaps that was trivial in the grand scheme of things. He turned back towards the sisters.

“So what are you here for today?”

“Yes, well, things have finally settled down in Bordeaux, so we have come to discuss our scheduled roadwork. We would like to put together a definitive construction plan.”

“We’ve brought the surveyors with us this time. The plan is to begin construction from Turnera and Rodina at the same time to shorten the work time.”

“I see...”

"Truth be told, our elder sister intended to come here personally, but there was a problem in the Erin mines, so she needed to settle that first."

"She was wholeheartedly bitter about it, ha ha ha!"

Erin was a mining town on the eastern edge of Bordeaux territory. It was one of the pillars of Bordeaux's economy, and any issue there would go straight to the top of her list of priorities. Belgrieve smiled and stroked his beard as he imagined her vexed face.

"Where are the surveyors then?" Anessa inquired.

"Oh, they got straight to looking at the village roads."

"They work fast," said Miriam.

"So we considered stopping by the chief's, but we thought it would be quicker if we had you introduce us. This is quite a selfish visit, admittedly..."

"Oh, if that's the case, that's easy enough."

"Good... Then shall we get to it?" Seren stood, only for Angeline to stop her.

"First, lunch... After all, 'You cannot retreat on an empty stomach.'"

"You cannot *fight*," Anessa corrected her.

"How about we take them up on it, Seren? We haven't eaten anything since we left Rodina."

"No, I must see the chief first. The surveyors have already started working, so we can't be the only ones relaxing."

Angeline insisted, "You don't have to worry about that."

"No, I simply cannot. It will only complicate things if there are outsiders doing something shady outside the village without—" Her stomach growled.

Sasha gave a grand laugh as Seren contained her belly with both hands, her face a bright red. "Y-You have it all wrong. This is, uh..."

"Now, now, Seren. I'm sure the chief is eating lunch as well. I'm sure you'll be able to have a nice long talk if you eat first. Everyone can see you came on a Bordeaux carriage; no one will complain."

"M-My apologies, then... Shall I take you up on that offer?"

"Heh heh, eat well, okay...?" Angeline grinned and patted her. Seren bashfully hung her head and fidgeted.

"Then let's get it ready," Belgrieve said and stood. "We'll need to make a lot, with so many mouths to feed."

"I'm sure Seren will eat a lot too," said Miriam.

"Seriously! Don't tease me so much!" Seren pouted.

A merry laugh was shared, and then the house was busy preparing for lunch.

# CHAPTER 76

## AS SHE STOOD AND BOWED HER HEAD

"Then can I ask you to do that?"

"Yes, right on it. Don't you worry."

As she stood and bowed her head, Village Chief Hoffman nervously bowed back. It was a bit amusing to see him act so reserved in spite of his bearlike build.

"You don't have to be so scared, Chief. She doesn't bite."

"I-I'm not scared..." Hoffman scratched his head.

Kerry had been standing in on the meeting, and he cackled. "Looks like you're weak to authority!"

"Ugh..." Hoffman groaned, eliciting giggles from Seren.

For starters, they apparently wanted to finish up the measurements around Turnera before they returned. This meant they would be staying in the village for around a week. The Bordeaux sisters were no strangers to Turnera—not since they took part in the fall festival—and even excluding their relation to the regional lord, their fine features and bold, yet soft demeanor were enough for the villagers to hold them in awe. It was decided that they would stay in Kerry's house, where there was plenty of room.

"Right, then I'm going to clean up a bit," Kerry said and strutted out.

As she watched his back, Sasha was restlessly stamping her feet as though she might run away at any moment. "Well then, I'll be carrying my bags to Mr. Kerry's house. Until next time!" And with that, she really did break into a run.

Seren sighed. "That sister of mine..."

"Well, what's wrong with that? That straightforwardness is one of her good points."

"I'm glad you think so," she said with a troubled smile.

Graham had returned for lunch, and Sasha nearly swooned upon meeting him. Though she had come on official business, she didn't want to waste a second she could have otherwise spent receiving his teachings. But Seren would have been livid with her, so Sasha had reluctantly accompanied her to Hoffman's house. It went without saying that she was restless all throughout their negotiations.

As they walked back, Belgrieve and Seren talked about all sorts of things. Once she heard about their impending southbound adventure, she blinked in surprise. "That... sounds like it will be quite a long journey."

"Yes. So I don't know if I can oversee the construction."

"That's not a problem... But that's quite amazing. I can't even imagine what it would be like."

"Ha ha, honestly, me neither. I hardly left Turnera until not so long ago," Belgrieve conceded. It really was quite strange how things had worked out. "I'm glad to hear things have finally settled down in Bordeaux."

"Yes, everyone gave it their all."

"And Helvetica is still as busy as ever."

"Some things never change... She really wanted to come with us..."

"It's a shame. Erin, right?"

"Yes. There was a dispute on ore prices. The people governing Erin usually manage things just fine, but it looked like there would never be an agreement if my sister didn't step in... First it was Hazel, then Erin. West to east, she's being rushed all over. I feel a bit sorry for her."

"But I'm envious she can go wherever and whenever she's needed. That must be why everyone adores House Bordeaux... Was there a problem in Hazel?"

Hazel, a town west of Bordeaux, had once been governed by Count Malta. Malta's plot to overthrow Helvetica by causing a crisis in Bordeaux was still fresh in Belgrieve's memory. The concerned look on his face betrayed his thoughts, as he worried that

some new disturbance had come, but Seren laughed him off.

"Heh heh, there was not another conspiracy, mind you." She had seen right through him. Giggling, Seren pushed up her glasses. "There's a place called the Ancient Forest near Hazel—it's old woodland, as you might expect—and there have always been all sorts of rumors about the place."

"Rumors?"

"Yes. Most of them are baseless—after all, the forest dates back earlier than Solomon—but it's hard to say they're all complete nonsense..."

"Hmm."

"The report was that a massive shadow was squirming amongst the trees. Every single soldier on night watch witnessed it, and many residents confirmed they felt a tremor... Given the severity of the situation, my sister paid a visit, but there was no major incident."

"I see..." Belgrieve's eyes narrowed thoughtfully.

There were indeed unimaginable things that slept in the remotest depths of forests and mountains. Sometimes it turned out to be a fiend, but at other times, it was something else altogether. In any case, it would certainly turn out to be something beyond human comprehension. It was good to know that nothing had happened, but Belgrieve wondered if it would really be resolved as easily as that. He was accustomed to fighting inhuman entities, but in spite of that—or rather, precisely *because* of that—he was fearful of the unknown. Swords and magic were not omnipotent. *Hopefully, it's an opponent that can be bested in a fight*, he thought, before shaking his head. His natural inclination to worry was getting to him again.

However, his bad premonitions often hit the mark. Of course he hoped that he was merely being overanxious, but he could not dismiss the feeling. *I don't know if this instinct is a good or bad thing*, he lamented with a sigh.

"Is something wrong, Sir Belgrieve?" Seren looked at him curiously.

"No, it's nothing," he replied, playing it off.

When he returned to the house, there was a clamor in the yard. Sasha, poised with her

sheathed sword, rushed at Graham with hurricane speed. Her technique was so great, Belgrieve could feel his eyes widening. However, without a single change in expression, Graham shifted his stance ever so slightly and dodged it, casually sweeping Sasha's legs in the process.

"Whoa!" Sasha fell forward, recovering in a panic.

"You're concentrating too hard on what's in front of you... Unify your senses. You mustn't rush."

"O-Of course!" Sasha steadied her labored breath. Yet she was all too eager to ready her sword again and attempt another strike. Graham dodged just as easily as he had before, using Sasha's momentum to trip her up with only the slightest motion. He was handling the accomplished adventurer as though she were a mere child. Of course, even Marguerite, who was nearly Angeline's equal, could not hold a candle to Graham, so perhaps this outcome was obvious.

Seren's eyes nervously darted left and right. "Um, um, is this all right?"

"It's fine. Sasha is tired, but she is not injured."

As they observed the bout, Angeline arrived, leading Mit by the hand. Mit was as expressionless as usual, but he exuded a somewhat triumphant feeling.

"Welcome back, dad."

"Welcome."

"Yeah, glad to be back. It's gotten quite lively." Belgrieve looked around. Kasim was having a blast watching the match from the shade of a tree, and the three young adventurers who'd returned were concentrating on Graham's movements. A few of the village youths had come as well. The small children all got together to cheer on the warriors. The carpenters stopped working, gazing down at the yard from the half-finished roof.

Angeline chuckled. "Sasha knows how to work up a crowd..."

"Looks like it. But Graham is incredible... Ange, do you think you could beat him?"

"No, I don't... You're super strong, dad, but he's even stronger."

“I’m not even at the level to compare to him...”

“Is grampa strong?”

“Yeah. Do you want to learn swordsmanship, Mit...?”

“Wanna learn...”

Angeline burst into a smile. “All right, then let your big sis teach you...”

“Yay. I’ll do my best.” Mit swung his arms. His expression didn’t change, but he was happy.

*They’ve really become siblings.* Belgrieve nodded in satisfaction.

Soon, Sasha finally fell to one knee. Her breathing was shallow and erratic, and though she tried her utmost to overcome it with long, deep breaths, it was to no avail.

“Pant, pant... Cough... Th-Thank... you!”

“Hmm... You must start by calming your heart. Your mind is racing so far ahead, you are not swinging your sword as you should.”

“Hah... Hah, hah...” She panted breathlessly. “I was just so happy to be facing the Paladin Graham... Hah... Phew... Next time, I’ll make you have to draw your sword!”

Graham had indeed overwhelmed Sasha with his bare hands. *So even an AAA-Rank adventurer is a trifle to him...* Belgrieve was once again reminded of the old elf’s abilities.

He hurried into the house and produced a cup of water for Sasha. “You did your best, Sasha. You must be thirsty.”

“Oh, Master. Much obliged...” Sasha downed the glass in one gulp and took a deep breath. “Sir Graham was extraordinary... You’re strong too, Master, but, as expected of a legend...”

“Oh no, I could hardly be compared to him... Also, I’m not so sure about you calling me ‘Master’.”

"Bell... I'd like to use a fishing rod," Graham interjected.

"Hmm? Oh, we have one in the shed. Are you going fishing?"

"Yes... The children want to go to the river. I'm considering making my own for next time."

"I see. Well, use the one in the shed for today."

"Thank you."

As they spoke, the children flocked around them, and Graham began hoisting them up with a troubled crease in his brow. "I told you not to grab my hair..."

Despite displaying overwhelming strength in battle, he had somehow become everyone's grandfather. Perhaps this legendary adventurer now treasured human interaction over the path of the blade.

Sola rushed over, her blonde ponytail swinging with every step and her cheeks flushed with excitement. "Amazing! Incredible! I was moved to tears! From Mr. Graham, of course, but you're pretty strong too, Sasha!"

Sasha finally regained her breath and stood up. "No, I still have a long way to go... I need more training."

"Wow, what a commendable spirit... Um, Mr. Graham, could you have a match with me too...?"

"H-Hey, Sola, don't be unreasonable! You're being rude!" Jake rushed in and hurriedly stopped her.

"I mean, you don't get a chance like this every day!" Sola protested, pouting.

"She's right, you know." Sasha folded her arms and nodded. "Everything is a learning experience."

"I knew you were on my side, Sasha! You heard her, Mr. Graham. How about it?"

"I don't mind... But can it wait? I must take the children to the river." He had a child on each arm, one on his back, and another clinging to his leg. Sola let out a dry laugh at

the sight.

"S-Someone's Mr. Popular... Okay, you go on ahead."

"Hmm, he doesn't complain at all with all those kids clinging to him... First Master, and then Sir Graham... Does true swordsmanship lie in a noble spirit...?" Sasha muttered to herself.

*Why is everyone putting me up there with Graham?* Belgrieve wondered, frowning. The sun was arcing westward and its rays seemed to come down sluggishly. The sun's warmth and a full stomach worked together to fill them all with a drowsy cheerfulness.

After he had taken the fishing rod from the shed, Graham called out to Kasim, who had been discussing something with Kain. "I'm going to the river."

"You want me there too?"

"I don't have enough hands."

"Well someone *is* popular, indeed." Kasim cackled as he put on his hat and took to his feet. "All right, then I'll go. You come too—you've got nothing better to do, right?"

"I-I'm supposed to be working..." Kain panicked.

"It's a bit late for that. And do you really think you need to be on guard here and now? That peddler over there doesn't want you loitering around him all around the clock, does he?"

"Well, I guess... not?" Kain stood.

Jake looked at him reproachfully. "Dude... After all that lip you gave us..."

"Wh-What else am I supposed to do? I'll never get another chance to exchange knowledge with the Aether Buster!"

"Tsk. How convenient."

"You have another rod, Bell?" Kasim asked.

“Nope.”

“Oh, what a shame. I guess I’ll look for some crabs, then.”

Graham, Kasim, Kain, and the kids made off for the river. The village youth dispersed in groups of twos and threes, and the carpenters resumed their work, the sounds of their wooden mallets echoing through the air. Sasha and Seren headed off to Kerry’s house.

Belgrieve let out a large yawn. Perhaps it was a good time to take in laundry.

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“You have to hold it like this...”

“This.”

“Relax a bit.”

“Relax...”

Standing across from Angeline, Mit continued shifting his grip on a wooden sword. Angeline instructed him on every detail, fine-tuning his positioning. Yet Mit offered no resistance whatsoever, obediently altering his hold with her every order.

Moving her head to verify it from multiple angles, Angeline nodded, satisfied. She took a stance with her own wooden sword held sideways in front of him.

“Hit it.”

“Hyah.”

Mit swung the sword. There was a dry sound of wood on wood, and Angeline’s hands quivered.

“Well done...”

“Well done?”

“Yes. Again.”

“Hup.”

This time, he must have lost balance, as the power was slightly weaker.

“Not quite... Like this.”

“This?”

“No, *this*.”

Again, he had to shift his grip. Angeline seemed to be having a blast teaching him and did not seem the least bit put off as she patiently continued. Mit’s expression, as expected, never changed.

From the sidelines, Jake and Sola tried to imitate what they were seeing—gripping, adjusting, and swinging. They tried several times, but nothing seemed to click.

“L-Like this?”

“You got it all wrong. It’s like this.”

But they had both already picked up their own styles as swordsmen, and it wasn’t going so well. Adventurers were different from soldiers—they had basic drills and manuals, but much of their technique was picked up in the midst of real battle. It was rare for any adventurer to learn a predetermined style like a member of the armed forces. In the first place, weapon shape, size, and weight had an influence on fighting style, and their weapons were nonstandard. As they fought more and more, everyone picked up a method that most suited them and expanded upon it.

The more experienced they were, the more difficult it was to teach a new sword technique. There were times when sword styles could come into conflict and other times when one would have to completely abandon everything they had learned up to that point. In that regard, the fact that Mit had never held a sword before made it easier; both for the teacher and the student.

In Jake and Sola’s time of need, Belgrieve stepped out from the house. He had just finished up with the chores. “Oh, you’re really getting into it.”

“Mr. Belgrieve...”

"How should I put this? We're trying to learn along, but it's not really working out..."

Belgrieve smiled and tugged at his beard. "You don't have to force yourself to learn a new style. You're both active adventurers, and it will make your job harder if your movements become stiff."

"I get that, but..."

"But we want to be stronger."

"Hmm..." Belgrieve thought for a moment, then fetched a few more wooden swords from the shed and handed one to Jake.

"Come at me as you usually would."

"Y-Yes, sir!" Jake nervously took a stance and hammered at Belgrieve with a powerful blow. After Belgrieve had blocked the first strike, Jake immediately led into a second and a third. It seemed to be a sword style meant to put immense pressure on his foe from the very start.

Though Belgrieve caught the blows for a while, he eventually used his peg leg as a pivot point to parry, and Jake was sent toppling forward with the force of his own swing.

Seeing the young adventurer hurry to his feet, Belgrieve chuckled. "That's what happens if you just keep trying to push forward."

"Ugh, sure enough..."

"The first strike was good. But your center of balance was off for every swing after that. The weight behind it was completely different."

"Y-You think so? I didn't feel like that at all..."

"With a sword style like yours, you'll find yourself in a worse and worse position if you don't have enough weight behind every blow. First, you should learn to use your center of gravity regardless of what stance you're in. I'm just speculating here, but you don't usually practice your swings, do you?"

"Well..." That must have been right, because Jake awkwardly scratched his head.

Belgrieve smiled wryly. "You might think it's uncool, but the basics are important. If you want to live long, I don't think you should neglect those parts."

"You're right... I'll do my best."

Jake bowed his head, his face flushing a bashful red. Sola was stamping her feet impatiently, as she had only been watching passively until then. She snatched the wooden sword out of Jake's hands.

"Why's it only Jake? That's so unfair! Me next!"

"Sure, go ahead." Thus, he took on Sola. Perhaps due to her smaller build, her style placed a heavier emphasis on nimbleness and thrusting. She would attempt to feint, then dash low to the ground and stab from his blind spot. Belgrieve tangled his sword with the blade that came shooting straight at him and easily wrenched it from her hand.

"Oh, wow!"

"You need to work on your grip a bit."

"Huh, I thought I was doing pretty well on that..."

Belgrieve tapped his sword against his shoulders. "Still, I baited you, right? You should be wary of those obvious openings. Also, like your friend there, you're only swinging with your arms. It's good to focus on speed, but that won't work on fiends with tough skin or hard shells."

"I-I see... But I'm pretty small, so I didn't really know what else to do..."

"If you want to focus on thrusts, then it's important how you step in. The better the step, the more powerful the thrust. If that's too difficult, you might want to learn to use your body like a spring. If you keep thrusting with only your arms, you'll bust your elbow joint. In any case, you need to learn to use your whole body."

"So, steps and springs... Right?"

"Yeah. I don't thrust too much, so I can't be more specific. You should ask someone who uses a spear."

"Oh, come to think of it, I saw your fight with Mr. Dortos in Orphen! Should I imagine myself thrusting like that?"

Picturing Dortos's fiery spearmanship, Belgrieve scratched his cheek. "It will be hard to get to that level... but you could use it as a reference point."

"I see... I'm a swordsman, so I was only thinking about swords, but I should take a lesson from spears too! Thank you! I think I learned something!"

"Ha ha, I'm glad I was helpful."

Belgrieve collected their wooden swords and headed out to the back of the house to continue his work. Watching him off, the two young adventurers looked at each other in a daze.

"He's... a good teacher."

"Right... I should practice my swings."

"I need to practice too... My whole body, huh?"

"Isn't he amazing?" a voice suddenly interjected.

"Whoa?!" the two cried out. Angeline had appeared behind them without a sound.

With a grin, Angeline puffed out her chest. "He's my dad..."

"R-Right... I'm starting to see why you're so strong."

"Yep, yep. I can totally see it."

"Heh heh..." Angeline laughed triumphantly, as though she were the one being complimented.

Mit waddled up behind her and tugged on her sleeve. "Why did you leave?"

"Ah, I'm sorry..."

Seeing Mit looking a little miffed, Angeline scratched her cheek. Jake and Sola chuckled.

The afternoon sun sank even lower towards the horizon, and the shadows began to stretch out from the western mountains. The carpenters collected their tools and prepared to go home.

Sola stretched out. "Then we'll be taking our leave. I'll do my best practicing on my own," she said.

"Sorry for the trouble. Um, can I come again?"

"Sure."

They both seemed happy as they left. Then as if to replace them, Anessa, Miriam, Byaku, and Charlotte, who had been away all afternoon, returned with several wild rabbits and birds that had already been beheaded and stripped of feathers and fur.

"Hey!" Angeline called out, raising one hand. "Welcome back... You got a lot."

"Yeah, we hit the mother lode. We're eating well tonight."

"I did it too, sis! I got one with magic!"

"Oh, nicely done! Good girl, Char."

"Tee hee..."

"Where's everyone else? Inside?"

"My dad is inside... Grandpa and Mr. Kasim are by the river."

"Oh, then we'll have fish too. It really will be a feast."

"Right. Since we're having so much, should we call Sasha and Seren over too?"

"That might be a good idea..."

"Whatever else we do, I'm hungry. Let's start cooking already."

"Merry... Didn't you have a big lunch?"

"I mean, the food here's so good, I just end up eating too much of it. It's the food's fault."

"Quit playing around and start prepping already. It's gonna get dark," Byaku said, heading into the house.

The girls exchanged a look. "He's getting softer, isn't he?"

"He's surprisingly good at housework."

"I can't lose to Byaku! I've got to work harder!" Charlotte hurriedly rushed into the house.

Anessa and Miriam smiled and shrugged before chasing after the duo, and Angeline happily led Mit in by the hand. She could hear the distant shrill screeching of a bird from the mountain.

# CHAPTER 77

## IN THE EARLY MORNING, THE HOUSE

In the early morning, the house was as still as the bottom of the sea. The occasional soft sound of a sleeper's breath only further emphasized the silence.

There was still some time before daybreak. The dim glow of the eastern mountain range colored the wispy clouds across the sky, but the sun had yet to peek its head out. And yet, that peculiar, faint light made it all the way into the house, so that Belgrieve felt as though he was seeing everything through a thin, violet veil. When he sat up, he saw that Angeline was already awake, quietly getting herself ready for the day.

She grinned at him when she noticed his waking. "I win, dad."

"Yeah, you're up early..." he said, rubbing his eyes. He then twisted his shoulders and neck to loosen up. As usual, he strapped on his prosthetic leg with great care before standing.

The days were gradually growing longer with more daylight hours between dawn and dusk. The early mornings felt a bit cold on the skin, but not so much as to drive one's shivering body out from under the covers. Still, there must have been a draft in the house, as he could feel the wind every now and again.

Angeline looked around the room. "Where's Mit?" she asked curiously.

"What?" Belgrieve likewise scanned about as he put on his coat. Everyone had been sleeping wherever they pleased around the fireplace, but now Mit was nowhere to be seen. "Outside, maybe..." he suggested, an uncertain frown crossing his face.

"He is outside."

The surprise interjection drew their eyes to Graham, who had seemed to be asleep against the wall mere moments before. He reposed there still, now looking at them with one eye cracked open. "He left not long ago. He won't go far."

"I see... Maybe he wanted to see the sunrise."

Angeline nudged towards her back. "Braid my hair."

"Yeah, yeah..."

This was gradually becoming a daily routine. Belgrieve combed her slightly disheveled bed head straight before tying her hair into a large braid. By now, he had become quite a master of the craft, and it barely took any time at all. Angeline furnished the front of her hair with the silver ornament Belgrieve had bought for her.

Once the braiding was done, she joyously shot to her feet. "Would you like me to braid you too? Hee hee..."

"No, I'm good," her father replied. *Should I just cut my hair at this point?* he wondered, considering the idea in earnest.

"All right, we should head out, dad," Angeline said while tugging on the sleeve of his coat. Belgrieve nodded and slowly made his way out the door.

The temperature outside was a different beast, and a serene chill immediately surrounded the both of them. Everything was enveloped in a pale light, and in some places the grass and the flowers would twinkle in the morning dew. Otherwise, there were few colors to speak of in this world of gray. But beyond the mountains, the skies were glowing bright red with dawn's early light. A golden light radiated from its heart, giving way to a faint blue beyond the thin clouds. However, the dark of night yet lingered over their heads, and a few stars still asserted their presence.

At the end of the yard, Mit sat by the fence gazing absentmindedly at the sky.

"Mit," Angeline called out before racing over to him.

"Hmm?" The boy turned. "Sis."

"I was worried, you know... When I didn't see you around."

"The sky is pretty."

"It is." With that, Angeline leaned against the fence beside him and joined in on watching the eastern sky. A brief moment was all it took for the sights to take a complete turn. The blazing reds were soon suppressed by a golden light. It wasn't long now until sunrise. The crowing of a rooster could be heard in the distance.

Belgrieve, stroking his beard contemplatively, approached the two of them. “Do you want to go on patrol too?”

“When the sun is out,” Mit said.

Angeline nodded. “All right.”

“I see,” Belgrieve said, entrusting his weight to the fence.

They stared out at the eastern horizon. The orb of light formed slowly, like water coalescing into a droplet, until the air was suddenly warmer. The sight stung to look at, forcing Belgrieve to squint.

Ever since Belgrieve had returned to Turnera, it was like he had taken a load off his shoulders. He still had some history to deal with, but he nevertheless held these recent peaceful days dearly, like treasure. He glanced at Angeline and Mit, who were both cheerfully watching the rising sun. He wished that this moment would last forever, but he knew he was just being selfish. He scratched his head, frustrated with himself.

The blazing sun suddenly breathed life into the monochromatic world, casting their surroundings in all manner of colors and causing long shadows to stretch from their feet. The dewdrops in the grass gleamed like a sea of stars.

“Now then...” He was about to say “We should go,” but paused when he heard the door to the house open. He turned to see that Anessa, Miriam, and Charlotte had come out. Charlotte raced over and latched onto him.

“I told you to wake me up!” she protested.

“Ha ha, sorry about that. But it’s not good to force yourself to get up early.”

“I mean, I want to make a habit of waking early! Right, Anne?”

“Yeah, you need to force it a bit until it becomes a habit.”

“Right, right. Early rising is all about practice...” Miriam said before letting out a deep yawn.

Angeline chuckled. “All right, then everyone’s here...”

"We set a trap yesterday. Should we go check it out, Mr. Bell?"

"Right, I remember you mentioning that. We can take a look on our patrol."

Mit reached out his hands. "Dad, carry."

"Uh-huh." Belgrieve lifted him up and placed him on his shoulders. Satisfied, Mit used both his hands to rub Belgrieve's hair all over.

"He got the best seat in the house... But fine. You can have it. I am a tolerant big sis," Angeline insisted, though she did not seem too pleased. "Dad?"

"What is it?"

"Give me a piggyback ride later."

"Well... Sure."

Charlotte hopped towards him. "Me too!"

"How about you get one too, Anne?"

"I'm fine!"

Belgrieve smiled and tapped his peg leg against the ground. "Now, on with the morning patrol."

The skies grew brighter and brighter as they spoke. It was the start of a new day.

○

Within a forest covered by fresh growth, a deer munching on spring shoots suddenly raised its head and bounded away. All the birds and small animals nearby also took off in the same direction. They seemed to be running from something.

From the opposite direction in which they fled came the sounds of snapping twigs and the rustling of leaves blown about by the wind, noisily jostling against each other. The sounds were gradually growing louder; something approached.

A wolf with dark ashen fur was in hot pursuit of a young buck weaving through the

trees. The wolf was larger than normal for its kind, and its fiery eyes were filled with ill intent—it was a fiend known as a grayhund. It pounced upon the deer, tearing through its skin with sharp fangs that scattered droplets of blood through the air. The doomed beast thrashed violently in its last moments.

All around this grim tableau, the trees gradually shifted from their fresh, bright-green hues to the deep shades of old wood. The branches shook, as though they were crying out in agony. It was then that the twisted, gnarled trees came, ambulating upon leglike roots. Their march pushed aside the trees that were originally there; the moss and lichen clinging to their old trunks crept upon these same native trees, instantly enveloping them. The moss hung from the branches, blocking off the soft sunlight that had filtered through.

A low rumbling followed the ominous sound of shuffling trees, but if anyone had been around and honed their ears, they might have sworn it sounded like someone groaning in pain. It was as though the dead and buried under the earth had yet to surrender themselves to eternal rest, and instead were doomed to cry out with wretched voices for eternity. Anger, sorrow, grudges, abhorrence—the sound melded all of these dark feelings. It was the kind of sound that made one sick just to listen to it.

The trees from the Ancient Forest had crossed the mountains and were undoubtedly spreading their roots north. Above their canopy, there loomed a shadow that almost resembled an ancient dragon.

Amidst the groaning susurrus, a faint voice could just be heard. It was a solemn intonation, like the wind stirring the forest.

*We... ll... ree... we... shall... be free...*

○

It was almost time to harvest the onions for the winter. At this point, the onions would be fresh, soft, sweet, and delicious, but their skins were too frail for them to keep long. However, if they were left in the ground until their outer layers were hard and dry, they could be eaten all throughout the colder months. With Mit on his shoulders, Belgrieve and the other farmers walked around the onion patch.

Onions were a much-used crop in the village. Until recently, each household produced

their own, but now they had started growing them in the common field to lay away in case somebody's crops failed, as well as for the sake of those who, through some calamity or other, became too injured to maintain their own fields.

Naturally, this field wasn't limited to onions. The planting of other vegetables with a longer shelf life was slowly shifting to the common fields as well. In these joint projects, the elders would pass down their wisdom and techniques, and the youth would receive these lessons firsthand. Thus the work proceeded:

"Should we pull 'em up next week?"

"Right. They'll need to dry a bit after they're out."

"They're taking a bit longer to ripen this year... They'll overlap with the wheat harvest at this rate."

"Not much we can do about that. Nature keeps its own pace."

"Well, I can't argue that."

"All right, we're gonna get busy soon."

Thus the conversation went.

"I'm gonna help," Mit volunteered, enthusiastically swinging his arms from atop Belgrieve's shoulders.

The farmers shared a jolly laugh.

"Adorable kid you've got there!"

"So, Bell, about those rumel trees we were talking about."

"Yeah, what should we do? Do you want to go and dig up some saplings?"

The plan was to plant medicinal rumel trees as a new local specialty. They had already plowed the site and had sown scrap wheat as fertilizer; it would take another year still before any saplings could be transplanted. In the meantime, the young scrap wheat would be plowed under and mixed with a composted blend of manure and fallen leaves. This was a method Turnera had devised to draw even more blessings from

what was already fertile land.

Kerry folded his arms and nodded. "Right, the environment's a bit different here than the forest, so I'd like to test if the soil's a good fit. Let's grow a few in pots and plant them once we know the roots are growing."

"The more readily plantable trees, the better."

"Otherwise, we'll have to graft them."

"Yes, and that's why we should try a few things out first."

"Do you know where to find them? One or two won't be enough."

Belgrieve nodded. "No worries there. It's a bit far, about an hour to get there..."

"That far, eh?"

"It doesn't matter how deep in the woods they are, as long as we're with the Red Ogre!"

The farmers shared another laugh.

"Dad is the Red Ogre!" Mit began playfully slapping the top of his head with glee. This made their laughter even louder.

"That's right, Mit. Your old man's a big shot!"

"Ha ha ha!"

Belgrieve smiled wryly and scratched his cheek. "Please don't tease me... So how about it? Do you wanna go now?"

"Yes, well, I'll need to prepare a few things. How about we gather in the square after lunch, then?"

There were no objections, so the group dispersed. It was a good time to prepare lunch, in any case, although in Belgrieve's case, he had no way of knowing if someone had already begun cooking back home.

When he returned, the yard echoed with the sound of wooden hammers, and Angeline

and Sasha were standing poised with their sheathed swords. Belgrieve watched as their blades met a few times before Angeline managed to send Sasha's sword flying from her hands. Although Sasha quickly leaped back, Angeline would not relent, stepping in and thrusting her sword at Sasha's throat.

"Your movements are too linear."

"Hmm... I thought I'd gotten a little closer... But you're no slouch, Ange."

"I think you're better than last time... Oh, welcome back, dad!"

Before she had finished lecturing Sasha, Angeline immediately bounded towards Belgrieve.

"Yeah, I'm back. Is anyone making lunch? Should I start?"

"Anne's doing it... And Char's doing her best to help."

"Ha ha, that's good. Nicely done, Sasha." He bowed his head as Sasha approached.

She politely returned the gesture. "Pardon my intrusion, Master!"

"You're as enthusiastic as ever!"

"Yes, if only that enthusiasm would get me a little closer to everyone else... But the wall before S-Rank is a high one."

As far as Belgrieve was concerned, she was just picking a far-too-extreme standard for comparison; Sasha herself was already quite strong.

Mit clambered down from Belgrieve's shoulders and tugged on Angeline's hand. "Is sis strong?"

"I'm pretty strong, heh heh... What were you doing?"

"Seeing the fields with dad."

It had been three days since the Bordeaux sisters arrived with the surveyors. The weather had been fine the whole while, and the surveyors were making good progress with their work. Seren was out with them overseeing their work every day, and also

going house to house to foster friendly relations with the village. She played with the children and sometimes helped out with farmwork. Despite Turnera belonging to Bordeaux territory, it wasn't until recently that any official ever visited the small village, and Seren's intent to change that fact was clear as day. Perhaps she considered herself Helvetica's stand-in, and this made her more assertive than usual. The villagers were quite delighted at this.

Sasha did much the same as Seren, though she would come to Belgrieve's house in her free time to spar with Angeline and Graham. From the sidelines, it looked like Sasha was being overwhelmed every time, but given who she was up against, no one thought less of her for it. For that matter, there were few who could properly exchange blows with the S-Ranks at all.

The three young adventurers who had arrived with the peddler would find time to stop by as well. Kain was utterly charmed by Kasim, and would talk about all sorts of things with him to deepen his knowledge, while the sword wielders, Jake and Sola, had begun to join in on Belgrieve's morning practice.

*Turnera's getting livelier*, Belgrieve observed. He didn't know what the peace-loving elders thought of this, but for his part, he wasn't opposed to it. In any case, nothing could stay the same forever. The times would change, and people would have to change to meet them. Surely there were plenty of those who could not change and faded into the shadows of history.

*No, I'm thinking too far ahead. You never know what will happen*, Belgrieve thought, kneading his beard.

"How about lunch, Sasha? Do you want to join us?"

"With pleasure—at least, that's what I'd like to say, but Seren is waiting for me," Sasha regretfully replied.

"Then bring her too...?"

"No, she has something to discuss with the surveyors today. Could we come another time?"

"Of course. Please tell her to prioritize her work."

"Even if I join in, I don't really understand what's going on. But Seren can be even

harsher than my big sister, so... *Sigh.*" Sasha shrugged.

Angeline giggled. "She's an earnest girl."

"Yes, that's what's good about her... Do you have any afternoon plans?"

"I'm going to the forest. What about you, Ange?"

"If you're going, I'm going too."

"Hmm." Sasha placed her hand on her chin. "I would love to join you, but..."

"But that depends on Seren. Right?"

"Ha ha! You know her well," Sasha said and turned. "Until next time!"

After seeing her off, Belgrieve turned to Angeline.

"Ange, you didn't injure her, did you?"

"Not yet... But it's getting harder to hold back against her."

"Ha ha, I see. Then you might end up losing one of these days."

Angeline scoffed. "That will never happen. It doesn't matter how strong Sasha becomes. I will never lose if I fight seriously."

"I... I see." He didn't know whether to be reassured or terrified. Either way, Belgrieve shuddered a bit at his daughter's capabilities.

Mit tugged at his sleeve. "I want to be strong too," the boy insisted.

"Oh, you do? Let's both do our best."

"Yeah."

"Heh heh, you'll get there with your big sis teaching you..." Angeline said.

Mit knit his brow ever so slightly. "Dad is a better teacher than sis."

"Oof." Angeline bit her lip. She had no rebuttal, as she thought so too. Nevertheless, she wanted to play the part of a big sister. At the same time that she wanted to leave it to Belgrieve, she also wanted to be the one to teach him. These two competing interests left her vexed.

Belgrieve placed a hand on her head. "How about we teach him together?"

"Huh? We can do that?!" Angeline's face lit up.

"Yeah. Though I'm busy today, so it will have to wait until tomorrow..."

"All right! Hee hee, I can't wait... Mit, dad and I are going to teach you."

"I just want dad."

"Aww..." Angeline poutingly puffed out her cheeks.

There was a bit of mischief in Mit's slight smile as he clung to her arm. "Joke. Teach me."



“Hmph.”

Angeline’s mouth was still pouty as she ruffled Mit’s hair. The two entered the house together.

*Mit’s becoming very humanlike,* Belgrieve thought, feeling a bit reassured. He headed to the woodpile and was rummaging around it when Graham came up to him. He had been babysitting in the square since morning and had sent the kids home when lunch was near.

Though he was a man of few words, he was strangely liked by children and was thus a great help to Turnera. This was especially true when more hands were needed in the fields; it was a great boon that the village mothers could go out and work.

“Welcome back, Graham.”

“Hmm...” Graham wore a somewhat conflicted expression on his face. His aged visage bore its usual array of deeply hewed wrinkles that gave him a taciturn appearance, but those grooves seemed even deeper than usual.

Belgrieve cocked his head inquisitively. “Did something happen?”

“I don’t know... But I feel something in my chest. It is as though something wicked approaches...”

“Hmm...? That sounds serious when you’re the one saying it.”

“Let’s hope I’m not overthinking it.”

Graham had said something similar a few times before. At times, the problem was less significant than he believed it to be, and still other times, it turned out to be nothing at all. But this time, he seemed more serious than usual. His natural elven sensitivity towards nature and the instincts he had honed over his long adventuring career made him anxious.

Belgrieve picked up a piece of firewood. “We should be careful, then.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to worry you...”

“Ha ha, I know you would never say something like that lightly... We’re heading out

into the forest in the afternoon. Will we be all right?"

Graham closed his eyes. "I cannot say for sure... But there's nothing wrong with being careful."

"I see... Well, for now, let's get some lunch."

"Indeed." Graham sighed and scratched his head. "How ominous..."

"Don't make that face. You're really making me anxious here."

Seeing Belgrieve give a joking laugh, Graham returned a slight smile.

The thin clouds from the south were gradually beginning to cover the blue sky.

# CHAPTER 78

## THE THIN CLOUDS TURNED FROM A PIERCING BLUE

The thin clouds turned from a piercing blue into a faded aqua. Still, the sun was going strong, and its rays made it feel almost unbearably hot as it made its westward descent.

"What? Then we'd better be a bit careful, then," Kasim said as he laid the fishing rod against his shoulder.

"Yes..." Graham replied with his customary frown. "I can't say anything definitively, though."

Kasim pressed his cap over his head. "Hmm... Got it. I'll just have to stay on my toes."

Belgrieve smiled awkwardly. "Well, we don't lose anything if nothing happens..."

"Something wicked... Like a fiend or something?"

Graham gave a troubled look. "I don't know. Even I know I'm being incoherent... I doubt you two need to worry, but we need to look out for those who cannot fight."

"Oh, I see. Well sure. That's our job, in any case." Kasim cackled and picked up his tackle box. "I'm praying it's nothing, and I'll get a nice dinner at the end of it. Hey, Bell, I'll fish up something nice, so do that herb-steaming thing of yours. I'm getting addicted to it."

"Well, why not—if you catch anything, that is."

"Now you've said it. Just you wait." Kasim made off for the river, swinging his rod about like a valiant warrior.

The scent of fresh growth wafted on the breeze. Belgrieve checked the sword on his hip and picked up a hoe.

"All right, I should head out... Ange, are you ready yet?" he called into the house.

There was a loud storm of footsteps before Angeline popped out. "Sword, tools, and... Do I need a hoe?"

"You don't need one. Can you look after Mit?"

Mit had said he wanted to go to the forest, so go he would. He appeared from behind Angeline, holding Miriam's hand.

"All right, let's do this thing!"

"Hmm? You're coming too, Merry?"

"I am, I am. I wanted to get a good breath of fresh forest air," Miriam said. She pulled off her cap, letting her ears twitch in the breeze for a bit, before putting it back on.

Graham looked a bit reassured. "I see. That's good..."

"Hey, do you think that bad feeling of yours will hit the mark?" Miriam chuckled.

Graham closed his eyes. "I pray it doesn't..."

"Heh heh... Even if it does, it should be fine with all of us around..."

"Uh-huh. Right, Mit?"

"Yep!" Mit raised his hand.

Graham smiled and patted him on the head. "Take care."

"Yeah. Take care, grampa."

The party laughed at the sight of the child proudly puffing out his chest.

Graham was on babysitting duty again for the afternoon. Anessa would stay behind to work in the fields and prepare dinner with Charlotte and Byaku. *It's nice to have enough people to divide up work like this*, thought Belgrieve.

When they arrived at the square, the other farmers were waiting with their tools. They

had no swords, but some had hatchets, and others carried hoes and spades. All of them had baskets to carry the cut-out saplings as well. With a curious glance at the mysterious tools the surveyors were using, they turned towards the forest's entrance.

"Okay," said Kerry as he slung his basket over his back. "Today is just a test run, so let's be back before the sun sets. Take the lead, Bell."

"Yeah, got it. Ange, could you watch our backs?"

"Yeah... Leave it to me." Angeline seemed enthusiastic to receive a task from her father.

Miriam teasingly prodded at her. "That's a *big* job."

"It is. But I will pull it off perfectly..."

"Then I'll be next to Mr. Bell."

Before she could take her leave, Angeline grabbed her by the nape. "Merry, you're with me!"

"Huuuh? Why?"

"You shall *not* have my father"

"What are you people doing...?" Kerry's son Barnes shook his head, an exasperated look on his face. He had a dagger on his hip and a quiver on his back.

"Hmm," Angeline mused. "What are you wearing...? You look like an adventurer."

"Sh-Shut it. You need to be on your toes in the forest. Right, Mr. Bell?"

"Yeah, that's right. But, Barnes, when did you learn to use a bow?"

Barnes awkwardly scratched his cheek. "Well, I had Anne teach me... Looks like I've got more of a knack for it than I do for swords and magic."

"Getting close to our Anne, are you?" Angeline mischievously smirked. "Want me to tell Rita?"

"What?! You've got it all wrong! Fool! Don't!"

And seeing him so flustered, the farmers shared a good laugh.

With that, they were on their way. Belgrieve matched pace with the farmers, who were unaccustomed to the woods, and slowly led the way. Angeline and Miriam took up the rear guard. Mit seemed quite satisfied holding their hands.

The air was clean amidst the trees. The buds that had so timidly peeked out at the start of spring now forcefully spread their leaves wide in the warm weather. The trees that had shed all their leaves over the cold winter were as green as they had ever been.

Weeds of all shapes and sizes poked out from beneath a thick layer of dead leaves, and the places that received the best sunlight through the trees were practically carpeted with green.

Their path took them uphill and downhill, and nearly an hour later, they reached a place where the trunks were too thick to wrap two arms around, and large branches formed a ceiling overhead. The ground was covered in small rocks with a slender stream flowing through it. Belgrieve scooped up a leaf off the ground. He rubbed it between his fingertips before handing it off to the farmers.

“Have a look.”

“Huh? What about it.”

“You’ll recognize the smell.”

“What? Then don’t tell me...”

“Yeah, the large trees are rumel. We should be able to find a few smaller ones if we look for them.”

The farmers looked up and around, sighing in satisfaction at their accomplishment. They had never come so far into the woods, and they had never seen rumel so large before. This deep in the woods, the sun could no longer reach the ground, and there was more moss and lichen than plants. This meant that the trees needed to grow higher to survive. The rumel trees had won this struggle for existence and had grown to towering proportions.

Old fallen trunks stacked on top of one another, and new trees grew over them. Perhaps there were even older trees farther below. This was quite different from the

woods around the village that the lumberjacks tended to.

Several offshoots had grown from the base of a rumel tree that had snapped and fallen under its own weight. The farmers immediately snipped them and also dug out the small sprouts that had most likely grown from fallen seeds and put them into their baskets. The leaves gave off a vivid scent, while the sap had a smell that filled the chest with a refreshing sensation that certainly seemed healthy.

“Oh, I’ve smelled this before.”

“Right, this is the smell of old Caiya’s cold medicine.”

“That takes me back.”

Belgrieve reminisced a bit over the memory of the old village apothecary who had passed a few years back. Now, her daughter was the one making the medicine, and he would often find himself gathering herbs for her.

Angeline wandered around, leading Mit by the hand, while Miriam, with eyes closed, leaned against her staff and breathed deeply of the forest’s refreshing air. She seemed half in a state of meditation. Belgrieve decided to leave the sapling collection to the farmers and gathered some sap with the vials he had brought with him.

As they chatted and worked, a lukewarm wind suddenly blew from the forest’s depths. It knocked the cap from the head of one of the farmers, who hurriedly snatched it up before it hit the ground.

“What are you doing?”

“Well, the wind, it... came from the forest.”

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes in doubt. The wind did blow through the forest, but it was strange for any of it to be coming from deeper within during this season.

“Wah!” Barnes suddenly cried out, readying his bow.

There was something standing amidst the trees. It looked like a gnarled tree trunk, and yet its branches and roots grew out like human limbs. Barnes opened and closed his mouth a few times before looking to Belgrieve.

"M-Mr. Bell, what's that? It was walking!"

"That's a tree herder," Belgrieve smiled, patting Barnes on the shoulder. "Don't worry. They don't harm humans."

The tree herder stood there a while, staring back at them, but eventually moved its root legs and walked off. Barnes let out a sigh of relief.

"Tree herder?"

"Yes... They're not fiends. A sort of spirit, perhaps. You sometimes see them in the deep woods. I've heard they also appear out of thin air in the desolate wastelands to plant trees and spread seeds—not that I've ever seen that."

The large hollow in the herder's trunk had looked almost like a huge gaping mouth, and Barnes shuddered as he recalled the sight.

Angeline jovially prodded at him. "Heh heh, scaredy-cat..."

"Y-You shut it!"

"Good grief," Kerry said, patting the dirt from his clothes. "The forest really is a mysterious place. Now I think we have all the saplings we need. Let's go before it gets dark."

The saplings gave off the same invigorating smell as the grown rumel. Carrying them along the way made the road back far more pleasant.

"If I'm remembering right, it's not just medicine. They use it for perfume too," said Miriam.

Angeline nodded. "I think that's right... I don't wear perfume, so I forgot..."

"Well, you already smell nice without any help, Ange. You have it easy."

And with that, Miriam closed in and got a good whiff of Angeline's scent. Angeline squirmed ticklishly.

"Quit it..."

"Does sis smell nice?"

"Not you too, Mit..."

Barnes had a tired look on his face as he watched the girls and Mit messing around.

*Found you.*

All of a sudden, Mit twitched. His expression, which had gone soft from frolicking, immediately stiffened, and he ran off in a hurry, latching onto Belgrieve's back. Belgrieve hurriedly braced his left foot to keep balance.

"What's wrong?"

"Scary... It's scary..."

Mit was shuddering as he held on for dear life. With a frown, Belgrieve shifted him to a safer position and looked around.

Perhaps the sun was setting, and the forest was darker than it had been on the way there. Though the winds blew, that was high in the sky, and the forest down below was still. He could not see anything off. The farmers seemed equally perplexed.

"What's this, what's this? Is he scared of the dark?"

"Ha ha ha, Mit's still a child."

Angeline rushed over. "It's strange. It's like we're being watched."

"Hmm..." Belgrieve stroked his beard and took another wary look around. He hadn't noticed at first, but he realized now that something was definitely strange. It was too quiet. "Let's stay on our toes."

Belgrieve consolidated the long line of farmers and took the lead once more. The farmers anxiously shouldered their baskets and looked around. Setting Mit on his shoulders, Belgrieve smiled to reassure everyone.

"Hey, don't worry about it. We could just be imagining it, but there's no telling what could happen in the forest. Let's be careful anyway."

"Y-Yeah."

"Well, if Bell says so."

"That's right, we have Ange and Merry with us."

With all eyes gathering on her, Angeline puffed out her chest. "Don't worry... I am an S-Rank adventurer. Think of it as though you're riding a sturdy ship of lead."

"Won't that sink?" Merry asked.

"Uh... It's shallow enough to stand."

"Then you don't need a boat at all."

"Aha ha ha! You say some funny things, don't you!" The farmers laughed, their spirits renewed, and resumed their trek once more. It seemed as though the calm had returned, and yet Mit was still stiff on Belgrieve's back with the same terrified look on his face.

The sun must have reached the mountains. As they continued their journey, the woods grew darker and darker, until there were no longer any shadows at their feet. But the village was nearer now; the trees were steadily growing thinner, and the weeds were once again outpacing the moss. They could even see traces of human footsteps. The slightly tense group let out sighs of relief.

"Dad!" Angeline suddenly cried out, bounding from the ground.

Belgrieve swiftly drew his sword. "Get behind me!" he called out to the farmers, who hurriedly circled around him.

Several grayhounds shot forth from the darkness like loosed arrows. But Angeline had already sensed their presence and intercepted them head-on. One stroke took out two, and the return swing decapitated one more.

This was accompanied by a flash of lightning as a grayhound that had appeared from another direction was burnt to a crisp. Miriam proudly held her staff out.

"Send as many small fries as you want!" She swung her staff, and, no sooner than it emerged from the darkness, another grayhound hit the dirt.



Angeline dashed around like she was flying, taking out one wolf after another. She had killed ten already. She could only wonder just how many more were lurking in the darkness.

Belgrieve kept his eyes peeled. He shifted a terrified Mit so as to hold him under one arm and used his sword to cleave through a grayhund coming their way.

Something was strange. No wolves were aiming for Angeline, who was at the front now. Instead, they were all trying to slip past her. Angeline wasn't going to let them, but they were clearly aiming for Belgrieve. Even the grayhund that had circled around from behind did not even spare a glance for the farmers who were a far easier target.

He could not think of anything that would make him a target. *Which means...* Belgrieve strengthened his grip on Mit.

Angeline returned from the vanguard, standing back-to-back with Belgrieve. "What do we do, dad?"

"How many more?"

"Less than ten, I think."

"Then we should deal with them. They're dangerous to leave be, and Kasim will laugh at me if I have trouble with an E-Rank fiend." Belgrieve adjusted his stance, smiling at Mit in an attempt to reassure him. "Don't worry. Daddy's with you."

"Yeah..." Mit buried his face in Belgrieve's chest.

A moment after he heard Angeline bound away again, he could hear the death throes of another wolf in the dark. Angeline's night vision was just as good as his own, if not better. Generally speaking, Belgrieve left the wolves to her as he slowly led the farmers to retreat and took care of any of the wolves that slipped through. Miriam offered precise support with her magic.

Eventually, not a beast was left breathing, and the mysterious stillness of sunset had returned. He swiftly scanned the area. He couldn't sense any fiends, and Angeline didn't seem to feel anything either. Belgrieve wiped off his sword before returning it to its scabbard.

"Is it over?"

"Yeah. Let's hurry out of the forest. Is anyone injured?"

"Nah." Kerry shook his head. "Thanks to you. That was quite something."

"I'm glad you were with us... Ange, you really are strong. Color me shocked."

"And you didn't lift a finger, Barnes."

Barnes pouted. "Well, what do you expect me to do?! It's dark, and I didn't want to hit you by mistake..."

Belgrieve chuckled and patted Barnes on the shoulder. "You made the right decision. It's a good thing, not making hasty decisions."

"Heh... heh heh..." Barnes bashfully scratched his head.

Darkness was quickly setting in now, and as they made haste through the forest, Belgrieve checked on Mit. Though the grayhunds had been taken care of, he still seemed just as fearful.

*Looks like it's not over yet,* Belgrieve thought with a furrowed brow.

When they were out of the woods and nearing the village, Graham ran up to them. His silky, silver hair almost seemed to glow in the faint, lingering light. Graham had a ghastly look on his face, but his pace and his expression both softened once he saw everyone was all right.

"You're safe..."

"Yeah... Did something happen?"

"I felt a strange presence... It's gone for now."

"Grampa." Mit clung to Graham, sniffling.

Miriam sighed. "We had a mess right at the very end."

"But grayhunds aren't much of an issue... Right, dad?"

"Right..." Belgrieve glared at the forest a while longer but soon turned. "Let's head back

for now. It's dark, so mind your step."

They were completely enveloped in darkness now, with only the light from the village houses guiding the way, and that of the stars twinkling above. Behind them, the leaves of the forest trees were rustling in the breeze.

○

For her part, Angeline seemed a bit giddy. She hummed a tune as she wound yarn into a ball. Sitting beside her, Miriam leaned in and peered at her face. "What's this, what's this? You seem happy?"

"Heh heh... I fought alongside dad." She smiled from ear to ear.

Thinking back, they had fought mostly separately during the uproar in Bordeaux, and it never felt like they had been watching each other's back. She never did give much regard to that, since Anessa and Miriam always provided excellent support, and yet, having Belgrieve oversee the battle from the back line gave her a strange sense of security. As she ruminated over this, the man in question had gone off to the church to ask to have the barrier strengthened.

They had already eaten dinner, and now was the relaxed time before sleep. Charlotte peeled the skin from the potatoes they would be using tomorrow while Byaku sat with his eyes closed in meditation. Anessa looked over her bow and arrows, and Graham silently sat with Mit in his arms. Though Mit was just as fearful upon returning home, he was now sound asleep.

Sitting across from Angeline, Kasim sat with his head propped up with one hand. "I'm not seeing why the fiends would target Mit," he said.

"Yeah... But Mit did have his mana siphoned by a strange fiend once before. It might be something similar..."

According to Belgrieve, the grayhunds had been after Mit—and Belgrieve's word carried enough weight that none of them would second-guess it. With that said, the *why* was still unclear, and both Kasim and Angeline were racking their brains over it.

"Gramps, didn't Mit use up all his mana at the time?" Angeline asked.

Graham lifted his gaze. "I thought so. It should have taken a considerable amount to

construct a body this close to human. But over the course of the winter, his mana has begun to circulate anew," he said, closing his eyes. "Yes, come to think of it, while it may be possible to temporarily vanquish a demon, it is impossible to erase it in its entirety... It's pathetic of me to admit it; I've seen them as my foes for so long that I thought I knew everything there was to know. Now that I have one under my wing, there are far too many unknowns."

"It's not your fault. Don't worry too much about it," Kasim reassured him as he folded his arms behind his head and laughed. Then, something seemed to occur to him. "Come to think of it, I saw a herder across the river when I was fishing."

"A tree herder?"

"Yeah. It's been a while since I last saw one. I guess they're not too rare when there's so much nature around."

*We saw one in the forest too,* Angeline recalled. They weren't supposed to appear so frequently, and she had only seen them a handful of times on former requests. Their habitats were restricted to desolate lands and deep forests completely untouched by human hands. Sure, nature was abundant around Turnera, but they were still a rare find here.

With her bow maintenance finished, Anessa took a seat beside Kasim. "Now that you mention it, I saw one while hunting as well."

"You too?"

"Yeah. It was just standing there, staring at me."

"The one we saw was like that too, right?"

"Yeah... Isn't that strange?"

Kasim let out a great yawn. "Well, it's not like the herders do any harm, so isn't that fine? It was just grayhunds today, right? Then with gramps, Ange, and me, there shouldn't be anything to worry about."

"Not exactly, Mr. Kasim." Angeline leaned across the table. "Dad is on guard... There must be something we're not noticing. I'm sure about it."

"Hmm..." Kasim mumbled. "You might be right. He always was the one who noticed danger before anyone else..."

"Right. So we must be vigilant..." Angeline herself did not perceive any cause for anxiety, but if Belgrieve himself was on high alert, that was more than enough reason to keep her on her toes.

Miriam folded her arms in thought. "But what are we supposed to look out for, exactly? It's hard to be on alert all the time..."

"Protect Mit. Protect him no matter what. That might be our priority..." Angeline said, looking Graham's way. Graham nodded with closed eyes. With a complacent smile, she turned back to Kasim. "There's one more thing I'd like to set straight."

"Hmm?"

"It's not because of you, or me, or Graham. The reason there's nothing to worry about is because my father is here."

Kasim burst into laughter. "Well, you've got a point there! Looks like I forgot the most important thing!"

Miriam and Anessa chuckled along with him. And it was at that very moment that Belgrieve returned. He entered, somewhat taken aback to find the house so lively.

"Are we having a party?"

"Heh heh... What about the barrier?"

"That should be taken care of. Let's hope it doesn't get put to the test..."

"Want some tea, Mr. Bell?"

"Hmm? Oh, thanks, Anne... What were you laughing about, Kasim?"

"Heh... heh heh, nothing. I was just thinking that Bell's always gonna be Bell."

"Huh?" Belgrieve looked at him quizzically.

Angeline beckoned to him. "Dad, come here... Let me sit on your lap."

“You’ve... gotten pretty heavy lately...”

“Don’t worry about that... Hurry up.”

With a troubled laugh, Belgrieve stroked his beard. The dark of night was growing all the darker, and the wind had begun to howl beneath the twinkling stars.

# CHAPTER 79

## DAY BY DAY, THE STALKS ROSE

Day by day, the stalks rose higher out of the wheat beds, and verdant green ears began to spread from their tips. Belgrieve had seen this same scenery for decades now. Eventually, green would turn to gold, and once the crops were ready for harvesting, the air would be filled with the spirit of summer.

Ultimately, the next few days passed uneventfully, and none of his fears were realized. The sunlight still shone down as it always did, and there was no flood of fiends from the forest to besiege the village. In fact, there were no traces of fiends at all. It was so peaceful, it was almost like the grayhund attack had been a dream.

Yet Mit was still fearful, and be it day or night, he would always cling tightly to Belgrieve or Graham. This was clearly unnatural, and it kept everyone on edge as they did their work. In the field behind the house, Charlotte watched with a perplexed face as a jug of spirits was diluted with water.

“What are you going to do with that?”

“This liquor here has had hera fruit steeping in it. That turns it into a nice bug repellent.”

Belgrieve gestured for her to take a whiff. Mixed in with the sweet smell of alcohol was a nasal-piercing stench. Charlotte reeled back and rubbed her nose.

“That stings!”

“Ha ha, doesn’t it? It’s quite effective. You can use it as a medicine too.”

Belgrieve chuckled as he further diluted the concentration. Then, using a ladle to scoop it out, he splashed it over the vegetable stalks that had begun to grow tall. As for the insects that were already on the leaves, he had to pick them off and crush them by hand.

“So now the bugs won’t have to die...”

"Yeah, you wouldn't want to eat a poison that kills bugs, right? This will just stop them from coming from now on. It makes quite a difference... Do you want to help out, Mit?"

He turned the conversation to Mit, who was riding on his back. Mit timidly nodded before clambering down to the ground. With a smile, Charlotte grabbed his hand.

"Let's do it together!"

"Yeah..." Mit's expression softened a bit as he scattered the concoction with Charlotte.

*It's nice to have children around at times like these,* Belgrieve mused as he stooped over to begin plucking the weeds.

They had already been working for a good while before Byaku came over from the house. "Hey, old man. You got a guest."

"Hmm? Who is it...?" Belgrieve turned and noticed Sasha standing behind Byaku. She looked as energetic as ever.

"Good morning, Master! Sorry for bothering you in the middle of your work."

"Oh, not at all. You're welcome anytime. I'm ashamed I have to greet you in these dirty clothes."

Belgrieve stood up and bowed, with Charlotte doing likewise. A tepid midday wind picked up small swirling clouds of dust around them.

"It's getting hotter every day," Sasha remarked, wiping sweat from her brow.

"Yes, it's been unusually hot lately."

Summer was not far off, and with how cold Turnera usually was, even a slight increase in temperature made it feel comparatively sultry. That said, the lack of brisk winds these past few days made it feel strangely muggy.

Sasha seemed impressed as she gazed over the field he had been tending to. "I know we were set to return to Bordeaux soon... but the surveyors don't seem to be doing too well."

"Oh?" Belgrieve said, grimacing.

More people were falling ill in Turnera than usual. It wasn't enough to put them out of commission, but it had become a bit harder for some of the farmers to swing their hoes in the fields. Belgrieve was anxious that an epidemic was upon them. There were far too many strange things going on.

"I'm not knowledgeable about diseases, so I can't get into the finer details," Sasha continued, folding her arms, "but they have no fever; they just feel too sluggish to move about as they want. They're all hard workers, so I don't think they're making excuses to slack off."

"I'm sure... Did you see the apothecary?"

"Yes, and we received an herbal decoction. They're resting for now, but it doesn't look like we'll be returning on schedule. I thought you should know."

"I see... I'll go pay them a visit later."

"That would be great... I'll leave you to it, then. Pardon me for the interruption."

"Don't worry about it."

Sasha smiled, before turning to Byaku and grabbing him by the shoulder. Until that moment, the boy had been standing there indifferently.

"Now—have a match with me, Byaku!"

"Tsk... This meathead..." Byaku scowled, rubbing where he had been struck before. He turned to Belgrieve. "The potatoes are already boiled."

"Oh, thanks. Try to be back by noon."

"Do your best, Byaku!" said Charlotte.

"Hmph..."

Byaku and Sasha walked off past the house. Sasha, who was now AAA-Rank, was apparently a good matchup for Byaku, who had been trained under Graham and Kasim. The yard was too small of a battlefield for Byaku, so they usually held their matches in the square or outside of town.

Once they were out of sight, Belgrieve stretched before bending back down to continue weeding. A warm wind brushed across his nape, neither refreshing nor comforting. It was like something peculiar was tickling his spine. Annoyed, he rubbed his neck a few times.

The winds had not died down these past few days. They continued blowing from the forest to the west. There were some seasons where the wind from the northern mountains came down uninterrupted, but this was different. It was a little strange for there to be such ceaseless wind from the west.

He was plucking weeds and thinking when Mit climbed onto his back.

“Dad...”

“Hmm? Done already?”

“We just have to splash it onto the stalks, right? Then we’re done,” Charlotte said, carrying the jug which was now mostly empty.

After that, they were all on weeding duty. The ones that had just begun to sprout were soft and easier to pull. Before the weeds gained traction, it was just a matter of whether they could be pulled carefully enough not to break the stems. The amount of effort required was completely different from what it would be if they waited too long.

At times he would stand and stretch as he plucked out a stem. When he looked ahead, he could see there was still a long way to go. But if he looked back, he knew he had covered a good distance.

Before he knew it, the sun was high and noon was soon upon them. Belgrieve—with Mit still perched on his back—stood up and began retrieving his tools, his mind on preparing lunch.

He returned to the house to place an already-filled pot of water over the fireplace and was busy mincing meat and vegetables when Angeline returned with a glum look on her face. She had gone to the western forest with Anessa and Miriam. Belgrieve frowned, wondering what could have happened.

“Welcome home, Ange. How was the forest?”

“Nothing wrong, as far as I could see... But something’s strange. It felt like someone

was watching me the whole time. I don't mean animals either..."

"Yeah, like someone's keeping watch for something," Miriam followed up.

"Something like that..." Anessa chimed in. "But there weren't any fiends... And nothing set off my traps."

"Hmm. Does that mean the animals are gone too?"

"Let me think... Yeah, I didn't see a single rabbit today." Anessa folded her arms, a doubtful look on her face. "And... There was another tree herder today. It was standing by the edge of the woods, looking at us."

The tree herders were still showing up around the village. Kerry and the other farmers had reportedly seen one of them when they were working on the fields outside the village where the rumel saplings would be planted. Though they could do no harm, the farmers were whispering about how ominous they were. Since they were being sighted all over the place, it probably wasn't just one specimen.

Within a few days, several of those very same farmers began to fall ill. These were hardy folk, their bodies trained from years of farming, so it was strange for them to become sick without warning.

"This is serious..." Something was undoubtedly happening where they couldn't see it. Though he kept vigilant, Belgrieve had no idea how to counteract the formless threat creeping upon the village like this.

He had decided to turn his mind to making lunch when Byaku returned with a strange look on his face.

"Welcome back, Bucky," Angeline greeted him, a teasing note in her voice.

"That ain't my name... Hey, old man."

"Yes?"

"Seren collapsed..."

"What?" Belgrieve's hands froze. "What do you mean?"

“I don’t know the specifics.”

According to Byaku, he had been sparring with Sasha outside the village when Barnes ran up to them in a panic. Apparently, Seren had been chatting with the farmers working on the rumel plot only to suddenly faint. As soon as she heard the story, a pale-faced Sasha dashed away to her sister’s side.

Angeline fastened her sword to her hip. “I’m going!”

“Yeah, I’ll meet you there.”

Lunch was now the least of their worries. Angeline left with Anessa and Miriam. Charlotte saw them off, nervously fidgeting, and Byaku placed a hand on her back.

“You’re worried, right? Get going already.”

After another moment of hesitation, she replied, “Yeah!” And then Charlotte ran off after them.

“What about you, Byaku?”

“Do I look like the sort of guy who goes around visiting the sick? You’re going, aren’t you? Then someone needs to watch the house.”

“I see... I’m counting on you, then.”

For the time being, Belgrieve left Byaku to tend to the house. He tucked a few vials of medicine into his bag, and, with Mit in tow, made haste for Kerry’s house. It felt as though the village was terribly quiet, and even the goats—usually bleating boisterously—sat silently in the shade of the trees. It was around the time to herd the sheep to the open plains, and yet, he could not see any of the shepherds making their preparations. He could not hear the children at play either.

The air was heavy. It was almost as if the village itself had fallen to some illness. Even Belgrieve, who should have been perfectly fine, began to feel strangely sluggish.

“What is going on here...?”

Once he reached the square, the young adventurers who had come to guard the peddler were sitting around, looking ever so bored. Sola waved once she noticed him.

"Hey, Mr. Belgrieve."

"Hello to you too. What's wrong? I heard you were leaving soon."

Kain shook his head. "Our client keeled over... The apothecary's looking after him, but it looks like we're stuck here for a few days."

*Yet another patient.* Considering the time frame, it was hard to think any of the travelers had brought in the disease. No one had fallen ill around the time they first arrived. Even if it was an illness that delayed showing symptoms, it would be strange for the traveler to fall ill at the same time as the villagers. It had been only two or three days since anyone began to sicken.

"Are you three feeling all right?"

"Yeah, I've always been robust, if nothing else," Jake said jocularly.

"Not sure if I should say this," added Sola, "but I'm happy I get to stay in Turnera a bit longer."

"Hey now. What are you saying when the village is in this state?"

"Eep..." Sola awkwardly winced in the face of Kain's rebuke.

Belgrieve tugged at his beard with a smile on his face. "In any case, you'd better watch out. You never know when it could strike."

"Got it."

"We'll be careful."

He parted from the three of them and continued on his way to Kerry's house. When he got there, he found the hired hands—who were not looking so great themselves—rushing about and tending to the sick. Seren's room was in the detached guest housing at the very back, where the surveyors were laid up.

Her face was pale, and her shallow breathing made it seem like the air was not reaching the deeper parts of her chest. Sasha, Angeline, Anessa, Miriam, and Charlotte surrounded her with worried faces; every now and again, they would take turns wringing out a hand towel and using it to wipe her brow.

"Do you think she'll be all right?"

"Seren... What happened to you?" Sasha lamented, biting her lip in frustration and clenching her fists.

Hearing his approaching footsteps, Angeline turned to him. "Dad."

"Dad..." Charlotte echoed.

"Yes... How is Seren's condition?"

"She just fell asleep... But she's struggling to breathe."

"I see. Where's Atla?" Belgrieve asked, referring to the village apothecary.

Angeline shook her head. "She's being called all over the place and hasn't made it here yet..."

"I should have known..." *Yes, given the state of the village, the apothecary would be in high demand.*

Belgrieve slowly approached and placed a hand on Seren's forehead. She did not seem to have a fever—rather, it felt like her temperature was dropping. Her nose was likely blocked, given how she was breathing from only her mouth.

Charlotte looked up at Belgrieve anxiously. "Is she okay, dad...? Seren's going to be okay, right?"

"Yeah..." Belgrieve paused for a moment's thought before he produced a palm-sized vial from his bag and handed it to Sasha.

"Smear that across her thymus. Around the center of her chest."

"What is it?" Sasha popped open the stopper and took in the smell. Her eyes blinked in surprise.

"It's a mix of a few herbs, mainly rumel and mint. I think it will help her breathe a bit easier."

"M-Many thanks!"

Sasha immediately tore open the front of Seren's robes, and Belgrieve swiftly turned to leave. He could hear Angeline's shocked voice behind him.

"She's... grown...?"

"It's true... She was a bit smaller before, wasn't she?"

"Yes, she was. She might surpass big sis at this rate."

"Hmm... What puberty does to a girl..."

*What are they on about?* Belgrieve wondered, before shrugging off the thought. He quickly got to work applying the same medicine to the surveyors. It seemed as though their labored breathing had become a bit lighter.

"That's a start..."

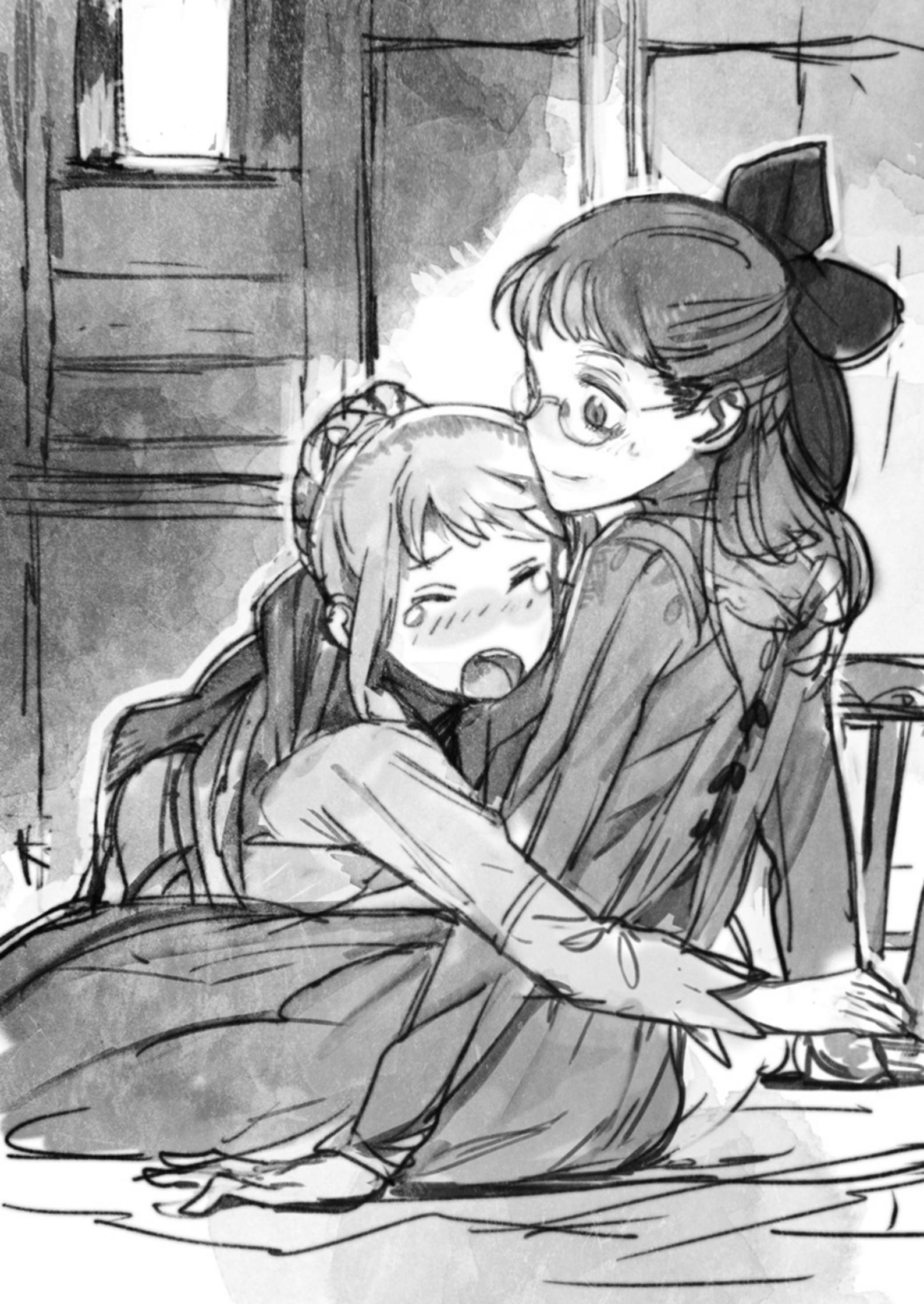
But this was merely treating the symptoms. He hadn't gotten anywhere closer to pinning down the root cause.

He felt Mit clench his hand and squeezed back tightly in return. It occurred to him then that he didn't know what had happened to Graham and Kasim. They had entered the forest separately from Angeline. Though he doubted he needed to be worried about those two, he was beset by irritated, impatient feelings.

All of a sudden, the air changed, and the heavy, stagnant atmosphere suddenly grew lighter. The supine surveyors were suddenly breathing peacefully, and those that had remained awake blinked perplexedly and sat up in their beds.

There was an uproar in the room behind him. Seren was awake.

"Seren! Thank Vienna you're all right!" Sasha wailed through her tears as she embraced her sister. Though Seren returned a troubled smile, her complexion had improved. Angeline and the others watched the sisters, exhausted yet relieved.



Belgrieve narrowed his eyes and stroked his beard. He highly doubted his own medicine had exhibited such a miraculous effect. A glance to the side revealed that Mit's expression had cleared a little as well. Surely there was something happening somewhere that he didn't know about.

Without warning, Sasha flew from the room and threw her arms around Belgrieve, who, having been caught off guard, found himself bracing his legs to avoid falling over. She nuzzled her beaming face into his chest.

"Master! Thank you so much! Seren... Seren is..."

"C-Calm down, Sasha... This isn't my medicine's doing."

"Hey, what do you think you're doing...?" Angeline poutingly poked at Sasha's head. Having forgotten herself in her delight, Sasha abruptly turned red. She frantically backed off and bowed her head apologetically.

"I-I'm sorry, I just..."

"Don't worry about it... Ange, I'm going to be heading back first."

"Yeah, we'll be off soon too..."

"Take care, Seren."

"Of course, and thank you." Seren sat up, still looking a bit sickly, but she seemed cheerful enough.

As Belgrieve passed through the town square again, he found Graham and Kasim standing there. Graham was right in the center, pressing the tip of his sword into the ground. The two were looking around, seemingly checking for something. When Kasim's eyes stopped on Belgrieve, he grinned.

"Hey, Bell."

"Kasim... What are you doing?"

"We found out the cause. Right, gramps?"

"Really? You know why everything's so strange in the village?"

"It's pollen," said Graham. "The wind from the west forest is carrying pollen."

"Pollen? How does pollen...?"

"It's mixed with trace amounts of mana. So minute even the old man and I wouldn't have noticed if we weren't looking for it."

"Each individual granule is nothing significant. But we must breathe to live, and inhaling this pollen day after day will cause trace mana to accumulate in our bodies. Though it does little to those of us who are versed in the manipulation of mana."

"In short, the village folk are being done in by the forest's mana."

"Does it have a poison attribute?"

"No, not exactly. It's more accurate to say there's some malicious force behind it. Though we still don't know who caused it," Graham said with a sigh.

Kasim pressed down his cap. "Well, in any case, this would take quite a bit of skill to do. We're not dealing with just any old fiend. It's at least AAA—in the worst-case, it could be S-Rank."

Fiends generally possessed bodies and powers that far surpassed those of humanity. Should anyone dare to fight a fiend barehanded, the pure physical difference would make victory nigh impossible. There were only two points that allowed humans to fight on equal footing: mana-based body enhancement and intelligence.

In most cases, the fiends were beasts, and many fell short of humans when it came to intellect. Orcs and other such humanoid fiends did possess a level of intelligence, but this was only enough for them to establish rudimentary societies and to engage in limited group tactics in warfare. Their intellect was not at a level where they could devise a sophisticated plan to manipulate mana to such a degree that it eluded human notice.

With that said, fiends ranging from AAA- to S-Rank could, in rare cases, possess such cunning. For instance, there were vampires—fiends who had once been human—and dragons, which accumulated knowledge over the course of their long lives. Still, over the course of mankind's long history, countermeasures to these transcendent beings had been found, and means to hunt them down had been devised. The ability to ponder over all facets of life was directly tied to strength. If, for instance, a grayhund

were to acquire human levels of intellect, it would quickly rise to the level of an S-Rank enemy.

In this case, the enigmatic threat creeping closer to Turnera seemed far more formidable than a mere fiend. It was an intangible malice with intellect. Belgrieve shuddered at the thought. "What exactly are we up against...?"

"Who can say? I've got nothing..."

"It may be... the forest itself."

Belgrieve grimaced at Graham's suggestion. "The forest?"

"Yes. I've told you about how the forest has a will, haven't I? I've walked these woods many times since I came to Turnera... But today, it was different."

"Do you mean the forest has turned on us?"

"I don't know. I will say that something has skillfully concealed itself. It's the first time I've seen a forest emanate such ill intent while looking no different than usual."

Graham let out a deep sigh and closed his eyes. This was perhaps the sorrow only an elf who lived among the trees would understand.

Mit clung to him. "Grampa..."

"Mit. You have been strange since you returned from those woods. Can you remember what happened to you?"

"They... called me."

"Called? Who?" Kasim said, sending him a dubious look.

Mid looked like he was about to cry as he shoved his face into Graham. "I don't know... But it was scary..."

"I see."

"Don't worry. No matter what comes, I won't let them take you," Belgrieve declared, stroking Mit's hair. Mit continued to nuzzle his face into Graham's shirt.

“So how did you clear away the forest’s mana?”

“Right, it’s that thing over there,” Kasim said, gesturing to Graham’s sword planted in the ground. The sword let off a low growl, its blade giving off a mysterious light, something completely different from merely reflecting the sun’s rays.

“That blade’s been fighting for a long time, and has taken in gramps’s mana all the while. They’ve grown up together, and it’s been stuffed full of an elf’s purifying essence. We’re using it to cover the whole village in a new barrier.”

The square was smack-dab in the center of town. Apparently, an invisible dome had been erected around the village with the sword at the center. The result was that the mana in the pollen had lost its connection to the forest, and those who had been afflicted by it could now recover.

Belgrieve let out an admiring sigh. “That’s quite something...”

“Heh heh, I’m glad to hear it from you.”

“But the situation is not resolved. We must enter those woods to pin down the culprit.”

“Right...” This would require some planning. Belgrieve did not know how much time it would take, but he could not have asked for a better team to work with.

The sound of scampering steps heralded Angeline’s approach. “Sorry to keep you waiting... Hasn’t the air gotten a bit lighter?”

“Yeah, thanks to Graham.”

She was soon followed by the others. The situation was explained to them on the way back to the house, and by the time they got there, they were all quite a bit hungrier than they would have been otherwise. It was getting late, but they could still talk over a meal. *We can plan tonight and head in first thing tomorrow morning*, thought Belgrieve.

When he glanced back to the woods, he could see a tree herder standing in the distance. The large hollow in its trunk seemed to be filled with bottomless darkness.

# CHAPTER 80

## THE WINDS WERE WEAK

The winds were weak, yet the rustling of the trees resounded endlessly. The earth basked in the darkness of late night while the sky twinkled with stars. The silhouette of the mountain became a dark, looming shadow, making it seem as if the sea of stars had been cleaved in twain.

Waking up at a time too early to call daybreak, Angeline went for a walk outside the village. Once the sun rose, she would enter the forest to pin down the cause of these strange happenings. Then, this peculiar situation would come to an end. Of course, she would be accompanied by her party, and Graham, and Kasim, and even Belgrieve.

“Heh heh...”

She knew it was imprudent of her, but she could not contain her smile. She was finally exploring a dungeon with her father, just like she had always dreamed of. At last, she would be able to experience firsthand that peace of mind Kasim had described. The thought of it excited her, and her restlessness had caused her to rise early. Once she was awake, she couldn’t just sit around the house.

Angeline took in a deep breath before exhaling. Though the night winds were calm, they felt far colder than the ones from midday. The breeze against her neck even made her hair stand on end. But this, too, was a comforting sensation to her feverishly warm body, surging as it was with restless energy.

She made it to the small hill she would always visit on her morning patrol. From here, she could look out over the whole village. It was still night, and she had to focus to see anything. Even then, she failed to make out anything on earth clearly, and only the flat, dark silhouettes told the tale of how things should be.

Setting down the lantern in her hand, Angeline took a seat atop her rock. She could feel its chill surface through her clothing. Then, hugging her knees to her chest, she stared into the distance.

“Who, and for what?” she muttered.

From what she had heard, they were going up against quite a formidable foe. Even Graham and Kasim had seemed tense.

Angeline personally had nothing against fighting strong opponents. She was someone who had gone out of her way to pursue adventuring as an occupation, so naturally, she was possessed of the courage to enjoy danger. Though she wanted to be a calm, dignified adventurer like Belgrieve, she could not contain her reckless, youthful spirit for adventure.

Unfortunately for her, though, she could not quite muster this when Turnera was in danger. Back in Orphen, no matter what absurd crises befell the city, she had peace of mind knowing she would still have a home to return to. Perhaps that was why she could get so excited over every little thing.

But adventure had now pursued her all the way home. She was sure she didn't hate danger, yet she felt strangely unsettled. Perhaps to Angeline, Turnera was something of a sacred place.

"Maybe there's no way around it..."

*But we have dad and Mr. Kasim. We'll definitely be just fine. We'll solve it just like that, and everything will go back to normal.* Nodding to herself, Angeline slid down from the rock to the ground, and in that same motion, she lay supine upon the ground. In a stark contrast with the darkness on earth, there were so many points of light above she could scarcely find a sizable gap amongst them. She lay there awhile, feeling the prickling of the grass and the wet dew on her back.

Suddenly, Angeline heard an unpleasantly jarring sound. She sprang up from the ground with a hand on her sword. Her sharp eyes glared in the direction of the sound, straight at a single withered tree. The tree's branches and roots spread out like arms and legs.

"A tree herder...?"

The herder's old branches creaked as it approached her. The only leaves it had were sparse and faded, extant only where its face might have been. Angeline let the tension drain from her body.

"Don't scare me like that..." she said with a sigh. She sat down right where she had been sitting, and the tree herder lined up beside her. Silently, Angeline stared out over

the village. It was less comfortable, now that she felt a peculiar stare from the herder, who had no eyes to begin with. It wasn't long before she could no longer bear it.

She turned to it and asked, "What?"

She asked, even though she knew she would get no reply. Herders were, after all, incapable of speech.

A strong gust of wind rocked Angeline's loose braid. She was beginning to feel the chill more strongly on her skin, which prompted her to fold her arms together and rub her elbows with her hands. She expelled a great yawn.

The adventure would start from the crack of dawn. She had woken too soon, even for an early mission. Perhaps it would be a good idea to get some more sleep when she returned. Hence, Angeline stood up to leave.

*Save them.*

"Huh?" It felt to her as though someone had spoken, and Angeline turned to look at the herder. Yet the herder stood there, no different than before.

"Did you say something?" *There's no way...* she thought, only to immediately hear the voice again.

*They're all in pain.*

"Pain...? Who are you talking—" she began, but before she could finish, the tree herder suddenly began to shudder, almost like it was convulsing. The leaves on its head rustled, shedding several of them which drifted to the ground.

Angeline looked at the village with a start. In the dark, it was as if something was closing in on it like a wave. Before she even understood what was happening, Angeline's feet were racing down the hill.

Graham sprang up, throwing his mantle over his shoulders before he was even on his feet. "Look after Mit for me!" he called out as he sprinted from the house.

Belgrieve slapped his cheeks a few times to clear his sleep-addled head before pulling Mit closer. Kasim was awake as well, staring out the window doubtfully. Though they did not fully understand the situation, Anessa and Miriam already had their weapons

in hand.

"Wh-What? Did something happen...?" Charlotte murmured, rubbing her sleepy eyes.

Byaku transferred a flame to the lamp. "Something is coming."

"Tsk, did it have to be at this ungodly hour? We're trying to sleep here," Kasim grumbled. He put on his cap and turned to Belgrieve. "I'm gonna go have a look, Bell."

"Got it."

After Kasim hurried off, Belgrieve carefully attached his peg leg and stood, tucking his sword into his belt. Mit anxiously kept ahold of one of his arms, and with his other, Belgrieve grasped Charlotte's hand.

There was a sound in the distance like rumbling or a low voice which sent a chill down his spine just to hear it. Something was clearly wrong, and perhaps they would be safer if they fortified the house. But Belgrieve's instincts were telling him he had to head out.

After a brief moment of hesitation, Belgrieve turned to Anessa and Miriam. "Let's head out too. We don't know if it's safe here." With that decided, he left, still holding Mit and Charlotte's hands.

Outside, he could hear screaming and yelling, and in the distance, he could see tongues of flame rising and flickering. Perhaps Graham and Kasim had already engaged their attackers.

"So they reacted as soon as they realized the pollen mana was cut off..."

*But I didn't think they would act this quickly. Perhaps I've been a bit too relaxed,* Belgrieve thought, clicking his tongue. This wasn't the work of any ordinary fiends; these foes changed plans as soon as they knew their initial means of attack had failed. What's more, they had taken advantage of the time—attacking in the dark, when they knew everyone would be asleep. Against such foes, there was no such thing as exercising too much caution.

MIIIIIIIIITTTTT...

"Eek!" Mit let out a slight shriek, gripping Belgrieve's arm even tighter.

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes. “What was that...?”

“Mr. Bell!” cried Anessa.

Acting swiftly, Belgrieve picked up the two children and ducked to the side. The limb of a tree herder that had silently sneaked up on them from behind passed through the space where he had been a moment before. Not a moment later, a bolt of lightning crashed down upon the herder. The creature fell, scorched, upon the earth.

Miriam’s cat ears twitched fretfully as she held up her staff. “I-I went and did it... without thinking... Was that all right?”

“That was the right choice given the situation... It was clearly after Mr. Bell.”

“Why are the herders...?” The unfinished question weighed on everyone’s mind: why was a tree herder—a creature that rarely ever turned hostile towards humans—acting this way?

Once she was lowered to the ground, Charlotte snapped back to her senses and looked around. “Where’s Ange?”

*Come to think of it, she wasn’t there when we woke up. Did she leave with Graham?* It had been pitch-black, and he hadn’t been fully awake, so his memories were fuzzy.

“Ange can handle herself,” Belgrieve reasoned. “Right now, we should be worrying about...” He looked down at Mit. The boy was shaking in fear, clinging onto Belgrieve for dear life.

All around them, the sound of rustling leaves seemed to be growing stronger. There was no knowing whether it was caused by the wind, or if something was approaching. In any case, it was pointless for them to stand around here. Surely, he would get a clearer grasp of the situation from the town square.

Their surroundings were suddenly illuminated in a sandy-gold light. Byaku’s three-dimensional magic circles floated about, glowing faintly, enabling Belgrieve to see his feet and the ground that had been cloaked in darkness before.

“We need to hurry.”

“Ha ha, thank you, Byaku.”

“Hmph...”

With the ground beneath their feet visible, running was now an option, so the party made haste for the square.

The rustling noise was now punctuated by screams—clearly, there was something wrong happening. Farther down the road, a shadowy form could be seen writhing in the darkness. One of the glowing sigils zoomed ahead to cast a light on it, revealing a tree herder holding something in its limbs—a child, crying and thrashing to no avail, as it was firmly in the herder’s clutches. Just like that, the herder was on its way out of town.

“Anne!” Belgrieve called out. Anessa loosed an arrow which exploded the moment it pierced the herder, splitting its enormous trunk.

A pair of farmers—the parents of the child—rushed out of a nearby house in their pajamas.

“Oh, oh thank Vienna...” The mother wept as she clutched the child who had tumbled to the ground. The father spotted Belgrieve and raced over to him, bowing his head as tears streamed from his eyes.

“Bell! Thank you! Thank you!”

“Thank me later! Hurry to the square!” From the look of things, the herders were launching attacks on every house. Under cover of darkness, they had come in great numbers, and Belgrieve could hardly grasp the situation.

“Let’s hope they’re not holding Graham at bay.”

Anessa and Miriam steadied their weapons. “I’m going to see if anyone needs help!”

“Yeah! There’s no point in having all of us in one place!”

“Thanks! Tell everyone to come to the square!”

The two girls nodded and raced off through the darkness. Belgrieve, for his part, ushered the family they’d just saved off to the square, where the villagers had already begun to muster. Blazing bonfires had been lit, and prayers to Great Vienna filled the air.

"Quit panicking, you fools!" Chief Hoffman yelled. "Keep an eye on your kids! Atla! We've got some injured coming in; can you whip up some medicine?!"

"Chief!" Belgrieve called out, rushing to Hoffman's side.

Hoffman beamed at him, seeming reassured by his arrival. "Oh, Bell! Glad you're all right!"

"What exactly happened? What's the situation?"

"I don't really know myself. Those walking trees started popping up all over the place. They're busting down doors and apparently trying to abduct people. Luckily, Lady Sasha immediately took command and had us gather here," Hoffman explained.

*I see. So the village muster is thanks to Sasha,* Belgrieve thought, feeling a bit of tension drain from his shoulders.

Byaku increased the number of his magic circles, and their sandy-gold light cleared away the remaining darkness, giving the assembled villagers some peace of mind. Still, there was no telling what threats yet lurked in the darkness.

The low rumbling sound—as of something groaning in pain—continued, and the rustling of trees only grew more intense with each passing moment. In the dark, they could only imagine what was happening around them. Perhaps the trees, driven by the herders, were closing in on them.

"But the barrier..."

Belgrieve glanced at the center of the square. Graham's holy sword was still standing tall, emanating a faint light. Surely the barrier was still effective. *Then how had the tree herders infiltrated? And why are they trying to make off with the villagers?*

At that moment, Angeline arrived, leading a few stragglers. She had found them when she had come to help after running down the hill.

"Dad!"

"Ange! Where did you go?"

"I got up early, so I went for a walk... Hey, the trees are closing in on the village."

"Trees... So it really is happening. Have they gotten into the village yet?"

"The barrier has dulled their movements, but they're powering through it slowly... There were fiends too, but those ones can't seem to get in."

*Meaning the forest trees are something separate from the fiends. Then the barrier isn't ineffective, but it can't completely stop their advance. We can't go about this the usual way.* Belgrieve frowned.

The number of gathered villagers gradually increased until the square was filled with people. Anessa and Miriam had returned after combing the village from end to end; Belgrieve noted Sasha, Seren, and the three young adventurers had also come as well. The air was filled with anxious whispering and sniffles. Every family huddled close, cowering from the encroaching terror.

Finally, Graham appeared.

"Graham!"

"I checked every house. Everyone should be here."

"I see... What about the barrier?"

"Indeed... To think there would be a foe I understood so little about. But this is strange."

The low noise grew steadily louder. The nearer it came, the clearer it was that this wasn't just any rumbling. This was a groaning noise, filled with resentment, reverberating all around as if echoing endlessly through a dark abyss. There was a distinct call mixed in among the screams.

*MIIIIIIITTTTTTTT...*

Mit closed his eyes tight and pressed his face into Belgrieve.

"Scary... Don't want to go..."

"Don't worry." Belgrieve was gently patting the boy's head when the growls of the holy sword grew louder. A hefty tree appeared, down the road from the square. Thanks to the barrier's power, it apparently could come no closer, nor did it have the power to

knock down any houses in its path. Yet its thick trunk continued to push forward, pushing against the sacred force, and each time, the holy sword would grow stronger in opposition.

Angeline leaped forth, stabbing her sword into the tree. However, this failed to halt its advance or collapse it. This was a bad matchup for a swordsman.

Belgrieve was about to call out to Graham and looked at the man only to be taken aback. Graham seemed to be gasping for air as he fell to one knee. He let out labored breaths while glaring at the tree before him.

“What is happening...? Why are there so many of you...?”

“Graham? What’s wrong? What happened?” Belgrieve cried out, placing a hand on his friend’s shoulders, which heaved with each inhalation. Seeing such a stalwart warrior reduced to such a state, Belgrieve came to the horrifying conclusion that their foe could use magic as well.

“Ange! Get down!”

Kasim’s voice boomed. Belgrieve stooped down before he even had time to think about it. Angeline had been preparing for her next strike, but she swiftly jumped out of the way and lowered her stance.

A sharp, blazing hot spear of flame shot out from behind them. The moment the fires pierced into the wood, the entire area was illuminated by an explosion as a massive hole was bored into the trunk. Accompanying this was a shrill, shrieking noise as the tree writhed and shook violently before finally falling immobile. Before anyone had time to cheer its defeat, another tree climbed over its corpse, splitting it underfoot. It pushed against the barrier just as the one before it had done.

Kasim jogged to Belgrieve’s side, clicking his tongue. “Well I’ll be... That’s not going to do a thing... A large spell could blow the village away, and we’ll have quite the conflagration on our hands if I don’t think before shooting...”

“Can you strengthen the barrier?” Angeline asked.

“Not more than this. Rather, the barrier only serves to slow them down. It’s not fulfilling its original purpose, for goodness’ sake. What’s going on? It’s the first time I’m up against something like this.” Kasim tiredly shook his head, pointing his fingers

forward for his next spell. Simply annihilating these trees would have been a simple task for him, but it would be pointless if the village were destroyed in the process.

*MMMIIIIIIITTTTTT...*

The voices were unrelenting. It was like each individual tree was calling out. The taller trees could now be seen towering above the village's buildings. The area around the square was already crowded with them, and with so many rustling, brushing leaves, it was like they were in the middle of the forest. It felt as though a strange oppressive atmosphere was crushing down on them.

It was amidst all this that someone began to murmur. "Do you think Mit... called it here?" Suddenly, all eyes in the square were on Mit. Mit shuddered and hid behind Belgrieve as the clamor broke out.



“Dammit, why did I have to get dragged into this...?”

“The house is a mess...”

“They’re calling for Mit, right? Then if we hand him over...”

“Hey, you quit that.”

“That’s right, it can’t be Mit’s fault. Surely.”

“But you know. There are so many trees...”

“Just imagine what they must have done to the wheat fields...”

Angeline clenched her fist. “Stop it! It’s not anyone’s fault! And definitely not Mit’s!”

The villagers hung their heads.

“I get that, but...”

“But you know...”

“Even if we survive this, how will we make it through the winter without crops...?”

“Tsk, because of a certain someone...”

“Quit it! Now’s not the time!”

“What other chance will we get?”

“Grr, I’m sure, deep down, you’re thinking it too!”

“Hey, no fighting! What are you thinking?! ”

It seemed that everyone was searching for some way to vent their frustrations—as far as they were concerned, they had been subjected to sudden, unreasonable violence, and a mix of fear and anger slowly robbed them of their composure.

Angry voices began to break out among the crowd amidst the cries of the injured. Sasha, Seren, and Hoffman tried to calm them, but to no avail.

It was just as Belgrieve was about to open his mouth—to say anything he could to get the situation under control—that he could feel Mit's hand sliding from his.

"I'm... sorry..." There were tears falling from Mit's eyes.

"Mit..."

"I'm sorry... I'm sorry..." He softly looked up at Belgrieve. "Goodbye." Ducking away from Belgrieve's outstretched hand, Mit raced off.

"Mit! Wait!"

The trees that had so doggedly cut off all the roads to the square cleared the way in the blink of an eye. The trees acted like a tunnel, opening up to the darkness beyond. Mit plunged in and vanished.

Before Angeline and Kasim could recover from their shock and chase after him, Graham gave chase, his silver hair flickering in the air like an afterimage. Graham disappeared into the darkness just before the trees closed up again. Then, the tunnel was gone. Like a receding wave, the trees retreated at a tremendous pace—their business had been accomplished.

Belgrieve was about to give chase, but he stopped himself. He could tell that those trees were leaving far faster than any human could run. He knew that he would never be able to catch up.

"How could this be...?" Belgrieve closed his eyes, covering his face in his hands.

The forest had no interest in Turnera. Perhaps it had attacked the villagers and pretended to kidnap them simply to drum up their resentment and isolate Mit. They had fallen right for its ploy, and Mit had left of his own accord.

The eastern sky was beginning to light up.

○

Kasim angrily paced the yard. "I can't stand them. The things they said..."

Belgrieve silently looked at his sword from front to back and checked the contents of his tool bag. He untied his hair, then tied it again before donning his mantle.

Kasim tapped his toes on the ground. "You're going, right? To save Mit and the old man?"

"Of course I'm going."

But once he did, perhaps he would need to resolve to leave Turnera. When he took Mit in, he had decided to shoulder all the trouble that came with that choice. He had a vague inkling there might be difficulties, though he hadn't imagined they would befall him so suddenly.

Kasim continued spewing invective against the villagers. The way he saw it, they had practically betrayed them. But Belgrieve could understand how the villagers felt. After all, he was from Turnera, and he had lived in the village far longer than he had lived away from it. It was a life of tilling the ground and planting one's roots. Whether they liked it or not, the people who lived like that were bad at keeping up with sudden change. Their work was the same year after year, and in a sense, theirs was a life of repetition. For that to suddenly be upturned was a fearful thing in itself.

So Belgrieve could not speak ill of them. In fact, he was grateful that they had graciously accepted Mit even after learning he wasn't human. Belgrieve couldn't possibly be so merciless against those who had fallen to anger after being placed in such an outrageous, unfair situation.

"Que será, será, I guess... But this is a bitter pill to swallow," Belgrieve muttered, stricken at the realization that he would have to abandon his home now, at his age.

The rising sun colored the land in vivid hues. Angeline emerged from the house with a meek look on her face. "Are you going?"

"Yeah. Are you ready?"

"Do you think we'll make it?" Anessa anxiously muttered.

"W-We'll be fine," Miriam said with forced cheer in her voice. "I mean, old Graham is keeping up with them."

"But Graham, he... didn't bring his sword..." said Angeline, leaving Miriam at a loss for words.

Indeed, Graham hadn't plucked his sword from the ground that night. He knew that

doing so would dispel the barrier and that the trees would flood into the square.

"Let's start with the square, then. If we can pull it out, we need to deliver it to Graham."

With that decided, they started on their way.

The devastating remnants of the previous night's battle still lingered. The roads were littered with holes, and many roof corners had been destroyed. As the barrier had seemingly drained the trees of their strength, the houses themselves were still standing, but the villagers' fields and chicken coops had been smashed. The west side of the wheat field was practically obliterated, and parts of the south side were a mess. Luckily, the east was untouched, but this would undoubtedly mean a greatly decreased yield. Belgrieve gloomily sighed.

Graham's sword was still stuck in the center of the square. It was still letting off a low growl and a faint glow. Standing beside it was the young adventurer trio, who rushed over once they spotted Belgrieve and the others approaching.

"Mr. Belgrieve!"

"Oh, I'm glad to see you three are all right."

Sola swung her sword around. "You're headed to the forest, right? Um, well, I might not be able to do much, but I'd like to help."

"Please take us! We can't just sit still..."

Seeing Sola and Jake making such a ruckus, Kain lowered his head with a troubled smile. "We'll try to stay out of your way. How about it?"

"Now look here," Kasim said, scratching his head. "We're heading straight into the midst of a foe even we might not be able to handle. One wrong step and you could die."

The three were at a loss for words. As they mulled that over, another voice joined in.

"I'll help out!"

It was Sasha. She had her sword at her hip and seemed perfectly prepared.

Angeline looked pleasantly surprised. "Sasha... It will be dangerous."

"Naturally. And who else but an adventurer would jump headfirst into danger? I thought you could use another hand on deck," Sasha declared before looking to the party of three. "The four of us will take care of the small fries. You must preserve your strength, or you won't be able to use it when you need it. I'm an AAA-Rank, you know. I won't hold you back."

"Good grief..." Kasim sighed, looking to Belgrieve. "How about it? It doesn't sound like she's the sort to be dissuaded."

"I have a few conditions. Your own safety comes first. Don't push yourself, and follow my orders. As long as you all do that..." Belgrieve bowed his head. "Then, please lend us your strength."

Sasha and the other young adventurers hurriedly rushed over to Belgrieve.

"M-Master!"

"No, no! Please don't bow to us!"

"That's right! This is just our selfish whim!"

That was when another group of lively voices approached.

"Ah! It's Uncle Bell!"

"Everyone's here!"

He turned to see that many small children had gathered—so many, he had to wonder if it was all the children in town. The party was taken aback. In every child's hand there was a wooden sword or staff, which they swung around excitedly.

"We're going to save Mit!"

"Grampa Graham too!"

"We're all going!"

"W-Wait! That's going too far!" Belgrieve frantically shook his head, only for the kids to begin loudly clamoring.

“Mit is a friend!”

“We like grampa!”

“Mit was crying...”

“I want to play together again!”

Belgrieve scratched his head. “Thank you. I appreciate the sentiment.”

“Then?”

“No, no can do. It really is dangerous. I don’t know if we’ll be able to protect all of you.”

“Then how about us, Mr. Bell?”

Yet another voice had chimed in. Belgrieve turned in surprise to find the village youths had assembled there. These were the very same young men and women that he and his masterful comrades had instructed in spellcraft and swordsmanship. Barnes walked over, a bitter smile on his face as he held up a bow.

“We can’t just push it off onto all of you.”

“You’re saving Mit, right?” Rita stuck out her chest.

The other youths waved their weapons in agreement.

*Well, I’ll be...* Belgrieve didn’t quite know what to say as he closed his eyes. He stroked his beard. There was another thundering of footsteps, alongside the clanging of metal tools.

“Bell.”

“Kerry? What are you doing here...?”

Kerry and Hoffman led the other adults of the village. Even those who had been so hostile just the night before had come, all carrying machetes, spades, hoes, wood saws, and axes.

“Let us help too.”

"Um, sorry for what happened back there. The blood went straight to my head..."

"Driving Mit out to solve things just doesn't sit right with me."

"He's a good kid. There's no way this is his fault."

"We can raise another field, but Mit's there all alone."

"We were about to commit the same mistake as we did back when we shunned you, Bell."

"Please, Bell. Let's go save Mit and Graham."

Kasim tilted his hat over his eyes as he chuckled at the skies above. "They're idiots, the lot of them..."

"Dad!" Angeline happily took Belgrieve's arm. For his part, Belgrieve stood silently with his eyes closed for a moment before shaking his head.

"It's not happening."

"B-Bell...?"

His eyes shot open, and he stared straight at the villagers. "Thank you. I really am thankful... But it's too dangerous this time. I might not return alive, and even Ange and Kasim might not be safe. I can't put you through any further danger."

The villagers hung their heads. "But then... We'll just be relying on you for everything again."

"No, there's something only you can do." Belgrieve smiled. "When Mit comes home... can you welcome him? Smile and say he did a good job making it back?"

"Bell..."

Some of them looked like they were about to cry.

"Hmm... All right! We'll leave Mit and Graham to you!" Kerry smiled and patted Belgrieve on the back. The villagers nodded and cheered.

Angeline's cheeks flushed as she waved her arms. "Have a feast waiting for us!"

"You got it!"

"Leave it to me!"

Then, the square was lively for a different reason. *We can still stay here*, Belgrieve realized. The thought elated him more than any other.

Meanwhile, the sun climbed higher in the sky as a gentle wind began to blow from the east. This was perfect adventuring weather.

# CHAPTER 81

## THEY APPEARED TO BE IN WHAT WAS PRACTICALLY A TREE COCOON

They appeared to be in what was practically a tree cocoon, or at least that's what Graham perceived it to be in his hazy state of consciousness. Fine branches entwined into a weaving pattern, forming a long, gently sloping ellipsoid. Though the gaps in the trees were too narrow to fit an arm through, they were just large enough to faintly see what was beyond—not that the view amounted to much, as much of what lay beyond seemed to be enshrouded in pitch darkness.

Mit, who was cradled in Graham's arms, looked up at him anxiously.

Graham had leaped into the tree tunnel after the boy and lost consciousness the moment he thought he had caught up. Then, before he realized what had happened, he woke up inside this cocoon. *At least I caught Mit.* Graham sighed, stroking his head. Mit stirred restlessly with tears dripping from his eyes.

"Grampa, I'm sorry... I'm nothing but trouble..."

"Don't cry. You did nothing wrong," Graham replied in a gentle, sincere tone. Mit wiped away his tears and nestled his face into Graham's shirt.

Graham took another good look around. It was faintly green, dotted with peculiar phosphorescent light. Perhaps because of this, the surrounding scenery felt like a disorienting illusion that his mind couldn't accept. It felt like he was observing the world through a hazy curtain.

Suddenly, something vaguely human shaped floated in the air nearby. At first, its form was like that of an amorphous fog, yet gradually its contours became more distinct. Soon, it fully manifested in the form of a partially transparent elvish woman. Not a single wrinkle could be discerned on her pristine face, and her smooth, silken hair trailed behind like water.

The elf opened her mouth. But rather than speech, it seemed as though the words

were directly transmitted to his mind.

"Child... Please, please forgive us."

"You are...?"

"We were a tribe that once crossed south from the Western Forest... We were consumed by the forest's malice, and even now our souls are imprisoned by it..."

"A relic of our ancestors, then." Graham closed his eyes. He was familiar with the legends of his homeland. There had been an ideological schism, and a group had broken off, seeking new land. That had been around the time of his great-grandfather, several hundred years before.

The translucent elf's form gradually shifted until she looked a good deal older.

"It is ironic. We lived alongside the forest, and it was the forest that destroyed us..."

"What do you seek? Why did you target Mit?"

"The dark shadows of the forest... In order to maintain their hatred and their power, they require—" The elf's form fizzled out, and Graham found himself wincing in pain at the sight. A short while later, the elven apparition returned, this time in the form of a young man.

"Are you all right?" the specter asked.

"The strange pain I was feeling—it was your suffering, wasn't it?"

"Correct... The souls of our tribe are still prisoners to the malice of these woods. It continues to drain our mana beyond death. Many of our brethren were lost to the madness over their many years of suffering... Their pain must have resonated with the soul of a fellow elf."

"Is that it, then? It is seeking Mit to replace them..." Graham's voice grew a bit coarse.

The elf looked at him sorrowfully. "Correct... That small mass of mana would be a wonderful feast to these woods... If only the little one were taken in, perhaps our *sOuls wOULD FinALLY—*"

The elf's shapely face suddenly twisted into something vile.

One of the branches forming the cocoon twisted before shooting out towards Mit like a spear. Graham immediately pulled the boy out of the way, but the sharp blade of wood managed to graze Mit and pierce into Graham's flank.

"Gah?!"

"Grampa!"

"Argh—no... The madness takes us again—you *mUst*... get away—"

The cocoon stirred. It pulsed. The elf melted away into nothingness. Gritting his teeth, Graham clenched the branch stabbed into his gut so hard that it creaked under the pressure. The faint lingering sanity of the elves, and their madness that sought release—he could feel it all through the branch. The madness resonated with the forest's malice, causing the forest to grow even stronger.

*If I can just separate them from the forest...*

"Interesting..." he murmured.

Mit wept and clung to him, and he placed a hand on his head, a mysterious smile on his face all the while that even he could scarcely explain, considering their desperate situation.

*How many years has it been since I've found myself in such a predicament?* he wondered. Ever since he made a name for himself, there were practically no opponents in the world who were his equal.

His days as a young, reckless adventurer were coming back to him. The instincts he had fostered over so many years of adventure, even in such a crisis—rather, *because* he was in such a crisis—caused his blood to boil. *I had some nerve to lecture my grandniece when I'm like this...* A touch of self-deprecation caused his smile to grow even wider.

Mit's crying ceased as he stared up at Graham in confusion.

Graham forcefully yanked the branch from his side and drew a deep breath.

"Try harder... My life... is worth far more than that!" he declared.

He stepped forth and, with great strength, tore that branch from the side of the cocoon. It let out a titanic snap as it broke, and the cocoon's sides began to writhe as though the structure was in agony. But Graham mercilessly reached for the next branch, and the next, until finally, he had opened a hole in the side, revealing a deep darkness beyond it.

Hoisting Mit up, Graham slipped out without a moment's hesitation.

"Grrrrrrrah!" Jake's face was bright red as he tugged at the sword stuck in the square. And yet, the sword did not budge an inch.

"It's not happening, Jake," Kain said, sighing.

"But we need to get this thing to Mr. Graham..."

Jake got right back to yanking at it, but this time, his efforts were rewarded with a roaring noise and a flash of light from the blade, which sent Jake rolling along the ground. "That smarts!" he cried.

"Wh-Wh-What was that about?!" Sola gasped. The blade of the sword was still flashing, accompanied by the sound of growling.

Angeline narrowed her eyes. "It's angry. 'I don't let just anyone touch me'—is what it's saying."

"Come to think of it, that sword's alive, isn't it? Hmm, as expected of the Paladin's sword..." Sasha mused, folding her arms.

"But are you sure we should be pulling it out? The sword's working to strengthen our barrier, right? Won't the trees attack us?" Barnes asked.

"I think we'll be fine there. The forest wasn't interested in Turnera, for one. And let's not forget that Mr. Bell is discussing defensive measures with the others," Anessa said, pointing.

In the direction she indicated, a short distance away, Belgrieve, Kasim, Kerry, and

Hoffman were at the center of a discussion among the village adults about how the village would defend itself while they were gone. The youths who had been taught how to fight would take turns keeping watch and would serve as the core force to fend off any fiends that appeared. It would be hopeless if their foes came with as great a force as they had the night before, but their foes had fulfilled their objective of seizing Mit. In all likelihood, Turnera was no longer on their radar, and these defensive measures were merely insurance.

Barnes's expression softened a bit as he scratched his head. "I see. Guess you're right. Thanks for reminding me, Anne—" While giving his gratitude, he suddenly lurched.

Rita had pinched his hip, her cheeks puffed out huffily. "No cheating."

"Y-You've got it all wrong!"

"Nah, you were obvious," said Angeline.

"You're fawning all over her." Miriam chuckled.

"Y-You're all out to get me!" Barnes screamed, red from ear to ear.

"What are you idiots doing...?" Byaku murmured, shaking his head in annoyance.

Meanwhile, the discussion seemed to have concluded, and Belgrieve and Kasim returned.

"We've worked things out for the most part. We should be fine heading to the forest now."

"What, you haven't pulled the sword out yet? What were you all doing, then?" Kasim said, idly stroking his beard.

"I mean." Angeline pouted. "The sword gets angry when you try to touch it."

"Hmm?" Belgrieve looked at the blade with a doubtful look on his face. The sword continued to let off faint growling sounds and flashes of light. It was a living sword; he didn't know if this meant it was alive in the same way a human was, but it certainly possessed some form of will. Moreover, it was about as long as Graham was tall, so it was surely quite heavy. Although Graham had been able to wield it with ease, would they be able to move it even if they could pull it out of the ground? With that said, that

didn't mean they could leave it behind either.

Belgrieve turned to Angeline. "The sword's alive, so how about you try asking it?"

"Asking...?"

"Yeah. I mean, you wouldn't want to be dragged off somewhere without being told why, would you?"

Angeline nodded and stood in front of the sword, gently placing a hand on its hilt. The sword let out a daunting roar in response.

"Don't be angry... We just want to take you to old Graham..." She wrapped her fingers around the hilt and grasped it. She could feel a strange warmth across its cloth grip.  
"How about you pitch in a bit to get us to him...?"

The growls softened, and what had been blinding flashes subsided to a softer glow. Wondering if that meant she had received its consent, Angeline put in a bit of strength and gave it a tug. As if its stubborn resistance had been a bad dream, it smoothly slid from its resting place. Angeline inadvertently found herself stumbling back.

"I guess it must be heavy," Belgrieve said.

Angeline shook her head. "The opposite... It's incredibly light." She had anticipated a fair bit of weight, so its unexpected lightness had thrown her off.

Angeline gripped it in both hands and gave it a test swing. She could hear both the blade slicing through the wind and its growling. It swung so fiercely she feared it would drag her body along with it, yet the moment she wished to stop it, the sword came to a complete halt. Angeline had never wielded a greatsword before, and yet she could handle this one just as she would a normal sword.

She found herself staring at the blade, spellbound. Her own figure was reflected on its mirrorlike sheen. "She's beautiful."

"Are you getting cocky now?" asked Miriam.

"No, this sword... is a girl. A very beautiful one too. She's like a harsh, prim, and proper princess..."

"Can swords be male or female?" wondered Anessa.

Angeline nodded. "I don't know about other swords, but this one is a girl. She's saying that there's no other way around it and that she'll lend her strength. She seems to adore Graham quite a..." The sword was suddenly heavier than she could have imagined, and Angeline frantically braced her legs. The sword glow took on a slight red tint. "Hee hee..." Angeline giggled. "No need to be so embarrassed about it."

"She's oddly expressive..." Belgrieve concluded with a wry smile. *Even though she was so quiet when Graham was carrying her around*, he thought. Angeline stroked the blade on the side to soothe it.

"I think she puts on a strong front when the old man is around..."

"Hmm, she suddenly seems a lot cuter, then," Miriam cackled. The sword growled and flickered in protest.

The sword had been extracted, and thus there was no longer any need to stick around. Belgrieve's face was set in grim determination. "All right, let's be off. Ange, you should hold her. You'd probably handle her better than any of us."

"Got it!" Angeline nodded happily and leaned the sword against her shoulder.

The forest party consisted of Belgrieve, Angeline, Kasim, Anessa, Miriam, and Byaku. On top of this, Sasha, Jake, Sola, and Kain were tagging along. This made for a large party of ten members. Charlotte would remain in the village with Seren. Meanwhile, Barnes, Rita, and the other youths would become the backbone of Turnera's defenses.

Everyone saw them off from the village entrance.

"Take care, everyone... Sash, please don't do anything crazy."

"No need to worry, Seren! We have Ange and Kasim, and most important of all, Master!" Sasha declared, sticking out her chest.

Charlotte clenched her fists anxiously. "Be careful... Come home safe."

Belgrieve smiled and placed a hand on her head. "Watch over the house for us."

He looked to the forest, which looked no different from usual. A life-or-death search

was about to begin, yet this was in stark contrast to the detestably warm and welcoming sunlight pouring down upon them.

They left the village, passing through the devastated wheat fields until they were at the edge of the forest. Nothing seemed to be notably different.

Kasim squinted as he peered deeper in. "They ran off. The forest around here's just the normal forest. Those trees that attacked town must be farther in."

"Where did they come from, exactly?" Belgrieve muttered, though he quickly recalled what Seren had told him about the shadows of the Ancient Forest. Perhaps the trees there had crossed the mountains, drawn to Mit's mana. That would only make matters worse—there would be nothing he could do if those trees made it back to their Ancient Forest home.

"Let's hurry."

The party entered the forest with all due haste.

Many of the trees that had appeared in the village boasted old, twisted trunks. They had been magnificently shrouded in hanging moss, and that alone was enough to know that none of them were here. The trees surrounding them were still young and short and full of fresh growth. This was probably because a fair number of people traversed the parts closest to town.

Most peculiar, however, was the fact that the forest floor seemed completely undisturbed despite the passage of such a large army. None of the native trees seemed to have been toppled either. *Did the forests come to a compromise of sorts? Do they have a sense of kinship?* Belgrieve wondered.

There were hardly any traces and nothing to lead the way, and yet Angeline—their vanguard—proceeded forward without a shred of hesitation. She moved so boldly that it actually made them anxious.

"Are we headed in the right direction?" Jake voiced their concerns.

"We're... probably fine," Angeline replied, never stopping.

Sasha asked her, "Is that your instinct?"

But Angeline shook her head and lifted the sword from her shoulder. "It's this girl."

The sword let off a faint light. After channeling his mana for so long, the sword seemed to have formed a deep bond with Graham. This synergy did not disappear even when they were so far away, and thus Angeline's steps were guided by the sword. Therefore, there was nothing to worry about. Graham's connection with the sword was strong, and there could be no mistaking its guidance.

Even so, living sword though it may be, it was nevertheless incredible for a warrior to boast such a bond with his blade. Their simultaneous realization of that fact made Belgrieve, Sasha, Jake, and Sola let out longing sighs.

They continued walking deeper and deeper in the depths without a second's rest, their surroundings gradually becoming dense with foliage and the increasing number of tall trees. The sky that they caught glimpses of through the gaps was distant and bright, brimming with warm sunlight, but the leaves blocked it before it hit the ground beneath their feet. For this reason, hardly any grass grew there. Instead, the withered leaves that had piled up over the previous cold months lingered softly under each step.

The party needed no reminding to be wary of their surroundings. Something was certainly watching them.

"Do you think it's a fiend?" Kain whispered softly to Kasim.

"Now who could say? Maybe one of those trees is hiding among the normal ones."

The young adventurers looked around in a fluster.

"Heh heh heh," Kasim cackled. "Kidding, kidding. We'd know right away if it was something like that."

"Well, it's not a joke anymore," Belgrieve said, staring between the trees. The group followed his eyes and swallowed their breath. A tree herder was slowly approaching.

Sasha drew her blade. "Do we fight?" she asked him.

"Wait..." Belgrieve didn't feel any hostility. He kept a hand tight on his hilt but waited for the herder to approach. It was soon upon them with the faint swaying of leaves, stopping only a few paces away.

Angeline shifted her grip on the large sword and stepped out in front. “Which side are you on?”

“Which side?” Anessa cocked her head. “What are you talking about, Ange?”

“There was a herder who asked for my help...”

“There was? Then is someone out there controlling the herders?” Miriam asked.

“I don’t know...” She just knew that not all of them were enemies.

The herder stood, staring silently without a word, then began to sway lightly from right to left. The leaves on its face made a light rustling noise.

*Save them.*

“Wh-What was that just now...?”

“Did it speak?”

Confusion was evident on Sola and Jake’s blinking faces.

The tree herder shook its body once more: *Release them.*

“Release...? What do we have to do? And for whom?” Belgrieve asked, before turning around sharply and circling to the back of the party. “On your guard! Something’s coming!” he yelled, drawing his sword.

In the blink of an eye, the entire area was shrouded in hostility. Grayhunds burst out from between the trees, with a higher-ranked hellhound leading the pack. Before these wolflike fiends could get anywhere near the party, they rammed into something—Byaku’s invisible magic circles. This surprise counterattack halted the momentum of their fiendish charge.

Not one to let opportunity slip past her, Sasha entered the fray like a tempest, her sword swinging all around her. The arc of her blade was supple like a whip, and with her technique, she dispatched their vanguard in no time.

“Oh, not bad.” Kasim grinned, twirling his finger in the air. His swirling mana jostled his clothes and the leaves of the nearby trees. Several bolts of magic manifested in the

air around him and fired, accurately taking out one fiend after another. “Heh heh heh, bring something stronger next time.”

“Hey, don’t waste too much energy, Kasim. We don’t know what we’ll be up against later.”

“This isn’t even a warm-up for me.” Kasim looked completely unperturbed as he took out more wolves in succession. Any that slipped through his assault were effortlessly taken out with Miriam’s magic and Anessa’s arrows.

Two S-Ranks and three AAA-Ranks—this was a battle formation that would only be formed for a guild request of the highest degree. Against such a party, grayhunds and hellhunds were no challenge at all. It took hardly any time at all before all of the fiends were dispatched.

The battle was over before Sola could find the right time to join the fray, so when she resheathed her sword, she did so with a rather dissatisfied look. “You’re all way too strong... There was no room for us.”

“If you don’t have to waste your energy, then don’t...” Angeline said. She too had remained immobile, allowing the others to handle the threat. She turned to Belgrieve. “Right, dad?”

“Yeah. Because this surely isn’t the end of them.”

And he was exactly right. They had no time to catch their breath before the forest’s depths were astir, and a single great tree appeared, flailing its knotted, gnarled branches. Hordes of large, unrecognizable insects scuttled up and down its massive trunk.

“Oh, that’s nasty!” Miriam’s shoulders quivered, her hair standing on end as she readied her staff.

“I’m taking some mental damage here...”

“I hate how their legs move.”

Sola and Kain grimaced.

The insects had flat bodies and six legs. Their carapaces were colored richly, yet they

were bizarrely patterned and were not pleasant to look at by any stretch of the imagination. Those of the party who were weak to insects had already become knock-kneed just at the sight of them. To make matters worse, a massive purple centipede emerged from the tree's hollows. The way its many legs shifted was a spine-tingling sight.

Kasim looked rather disgusted as he held out his fingers. "I don't want to look at it any more than I have to. Let's crush it and move on."

"Can I...?" Angeline unerringly stepped forward. Graham's sword glistened over her shoulder. With her nature-immersed country upbringing, it seemed that insects were the least of her concerns. "Let me stretch a bit."

The second she saw Kasim nod in approval, Angeline hefted the large sword above her. The blade, growling and glowing at once, overflowed with swirling gusts of mana that made Angeline's black hair stand up. The insects coiling around the trunk descended to the ground at once and rushed straight for her. Angeline stepped forward decisively, and with a forceful "Hah," she swung the blade downwards.

Like an immense shock wave, a torrent of mana was expelled from the blade, gouging out the earth below and carving into the surrounding rocks and trees. The insects coming at her were completely pulverized. Carapace fragments and gory fluids were blasted away, but all were consumed by the violent torrent of energy. This single attack tore through the branches and trunk of the tree that had conveyed the insects to their battlefield, which looked as though it would fall at any moment now.

Though it was Angeline herself who had struck with the weapon, even she was completely dumbfounded by its evident might. Now the growling and glowing of the sword had a tone of pride and accomplishment to it, as though it expected to be met with thunderous applause for its feat.

"This is downright unfair. Looks like I'm not beating Graham anytime soon."

The sacred blade topped the list of Graham's already-tremendous strengths. *How can anyone hope to match him?* Angeline thought with a shudder as she steadied her hand. The party watching from behind stood stock-still, their mouths agape.

"W-Wow..."

"There's even less room for us than last time..."

"Ahh, to think I would be able to witness the Black-Haired Valkyrie wielding the Paladin's sword," Sasha remarked. She looked as though she were deeply moved right to her core.

Recalling the last time an incident had happened in the forest, and how Graham had managed to eradicate the grotesque fiend behind it with a single strike, Belgrieve chuckled lightly. *Who would have thought I'd be able to see my own daughter do something like this?*

The wounded trunk swayed back and forth for a few moments before it leaned over and finally capsized with a thud. Its trunk was in tatters, like it had rotted from the inside.

"Hmm..." Belgrieve narrowed his eyes and jogged up to it. Seeing him squat down with a frown on his face, Angeline and the others swiftly joined him.

"What is it, dad...?"

"Bones. Human bones."

Indeed, there were what appeared to be human remains peeking out between the fragments of rotten wood.

"From the village...?" Byaku muttered, prompting Angeline's face to take a turn.

Belgrieve shook his head. "No, it can't be. Everyone in Turnera was accounted for. More importantly, these are old bones."

"That is strange... A tree that grows using corpses for nutrients would have bones in its roots. Not its trunk," said Kain.

Belgrieve nodded. "They really are an enigma. We can't underestimate them."

"Well, the fact we met one means we must be getting close." Kasim cackled, adjusting his hat on his head. It had been knocked askew by the impact of the tree's calamitous fall.

Suddenly, they heard another rumbling noise—this time, from behind them. As if they had come down the same path the party had followed, several trees appeared, accompanied by more insectoid and lupine fiends.

"They just keep coming..." Angeline clicked her tongue in annoyance, but before she could take charge of the situation, Sasha stepped in. She had Jake and Sola at her flanks and Kain providing support.

"Why let the small fries hold you back? We'll intercept them here, so everyone move on!"

"At this rate, I won't even know why we came here!"

"Yeah, let's show the results of our training!"

Belgrieve mulled over the dilemma. If the whole party ganged up on the enemy, the trees and fiends would be no threat whatsoever. But he was worried about Graham and Mit, and he knew that they did not have the time to stand around. If they all took on every foe that came at them, the sun would set before they could catch up to the fleeing forest.

*Sasha aside, will the three young adventurers be all right?* As he mulled over this, Anessa and Miriam patted him on the back.

"We'll stay too. I can only guess, but there will probably be far more of them coming after this."

"Yeah. If you're charging their base, you'd rather have Ange and Kasim with you, right? We'll join up after we've taken care of them."

"All right... I'm counting on you." Belgrieve smiled at them before turning his back. He glanced at the tree herder that was still standing beside them; it stared at him pleadingly through its eyelike knotholes.

*Please.*

"Let's go."

"All right! Everyone, take care..."

"Godspeed, Ange!"

Leaving six behind, the remaining four raced ahead.

Belgrieve faintly sighed as he listened to the sounds of battle behind them. In an ideal situation, he should have stayed behind and allowed Anessa and Miriam to go ahead, but with Mit in mind, a part of him simply couldn't let anyone else handle the matter. It was, after all, Belgrieve's decision to bring Mit back to Turnera. Even if there was a more reliable way to handle the crisis, it would not feel right if he failed to take responsibility for his decisions.

"Am I being selfish?" *I can't seem to act my age...* He scratched his head, then noticed Kasim laughing as he ran beside him. Belgrieve looked at him questioningly. "What's so funny?"

"Well, I know it might not be the right time or place... But I'm glad I get to explore another dungeon with you. Heh heh heh."

"Good grief." Belgrieve sighed. Granted, it wasn't a bad feeling, but those waves of nostalgia could wait. He tightened his focus as he leaped gracefully over fallen trees and strode the uneven ground.

Gradually, the branches overhead formed a canopy several layers deep. The lichen and mosses spread wider, and the atmosphere beneath changed. The thick smell of grass filled the air, strange shadows loomed overhead, and the blue sky was gone for good. Ahead of them, trees entangled with one another to block their path. It seemed they had finally caught up to the woods.

There was no longer any reason to rush recklessly. They would deplete their stamina if they continued to run. The party of four slowed their pace, devoting even more of their energy to vigilance of their surroundings. Although there didn't seem to be any fiends nearby, it seemed as though something was constantly watching them.

"We're in our enemy's midst."

"What now, Bell?"

"You're asking me... Well, whatever. Ange, take the lead. Please listen to the sword and guide us. Kasim, Byaku, you stay behind her. I'll watch our backs. Byaku, you just have to focus on defense. Ange and Kasim have more than enough offensive power. The trees could very well turn on us, so keep an eye out for what's above you as well..." Belgrieve scanned the area as he issued orders without hesitation. His bearing was far removed from the simple farmer swinging a hoe in his fields that he was in Turnera.

Byaku stared at Angeline dubiously. "What are you smiling about?"

"Heh heh... It's nothing." Angeline grinned before raising the sword aloft and honing her ears to its growls.

## CHAPTER 82

# LIKE A LONG, DARK CORRIDOR

Like a long, dark corridor, the tree branch walls seemed to go on forever. Here and there, emerald-green phosphorescent light would wax and wane in an endless cycle, filling the area with a faint glow.

Be they branches or roots, Graham could not tell. But in any case, the trees had tangled and shifted together to form a path beneath his feet. It was like the entire corridor was made of interwoven branches. Grimacing at the wound in his side, he walked down these halls with Mit carried on his back. Though he wasn't sleeping, Mit's eyes remained only drowsily half-open. There was no knowing whether the boy's languor was a product of having cried himself into exhaustion or if the cause was something else altogether.

Every now and again, Graham could hear a clear sound like the chiming of a bell. It was a strangely soft and refreshing sound, in stark contrast to the gloom of these shadowy trappings. The corridor they were in was a one-way road. A tepid wind blew from farther in, ruffling his silver hair. It was not a comforting wind—there was a strange foulness to it, like the smell of rotting meat.

He had no idea how long he had been walking, but finally, the walls widened—or rather, the corridor turned into a room. There was no longer an iota of light to speak of, and though he could feel the surface beneath his feet, it was too dark to see it now. Unlike the corridor, it was not made of intertwined branches, but was even and flat.

From ahead, there was a sound of rustling of leaves. Honing his senses, Graham could vaguely make out a great, withered tree beyond the darkness. Its trunk was so great and wide that it would take ten adults linking arms to surround it. There were lumps and hollows dotting its surface, and in one place, there was a twisted protrusion extending out from the trunk.

Before Graham knew it, they were surrounded by massive trees, all nearly as splendid and thick as the one before him. Their trunks were all twisted and warped in the strangest ways, and their leaves were dull and far from pristine in hue. It was hard to tell whether any of them were alive or dead. The trees had formed a circle with no exit.

Graham silently stared at the one before him—a touch larger than the others. From time to time, his chest would be seized by a disconcerting pain, but he merely grimaced without allowing himself to flinch.

Eventually, several pale lights emerged from the tree trunks and floated in the air. Gradually, they gathered upon a single point, bit by bit, until they assumed a humanoid form. The figure before him, distinguished by its pointed ears, was an elf.

“Child...” It spoke to them with a voice like the wind that blew through the woods.

Graham barely turned his head, not deigning to respond otherwise.

“You did well... to make it here.”

“Are you the chief of this tribe?” Graham asked.

The luminescent elf seemed to nod. “I would like to apologize for injuring you...”

“I don’t mind at all. I’d rather you tell me about these woods. I have never seen a forest filled with such hatred and ill intent. Where did you come from?”

“We hail from a land spanning east to west—a forest that existed in the age of gods.”

The Ancient Forest’s history was incalculably long. Even before those that sought to rule the continent appeared, the forest quietly watched over a delicate cycle of life and death.

As could be said of any other aspect of nature, the forest presented two faces—one of compassion, and the other of extreme cruelty. The joys of life and the dark shadows of death existed side by side, and through the cycle of countless small changes over many long years, the forest would renew and restore itself. In accord with its nature, the forest was broad-minded enough to accept those who came to it in peace, but it put up a violent front against any who tried to control it.

“The forest’s hatred and malice would grow in order to fight off foreign enemies. It had no concept of offense or defense... It would simply attack its invaders until they were subdued, regarding them as little more than a driving force for combat...”

Graham nodded in acknowledgment of the spectral elf’s words, which were tinged with sorrow. He could scarcely claim that hatred and malice had never driven him

when swinging his sword against fiends. “The forest has grown so powerful. Were there simply so many who sought to make it their own?”

“There were... But the forest’s power was vast. Many who plotted to control it were not even considered a threat. Thus, its hatred never needed to grow to such degrees... Then, one day, it was pitted against a tremendous foe.”

“Who could have opposed it?”

“It was Solomon.”

Graham’s eyes widened in shock. “You mean this forest fought Solomon before...?”

“That’s right. He was no ordinary foe. Therefore, the forest naturally had to enhance its hostility and hatred as a self-defense mechanism.” The spectral elf spoke as though he had witnessed these events with his own eyes. It seemed as though this being was the manifestation of not only the elf’s memories, but of some of the forest’s own consciousness as well.

“The forest lost half its territory, but it never submitted to Solomon. Though perhaps this was because Solomon was never particularly interested in the forest itself to begin with... Nevertheless, the forest’s malicious side was deeply wounded. Beyond a merely defensive instinct, it developed a sense of *self*, which began to lurk in the shadows of the trees.”

“Hence why it sought power to fight.”

“Precisely... Now, the forest’s malice seeks power for the sake of power. It has no goal beyond this. And so, it devoured us and robbed us of our mana, and holds our souls captive to this day.”

“There’s still something I don’t understand. Why did the forest awaken now?” Some time had passed since Mit came to Turnera. If it had been drawn to his mana, it was strange it hadn’t appeared during the first incident in the forest when the boy’s mana had run amok.

“Someone roused the forest’s malice,” the spectral elf said, shaking his head. “A man in white.”

“What...? What sort of man?”

Suddenly, the spectral elf's body twisted in pain. This pain could be felt by Graham too, and he found himself scowling again. Mit stirred on his back.

"Someone has... entered the forest... There are humans... heading towards us."

Graham narrowed his eyes before cracking a thin smile. He could faintly sense his own partner, who had stuck with him through thick and thin. It was his sword coming for him, and he was certain he knew who was bringing it.

The phantasmal elf reached a hand towards Graham.

"I have a request of you..."

"I shall not hand Mit over"

"What do you intend to do with a child Solomon left behind?"

"I don't know. But this child is more than a mere harbinger of destruction... And knowing that he will suffer, there's even less reason for me to hand him over now."

The leaves of the surrounding trees rattled. The malice that had been suppressed until that moment seemed to be slowly rearing its head.

"I thought you... would understand our suffering."

"I understand it well enough... But I do not believe handing Mit over will free your souls. The forest's malice is simply seeking greater power. You and your tribe will remain its prisoners."

"But... But... we Can'T take AnY mORe..." The ghastly elf's form flickered, holding his head and shuddering. He now spoke with ferocity in his voice. "HE... said... wE would be Free... You want US to suffEr... MORE!"

The trees roared, lifted their branches, and wriggled their roots as they pushed closer to him. Graham steadied Mit as he lightly evaded the first blow.

"It's ironic... A forest that sought power to fight Solomon... is seeking power from Solomon's child."

"Grrr... GAAAAAAAH..."

“Hold on a little longer. My friends will free you.”

“What can... mere humans do?!”

The spectral being held his head in pain before scattering into countless motes of light, no longer able to maintain his form. The trees let out a howling sound as they shambled towards Graham.

The silver-haired elf dodged their assault with a fearless smile. “Don’t underestimate my friends. That’s what I’m saying.”

It took but one swing from Angeline to shred through the many branches encroaching upon her. The sword howled in its swirling trajectory, mercilessly pulverizing its foes. After exerting herself a short while, Angeline had to stop to catch her breath.

“It’s hard, swinging this at full force... I need to restrain myself a bit...”

A massive hornworm in the distance was pierced by a bolt of Kasim’s magic. Its fluids burst out as it collapsed.

“Heh heh heh, already working up a sweat, Ange?”

“Not exactly... This sword eats up way too much mana when you swing it...”

The sword replied by making snarling noises and emanating light.

Angeline pouted with puffed-out cheeks. “Don’t underestimate me... I’ll get you to old Graham, just you wait!” she exclaimed.

She adjusted her grip, brandishing the blade high before cleaving through a serpent that appeared before her. Then, she twisted her body and slashed at a large insect that was trying to ambush her from the side.

“I’m still... good to go!”

Still, the sword did not stop there, as she continued the motion to clear away the branches that were coming at her once more, the blow reducing them to scattered wood chips.

It was at that moment that Byaku's circles flew over her head. A spider fiend had tried to drop straight onto her, only to find itself crushed between two magic formations. Angeline swiftly kicked off from where she was to evade the rain of spider parts.

"Damn fool!" Byaku roared. "Don't let your guard down, sis!"

"I didn't..." Angeline pouted, her hand tightening around the sword hilt.

Ever since they had entered the forest, they had headed straight into its depths, but it wasn't just the trees blocking them. There were fiends standing in their way as well. Their foes seemed to grow in number the farther in they delved, and now they were forced to stop and fight.

Angeline realized that this was similar to a high-ranking dungeon. Fiends would be drawn to the mana emitted from the powerful artifacts at their innermost depths, and this meant that the areas nearer to treasure would be teeming with stronger fiends. With that said, the situation was nothing special to Angeline. She would not have become an S-Rank adventurer if this was enough to deter her.

She pursed her lips and was bracing her legs for her next swing when she heard her father calling from behind.

"Ange! Behind it! Aim for the tree covered in insects!"

Angeline looked up and beyond her nearest foe. There was a twisted, gnarled tree standing hidden among the others, with those same vibrantly patterned flat insects dancing across its surface.

Before she had even locked onto her target, Angeline was sliding along the ground, weaving her way through the fiends and approaching the tree. When she got there, she felled it in one powerful swing. Before its blade had contacted the wood, a vicious torrent of mana gushed out, creating a shock wave that blasted away the trunk, insects, and fiends all at once.

Just like that, the presence of other fiends grew fainter. The remaining ones in sight were taken out by Kasim's magic, one by one.

Angeline took a deep breath, letting some energy drain from her as she watched Belgrieve jog up to her.

“Dad...”

“Well done. Do you think you can go on?”

“Yeah! I’m perfectly fine!” Angeline answered, laughing gleefully as she laid the sword against her shoulder.

Belgrieve returned her smile before he began to prod the splintered tree trunk with the tip of his boot. “As I thought...” Old bones peeked out from the decrepit fragments.

Byaku came up to look at them and frowned. “Same as last time... What does it mean? Whose bones are these supposed to be?”

“Couldn’t say... but it’s clear we’re dealing with something crazy. It’s a real bother, going up against the unknown,” Belgrieve grumbled.

Having more or less dealt with the remaining fiends, Kasim joined them. “So this thing was something like the commander of this area. Nice catch, Bell.”

“It was half instinct.”

“And the other half?” asked Angeline.

Belgrieve scratched his head and explained, “You know, it felt like the fiends were more concentrated around that area before we even got here. So I thought something might happen if we got rid of the tree. I didn’t know what exactly, but we weren’t getting anywhere otherwise... I only managed to spot it because you were able to hold the fiends off.”

“Hee hee...” Angeline grinned, grabbing Belgrieve’s arm and nuzzling it.

She was starting to feel like she understood the peace of mind Kasim had told her about. It was a relief to know that Anessa and Miriam were watching her back, but it was different to have someone who could swiftly grasp the situation on the battlefield and give accurate directions. She could concentrate on herself without worrying about anyone else.

She looked at Byaku, a triumphant look on her face. He stared back, baffled. “What...?”

“Admit it. My dad’s amazing...”

Byaku silently turned away. All of a sudden, Angeline seemed to recall something. She rapidly closed in on Byaku and peered into his face. “Bucky...”

“Yeah?”

“Did you just call me... sis?”

“Huh?!” Byaku staggered back, flustered.

“You did... Didn’t you?”

“Like hell I did. You’re imagining it.”

“Heh heh... heh heh heh... My cute little Bucky...”

“I didn’t say it, dammit!”

Angeline grinned, poking at Byaku’s cheeks, as Kasim looked on with an amused smile. Belgrieve patted her on the head, drawing her attention to him. “It’s not over yet,” said Belgrieve. “Let’s move on.”

Though the number of fiends had fallen, they were not completely gone. Angeline’s face tensed as she perceived another presence approaching from the forest depths. She honed her ears to the sword’s growls, setting her feet on the shortest path to Graham.

“Still, it’s completely become a dungeon here,” Kasim said as they pressed on. “I hope the old man and Mit are all right.”

“Yeah... Graham should be fine, I think...”

Though Belgrieve was of course worried about Graham and Mit, he was also concerned for Sasha and the adventurers they had left behind. With Anessa and Miriam assisting them, it was hard to imagine the situation would become too dire, but there was an endless list of things that could go wrong. Nor was his own party completely safe either. In any case, they had to press on, lest all their efforts be for nothing.

They had traveled a fair distance, fighting off occasional swarms of fiends, when the sword in Angeline’s hands emanated a stronger light than usual.

“We might be close...”

“Hmm...”

The path ahead was sealed off. Fine branches formed an ivy-like weave, crossing vertically and horizontally like a great basket wall. The space above them was covered in thick green foliage that continued straight up into the green ceiling overhead.

“On the other side of that...?”

“Looks like it... We’ll have to break through.”

“All right, stand back,” Kasim said, sticking out a hand as wind swirled about him, billowing his clothes and hair. With one hand holding on to his hat, he concentrated mana in the other.

“Pierce the earth, heavens, and soul.” The swirling magic flew straight at the wall and bit into it like the fangs of a massive beast.

“It’s hard...” he said with a grimace. “This has to be the core, no doubt about that.”

He focused more strength into his emaciated arms until blood vessels began to pulse over his skin. The magic fangs gained more and more momentum until they finally opened a hole. It was pitch-black inside as if everything had been slathered in soot.

The moment anyone thought to make a move, there was a strange, creeping sound. The slender branches forming the wall were crackling and shifting, slowly closing in to seal the gap—and that turned out to be the least of their troubles. As the party rushed forward, the magic circles that had been surrounding them suddenly gathered behind them.

“We have company,” Byaku said as he turned.

Belgrieve glanced back as well. With only the faintest of sounds, branches and vines wove together into the form of a great dragon, its body clad in a peculiar, faint shadow. The false dragon of wood gave off as intimidating an air as any flesh-and-blood one.

Feeling a strange chill, Angeline immediately jumped out with Graham’s sword at the ready. The dragon’s wooden arm, as thick as a cow’s body, thrust forth like a battering ram and shattered all the circles that Byaku had deployed for defense. It was finally

stopped when Angeline caught it with the broadside of the greatsword.

"Heavy..." And that was after the force of the blow had been softened by the circles. Her arm would have broken had she taken it at full force.

Angeline angled the sword slightly to divert the rest of the impact. The sylvan dragon's branches grated against one another as it roared. The sword loudly howled back as though in reply.

Meanwhile, Byaku bombarded the dragon with several more of his circles. He had spun them so fast that the circles looked like spheres, but he had only managed to barely scrape the surface of the wood. The dragon, snarling, shook and snapped at any circles that still stuck to it.

Of the many fiends of the world, dragons were said to be among the strongest. There were similar beasts like wyverns and lesser dragons filling out the lower ranks, but true dragons were placed at AAA-Rank, even S-Rank at times. The dragon of wood standing before them was not a real dragon, but the forest's mana had created an entity that could stand toe to toe with a real one. Its intimidating aura, which made their hair stand on end, was certainly real.

Angeline spat and took a deep breath, glaring at the dragon.

"Now that I've calmed down, it isn't a big deal."

"Hey, hold up." Kasim grinned as he stepped out to join them. "They must be getting serious if they're sending out a dragon... I'll hold it back. You hurry up and get that sword to the old man."

"Will you be all right on your own...?"

"Don't underestimate me. Who do you think I am? I was getting bored of all the small fries."

"Uncle Kasim... That's apparently what they call a death flag."

"Where did you learn something like that? Just get going already..." Kasim said, heaving a sigh.

Fighting back against the branches that were trying to close the hole, Belgrieve yelled,

“C’mon, Ange, Byaku! Don’t do anything crazy, Kasim! If anything happens, prioritize your own safety.”

“I know. Heh heh. I’m not an S-Rank for nothing, Bell!”

They left Kasim to fight the roaring wooden dragon, the three of them plunging into the shrinking hole behind him.

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The darkness they had seen from outside the hole turned out to not be so impenetrable once they were inside. They couldn’t see far, but there was enough dim light to see the ground beneath their feet as they walked, which seemed to comprise a tangled assemblage of roots and branches. They could feel the minute ups and downs of the uneven terrain through their shoes.

The holy sword in Angeline’s hands added to the faint glow of Byaku’s circles, and alongside them, a faint greenish light would flicker on and off, and on again. With each flash, new shadows would cross their weary faces.

*This is strange,* Belgrieve thought, frowning. The moment they entered the hole, there wasn’t a trace of any fiends to be found, nor did he feel those prying eyes that had been watching them the entire time they’d traversed the woods. It seemed Angeline and Byaku were on the same wavelength, and they proceeded cautiously with palpable suspicion on their faces.

“This should be the place...” Angeline muttered. The sword flashed with a soft growl. Angeline pouted at it in return. “Oh c’mon, I’m not saying I doubt you.”

“Shh!” Belgrieve softly held up a hand and scanned the area. He had heard a creeping sound again. Narrowing his eyes at the darkness, he identified something shifting in the flickering phosphorescent light.

They were vines—vines thick enough to rival the trunks of small trees, slithering like snakes. They crawled slickly along the hard, uneven ground. Although he did not sense any hostility, he knew the forest was not to be underestimated. This could very well have been a ploy to make them lower their guard.

Byaku projected even more circles as he looked at Belgrieve. “What now? It’s pretty much a guaranteed trap.”

"Let's keep going for the time being. We can't turn back now, and standing around won't get us anywhere." They picked up the pace while increasing their vigilance.

"It's pretty deep..."

"How far does this place go...?"

Even Angeline, who was still leading the way, didn't seem to know. She simply let the sword guide her steps. As the blade's glow grew stronger, they were most likely approaching Graham, but there was no way to be certain. To walk so long in what seemed like circles through endless darkness made them anxious whether they liked it or not.

Meanwhile, the lack of any hostility made it all the more uncanny. Having seen what the forest was capable of, they could not shake off the feeling this was some sort of trap. Yet they had to press on. They hadn't the leisure to turn around and regroup.

The flickering green lights suddenly illuminated something shifting in the distance. They could make out the color of tree bark—it wasn't like the vines creeping all around them. This was an old, twisted tree, surely one of *them*. They had not met any of these living trees for a while now. And then, the holy sword burst into furious radiance. It let out a roar greater than any before it.

Someone had fallen in front of the tree. *Long, silver hair and a gray mantle...* Angeline's eyes widened.

"Graham!"

Their surroundings were alive and hostile now. There was a fierce rustling as the trees that had attacked the village appeared, and the gaps between them were filled with those same vines that had crept around the party moments before. They had known it was going to happen, and they had let themselves fall for it anyway.

"Tsk!" Byaku clicked his tongue. Yet again, he multiplied his sand-colored magic circles, sending them flying around to protect their party of three. "Here they come, old man!"

"It was a trap after all..." Belgrieve swiftly scanned the area. It was only the trees and the vines—there were no fiends. He drew his sword and yelled, "Ange, you take care of Graham!"

"Got it!" Angeline took off and raced towards Graham.

The vines flew at them, and the large tree trunks were soon to follow. This seemed a bit much for him to cut with his sword, so Belgrieve twisted to avoid the first strike. He could hear the sound of something bursting, and when he turned, he saw Angeline swinging the greatsword to eradicate the vines and branches stretching to block her path. Beyond them, that initial tree had reached its branches out to coil around Graham's body.

"Don't... get... in... my... way!" Angeline roared, rending branch, vine, and tree before her. The sword howled with each swing, its blade exploding with mana each time it made contact. But it was like some kind of cruel joke—the farther she proceeded, the more branches there seemed to be. She was reaching a stalemate.

Belgrieve clicked his tongue, cursing the fact he could not be much help as far as fighting power was concerned. He knew they would be at a disadvantage the moment they entered enemy territory, but perhaps he had been more naive than he thought. Not to mention, Mit was still nowhere to be seen. *Has he already been absorbed by the forest?*

The movement of the trees abruptly dulled. They shuddered and rustled, as though something was just barely holding them back.

"Why...?" whispered a clear voice. It could have come from man or woman all the same. Yet it wasn't entering through his eardrums—rather, it seemed to resound directly in his head. "Why have you risked your life... to come here...?"

Belgrieve slashed through the nearest vine and yelled, "I came for my child and my friend!"

"You may have the elf... And we would lend our power to help you leave... But you shall not have what Solomon left behind..."

"Don't be stupid! Mit is my little brother! You can't take him without dealing with me first!" Angeline cried, seething in rage.

"The forest was called to these lands for his mana... He is not human..."

"That's got nothing to do with it!"

The trees were slowly overcoming their restraints.

"He will cause... calamItY AGAin... Aah... hURRY" There was a madness seeping into the voice. "We... must... be free..."

"It may be self-absorbed of us, but there are some things we can't compromise on," Belgrieve declared, his sword at the ready, his eyes staring unflinchingly ahead.

The voice in his head finally lost what last shreds of *self* it had and suddenly became cold and inorganic. "Then you shall become a part of us."

The trees regained their motility, and Belgrieve was forced to dodge and slice vines that swung at him like whips. Although Byaku maneuvered his circles to block the trees' attacks, he was being pressured hard.

"Are you okay, Byaku?"

"Hmph..." Byaku grunted, gritting his teeth and waving his hand. His circles raced through the air, colliding with the vines. His white hair was taking on a hint of black. Belgrieve hurriedly grasped Byaku by the shoulders and pulled him close.

"Don't push yourself!"

"Ugh..."

He felt his feet astir. Looking down with a start, he saw that slender vines had crept up on Byaku while he wasn't looking and coiled around his ankles like snakes. They were creeping higher still.

"Grr... This is bad."

For want of any other ideas, he decided he would hoist Byaku onto his back to keep him out of danger, but as if in staunch rejection of this plan, Byaku lurched forward and fell to the ground. The vines immediately wrapped around him, pulling him to one of the nearby trees.

"Another of Solomon's lost ones."

Belgrieve hurriedly tried to chase after him. "Byaku! Stay calm, I'll get you out!"

"Now's not the time to care about me... We'll be wiped out at this rate! If you don't analyze the situation, then who will?! Hurry and do something about their boss, damn old man!" Byaku yelled back.

*He's right. What is there to gain by losing my cool? "I'm sorry! Hold out a bit longer."*

Belgrieve momentarily turned his back to Byaku and scanned for the largest tree. There was a pale light within it that could be seen through the hollows and grooves in its trunk. However, the tree itself was clad in a heavy, dark shadow, making for quite the ominous sight.

"Ange! Aim there! The tree in the back! The largest one!"

Angeline searched for her mark with eagle eyes, and finding it, she battered away the branches surrounding her and leaped for it. The next wave of vines and branches served as farther and higher stepping-stones to guide her way. At last, she was only moments away from reaching the largest tree. She channeled power into her arms for a powerful swing... but her momentum was killed before she could reach it. Vines had stretched soundlessly from the ground, entangling her feet and pulling her down. Angeline immediately sliced through them, but there was nothing to propel her forward. She was stuck, falling to the ground. A net of overlapping vines was already laid to catch and trap her.

"It's pointless," the voice said.

"Curse you... Let go!" Angeline violently swung the sword around, but each vine she severed was quickly followed by another.

Belgrieve took a great leap from behind her. If Angeline couldn't do it, then he would. But could he? Before he could ready his blade, Angeline shouted, "Dad!"

A howling sound approached him. He looked her way to see that Angeline had thrown the holy sword. He carefully caught it by the grip, staggered by its momentum. Despite being light as a feather, he could feel more than enough weight behind it when he gave it a swing.

"She really is an incredible sword." But there was plenty of time to be impressed later. Belgrieve held the blade aloft, but suddenly found his right leg bound by the vines.

"Dad! Watch out!" Angeline cried out, the color draining from her face.

It was a split-second decision. Belgrieve flipped the metal fastener that tethered his peg leg to him, the vines collapsing down with the force they had used to tug at it.

His gaze took in the great tree which now towered before him. Graham was there too, entangled in its branches, his head hanging limp.

He tightened his grip on the hilt. Only a moment had passed, yet it seemed to have been far longer than that. He poured his mana into the sword, and the sword responded in turn. The body of the blade glistened as it overflowed. He could feel its explosive power, and the second he thought to swing the weapon, it was like flames had erupted from the back of his hands, propelling the sword forward.

The trees that had been moving with tremendous speed came to a sudden stop. Belgrieve couldn't believe he had sliced through it—he had felt far too little resistance from the blade for that. But the blade had most definitely passed through the trunk. Belgrieve was left a bit dazed from the lack of resistance, only to come to his senses once he realized he was in free fall.

"Whoa!" He tried to land softly and failed. He had completely forgotten about unfastening his leg and smacked his hip as he hit the ground.

"Agh... Ahh..."

The great tree twisted. But this was not an intentional motion. Its trunk had been severed down the middle, and it was on the verge of collapsing under its own weight. It wasn't only the tree; the dark shadow enveloping it wavered, cut down the middle just like its husk.

A trunk that should have been far larger than the blade had been severed in one swing. Belgrieve looked down at the sword, unable to believe he was the one who had done that. The sword glowed slightly and made a faint snarling sound.

There was a pitter-patter of light feet before he was embraced by Angeline from behind. "Amazing... Incredible! You're wonderful, dad!" she exclaimed, as giddy as a small child.

"Ange... Ha ha..." He softly chuckled in return before he remembered himself and looked up. "Graham!"

The tree tilted a little, then a bit more, and then finally it began to fall. Graham, who

was seemingly unconscious, fell with it. Angeline drew her sword from her hip and took a leap.

"Grandpa!" Angeline shouted as she sliced through the branches entangling him and caught his body. She kicked off from the falling trunk and fled to a safe distance.

Then came the heavy thud. The faint light from the hollows and ridges faded away, and then the shadows scattered into the air. The crowds of twisted trees around them began to crumble—the rot of many years tearing them asunder.

*Thank you.*

The wind was blowing now. It was no longer the fetid wind that had tormented them so. This was the refreshing breeze that passed through the trees; it was the smell of Turnera's forest. This wind swirled up towards the sky, and the shadows that had been looming overhead were cleared away as twisted branches and vines rotted to dust. Finally, they were greeted by the sunlight filtering through the trees, and before they knew it, they were deep in familiar woods.

"So we managed to dispel the dungeon..."

His blank gaze fell upon a small body before him, collapsed face up on the ground. Where the great tree had stood moments before, there was Mit. Belgrieve scrambled to his feet—or at least tried to, only to recall his leg was gone. He looked around to find it, but it was nowhere to be seen—not that this mattered much to him now. He carefully raised himself up onto one leg and hopped over to Mit.

"Mit!" He hovered a hand over the child's mouth, confirming a warm, gentle breath. The child seemed to be asleep. Belgrieve sighed as he fell to the ground himself.

"Good grief." He patted Mit's head, relieved. The boy's small body stirred slightly in response.

"Is it over?" Byaku asked as he approached with crisp steps.

"You're okay, Byaku? That's good to know."

"Finish up quicker next time, you slacker."

"Ha ha, sorry, sorry... Was it scary?"

"Of course not."

Yet another set of footsteps approached. Navigating the fallen trees and rocks, Kasim ran to them. As soon as he spotted Belgrieve, Angeline, and Byaku, his expression softened. "Hey, you did it. Nicely done, Bell."

"No, I could never have done it alone..." Belgrieve gazed at Angeline, who was trying to help Graham up. Though Belgrieve had gotten the last hit, it was his daughter who had done most of the work.

Heaving a deep sigh, he looked around in search of where his prosthetic had ended up. Though there was some sunlight, they were still deep in the forest and there were too many dim spots around to be sure.

"My foot is..."

"Here, take it," Byaku said, handing over the wooden appendage. Belgrieve took it and fastened it to his right leg as he had countless times before. He stood up and tapped it against the ground a handful of times.

"Yeah... Thank you, Byaku."

"Don't mention it," Byaku said flatly and turned away. Belgrieve smiled and picked up Mit from the ground. He walked to Angeline's side, his gaze falling on Graham's unmoving form. The sword he held seemed to yelp, and Belgrieve, too, found himself a bit anxious as he saw the old elf in such a state.

"Graham?" he called out to him.

The old, silver-haired elf slowly lifted his weary face and faintly smiled. "I missed my chance to die again."

The sword growled in Belgrieve's hands, apparently angry. With a wry look, Graham managed to stand on his own two legs. "Just kidding. Don't be so mad... I'm all right."

Angeline looked at him anxiously. "Are you... really...?"

"Yes... Thank you. You saved me."

"It looks like Mit's fine too... Let's go."

Belgrieve handed the sword to Graham and adjusted his hold on Mit to a more stable position. Once the blade was in Graham's hands, its grumbling subsided, and it illuminated the area with a vaguely satisfied light. The soft winds now carried lively voices from the distance, beckoning them home.

○

With a snapping sound, the glowing mirrorlike device shattered before fading to nothing.

The white-robed man stood in a forest, where the leaves of the dense trees cut off the light. It was dark and ominously quiet even in the middle of the day—even darker, now that the faint light of the mirror was gone.

From beneath the hood of his white robe, the man's sharp eyes glared at nothing. His mind seemed to be occupied with something, though perhaps he was merely dissatisfied.

“I misjudged them... Does that mean I must send an even greater threat...?”

But Graham's face crossed his mind. That elf, who should have grown soft from country living, would surely take this incident as a call to sharpen his skills once more. The man in white knew he could not be underestimated.

“He had already left the flow of the world. It was a mistake to let him be involved in this battle,” the man muttered. It was like he was trying to convince himself, though it was equally possible he was simply collecting his thoughts.

“Perhaps I should just ignore Ba’al’s fragment for now. If instead, that girl was the center of an incident... She may come to our side someday.” He nodded, satisfied with the conclusion he had reached.

“Then it’s not a bad idea to observe her from somewhere closer.”

His robe fluttered as he turned, and his form wavered like a mirage... And then he was gone. The wind blew through whatever gaps it could find in the thicket. The branches and leaves rustled before falling still.

# CHAPTER 83

## SEVERAL VILLAGERS HAD GATHERED AROUND THE BONFIRE

Several villagers had gathered around the bonfire in the town square, beneath the westerling sun. A large pot was hung over the flame, from which came the burbling sounds of simmering stew. Charlotte was stirring it with a long, wooden ladle.

Kasim held court with a cup of hard cider in one hand. “I mean, it kept regenerating no matter how many times I blew it away, see,” he complained. “I was about to use the strongest spell in my arsenal to blow it away for good, but that was when Bell and the others settled things. It was so full of pep one moment, only to be reduced to ash the next. What a waste—I thought I’d be able to go all out for once.”

“It may not have been a real dragon, but you still took on a dragon-class fiend alone... As expected of the Aether Buster,” Sasha marveled, her eyes glistening with admiration. The three young adventurers and the village youths were gathered around to be regaled with his tale as well, their nodding heads evidence of how invested they were. Though everyone looked tired, their faces were bright and cheerful.

Belgrieve didn’t actually think there would be a feast waiting when he returned. But the pot was already bubbling and the casks of cider at the ready once they arrived.

When he saw the villagers laughing and pouring drinks for one another like this, it was hard to believe he had been in a scramble for life and death not long before this moment. Perhaps the stark contrast to those grueling events was what made it all the more important to make merry like this.

He shrugged, stretched, and took a deep breath. The forest had made him so tense that he had hardly noticed his fatigue, but now it weighed on him heavily. Belgrieve had exerted himself like the young’uns and high-ranking adventurers, but now he was paying the price. He worried about the inevitable joint pains to come, but they were the cost of saving Mit and Graham. *Why would I ever regret that?* he thought, smacking his palms against his cheeks.

Belgrieve looked around. None of the houses he could see from the square had quite collapsed, but there were some with crushed eaves and cracked walls. The villagers had done their best to clean up while his party was traversing the forest, and the result was still in stark contrast to the mess it had been that morning. Only a few houses were too dangerous to live in, and most could still fulfill their roles with some cleaning up and simple structural reinforcement. The village carpenters were already loudly discussing their repair plans.

As long as they could rid themselves of the fear and anxiety that came from such an extraordinary attack, the people of Turnera were strong. Even in a hopeless situation, it seemed they were able to move on as long as they could see one bright thread of light.

Hoffman, the village chief, poured a glass of cider and handed it to Belgrieve.

"Lady Seren, see, she said she's gonna talk to Countess Helvetica about supplying enough wheat to endure the winter. That was a real load off our shoulders! Aha ha ha ha!"

"And that's not all. She's going to send some people to help restore the village too. It sure is nice to have such a reliable countess," Kerry chimed in, laughing.

Luckily, Seren had been at the center of the storm and knew the situation well. Support would be soon to come. Of course, this was not up to her sole discretion, but it was hard to imagine Helvetica turning down her proposals. Food supplies, building repairs, and treating the injured, among other things—Turnera would be receiving as much help as possible.

"Connections are a huge help at a time like this. Bell, this may be thanks to you," Hoffman said, taking a swig of cider.

"I wouldn't say that..." Belgrieve replied. He glanced over at Angeline, who was chatting with Seren. They seemed to be having fun, and at times they would share a laugh. Any connection he had with House Bordeaux had started with Angeline. Angeline had saved Seren from bandits, and then Sasha came, and Helvetica followed... All sorts of things had built up bit by bit, finally culminating in the present moment.

In any case, it did not seem like Turnera's restoration would be an issue. It wasn't the best of times, but everyone was giving it their all, and the incident had concluded more

or less happily. As long as they had a clear outlook of the future, they were not going to complain about the past.

Belgrieve stood and left the square, taking a pot of apple juice with him. In his house, Mit lay face up on the bed, and Graham sat silently beside him.

“How’s he doing?”

“He hasn’t woken yet, but his complexion is not bad.”

Belgrieve poured some juice into a cup, handing it to Graham before taking a seat. He looked down at Mit. The boy breathed softly in his sleep, though from time to time he would struggle and grimace like his nose was stuffed.

“Is he having a bad dream?”

“After all that happened, I don’t blame him.” Graham sipped a mouthful of juice and closed his eyes. “You saved us. Let me thank you again, Bell.”

“Ha ha, hey, it’s not like I did it on my own. We had Ange and Kasim... Everyone did their best.”

He reached out a hand to stroke Mit’s hair. The child’s tense face softened a bit at the contact. Belgrieve smiled before looking up to address Graham. “It seems we were just deferring the problem. Once again, something came for Mit’s mana.”

“Hmm...” Graham frowned. “It seems that someone was directing the forest’s attack.”

“What...? Who could that be?”

“I don’t know. But the minds of the elves held captive spoke to me. A man in white awakened the forest’s malice.”

“White...”

*Who could that be?* Belgrieve cocked his head. *And what could they have been trying to achieve?*

Graham closed his eyes and muttered, “It’s strange, thinking back on it. Mit was the only one the forest targeted... If it wanted power, then it would have gone for Charlotte

as well. She has more mana than he does at the moment. I don't know what means he employed, but I feel something contrived about all this."

"Hmm..." It was a good point. But from what Graham had told him, the forest had amplified its hostility to combat Solomon. Perhaps that had resulted in a lasting effect, causing it to target Solomon's homunculus, Mit. As a matter of fact, the trees had reacted to Byaku once his demon side came out.

After Belgrieve presented his theory, Graham folded his arms. "That's not impossible... Ultimately, we can only give our best guess."

"Right... Do you think the man in white will do something again?"

"I couldn't say. Considering how he did things this time, he's not the sort to dirty his own hands. I'd imagine he's a scoundrel who pulls the strings behind the scenes... which makes him difficult to deal with."

"That's awful."

*This is no time for a journey, then,* Belgrieve realized. He sighed.

Graham stared at Belgrieve. "But it was not like he aimed for Turnera. From my experience, those that don't act in the open are more cautious than any other. Now that one failure has put him on his toes, I doubt he will make his next move in the near future. Even if he sends something else, I will be ready for it. I know how he operates now." There was a sharp glint in Graham's eyes.

"If you say so," Belgrieve said, scratching his cheek.

Indeed, they had no idea what they were dealing with, so they had been a step behind at every turn. Now that he had experienced it once, the old elf would not overlook the signs again.

"You seem like you're looking to challenge yourself, Graham. You remind me of Maggie."

"Hmm." Graham awkwardly pursed his lips.

Belgrieve chuckled. "I guess a crisis was enough to reawaken your adventurer instincts?"

"Good grief... You see through everything," Graham remarked with strained laughter.  
"You should go make amends with your past. I am capable enough of shouldering your burdens while you are away."

"Sorry about that... It turns out I'm more selfish than I thought."

"I would not even regard that as selfishness. You've done more than enough for others. It's about time you did something for yourself."

"If you say so."

Belgrieve tousled the hairs of his beard. Though he wasn't completely on board, he had to take Graham's words seriously.

After swallowing a mouthful of juice, Belgrieve leaned in. "We still haven't resolved Mit's problem, though... He may have had his mana drained again, but his body is still producing an excessive amount, right? His body was originally a mass of mana, in any case."

According to Graham, Mit had used a majority of his mana to produce a body amazingly close to human. However, further investigation proved that his body was still a mass of condensed mana, and the boy was still producing even more within his body. The mana he was unable to contain would slowly flow out, and that had definitely played a part in the incident.

The mana that came from Solomon's homunculus was evidently different from what elves and humans possessed, and it seemingly had a tendency to attract rather ill-intentioned types. Even if it wasn't as bad as the Ancient Forest, there was a high chance Mit's presence might call forth a fiend of some sort.

Graham nodded. "I have something in mind. It would be impossible to prevent mana production, but if we can continuously expend it on something else, we can prevent him from summoning anything too powerful."

"Oh? But how do you plan to do that...?"

"Yes, well I wanted to ask for your help on that."

That was when Mit drowsily opened his eyes. He slowly sat up, blinking several times. Then, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, he let his eyes wander.

“Where... am I?”

“Mit...”

Mit seemed a bit fearful, but as soon as he heard Belgrieve’s voice and saw he was there, he jumped into his chest as swiftly as a fleeing hare.

“Dad!”

“You held on well, Mit.”

Belgrieve patted him on the head. And Mit stayed like that, sniffling, his face buried in Belgrieve’s chest a while before he suddenly broke free.

“Grampa! Is grampa okay?!”

“I’m right here.”

Mit was stunned for a moment, but quickly clung to Graham.



"Grampa... I'm sorry."

"What are you apologizing for? You have done nothing wrong."

"But... But it's my fault..."

Graham placed his cup on the table and ruffled up Mit's hair with a smile.

"You ran into the forest to save Turnera. There is no fault in that."

"Urgh..." Mit wept. He didn't seem satisfied with that.

"Well, I'm glad you're all right," said Belgrieve. "You're hungry, aren't you?"

Graham lifted Mit up, stood, then frowned. "Bell... I'm sorry. Can you handle this?"

"You're still hurt. Don't push yourself," Belgrieve said, smiling wryly as he took Mit from the old elf's hands.

Graham gingerly rubbed his side. Honestly, Belgrieve was having a hard time as well, but he was in far better shape than Graham, who had been run through by branches. So, with Mit in his arms, Belgrieve left the house, Graham slowly following behind.

The sun had descended a fair distance, its bottom edge now resting atop the ridge of the mountains. It wouldn't be long before it fell farther and painted the sky a scorched red.

Mit blinked his eyes, perplexed. "Where are we going?" he asked.

"Oh, we're going to grab some dinner."

Mit squirmed a bit, but Belgrieve paid him little mind as he headed to the square. The stew was finished cooking, and by now there was steam rising from a good many bowls as well as the pot. Angeline looked up from the bonfire.

"Ah, dad... Mit! You're awake!"

All eyes immediately gathered on them. Angeline happily hopped up and dashed over.

"S-Sis... I..."

“I’m glad you’re all right...”

Behind Angeline’s smile, the village adults and youths were gathering. Mit clung to Belgrieve even more strongly. He was most likely fearful that they would be angry at him. But the villagers smiled, half in tears, and sent him warm word after warm word.

“Welcome back, Mit!”

“I’m sorry, I said something terrible to you... Forgive me.”

“It must have been hard... I’m glad you’re okay... Thank Vienna.”

“Was it scary? You held on well. Good boy.”

“Are you hurt? Hungry? Eat your fill.”

Mit was in a daze. The strength drained from his body; Belgrieve could feel the boy’s grasp weakening as his mouth opened and closed silently.

Then, he finally mustered some words. “I’m... sor... sorr...” At least, he tried to do so, but his sobs got in the way.

“You don’t have to apologize. You didn’t do it on purpose.”

“Yeah, yeah, it’s those strange trees that did it.”

Mit broke into tears, sniffling. “Can... Can I stay here...?”

The villagers patted his head and assured him he could.

“Thank you...” he managed, weeping into Belgrieve’s shirt.

Though they didn’t say it aloud, surely the villagers weren’t so keen on writing everything off like that. But they still accepted him. Hopefully, things would sort themselves out little by little.

Belgrieve lifted his gaze. “Now I’m sure everyone’s starving. Let’s take it easy today.”

“I made plenty, so eat lots!” Charlotte announced, waving her ladle.

Food and drink went around, and the square was cheerful at once. Soon, the sun was hidden beyond the mountains and darkness was upon them, yet no one seemed to take notice.

Belgrieve watched over this warmly, then glanced at Graham beside him. Graham answered his look with a slight smile and a nod.

What had once been subtle summer hints now reigned supreme as the seasons finally shifted. The verdant forests around the village swayed in the breeze, and at this time of year, the sheep's fleece would be long enough for shearing. The potatoes were already dug up, the surviving wheat fields had turned golden, and they were nearly finished with the harvest already. Turnera's repair work was now mostly complete, and everyone was attempting to return to their normal lives. After all, it wasn't as though anyone had died. Once it was all over, and there remained no scars on the scenery, it was as if the assault of trees were a distant dream.

Angeline stood inside the new house, which now had its outer walls put up. The interior was still unfinished; with all the repairs needed on the other houses, work on this new construction was put on hold. However, it was already shaping up to be a home, and now that repairs were complete, work had resumed.

Though construction was still in progress, ever since the day the walls were put up, Angeline and the others would drag in tables, chairs, blankets, cushions, and the like, gathering each night to play. It was like they could envision their new life ahead, and it was rather invigorating.

"But, before that..." she muttered. She placed a hand on the sword at her hip, tugging up on it to adjust its position. "What sort of person is Percy, I wonder?"

Her thoughts had turned to her father's old friend. Belgrieve had apparently lost his leg protecting him. She tried imagining her own life, had her father instead lost a leg protecting *her*. Just picturing the scene was already so painful she couldn't imagine it any longer. Before she knew it, she was holding her face. She was hit with a surprising amount of sadness and guilt. Living with these feelings for more than twenty years was beyond what she could comprehend.

Blinking, she came back to reality and, standing upright, left the house. Immediately, the bright summer sun prickled at her eyes. The piercing blue skies were dotted with a handful of round clouds like meatballs in a stew. It was warm enough to make her

sweat.

Today, she would set off on a journey. Her destination was the Nyndia Mountains to the south and the Earth Navel that was said to lay somewhere amongst them. That was where Percival would be.

Angeline herself felt quite conflicted when it came to Percival. She resented him, knowing he was the reason for her father's crippling injury, but she couldn't even imagine the pain he was feeling even now, so she also felt sorry for him. Furthermore, if Belgrieve hadn't covered for Percival, he would have never met Angeline. When her thoughts began drifting in *that* direction, Angeline began to see herself as terribly selfish.

She glanced over to see Belgrieve and Graham discussing something at the end of the yard—most likely what tasks had to be done in their absence. Angeline jogged over.

“Dad.”

“Hmm? Oh, Ange. All prepared?”

“Yeah...” Angeline timidly pinched Belgrieve’s sleeve. “Er, dad... You’re not scared? Of... meeting Percy, I mean.”

“Hmm... I wonder. I’m not really sure myself,” Belgrieve said, placing a hand on his daughter’s head and ruffling up her hair. “But Percy is a dear friend. Even if I am scared, I still want to meet him.”

“I see...” Angeline mumbled before latching onto Belgrieve’s arm. For some reason, she felt a strange sense of anxiety.

Belgrieve smiled. “In any case, we have something else we have to do too.”

“You mean Mit, right?”

“Yeah.”

This journey was no longer just a trip for Belgrieve to meet an old friend. In order to implement one of Graham’s ideas, they would need materials from a high-ranking fiend—and it just so happened that they were headed for the Earth Navel, which was inhabited by powerful fiends. It was a bit strange to call this a side mission, but it did

work out nicely.

She could travel with her father and fight alongside him. Though she had been so apprehensive moments before, simply picturing this was enough to put her at ease.

There was growling from Belgrieve's back, and a faint light emanated from Graham's greatsword. Prodding it, Angeline asked, "Are you sure you'll be all right without her, Graham?"

"You needn't worry... It was wrong of me to rely on it for everything," Graham answered with a chuckle. His smile was not the sagely one of an old man; now, his was the demeanor of a youngster facing a new challenge in life. Apparently, this incident had brought about some kind of change in the old elf.

"Still, are you really all right with lending her to me?" Belgrieve reached for the hilt looking rather troubled. "Wouldn't Ange be...?"

"No, I think that girl has a better affinity with you, dad..."

"Angeline is correct. Excluding myself, you should be able to handle the sword better than anyone. I'm sure she has quite a bit of trust in you. And she's got far too much life in her yet to retire out here."

"Hmm..."

*When you put it like that, I can't really decline,* Belgrieve mused as he scratched his cheek. Yet despite their insistence, Belgrieve could not hear the sword's voice as Graham and Angeline could. The sword's growls subsided; he didn't know whether it was being sullen or bashful.

Fighting high-ranking fiends was practically inevitable on this journey, so Graham had loaned to Belgrieve his own greatsword. Belgrieve did not feel he was worthy of wielding what had once been lauded as a holy blade, but not so much that he would obstinately refuse the offer, and with several people urging him to take it, he ended up obliging. Naturally, Angeline was delighted at her father's unexpected upgrade.

They headed to the village entrance, where a wagon was waiting with Anessa, Miriam, and Kasim. Byaku, Charlotte, and Mit were there to see them off. They were accompanied by several of the village children and youths.

Kasim waved with his hat from the wagon. "Heya, finally here. Are you all set?"

"Yeah, sorry to keep you waiting. We should get going."

"Take care, dad!" Charlotte said, grabbing Belgrieve's hand.

Belgrieve patted her head. "You too, Char. Don't catch a cold..." He then turned to Byaku. "Byaku, look after the kids, would you?"

"Yeah." Byaku seemed a bit sullen. He averted his eyes, scratching his cheek.

Belgrieve turned to the peddler who would be driving them and bowed his head. "We're in your debt again."

"Oh, no, that should be my line! It's a huge relief to have you all along for the ride!"

The smiling woman was the same blue-haired peddler they had come to know rather well. She came to Turnera at just the right time, and they ended up taking advantage of that.

As they loaded their things, Belgrieve glanced at Mit. Mit was standing beside Charlotte, staring up at him. He gave off a somewhat more mature demeanor since the incident, and though his appearance hadn't changed, he had gotten better at speaking.

"Dad, take care..."

"Yeah, you too. Help out your grampa, okay?"

"Yeah." Mit smiled and nodded in reply. He was slowly becoming more expressive, and the emotions he felt were now properly conveyed via his countenance. Not knowing whether to be happy or sad that her little brother was growing up so fast, Angeline settled on stroking his head for the time being.

"Sis... Come back soon," he told her.

Angeline grinned. "Of course!" She patted his head a little more roughly.

With a swing of the reins, the wagon creaked into motion.

There were other "take cares" and "good lucks" from the crowd. Mit and Charlotte

raised their voices to their limits as they waved their hands, while Byaku stood behind them with crossed arms and a pouty expression. Angeline leaned out of the wagon to wave back at them.

Gradually, those send-off voices grew quieter until they were gone. The sun beyond the tarp canopy of the wagon was warm, and a southerly wind blew from ahead. With each gust, the grassy plains would rustle and sway in waves.

*Our destination is beyond these winds*, she thought as she looked ahead. She leaned against Belgrieve beside her.

The wagon lurched as it ran over a stone. Thanks to the many passengers aboard, this was liable to be a slow journey. At this rate, it would be sunset by the time they reached Rodina.

# **EXTRA**

## **SPIRIT FIRE**

It happened after the incident, but before the start of the journey.

There was a long road ahead of them, but they couldn't let themselves be so caught up in preparations that they neglected their daily work. They harvested wheat, dug up potatoes, and helped mend houses, and in the midst of it all, spring continuously faded away to be replaced by a faint summer air. The brightly colored sprouts that had peeked out in the spring were now a strong, deep green. Even the sky's blue seemed to grow more lustrous in the light of the gradually strengthening sun.

The villagers' afternoon was dedicated to reaping wheat. After the men swung their large scythes, the women would bundle and transport the harvest, and children would follow behind them to retrieve any fallen gleanings. Charlotte was among them, wearing a straw hat as she gathered fallen ears of grain. Any she retrieved were placed in a basket to the side. The individual scraps were small, but they made up a considerable amount once gathered. Although this was routine work for them, the Ancient Forest's attack had ruined many of the wheat fields, and everyone was collecting far more carefully than usual this year.

Having been stooped over for a long while, Charlotte let out a deep breath and stood up, stretching her back. She wiped the sweat from her brow, staring up at the sky through squinted eyes. As an albino, Charlotte was terrible with strong sunlight. She always wore long sleeves and a wide-brimmed hat to minimize exposure.

Angeline came up to her, a bundle of wheat under her arm. "Are you all right...?" she asked. "If you're tired, you should get some rest."

"I'm still good to go. We've only just begun." Charlotte adjusted her hat and puffed out her chest.

Angeline grinned back at her. "That's good to know. But no forcing yourself... Is Mit all right?"

"I'm fine. Are you fine, sis?" Mit patted the dirt from his hands as he looked up at

Angeline. Ever since the forest attack, his wide eyes now reflected a stronger light of will, and his sentences were clearer than before.

Angeline chuckled. "Naturally. I'm the big sis here."

She carried her bundle of wheat to the wagon as the two children got back to work. They picked and picked, and there were still plenty of fallen ears to go. Even when they focused their hardest, trying to get every last one, when they looked back, they would still find bits of wheat they had overlooked.

"It's like they're popping out of the ground when we're not looking," Charlotte said.

Mit nodded. "Yeah. But everyone will be happy if we pick up lots."

"Right, we have to do our best, then."

They gathered with newfound motivation, and gradually their basket was filled. A nearby adult praised them for their hard work and carried the basket to the wagon for them. Then, rinse and repeat.

The sun began to set, and the additional spectrum of hues seemed to make the light fall all the more heavily on them. Charlotte wafted her sweat-soaked clothes to get some air under them and took a deep breath.

"It's getting hotter... Are you okay, Mit?"

"Yeah. But you're tired, Char. Let's rest." Mit took her by the hand and pulled her towards the shade of a tree near the field.

There were places around Turnera that served as a distinct dividing line between plains and forest, but there were also places where sparse, stray trees gradually grew denser until they formed an extension of the forest. These stray trees served as a resting point for farmers in the time between work.

"Mit, you're not scared of the forest anymore?" Charlotte said, a little concerned as she stared at the forest in the distance.

Mit nodded. "I'm okay."

"I see... I hope so." Charlotte was still a bit skittish herself. She'd heard that the Ancient

Forest had come for Mit's mana, and having been born with an immense mana pool of her own, she couldn't help but find the woods a bit frightening now. If she had been whisked away alone into those dark trees... Just the thought of it made her shiver.

It wasn't as if the two of them hadn't entered the forest before. Mit had gone countless times with Graham, and Charlotte had gone with the others to pluck glowgrass before the spring festival. She hadn't felt any fear then. Yet, after the incident, she was hesitant even to approach it.

*I might be no good on my own, but we should be fine together,* Charlotte thought as she clung to Mit's hand and he led her onward. His hand was covered in dirt and sticky with sweat.

After a short walk up a gentle slope, they were under the leaves of an elm tree which shook in the cool breeze and cast a comfortable shadow on the ground. Not far away, the dense forest glowed green under the light of the waning sun.

Beneath the tree, they found Kasim lying faceup, his cap covering his face.

"Ah, Uncle Kasim, I was wondering where you'd gone off to!"

"Are you asleep?" Mit tapped Kasim's flank with his shoe, eliciting a groan from the man in reply.

"Ugh... Huh, it's just the kiddies." Kasim sat up, stretching out his arms as he yawned.  
"Ahh, that was a good nap. Is it evening yet?"

"Don't 'good nap' me! Dad will be angry if he finds out you've been slacking off here!"

"Oh no, woe is me. You gotta keep it a secret. Bell is pretty scary when he's mad." Kasim chuckled as he put his hands together and bowed his head.

"Be serious!" Charlotte retorted, touching a hand to her hip and puffing out her chest, but she didn't seem too keen on pursuing the matter. She took a seat at the base of the tree, and Mit sat down beside her.

"Sis said you were a slacker," said Mit.

"She's dang right I am. So don't be too mad; it just comes naturally to me."

"Hey, what are you going to do if Mit starts imitating you?"

Mit seemed thoroughly offended at the suggestion. "I won't. I'm going to imitate dad."

Kasim stroked his beard in amusement. "Imitating Bell, huh? How do you plan to do that?"

"Practice sword. Then grow beard."

"A beard won't look good on you, Mit!" Charlotte protested. "And dad's sword isn't all there is to him! You have to work hard and be kind to everyone!"

"What a jolly duo you are," Kasim mused. He yawned again and leaned against the elm.  
"Is work done for the day yet? Did you come here to wake me?"

"Nah... We didn't even think about you..."

"Harsh."

"We're just taking a break. According to Ange, we'll be gathering until the sun sets."

"Wow, so much work. Definitely not for me."

"Just give it a shot, why don't you? It's interesting, like treasure hunting. There's a huge sense of accomplishment when you find an ear packed to the brim with grain. Right, Mit?"

"That's right. You're an adult. You have to work."

"There's no law saying every adult has to work."

"But... but dad works."

"That's because he's Bell. Bells are Bells. Kasims are Kasims. What's wrong with that?"

"Well..."

"Wait, Mit, don't let him fool you! Uncle is just using sophistry!"

"Hmm, you know a pretty hard word, Char. Good on you."

“C-Compliments will get you nowhere with me!”

“Now, now, no need to be crabby. You came to rest, right? Let me teach you the joys of slacking. Did you know there’s a spell to dream any dream you want?”

Mit and Charlotte exchanged a look. Although Kasim was clearly tempting them in a devilish way, it still brought out their childish curiosity.

“The joys... of slacking...”

“B-But dad wouldn’t...”

“Hey, don’t worry about it. You just don’t have to tell old Bell. It’s fun to have a secret or two.”

“What nonsense are you teaching the kids?” said a new voice. Before they had noticed, Byaku had come to stand by them with a sour look on his face.

Mit gasped, stood, raced over, and nearly tackled him in an embrace. “Bucky!”

“Gwah!” Byaku staggered as he caught him. “Hey, I told you not to ram into me,” he barked.

“Mm-hmm.” Mit didn’t pay him the slightest mind and immediately began climbing him. Byaku was rude and unsociable, yet for some reason, kids took to him well, and Mit was no exception.

“The big brother’s as popular as ever, I see,” Kasim said with a grin.

“Tsk... Blasted delinquent old man.”

In spite of his obstinate frown, Byaku subtly shifted to make it easier for Mit to clamber up—the sight of which elicited giggles from Charlotte. *We’ve both changed a bit since our heretical pilgrimage*, she thought. Back then, her heart had been thorny and the world seemed so detestable. Now, everything seemed radiant.

Mit had reached Byaku’s chest, and Byaku swung the boy around onto his back.

“We’re supposed to go home first and start preparing dinner.”

"Oh? Is that what dad said? Then we should get going." Charlotte sprang up, collecting her hat along the way.

"Hey, you walk by yourself," Byaku grumbled as he lowered Mit to the ground and rolled his shoulders. He had trained up a bit since coming to Turnera, but his build was still slender. It would be a long while before he could hold children as lightly as Belgrieve and Graham could.

Kasim stood and stretched. "Right, onward. What's good for dinner?"

"Uncle! You're going to help out, mark my word!"

"Yeah, yeah, as you wish, princess."

And like that, they were on their way. Mit looked over his shoulder and stared back at the trees. The sound of rustling leaves tickled his ears.

○

By the time dinner was over, the night breeze had picked up. When the tableware was put away, the kids headed to the half-finished house with lamps and candles. Though it wasn't yet complete, the roof had been finished, the walls had been put up, and the window frames were filled with glass panes, so it was enough to stave off the rain.

Still, there was no flame in the hearth, and the inner structure was still a work in progress. They didn't bring any permanent furnishings, but after dragging in a table and chairs and lighting some candles, it lent the vibe of a secret base to the otherwise skeletal interior, and it was exciting just to sit in there. It was still a bit cold, but the blankets they brought along added to the giddy atmosphere.

Angeline set a checkerboard—a haul from her latest souvenir shopping spree—on the table. "Now, Byaku. Your turn..."

"No way. You're weak as hell."

"As if you have a say in the matter... I won't let you end on a winning streak!"

In the face of Angeline's obstinate demand, Byaku heaved a tired sigh and took his place across from her.

The table had been placed on the bare dirt floor. There were raised floorboards around that unfinished spot, where they had placed pillows to sit. This let the girls lie about with their toes dangling in the open air.

This would be her home once their journey was over. Angeline imagined how life would be as she stared around the candlelit interior. Miriam sat comfortably as Charlotte fiddled with her hair, braiding and binding it into various styles. Anessa was a short distance away, with Mit rolling around beside her. She looked over at Charlotte's handiwork, mildly interested.

"Your hair is so fluffy, Merry. It's so airy and wonderful when it's braided. Let's fasten it with a ribbon," Charlotte insisted.

"You think so? I never really mess around with my hairstyle."

Miriam's first priority was hiding her ears away, so she rarely removed her hat. It hardly mattered what her hairstyle was when it would be covered up regardless, so she had never given it much thought.

The moment her hairdo had been tied with ribbons into pigtails, Anessa burst into laughter. "Pfft! Well, look who's cute all of a sudden."

"Aren't I? Hee hee, you jealous?" Miriam delicately held up one of the braids with a grin.

"Nah, mine's not long enough for that," Anessa said, combing a hand through her hair.

"Oh, but there are still plenty of things to try. We have hairpins and ribbons."

"Let's put on a huge one. A big, bright red ribbon!"

"Hey, that one just ain't gonna do it!"

That was when Angeline let out a strange groan. Byaku was wearily collecting the checker pieces from the board.

"That's three wins for me. Just give up already."

"Grrr... Why can't I win...?" Angeline pouted, glaring at the board. Then Anessa came up to her and nudged her shoulder.

"Isn't that enough? Let me have a turn."

"Urgh... Fine. My head needs some rest."

"It's resting all year round, isn't it?" Byaku teased with a thin smile. Angeline stuck out her tongue in reply. She flopped down onto the floor and stared up at the ceiling.

"Sis, you lost?" Mit asked, leaning over her.

"I did not lose... It was a strategic retreat," Angeline equivocated before pulling Mit into a tight hug. Mit squeaked and squirmed, but ultimately resigned himself to his fate.

The candlelight flickered, causing the shadows to dance around Byaku and Anessa's faces across the checkerboard. They both stared at it intently.

With a grunt, Angeline sat up with Mit still in her arms. "Bucky, that wretch. He never looked that serious when he was against me."

"Is Anne strong?"

"Yeah..."

Angeline had never beaten Anessa in checkers before. *Isn't that strange?* she wondered as she rearranged her legs to sit cross-legged. With Mit resting in her lap, she hugged him from behind and rested her chin atop his head. Mit offered no resistance.

"Hey, when I look at you like that, you're the spitting image of one another." Miriam giggled. "Your hair's the same length and color too."

It looked that way because they both shared long, black hair. Angeline pinched Mit's cheeks. They were soft and smooth, a delight to touch. "We're siblings... after all."

"Yep."

The winds were picking up, and they could hear their rustling through the window. Mit glanced over, then hopped up and hobbled over to the windowsill. If he didn't get close enough, the glass would just reflect his own face. Angeline stood behind him, glancing out as well. The edge of the yard was illuminated in a faint blue light—

evidently, the moon was out. The scenery was cast in pale light as far as the eye could see, and though she could not make out any of the finer details, she could still see the silhouettes of trees shifting in the breeze.

"Oh... Want to go have a look? It'll be a nice walk."

"I wanna go."

"Huh? A walk? I'm going too!" Charlotte stood and joined them.

Miriam wrapped a blanket tightly around herself and fell lazily onto her side. "Good luck with that."

Angeline nodded, looking at the two faces around the checkerboard. "What about you two...?" she asked, to no response. "Hey... Do you want to walk?"

"Hmm..." Anessa answered vaguely. Byaku gave no reply at all. They both had deep creases on their brows, seemingly deep in thought. Angeline shrugged and swung open the door, holding a lamp in one hand.

○

Outside, the air blew briskly. In the early summer, they didn't have to worry about frost setting in, but there was still some snow lingering around the summit of the northern mountains, and the temperature would plummet whenever the winds blew down from them. The contrast to the hot-and-sweaty daytime was quite a shock to the body.

From the windows of the original building and the annex, the light cast bizarre shadows.

Up in the sky, the pale half-moon had thin wisps of clouds flowing around it. The air was clear, so all of them had crisp outlines. Their upper parts were white and clear enough to make out every bump and cavity in the moonlight, but their more shadowy parts faded to a deep blue, so their features melded together. The moon was too bright for the stars to leave much of a mark, but there were still a few brighter ones making their presence known here and there.

A rustling in the distance heralded another strong gust which then shook the apple tree and shrubs in the yard. Mit honed his ears, trying to discern what these winds were trying to tell him, while Angeline closed her eyes and filled her lungs with the

brisk air.

"Let's walk a bit, sis. Standing around is freezing," Charlotte suggested, tugging at her sleeve.

"Right... Let's go."

The three of them went on their way. Angeline was between Mit and Charlotte, holding both of their hands. Mit was holding up the lamp in his other hand. When the wind picked up, they would be pelted with the evening dew and the smell of grass.

The village was still. Unlike Orphen, they did not have a single streetlight. Though light seeped through the gaps in the windows and doors, they rarely ever heard any voices.

"Turnera nights are always so dark... It's nice that we have the moon today," Charlotte observed, looking around.

"Right, the moonless nights are pitch-black... Mit, will you be lonely looking after the house?"

"No... I'll be with grampa."

"Hee hee, I see... Have you ever experienced a clear winter night?"

Mit blinked. After Belgrieve, Marguerite, and Duncan set off from Turnera, Mit spent the winter there with Graham. Of course, they went out for walks, but there would be heavy clouds looming over them every day, scattering cold white snow over everything. He had been sure that these clear moonlit nights simply didn't happen in the winter.

"No... It clears up?"

"It can. The ground is pure white, and it glimmers in the moonlight. It's brighter than you'd think..."

"Wow... That sounds lovely," Charlotte said.

Angeline grinned, tightening her grip on Mit's hand. "Let's walk on the outskirts a bit."

"Yes... Grass, and dew. I like the smell," Mit said, taking a deep breath.

Outside the village, the overgrown plains seemed to glisten. Walking through the grasses soaked them to the shins in dew.

Angeline snuffed out the lamp. Their eyes took a bit of adjusting, but after enduring the darkness for a short while, the moonlight was enough for them to see clearly. In fact, everything seemed even brighter now that the lamp was gone.

Mit's eyes shimmered as he looked around. The plains seemed to continue on and on until they melded with the sky. The towering mountains that seemed to bear up the sky floated like solemn white peaks. Usually they loomed over them as large shadows, but in the moonlight, they could make out the rocky, craggy surface. The trees that grew halfway up stopped after a certain point, and it was rock all the way up from there. They could make it all out so clearly even though it was night.

Suddenly there was a noise like something had been strangled to death. It was a shrill shriek, yet its source was unseen. Mit and Charlotte stared around nervously.

"What was that...?"

"There's a bird that sounds like that in the forest."

"The forest..." When Mit glanced over, it looked as though there was something just at the edge of the tree line. "Something's there."

"Hmm?"

Angeline squinted and looked over as well. There were green lights flickering on and off, moving in a wide array. Theirs was a peculiar glow, unlike that of glowgrass. Mit clung to Angeline fearfully.

"That's..."

"Don't worry. That's nothing to be afraid of..." Angeline reassured him. Then, a mischievous smile crossed her face. "Let's go see them from up close."

"Huh?"

"Your big sis is with you. Let's go, let's go."

Mit still seemed somewhat timid, but Angeline had him by the hand, and he had no

means of escape. Though Charlotte was nervous as well, she followed without complaint.

They cut across a completely harvested wheatfield. The soil was sticky and damp, and when they stepped on the wheat stumps, there was a crinkling sensation beneath their feet. Here and there, they would come across tall weeds covered in glistening droplets.

They walked all the way to the forest's edge in sodden shoes, finally nearing the place where the green lights wavered just beyond the next row of trees. It seemed like some sort of phosphorescence, but it wasn't as if there were any fireflies flying about. It was simply a detached light that flickered from stronger to weaker.

Mit's heart raced as he tugged at Angeline. Though his memories were faint, he felt like he had seen those green lights when he had been captured by the Ancient Forest. Just looking at them brought back all sorts of things he didn't want to think about.

"Are you scared?" Angeline asked him.

His face pricked up. His eyes wandered this way and that before finally, he stuck out his chest. "I'm fine... Are you okay, Char?"

"I'm fine. Sis is with us."

Despite what they said, the two children peered anxiously into the forest's darkness and the lights that lay beyond.

*No need to put up a strong front,* Angeline thought, stifling her grin and pulling them forward.

"Okay... If everyone's good, then let's go a bit farther. It's an adventure."

"Huh?!"

"B-But dad said the forest was dangerous at night..."

"Just a little is fine. I'm with you. C'mon, let's go."

Past the tree line, the moonlight was cut off, but that flickering green light illuminated everything beneath their feet. After focusing a bit, they could roughly make out all the dips and bumps and fallen branches.

Mit calmed his racing heart, his eyes flitting to and fro. He felt a chill run down his spine. Each cluster of trees could well be a herder, and he was using two hands now to hold on to Angeline. Charlotte looked around, unsettled and fearful, sticking close to Angeline as well.

Angeline's hands disappeared for a moment, and then she was stooped down, her hands on their shoulders. "Have a good look..."

They gazed ahead at the green lights, which drifted airily through space and gradually approached them. The kids blinked, unknowingly grabbing each other's hands.

Finally, the lights surrounded them—they were specks, like grains of sand, and there was one conspicuously large and round one at the center. It waxed and waned, and each time it flickered, the surrounding trees seemed to manifest from the darkness. The rustling of leaves gently resounded.

"Whoa..." Charlotte exclaimed. The forest trees, illuminated in green, were a beautiful and mystic sight. Mit forgot his fear from moments before, and before he knew it he was reaching out to grab one of the lights in his palm. Yet he had closed his fingers so gently around it and had wound up with nothing.



“Ah...”

Gradually, the number of lights disappeared one by one. It was not long before the last one vanished, and the forest was again shrouded in its original darkness. Mit stared up at the traces of moonlight through the treetops. Angeline chuckled, grabbing their hands and standing.

“Now let’s go back.”

Not understanding a thing, Mit and Charlotte followed her lead. They had barely entered the woods and were now out once more. The moonlight was as bright as ever, lighting the plains in white.

Looking up at Angeline, Charlotte asked, “What were those lights, sis?”

“That, you see—that was spirit fire,” Angeline replied.

“Spirit fire?” Mit cocked his head curiously.

“Yes... Once upon a time, I was lost and alone in that forest.” Angeline’s eyes narrowed as she reminisced. “It was before the spring festival, you see. I thought I’d pick some glowgrass on my own, and that dad would praise me for it... But I got tired and fell asleep along the way, and before I knew it, night had fallen. It was dark and cold, and I was terrified.”

“What happened then?”

“I was too scared to move, and when I was mulling over what to do, those lights came to me... Their beauty let me forget my fear for a moment. And after that, dad came to save me. When I asked him later, he told me it must have been spirit fire. He said they came because I looked lonely.”

Mit blinked. He wondered about those flickering lights he had seen in the Ancient Forest—had they come because they were worried about him?

“Are spirits... kind...?”

“Yeah. They like kids, I hear. Though they do their share of mischief too... I’m sure they came all the way to the forest’s edge because they wanted you two to notice.”

Mit and Charlotte immediately found themselves looking back. In the depths of the shadows, the green light let off one final burst before fading for good. It felt as though it was waving a hand. Their fears were gone now, and Mit was excitedly pulling Angeline ahead.

“Amazing. It was pretty.”

“It was. The forest isn’t as scary at night as I thought,” Charlotte said with a giggle. When she went to pick glowgrass, she had gone with a large party, and she hadn’t been given the time to feel scared. Even now that it was just the three of them, she felt more awestruck than afraid.

“There’s a folktale about spirit fire, you know. The tale of Lost Isolde... My dad knows it.”

“Really?”

“I want to hear it.”

The three returned in a hurry for a story. They didn’t head to the annex, instead opening the door to the main house. Belgrieve and Graham turned from their seats at the fireplace.

“Hmm? Bedtime already?”

“Dad, I want to hear about Lost Isolde!”

“Tell us!”

The kids raced to Belgrieve and sat on both sides. Belgrieve looked pleasantly surprised, tugging at his beard to bring back some memories.

“That story... All right, I don’t see why not. But first, brush your teeth and get ready to sleep.”

They quickly stood and went to get their pajamas.

Kasim, slouched in a chair and sipping distilled liquor, cackled. “The kids sure are lively.”

"Yeah... Ange, did something happen?"

"You could say that..." Angeline chuckled.

Graham closed his eyes, a slight smile on his face.

As they changed clothes, Charlotte softly whispered to Mit, "Honestly, I was a little scared when we entered the forest."

"I... was too. But I really am fine now."

"Hee hee, yes. I never knew it could be so warm in there."

Strangely, it *had* felt warmer in the forest than on the plains. The canopy had protected them from the cold air blowing from above. Though they had been too nervous and fearful to realize it then, the memory seemed to be coming back now.

When they were changed and their teeth were brushed, they sat down beside Belgrieve. Belgrieve prepared some hot water and then slowly told a tale. It was a story of a girl who lost her way, and how she was led back to town by the light of spirit fire. That's all there was to it; it was a simple tale, yet it was lovely for its simplicity.

The forest could be scary, but it could be warm too. *I'll have another look at it*, thought Mit. The fears he had held on to for so long had seemingly been burned away.

There was a crackling sound. The log in the fireplace burst, sending specks of flame dancing through the air.

# AFTERWORD

We're finally on the sixth afterword. And do you know what that means? That means we're on volume 6. I'm trying to make each volume's plot self-contained, but looking at the series as a whole, you could consider this the midpoint. The readers might think, "Only halfway?" Others might say, "There's still half to go?" but that is none of the author's business.

I always hesitate over what to write in the afterword. I get the feeling there's something I want to write, but even if I want to write, I can't write everything, or it will just get out of hand.

It's been almost ten years since I took up writing as a hobby. Gradually, I've shifted from thinking about what I should write to thinking about what I have to write. I'm always trying to strike a fine balance—neither too little nor too much. But after I've actually written it, I grow anxious about whether or not I've put down enough to get the image across. I end up putting down more and more words like overlapping roof tiles.

Writing should, through words, reproduce images and emotions in the hearts and minds of readers, and my sentences become long and droning in an attempt to achieve this. Despite my efforts, I know that the author's exact intentions will never perfectly get across. I keep trying to reinforce a dilapidated house, but the wind will still make it through the gaps.

Yes, I'm sure the one filling these gaps is Master toi8 and his wonderful illustrations; however, there are sometimes too many gaps for him to do anything about. That's when Urushibara-sensei steps in with his manga version and hammers even more boards in place. I'm incredibly thankful.

Up to this point, I've tried to keep the contents of the novel out of the afterword, but there is something I'd like to add for this volume. Rather than it being about the story, it's more of my excuses for the portrayals and developments.

The entirety of this volume takes place around Turnera. It's a small village in the countryside, and a region with its own unique culture and customs you won't find in

the big city. The author lives in the countryside himself, and he mulled quite a bit over how to portray it. It has its good parts and just as many less-than-favorable parts. Human relations are especially troublesome.

Generally speaking, most countryside locations maintain their communities around the local traditions they grew up with. When this happens, people prioritize maintaining their everyday life and naturally become quite conservative. They fear those that go against tradition and see them as something to get rid of.

Within the confines of this story, Belgrieve falls afoul of this. It comes through a bit when it's said he's seen as an outsider and an oddball, and he becomes the first suspect whenever any problem occurs.

This is also quite frequent in reality and is not restricted to the days when superstition and prejudice ran rampant. Even if it might not be as blatant in modern society, it is not rare at all for there to be a discrepancy in the sense of values of a traditional community and those who come from the outside. The place where I live has always seen a lot of travelers, so it's not that bad, but I've heard it gets pretty terrible in the mountain villages that no one visits. Being the "outsider" is more troublesome than you might think. You may be able to maintain normal relations on the surface, but there's always backbiting and cynicism in every little thing.

Given the setting of this work, these issues are probably even more severe than what we see nowadays. A problem like this would have meant that Belgrieve and his friends would no longer be allowed into the village. Considering the witch hunts that did actually happen, perhaps exile would be the least of their worries.

However, this is a novel. There's a fundamental issue of what sort of story the author wants to deliver to the reader. Using real countryside issues for conflict is one way to go about it, but this is a fantasy work, and it would be strange to turn to reality for everything. If I wanted to make a realistic work, I don't think I would have put "S-Rank" in the title.

So the outcome might have turned out looking a bit too convenient this time, but this was an intentional decision. I'm sure there are readers out there who think, "This sort of hackneyed stuff just isn't realistic," but please understand that I want to portray a bit of idealism.

The real world's been too stiff-necked these days. Can't there at least be some soft,

tender-minded people in novels? The author thinks so.

I ended up speaking more seriously than I'd hoped. You get into all sorts of trouble after you say things like this. Everything I've just written has to do with my own struggles, and it is not directed at anyone reading this. So please, just forget about the author's senseless drivel and have fun reading. That's more than enough.

In any case, their travels continue. What lies ahead? Some might know already, and some might not, but I hope we all meet again in the next volume.

MOJIKAKIYA, September 2019



Puppy!

Toi8

2019

# BONUS SHORT STORIES

## SASHA FIGHTS ANOTHER DAY

Sasha Bordeaux folded her arms and thought deeply. Before she returned to Bordeaux, she wanted the renowned Paladin to take her seriously enough to at least draw his sword. They had sparred several more times since their match on the first day, but not only had Graham never taken up a sword against her, he hadn't even used both hands. Her mobile combat style that made full use of her prided fleet-footedness seemed like mere child's play to the old elf. Sasha was proud when she rose to AAA-Rank, but the S-Ranks that gathered in these northern outskirts had easily shattered her flimsy pride.

"More diligence! Yep, that's what I need!" She nodded to herself a few times. She was never one to lose heart. When she witnessed a realm of strength beyond her own, she was the sort who grew inspired rather than discouraged. Unbeknownst to her, this attitude had quite a positive impact on the other adventurers of Bordeaux. In any case, moping wasn't getting her anywhere. Sasha sat down on the spot and took a deep breath in.

"What I'm lacking... is a level head! I can't imagine either Sir Graham or my master Belgrieve letting their emotions affect their agility!" Sasha muttered, as though to convince herself. She seemed to have no qualms about putting both those names on the same pedestal.

For the time being, she decided to close her eyes and meditate. She had heard that Belgrieve had achieved results a cut above the rest through his meditation. However, her head was swirling with far more things than she had expected, and she simply couldn't concentrate—and once she acknowledged that, her mind began to go off on even more tangents.

In spite of her irritation with her wandering thoughts, she simply put up with it and continued sitting still even when Angeline appeared.

She was lightly skipping by and swinging around a stick while humming a tune. The sight of Sasha brought her to a halt. "What are you doing?" Angeline asked.

"Oh, if it isn't Ange," Sasha said, opening her eyes. "I thought I'd try meditating... But it's not working out as I'd hoped."

"Hmm." Angeline sat down beside her. The weather was fine today, resulting in a deep blue sky with scattered clouds like firm clumps of cotton. The mountains bearing up the sky were also blue, and they caught the light in a way that made them near blinding to look at.

Wrapping her arms around her knees, Sasha sighed. "Did you ever do meditation training, Ange?"

"Nah. Not really... It's not my strong suit." Even if she didn't straighten up and meditate, Angeline could grasp the flow of mana in her own body with minimal effort.

Sasha tightly clutched her knees and, with her chin resting atop them, frowned. "This must be a difference in talent... No, but..."

"There's no need to force yourself to sit still... Graham said that moving around can also be a sort of meditation," Angeline said, patting Sasha on the head.

Sasha blinked, feeling somewhat abashed. "Come to think of it... In your eyes, how strong is Sir Graham?"

"Too strong... I've met a few people who I thought I might lose against. He's the only one I knew for a fact I'd never beat."

"I-I see... But you don't lose to him when he's bare-handed, right?"

"If I got serious, I'm confident I could get him to draw his sword... But that would only lower my chances even more."

Sasha folded her arms. "If you are saying that... I have a long road ahead of me."

"Want to spar?" Angeline offered, whipping her stick around.

Sasha immediately sprang to her feet, her eyes sparkling. "Can I really?!"

"'Tis my duty to save a girl from her worries... Besides, we all meditate in our own way," Angeline proudly declared, puffing out her chest.

Sasha picked up her sheathed sword, glancing between her weapon and the stick in Angeline's hand.

"Uh... Y-You're not going to use your sword?"

"If you can't beat me like this... Then you're a long way from facing off against Graham's sword," Angeline asserted, swishing the stick around. It was still furnished with fresh green leaves.

Sasha shut her mouth and took up her stance, the tip of her sword angled slightly towards her foe. Perhaps because she was using a different weapon than usual, Angeline held the stick one-handed, with her other hand dangling loosely. She was watching Sasha with probing eyes, but betrayed no openings of her own.

*I must have underestimated her when she said she would use the stick,* Sasha thought with uncharacteristic objectivity. Nevertheless, she was already licking her lips, knowing she would be facing a formidable foe.

*Calm down, calm down,* she told herself as she closely observed each move Angeline made. Then, Angeline suddenly announced, "If you're not coming, I am," and burst forward.

Angeline was already standing right before her. Startled as Sasha was, she blocked the supple stick with her sheath. From deep within her body, Sasha could feel heat beginning to rise up as her mind became clear. *This was what she loved, and she simply couldn't deny it.* There were few opponents on par with her in Bordeaux; just how blessed was she to find so many higher-level partners willing to put up with her now?

*This is my meditation,* she thought gleefully. They exchanged several slashes until Sasha's blade swung through thin air as Angeline struck her with the stick from behind.

"Wah!"

"You're too excited. You can't meditate like that."

Sasha blushed.

## A GRAVE VISIT

Turnera's cemetery lay on the north side of the village. It was an open and sunny place, and though it was quiet, it never felt gloomy. A small brook ran beside it, which joined the larger river a short distance away.

In Turnera, where the spirits of ancestors were held sacred, the graveyard was not a place for mourning. The sleeping dead were like dear neighbors and were so revered. And although there was no one officially designated to the role, someone or other would always keep the place clean and tidy.

It was a gentle day. A bit of time had passed since the forest's attack, and the fields and houses were mostly repaired. Relief supplies and construction workers had come in from Bordeaux, and they were steadily working towards returning to the norms of daily life.

From the distant mountain peaks, icy clouds blew through the air and slowly changed shape as they glistened in the blue sky. The sunlight fell warmly at the end of spring, and the winds were calm. It was the perfect weather for an afternoon nap.

For their part, Belgrieve and Angeline had come to the cemetery. They had been too busy in the village to visit for a long time now.

"What a nice day..." Angeline said. She stretched, groaning in satisfaction.

"A good day indeed."

Around the cemetery's entrance there grew tierra trees, casting pleasant shade onto the ground. Their green leaves, which had budded in early spring, now grew densely.

"It's been a while since we were alone together," Angeline observed as she held onto Belgrieve's arm.

"Ha ha ha, I guess you're right. We're here to visit family, after all."

There were new grave markers amidst the old, but they could find the most ancient ones if they were to make their way to the back. These markers, which once had square corners, had rounded out due to the wind and rain. They were coated in a film of moss that grew wherever the shade was most persistent. The carved names on these stones

had nearly been worn away, and one would need to look long and hard to make out their inscriptions.

"Grandpa, grandma, how have you been..." Angeline crouched down and spoke to one grave. Naturally, there was no reply.

Belgrieve's parents had died when he was still a child—his father, when he was seven, and his mother, when he was eleven. Angeline never had the chance to meet them.

Belgrieve used the broom he'd brought along to swiftly clean the grave and the ones around it, his mind racing through memories of his parents. His father had been a man of few words but a hard worker, and he remembered his mother smiling a lot. Belgrieve's red hair was inherited from her side of the family, though its tendency to curl had come from his father's.

After he had buried his mother and returned home, the house had felt so terribly spacious. He could still clearly remember how he felt at the thought of spending his life there, alone. But his parent's faces had gradually faded from his memory; he could not remember what his father's face had looked like, and his mother's had grown hazy lately as well. However, he still had a distinct memory of his mother's burning red hair and his father's scruffy beard. Perhaps Belgrieve had subconsciously grown out his own beard as a sort of commemoration.

"Do you think grandpa had a yearning for adventure too?" Angeline asked as she set about scraping away the moss.

"I didn't see it in him," Belgrieve replied, shaking his head. "I don't think he ever left Turnera."

"Oh, I see... A trueborn son of Turnera, then," Angeline concluded.

"That your grandpa was. But grandma didn't grow up here. She was the daughter of a peddler, you see... When I was little, she would always tell me about all the places she'd seen before I went to bed."

"Like Checkpoint Haril...?"

"Oh, I'm surprised you remembered."

Some of the stories Belgrieve had told Angeline as a child had come from his mother.

Most of her tales were simple ones. She told about her travels as a peddler, and that was enough to mystify a boy who had only ever known Turnera. There was something beyond the small world of the village, and someone so close to him had seen it. This had kindled Belgrieve's yearning for adventure—though perhaps his mother would have regretted that her stories had resulted in him actually striking out on his own.

*I might not have been the best son*, Belgrieve thought. His parents had both loved their peaceful life in Turnera, and he couldn't imagine that either of them would have wanted their son to become an adventurer. All the less so, given his adventure had ended in his being maimed.

Nevertheless, he did not regret his choice. It was human nature to wonder what could have been if only another path had been taken, but no other road would have led him to the present. Perhaps he hadn't chosen the best route, but he didn't believe he had made a mistake either.

Once he had finished sweeping, Belgrieve offered up the flowers he had plucked on their way to the cemetery.

"It's quite curious. My dad had a dad and a mom of his own... It should be obvious, but I can't imagine it at all," Angeline said, looking between the gravestone and Belgrieve. "Did grandpa look like you, Dad?"

"I'm not so sure... It's been nearly forty years since he passed. To be honest with you, I've completely forgotten."

"Is it that easy to forget a face? Even when he's your dad...?" Angeline wondered, sounding a bit forlorn.

Belgrieve thoughtfully stroked his beard. "All sorts of things have happened since then. Ever since you came to me, Ange, I've been too busy to remember."

"I see..." Angeline took Belgrieve's hand and rubbed her cheek against it. "But no matter what happens after this... I'll never forget your face..."

"Yeah... That's good to know." Belgrieve smiled and gently patted her on the head. "All right, let's get going."

"Yeah."

The two turned back down the same path they had come from. The wind shook the eaves of the tierra trees, and the light that filtered through their leaves flickered and shifted upon the ground below.



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My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer: Volume 6  
by MOJIKAKIYA

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Original Japanese edition published in 2019 by Earth Star Entertainment

This English edition is published by arrangement with Earth Star Entertainment,  
Tokyo

English translation © 2022 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: December 2022

Premium E-Book



PtF by: traitorATZEN