

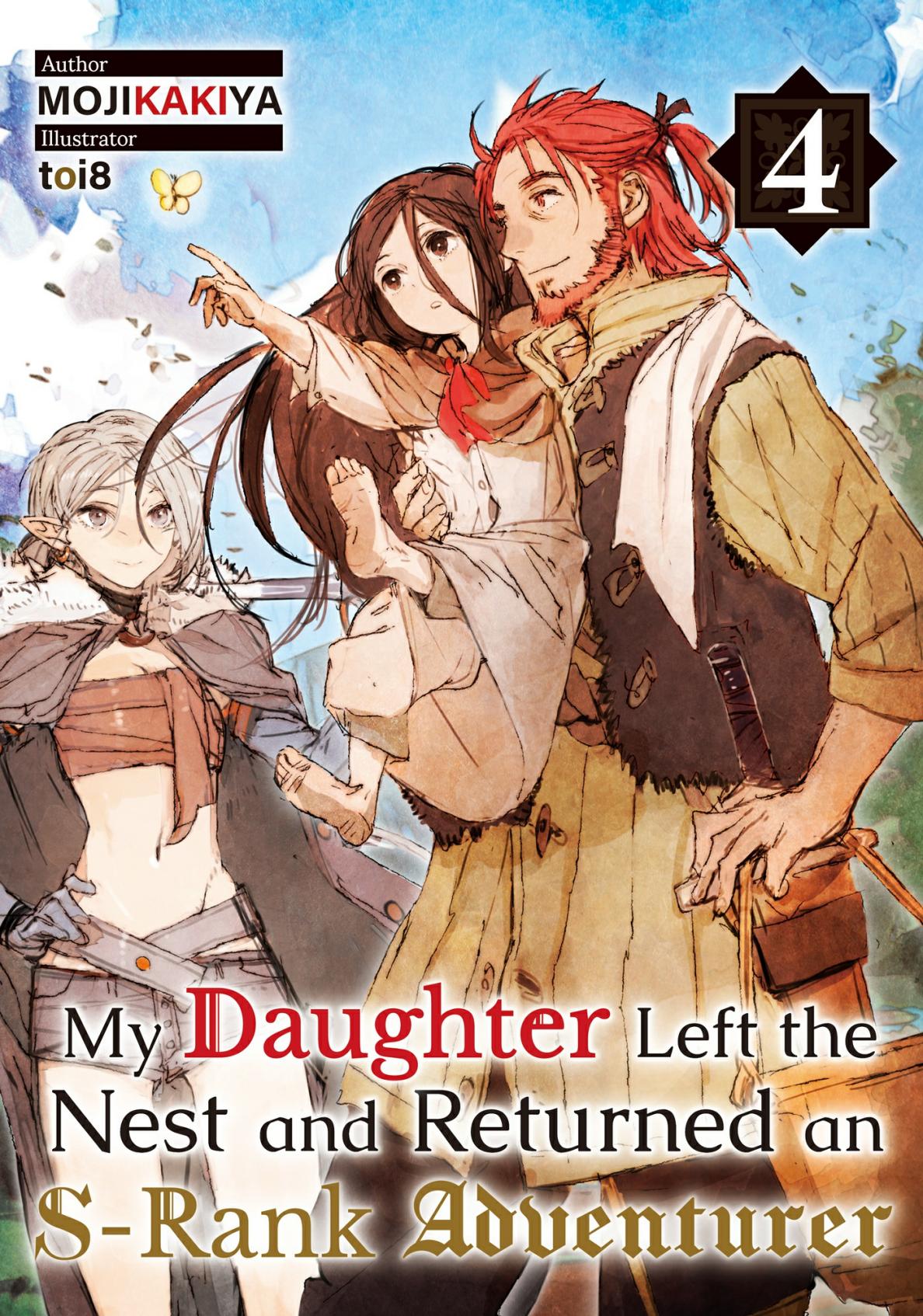
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# My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer



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

Author MOJIKAKIYA Illustrator to18





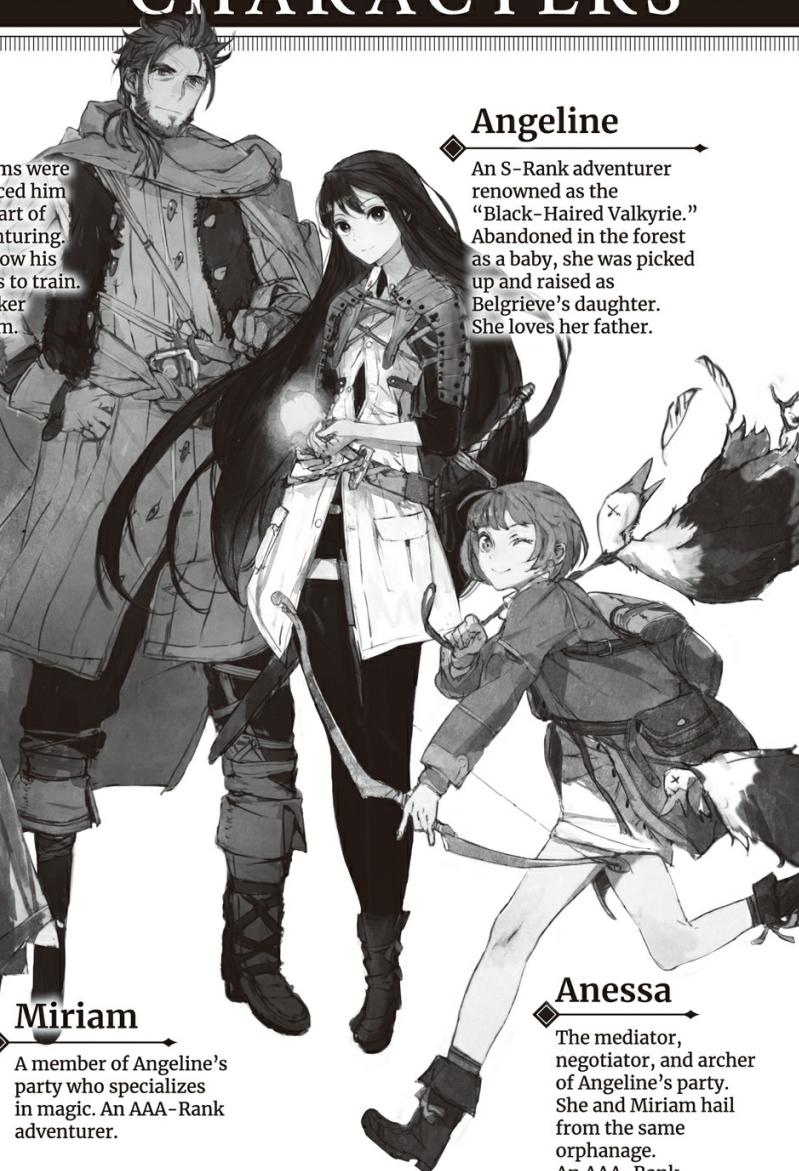
# CHARACTERS

## Belgrieve

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

## Angeline

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



## Miriam

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

## Graham

An old elven adventurer, the living legend known as the Paladin. He found himself in Turnera while pursuing Marguerite.

## Marguerite

Graham's granddaughter, as well as the daughter of the king of an elven forest. Though she may be rough around the edges, she has a very sincere and straightforward personality.

## Mit

The remnants of a demon's power found lingering in the forest. He takes on the form of a child and clings to the residents of Belgrieve's house. Though unexpressive, he is quite curious.

# STORY

After coming back to Turnera, Belgrieve encountered a legendary old elf and his granddaughter, and took it upon himself to help them fit in with the other villagers.

During this time, an ominous force broke out near the village, and once they reached its source, they discovered a mysterious child with the powers of a demon.

**“I don’t think this child is dangerous.”**

And so Belgrieve decided to raise the child, who had since lost most of his power.

Meanwhile, Angeline got it in her head to cure her father’s (presumed) loneliness by finding a bride for him in Orphen.

**“Yes... It’s up to me to search for a proper bride then.”**

Along the way, she encountered the children responsible for the calamity in Bordeaux. Seeing their resolve to atone for their crimes, she offered them shelter even knowing she would have to deal with the various assailants out to kill the children—a challenge Angeline and her comrades ultimately managed to overcome.



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

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

# WORLD MAP

Elf Territory



Ancient Forest

Rodina

Hazel

Bordeaux

Sid

Elvgren

Garuda

Orphen

Asterinos

Estogal City

Turnera

Haril Checkpoint

Northern Trade Route

Erin

Tyldes

Eastern Trade Route

Benares

Yobem Checkpoint



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# Chapter 43: It Seemed to Be an Underground Dungeon

It seemed to be an underground dungeon, in which the cold, inorganic iron bars would creak from time to time.

A man was moving with a jangling sound. The faint torchlight cast the otherwise drab stone interior in much-needed color. There were several rusted iron chains fastened to the windowless walls, one of which was attached to someone—a human lying flat on the floor.

Whoever he was, the man did not seem so emaciated as to be immobilized. The chained man lay there using his own arms as a pillow, with sandal-clad legs sprawled out and a wide-brimmed derby hat atop his face. He exuded an easygoing mood, as though this were simply an afternoon nap. Several empty bottles—liquor, presumably—littered the floor around his supine form.

Eventually, the clanging of metal armor gave way to a party of soldiers on the other side of the iron bars.

“Get up,” said a man in black armor, evidently their captain. However, the man in the cell responded only with folded legs, showing no other indication of complying. In his irritation, the armored captain kicked the bars. “How long do you plan to lie about like that?”

“As long as I can. I’d die like this if I could,” the man in the cell replied, rather carefree. The voice was masculine—a tad high, though somewhat gravelly as well.

The armored man folded his arms. “Pathetic... Are you really an archmage?”

“I don’t care what people call me without my say-so.” The man in the cell painstakingly lifted his torso. He shifted his hat from his face to the top of his head.

He looked to be about forty. Only a tattered long-sleeved shirt and a pair of trousers covered his slender, spindly body. The brown hair that grew out

from beneath the hat stretched past his shoulders and melded with his thick beard that seemed to have been grown more as a matter of laziness than of grooming.

“I was dreaming, see,” the man muttered to no one in particular. There was a touch of joy in his voice. “Dreaming of once upon a time... Me and them, we were all so young—I was the youngest, you know... Those were some fun times.”

With that, the man in the hat held his knees and sighed. His breath came out as a white mist.

The armored captain cackled. “So you’re clinging to illusions of the past... Just look how far a hero has fallen. But that’s more convenient for us.”

“A hero, heh...” the prisoner mused, cynically chuckling back.  
“Ridiculous.”

The armored captain scowled. “Hmph... So be it. Now get out here. The lord has summoned you.”

“No way.”

“What did you say?”

“I don’t feel up for it. I don’t feel like doing anything these days.” And with that, the man in the hat pressed his chin into his hands, which were clasped over his knees.

The armored captain began tapping the toe of his boot against the ground, a vein popping on his forehead. The soldiers behind him raised their weapons to intimidate the man in the cell.

“That’s enough from you. Keep putting on that arrogant act and...”

“And?” The prisoner stared back at them. “What would you intend to do then? You think you and these men of yours are enough to do anything to me?”

The captain paused. He thought for a moment, then said, “You don’t think this is enough?”

“You can try me, but you’ll die.”

The man in the hat grinned, sticking up his index finger and swirling it in the air. The surrounding mana gathered, and the wind rose even though there was no inlet for air. As their capes billowed, the soldiers swallowed their breath.

Tightly pursing his lips, the man in black armor glared at the prisoner for a while. Then, he finally clicked his tongue and pointed his men away. The

soldiers lowered their weapons and loosened their stances, and with flurried steps, they took off.

The man in the hat disinterestedly waved his finger. His shackles immediately came undone, crashing to the floor. He gingerly picked them up with two fingers and tossed them aside. He absentmindedly stared at the ceiling—at the shadows that swayed from the torch’s flame.

He let out a great yawn, wiped away some tears with a finger, and let out a lonesome sigh.

“Percy, Satie...Bell... How’s everyone doing these days...” he muttered before tilting his hat back down over his face.

○

As the harvest season neared, the spring-sown wheat gradually took on a golden hue, its ears growing heavier as they danced in the breeze.

Belgrieve carefully grabbed one of the stalks, shaking it to check its weight and fullness. He tore off a bit, peeling the husk and letting it rest on his palm. The tightly packed grains were nicely glossy—a fine product once again. He was already beginning to look forward to the harvest.

Soon, there would be a greater yield in the mountain as well: wild grapes, cowberries, akebia, mushrooms, and all manner of fruits, nuts, and herbs. With luck, he might find honey as well. He usually entered the forest alone, but the youngsters would often tag along this time of year. Of course, now that those youngsters had picked up the means to fend for themselves, they were starting to venture out on their own accord.

The village was hectic with preparations for the fall festival. By the time the cider barrels were full, the wheat would be ready to harvest. Then, it would be time to strew wheat for the next season, harvest the legumes, stockpile fuel, and prepare preserved food and livestock feed to sustain them through the winter... It was one event after another with hardly a moment to catch their collective breath. The villagers would give it their all to make the winter more bearable. Belgrieve did not just tend his own crops, but helped in others’ fields as well; Duncan did much the same.

In his head, he thought through the various stages of work while Mit waddled over and clung to his leg. Scissors were useless on the boy’s long hair, so it had been tied back.

“Dad..”

“Hmm?” Belgrieve lifted him up. “What’s wrong? Where’s grandpa?” he asked.

“Grampa, there.”

Belgrieve turned, his eyes tracing Mit’s gesturing before landing upon Graham and Marguerite squaring off with wooden swords in hand. Even Marguerite, who typically wielded her sword with arrogance, was visibly anxious to face off against Graham. She had a serious look on her face, maintaining a steady stance as she cautiously waited for an opportunity to strike.

The elf master and student had blended right into Turnera. They had no intentions of settling down here, but Graham didn’t plan to leave for the time being—not when Mit was around.

Marguerite had, evidently, come face to face with her own inadequacies. Not only did she beg Graham to retrain her from the ground up, she also headed out to the forest with Belgrieve and the others to learn how to search and explore. She already had some experience in the field, but there was something to be said for gaining a new perspective. The elves saw forests as a place to live, while adventurers saw it as a wilderness to explore; Marguerite seemed quite intrigued by this difference.

In the village, she was as rowdy as ever—but though she remained rough and reckless, she would stop to think now and again and go off to wander the grassy plains on her own. Her troubled face as she wandered off—framed by the characteristic comely features of her tribe—made her seem so terribly ephemeral.

Meanwhile, Belgrieve was practicing with his sword far less than before. He never missed his morning and evening practice sessions, but he now focused more on breathing and meditation. At forty-three years old, training his body was no longer the most direct way to increase his abilities. Training as though he were still a young man could have the opposite effect, and reckless muscle training would only slow his decline.

Under Graham’s instruction, he had taken a step forward in improving synergy with his blade, as well as in moving mana efficiently through his body. His dynamic style had shifted to a more static one, and while it may have been hard for others to tell, Belgrieve could feel he was definitely changing.

*How ironic*, he thought. Back when he fought as an adventurer, he felt as though he had reached the limit of his ability as a frontline fighter. However, the loss of his leg had forced him to swing his sword in a different way. He would never have bloomed like this otherwise.

Belgrieve chuckled as he watched Graham's wooden sword smack into Marguerite. The girl was incredibly strong, yet it was as though she were a complete amateur next to her granduncle.

Mit pointed with a curious look on his face. "Grampa and Maggie fighting?"

"I wouldn't exactly call it that."

"But it looks painful..."

"Don't worry. It's just pain, and nothing more." Belgrieve caught the boy before he could slide down. "Now then, I have another job to get to. What do you want to do, Mit? Go with dad? Or go back to grandpa?"

"With dad..."

"All right."

With Mit in his arms, Belgrieve walked by the side of the field. He could hear seed-sowing songs being hummed and sung here and there.

The potatoes planted in spring needed to be dug up. Those tubers were the second-most important staple food next to wheat. Thankfully, they could grow vigorously even in the cold of the north.

He tore through the ground with a hoe and placed any potato he saw into his basket. He was used to the work but had to crouch down to do it. Now and then, he would have to stand and stretch his back, or it wouldn't hold out.

As Belgrieve excavated potatoes, Mit sat by the side letting his gaze wander through space. He seemed to be focused on the bugs that would fly by. Suddenly, a cricket sprung into the air—Mit quickly caught it in his hands and shoved it into his mouth.

With a sidelong glance, Belgrieve frowned and made his way over.

"Hey now, Mit."

"Mmm."

"I told you, no eating things off the ground."

"Mmm."

"Did you think I wasn't watching? You can't do that."

While Mit seemed reluctant, he did nod ever so slightly. Belgrieve heaved a deep sigh.

Each time he saw such a display, he was reminded that Mit wasn't truly human. He wasn't limited to bugs either. At mealtime, the boy would occasionally bite into the plate his food was served on, and other times, he would chow down on leaves, branches, and rocks he found at the end of the yard. Belgrieve would give him a scolding whenever this happened, but perhaps because he was so young, it was difficult to break his habits.

The villagers doted on Mit, seeing him as an ordinary abandoned child; Belgrieve had no idea how they would react if they caught sight of such behavior. He hoped they would laugh it off, thinking he was simply a peculiar tyke. However, they could also come to fear him as a mysterious entity.

Belgrieve was always very tense whenever he saw that side of Mit come out. He never let him run off and play with the other children, nor would he entrust him to anyone else's care besides Graham or Duncan.

This wasn't something that could be hidden forever. The day would come when they would have to pull back the curtain, and Belgrieve couldn't stop worrying about what to do about that. Other than his eating habits, Mit was completely harmless. He was innocent, curious, and cute—if a tad unexpressive—and a little more infantile than his appearance would suggest. The villagers adored him.

“Que será, será, I guess,” Belgrieve muttered to himself as he tossed another potato into his basket. He took a glance at Mit to see the boy rocking back and forth with his eyes closed.

“Heeey, Bell!” Duncan suddenly called to him.

Belgrieve lifted his face. “What's wrong?”

“It's almost time for lunch. Kerry wanted to know if you wanted to eat with him.”

“Oh, it's already that late.”

Before he realized it, the sun was already high in the sky, and his basket was full.

“All right, let's go. Come here, Mit.”

Mit toddled his way over. Belgrieve placed the basket of potatoes down by the side of the field and lifted the child up.



A great many shadows danced against the murky gray walls of Orphen's adventurers' guild, which was as lively as ever.

"The Turnera Marriage Party will be a complete failure at this rate..." Angeline murmured, her face planted into a table in the lobby.

The man sitting across from her shook his head. "I don't know what you're talking about, but my condolences."

"Hey, Mr. Ed. You know any good bride candidates?"

"Don't ask me. In the first place, shouldn't you be out looking for a groom?"

"Not for me... For dad."

The man called Mr. Ed tilted his head. "Your dad? He's not married?"

"Yeah... I was a foundling. He picked me up..."

Mr. Ed—or rather, Edgar—nodded, now somewhat intrigued. His short hair was a near-black shade of brown, and he wore a bandana over his brow. He was one of Lionel's old party members and had rushed to Orphen from the imperial capital. He was still an active AAA-Rank adventurer. Upon his return, he fought on the front lines and negotiated behind the scenes, smoothly taking on whatever job was needed to support Lionel.

His odd jobs rarely put him anywhere near Angeline, so while they had occasionally exchanged small talk, they had never sat down for a conversation like this.

Angeline's plan of finding a bride for Belgrieve was at an impasse—mostly because all the bridal candidates she had arbitrarily selected were not as enthusiastic as her. Angeline herself hadn't given up yet, but it wasn't like just anyone would do. That said, she had already visited everyone she thought might fit the bill and had painted herself into a corner.

Now thoroughly crestfallen at the thought that she would never have a mother, Angeline would complain to each and every person who would hear her out.

Edgar rubbed the flame out of a paper roll of tobacco and took a sip of his tea. "Your dad's the Red Ogre, right? You think he's in the same generation as me?"

"How old are you, Mr. Ed?"

"Forty this year. Same as Leo. Ahh, how time flies..." With that, Edgar leaned back into his chair, letting the weight of all the years settle in. He placed a new roll of tobacco between his teeth. Although he still looked

young at a distance, the wrinkles beneath his eyes were a bit too conspicuous, and a bit of white had begun mixing in with his follicles. “So what’s your old man’s age?”

“Forty-three.”

“Hmm, a bit older, but just about the same generation. He was an adventurer, was he?”

“Yeah...” Angeline sipped her tea.

Edgar lit his tobacco as he let his mind wander. “Red Ogre, eh. Yeah, I’ll be honest, I don’t know a thing about him. Was he really an adventurer in Orphen?”

“He was.”

“Hmm...” Edgar folded his arms. He seemed to be searching for even the faintest notion to cling to, but there was no way he could have any idea of who Belgrieve was—this moniker had been made up by Angeline herself.

“Who was famous in your generation, Mr. Ed?”

“Hmm, well, let’s see. There were plenty of strong ones, but the first name that comes to mind would have to be the Exalted Blade. See, Leo was an S-Rank too, but he never really left a mark because he was in the shadow of that monster. Though that guy left Orphen pretty quickly, so I didn’t see much of him.”

“Did he head off to the imperial capital?”

“Nah, I heard he left Rhodesia. Skipped past Lucrecia and Tyldes for the Eastern Federation or something. It’s all rumors, and it’s an old story. I couldn’t tell you where he is now.”

“Is he stronger than my dad?”

“How should I know... Is your dad that strong?”

“He’s stronger than me.”

“Well that’s incredible.” Edgar scratched his cheek with a dry laugh.

There wasn’t an adventurer in the general vicinity of Orphen who didn’t know Angeline’s skill level. She was famous for slaying a demon, and many had sparred with her to experience her prowess firsthand. If a ranking were made of all the adventurers in the dukedom, it would be faster to find her by counting from the top.

Yet there was a man that Angeline praised so highly. Perhaps Angeline was simply hyping him up, but by now, he was famous among all the reinstated former S-Rank adventurers. This made him all the more intriguing.

Edgar propped his head up, a look of wonder on his face. “Why is someone so incredible in the furthest reaches of the north...”

“He’s protecting our homeland... Turnera is safe because he is there.”

“Is your homeland at war with the elves or something?”

Suddenly, there was a call from the desk. “That’s for me,” Edgar said. He bowed and took his leave.

Angeline downed the rest of her floral tea and slouched into her chair, idly looking around. The building was abuzz with job seekers and the employees assigning them. *With so many people around, I can’t blame them for keeping me waiting.*

She was waiting for the verdict on her application for time off.

Things had changed since the mass fiend outbreak, and there shouldn’t have been anything holding her back from leaving, but various systems were being tested out and formalized as the guild tried to go independent. For the time being, at least, and even if only for appearance’s sake, they had to go through the proper procedures for everything. Thus here she was, waiting.

Angeline arm wrestled herself in boredom. She had entrusted Charlotte and Byaku to Anessa and had absolutely nothing to do now that her conversation partner had left. Still, she couldn’t leave yet, so she sat and waited.

At times like this, she could only let her imagination run free. Once she got her time off, she intended to return to Turnera. Whether she would be back in Orphen before winter, or whether she would pass the winter in Turnera and return in spring—she would decide that once she got there. For what it was worth, her application stated she would be gone for two months, but she had no intention of holding herself to that, and she couldn’t imagine how that could be a problem.

To start with, she would introduce Charlotte and Byaku to her dad. He would surely be surprised, but he would welcome them warmly. Charlotte wouldn’t be lonely with Belgrieve, and Byaku’s twisted personality would be beaten into shape too.

Then, she would go out to the mountain to pick cowberries, grapes, akebias, and mushrooms too. With luck, perhaps she could even catch an elenia bird.

The potatoes would be harvested by then. *Then what about the spring wheat?* If the harvest was over, they could eat bread baked with freshly

milled flour. The dough was nice when torn into small strips and boiled. *If we have mutton, then we could prepare it with root vegetables and jarlberries...*

“Ha... I can’t wait.” She chuckled to herself while a passing party of young adventurers cast dubious looks in her direction.

After playing in the forest of her imagination for some time, she was finally called to the reception desk. Angeline headed over to find Yuri smiling as she spread documents over the counter. “All right, please read through these. If everything is in order, I’ll need you to sign here.”

“Done.” Angeline’s pen raced slickly over the page without a second thought before she returned the form to Yuri. She trusted that the Orphen guild wouldn’t possibly try to cheat her at this point. Frankly, she felt rather offended that all the waiting amounted to nothing more than a single signature.

“Anything you can do about all this paperwork...?”

A troubled look crossed Yuri’s face. “I’m sorry. The guild doesn’t have any problems with you leaving, but the prominent nobles will give us an earful. ‘Why are you sending away such a valuable asset?’ they’d complain to us. We need to at least look a little reluctant.”

“Hmm... I’m human too. Not a tool to kill fiends. I need my time off.”

“Yes, I think that’s how it should be. I think a little scolding will be enough for Leo to figure it out.”

Angeline smiled as she pictured Lionel’s pale face. “The guild master is too weak-willed...”

“Hee hee, Leo has always been a coward. That’s how he’s survived so long.”

“Yes... My dad said that a little cowardice is necessary... You should come to Turnera one of these days, Yuri.”

Yuri laughed it off and patted Angeline on the head. “Nice try, Ange. Now go and have fun.”

“Grrr...”

Now she was being ignored even when she hadn’t brought up marriage at all. Angeline pursed her lips, but there was no point in taking Yuri there against her will. She turned around and headed off to the usual tavern.

A fall wind was blowing, but the sun still carried the scent of summer.

# Chapter 44: They All Had a Faint Hunch

They all had a faint hunch that rain was coming. The morning clouds gradually spread to cover the sky, and a shower was falling by noon.

It started light, and so the day's work continued in rain gear. But the downpour grew steadily stronger, and by the time the sun wended its way down, the droplets were popping and bouncing against the ground. The villagers retreated to their homes, staring reproachfully at the dark skies above.

Belgrieve was among those going home. He had finished digging out the potatoes from his own field but hadn't finished harvesting the wheat from other fields he helped out with. They would have to wait for them to dry, which would take quite some time. There was still much work to be done plucking legumes as well.

Rain was rare in Turnera at this time of year. Once winter came, they could expect cloudy and snowy days, but fall was generally accompanied by good weather. This only made the village all the more restless when a sudden downpour took them by surprise.

"Can't really argue with nature, though..." he muttered as he stared out the window.

The heavy clouds made it dark even though the sun had yet to set. Behind him, Duncan started a fire in the hearth, Graham tended to Mit, and Marguerite chopped vegetables for their meal. This motley cast had all grown accustomed to their shared living situation and had developed their own division of labor without any prompting.

"Hey, Bell. Can I use the dried meat here?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

Marguerite dexterously sliced up the dried meat and added it to the pot as well. Despite her rough and tough personality, she was surprisingly good at cooking. It wasn't as though she had an intricate sense for the balance of spices, but she could make the sort of dish that anyone would like well enough. This was not a skill she practiced; apparently, she was able to

instinctively anticipate the taste of the ingredients.

Graham came to the window with Mit in his arms and looked at the sky. It seemed to be a uniform gray beyond the raindrops, but on closer inspection, Belgrieve could make out the flow of the clouds.

“This is a long one,” said the old elf. “It will rain through the night.”

“Hmm, I see... Then we’re lucky we got the potatoes out in time.”

“Rain is rare in this season...in the north, anyways. Let’s hope it’s not an omen.”

“Hey now, Graham. Please don’t say anything so sinister. It feels like something really will happen when it’s you saying that,” Belgrieve replied.

Graham smiled wryly and scratched his head. “Sorry, Bell. It’s a bad habit.”

“Grampa, made him mad?” Mit tugged on Graham’s long hair.

Graham smiled, not put off in the slightest. “Yes... I can’t win against Bell.”

Ever since the incident in the forest, Graham had come to treat Belgrieve as a trusted confidant, and he wanted to be treated the same in turn. Given his renown, the elf hero hardly had anyone he could call a close friend. Belgrieve was a bit reserved at first but began speaking more casually once he understood Graham’s circumstances. The elf was more than twice his age, but they acted as though they were equals. The man did not want to be held in awe and adoration as a hero—he craved someone to treat him as an individual.

When all was said and done, Graham had completely taken to his babysitting role. He was unfamiliar with field work and couldn’t help out very much, but he liked looking after Mit. Graham would claim he was conducting research on demons, but he had the soft expression of a grandfather whenever he was with the child. For this very reason, he would find himself looking after Turnera’s other children as well. Reticent and stately as he was, only the innocent children would boldly approach him.



Belgrieve's house had adopted yet another new rhythm that was gradually fixing itself in place. While the simmering stew let off steam, the steamed potatoes were crushed and kneaded with flour into dumplings before being steamed again. After this, plenty of stew was poured over them and they were topped with a bit of shaved goat cheese.

"Food's ready. Is it still raining?"

"It's not stopping soon. Even if it did, the ground's too slippery to work today," Belgrieve answered as he brought the plates to the table.

Duncan sighed. "Bother. We haven't finished with the wheat yet."

"This is something we have no control over."

"Hmm... Even if it is inevitable, it's still quite irritating."

Belgrieve could barely contain his laughter, seeing how far the farmer mindset had gotten into Duncan. He had a good reputation as a strong and hard worker. His skill with the axe meant his work was not limited to the fields; the lumberjacks acknowledged his prowess. It seemed Duncan himself was not too opposed to the peacefulness he felt here, which was distinctly different from the adventurer life. He had missed the right time to leave the village behind.

They ate an early dinner, their ears perked to the sound of the rain—or rather, the sound of raindrops drumming against the roof and ground. The noise continued incessantly, yet it was as if this terrible din only amplified the stillness. Everyone listened silently, reluctant to break it.

Using her thumb to wipe stew from her mouth, Marguerite finally said, "Hey... It will be hard to leave Turnera when winter comes, right?"

"Yeah, I doubt it's as bad as elven territory, but the snow comes down pretty thick around here. The roads aren't maintained, so it will be quite a bit of trouble to leave."

"I see..." Marguerite quietly brought a spoon to her mouth. She lifted her face, which bore a deeply serious expression and a glint of resolve in her eyes. "Well... I'm thinking of leaving Turnera before winter."

Graham's brow twitched. He stared back at Marguerite. "Where do you intend to go?"

"South. Turnera's a nice place, but my mind's set. I want to become an adventurer like you. I want to see something new."

"I doubt I can stop you," Graham said as he stroked the child on his lap.

Mit looked at Marguerite, perplexed. "Maggie is leaving?"

“Yeah, but not forever. I’ll be back once I’m a first-rate adventurer, just you wait.” She reached out and patted Mit’s head. But the boy kept looking at her with those same curious eyes.

*This is rather nostalgic,* Belgrieve thought. He could feel the corners of his lips rising.

“I’m done,” Marguerite said, standing with her bowl.

“Well, if you’re leaving, it’ll be after the fall festival.”

“Huh? Why?”

“There will be plenty of peddlers and caravans here for the festival. You should go with them when they leave,” Belgrieve suggested. But Marguerite grimaced at the thought.

“Bleh, that sounds so uncool. It’d be a lot easier to just travel alone.”

Graham closed his eyes and shook his head.

“You won’t become first-rate like that,” Belgrieve said with a strained smile. “Do you plan on heading out alone and getting lost again?”

“Ugh...” Marguerite groaned, blushing.

Duncan chuckled. “Maggie, an adventurer must always think of how to minimize the load and the risk. A needless burden might dull your movements at an inopportune moment.”

“Duncan’s right... Marguerite, it seems there are many things you have yet to learn.”

“Urgh... I-I’ll do my best.”

Marguerite hung her head, imagining Graham’s harsh training that awaited her.

○

Byaku tumbled along the ground as if he had taken a harsh smack. Across from him stood Maria, who seemed terribly displeased.

“What do you think you’re doing? Can’t even dodge that? Cough.”

“Can it.”

Irritated, Byaku stood up and held out his arms. His three-dimensional circles manifested, and his hair took on a black tint. But Maria swiftly waved a finger. The space around them seemed to flicker and distort, and Byaku suddenly collapsed forward as though someone had pushed him from behind.

“We won’t have any of that. No relying on demon power.”

“Curses...”

Byaku forced himself up and swung an arm. A sand-colored circle flew at Maria only to collide with an unseen barrier before it could reach her. Still, Maria nodded.

“Good, that’s the spirit. Be more conscious of the mana organ in your body. Separate that demon’s mana from your own. *Hack, hack...*”

“Grr...”

But as he ran out of steam, his hair turned into a speckled mess of black and white. Maria instantly struck him to the ground with her magic.

“Too soon. Try maintaining it longer.”

“You old hag... Get off your high horse!”

Rising with a furious roar, Byaku enlarged his circle to absurd proportions and tried smashing her from above. However, his frenzied blow was swatted away by Maria with just one finger as though it were nothing, and he was struck down again.

“Do you think screaming makes you stronger?” Maria hissed. “Enough tantrums, you brat—*cough! Hack, hack! Cough, hack!*”

It seemed a gob of phlegm had become lodged in her windpipe. As she endured the impressive choking fit, Angeline raced over to rub her back.

“You okay, granny...?”

“*Cough...* How irritating...” Maria grimaced and spat a load of saliva onto the ground. Meanwhile, Charlotte helped Byaku up from the dirt.

They were in the training hall owned by Orphen’s guild, a spacious plot of dirt surrounded by stone walls. This facility was where adventurers new and old practiced their techniques. The walls were embedded with magic sequences that strengthened them to the extreme, and not even powerful magic could knock them down. Nevertheless, they were dotted here and there with marks left by history’s greats.

At first, Maria had begun investigating demons in her spare time. She became far more invested in it than she had anticipated, neglecting all her other research to dig into demons and everything concerning them. It hadn’t been long at all, but she wasn’t renowned as one of the empire’s archmages for nothing—she was already beginning to grasp the nature of the beings called demons.

It was during this period that her interests aligned with Angeline’s—namely, doing something about the demon within Byaku. She would teach

the boy how to handle mana and fight, all while investigating the nature of his mana.

Byaku could manipulate his circles at a considerably high level; however, he depended on his dormant demon for much of his power. Angeline wasn't too happy about that, and neither was Byaku—whenever he overexerted those powers, he could feel the demon corroding his personality. Thus, he accepted Angeline's proposal and underwent Maria's training.

However, Maria's training was more than harsh—she didn't hold back in the slightest, and if he failed in any way, he would be mercilessly assailed by her magic. Even when he succeeded, she would not offer praise.

Angeline had heard rumors, but now that she was seeing it firsthand, she could somewhat understand why Miriam was always bad-mouthing her old teacher. Even so, to her, it seemed this cruel regimen stemmed from Maria's awkward kindness. That was why Miriam cared for her, even if she was always so toxic.

Byaku stood up with a coughing fit of his own.

"Are you okay, Byaku...?" Charlotte asked, rubbing his back.

"Tsk." Slumped over with a hand on one knee, he glared at Maria. "One more time, hag. I think I got it."

"Quit calling this poor little maiden a hag. If you think you've got it, just come at me already. *Hack...*"

The two resumed their fight, so Angeline led Charlotte away.

"Do you think he'll be all right, sis?"

"He'll be fine. I don't *think* granny is trying to kill him."

Byaku kept a low stance, moving freely around the field as he manipulated his circles. From time to time his hair would change color, but never all of it. It seemed he was slowly picking up on how to keep the demon contained. Maria was abnormally harsh, but she was not wrong.

A tad frightened by the vicious exchange, Charlotte quietly squeezed Angeline's hand. Angeline gripped back. The young girl let out a relieved breath.



“Are you scared of battle?” Angeline asked her.

“Yeah... When I had Samigina’s ring, it seemed like I could do anything.” Charlotte bit her lip. She remembered how that feeling of omnipotence had made her arrogant.

In these peaceful days she spent with Angeline and her friends, everyone was so kind and gentle. It became harder and harder for her to think back to when she hated everything and wanted it all gone.

When she went on her pilgrimage as Solomon’s priestess, though she had hated the sight of blood, she had no qualms about hurting others. Her heart was filled with vengeance, and her past as a noble’s daughter had filled her with an inflated sense of self-importance. She had scorned everyone she met, even if only to justify her own actions.

However, now that she had become a completely powerless girl, she had learned just how terrifying it was to fight. And so, she found herself clinging to Angeline and her warmth.

Angeline placed a hand on Charlotte’s shoulder.

“But there’s no telling what will happen... You should learn magic one of these days.”

Charlotte shook. “From Maria?”

“No, from someone a little kinder.” Angeline smiled bitterly, seeing Byaku blown sky-high.

Byaku was finally at his limit, so they had to end training at that. Although he had humiliation written all over his face, he accepted Angeline’s help to stand.

“Drat... Why do I have to borrow your shoulder...”

“Don’t be shy, don’t be shy. Your big sis has your back.”

Byaku scowled, attempting to stand on his own and push Angeline away. But he soon stumbled to his knees again.

“What are you doing...?” Angeline asked, wearily taking him by the hand.

“Sh-Shut up...”

“You don’t have to be so bashful, Byaku. Your big sis is just concerned for—”

“I’m not bashful!”

In the midst of their prattle, Maria came over with the same displeased expression as ever. She stooped down, sandwiching Byaku’s face between her hands. She tugged him close to her own face. He could feel her breath.

They were close enough for their foreheads to touch.

Byaku's eyes widened in terror. "What?!"

Angeline and Charlotte looked away, their cheeks red, their faces covered with their hands. But they took cheeky peeks from the gaps in their fingers. Byaku was visibly dismayed.

"S-Stop!"

"Huh? This ain't a kiss. What are you misunderstanding, you precocious brat?"

Byaku glared at her, his cheeks flushed. Maria stared into his eyes—her disgruntled mug reflected back in his black pupils. She concentrated, searching out the demon Caim that hid in their depths. Only a faint shadow flickered before fading like a mirage.

"Hmph... You kept it in better than—" She was interrupted by a strike from behind, a blow to her crown from a twisted staff. Suddenly, a galaxy of stars was laid out before her. Maria held her head, squatting down in agony.

"Owww..."

"You lusty old crone! What do you think you're doing to our Bucky?!"

Miriam stood squarely with rage on her face. Maria glared at her through teary eyes.

"You...stupid...disciple! What makes you think you can strike your master?!"

"Don't you go playing dumb! Your faces were almost..." Miriam trailed off.

Maria stood up and loathingly scowled, slapped off Miriam's hat, and grabbed her by the ears. "Hopping to conclusions, you harebrained cat?! You want me to make cat soup out of you?!"

"Ow ow ow! Wh-What do you think you're—"

Miriam tossed down her staff and began grappling with the woman. They continued squabbling like that a while longer. Nevertheless, they were both magicians and one of them was sickly; it wasn't much of a fight.

As Angeline watched, rather bemused, Anessa came up next to her.

"What's going on here?"

"Granny was taking a look at the demon inside Byaku. Then Merry had a misunderstanding."

"And that led to this? Good grief, I can't tell if they actually get along or not..."

As magicians, neither of them was well suited to physical combat, and it wasn't long before they were both on their knees, gasping for breath.

"I think they're good friends."

"I guess so."

Angeline and Anessa exchanged a look and laughed.

Byaku unsteadily teetered over with Charlotte's support, angrily clicking his tongue. "Dammit... What an outrageous hag," he cursed.

"Hm hmm, you're pretty cute when you're embarrassed, Bucky."

"Don't call me Bucky. And in the first place, if she's looking into demons, she should have a look at you too."

"My strength comes from my father. How many times must I tell you?"

"Tsk... How empty-headed can you be..."

"Hey, you can't say that to big sis!"

Charlotte lightly struck her palm against Byaku's forehead. The boy let out a resigned sigh.

# Chapter 45: The Red-Haired Boy Looked Somewhat Tense

The red-haired boy looked somewhat tense as he placed a hand on the hilt at his waist. Though there was a clear blue sky above, a horde of fiends roared out just across the grassy plain below.

The boy was joined by adventurers of all ages, each with their trusted weapons in hand. But they were mostly the young ones—naturally so, as most of the adventurers here weren't any higher than C-Rank.

This was a joint subjugation quest: a mass outbreak of humanoid fiends had begun pouring out from a dungeon. As these were not high-ranking fiends, the guild recruited adventurers and parties up to C-Rank, hoping to give them some experience.

“Hey, don’t just watch this time!” a competent adventurer beside him barked.

The red-haired boy hung his head. “Right...” he muttered.

It hadn’t even been a month since he joined this party. They were novices just like him, and he had found them taking applicants in the guild. The red-haired boy had already been in several parties before; his sword arm was mid-tier at best, but his skills of observation, preparation, and vigilance—all of which stemmed from his natural cautiousness—were abnormally high.

This would have been a blessing had he been an archer or a magician on the back line, but he was a swordsman—it was his role to be useful at the vanguard. This mismatch earned him dubious ratings from every party he’d done a stint with, none of which had lasted for long.

His current party was the same. These hot-blooded, greenhorn recruits would never stop for a second to observe the situation—and they saw nothing wrong with that. In fact, low-ranking requests could often be cleared through brute force without wasting time on developing a strategy. The boy who would always begin an encounter by waiting to see how his opponent approached him had been labeled as a coward and was already being treated

harshly by his new comrades.

The guild's high-ranking adventurers ordered the subjugation force to advance. The fiends responded in kind, crying out as they charged forth. The adventurers excitedly raised their weapons, bursting with the desire to achieve more than anyone else.

“Here we go!”

The boy's party was among them, pushing and shoving to join the front line. Although he raced after them, he was a tad slow. The front lines of both forces made contact and immediately devolved into a free-for-all. Weapons clashed, arrows flew, and magic flashed as the air was filled with war cries and screams.

Keeping mostly to himself, the red-haired boy concentrated on defeating the fiends that appeared in the other adventurers' blind spots as he tried to grasp the situation.

Every adventurer was in a frenzy, focused on nothing more than slaying the enemy before their eyes. The fact that their foes were not much of a challenge only spurred on their wild charge. Defeating enough monsters would mean a rise in rank and reputation. They were different from a unified army, but so long as they achieved results, they could do whatever they wanted.

Perhaps that was why no one apart from the boy seemed to notice.

“No... Not good!”

The red-haired boy raced to the right flank, where a great throng of fiends had taken a large detour and was headed straight at them. He searched for the party's commander as he ran, but the man was busy steering the adventurers who were all rampaging separately. The boy could tell his voice wouldn't reach, but that didn't stop him from trying.

“This way!” he cried, sword at the ready. “They're coming!”

A few nearby adventurers noticed him and saw the ambush coming their way. They braced themselves and intercepted the fiends coming at them. The enemy had the initiative, but they failed to pull off the surprise attack.

How much time had passed? He couldn't say. The battle was a victory for the subjugation force. It wasn't without incident, of course; the dead and injured were in no short supply. Some groaned at their wounds, but most were celebrating, drunk in their victory.

The red-haired boy leaned against his sword like a cane and heaved a deep

breath.

Ultimately, he had only managed to fend off flanking fiends at the very start. The other adventurers took over from there. There were plenty of folks better than him at the sword. This left a problem with his numbers. The commander had been wracking his brain over how to curtail the chaos, and no one knew or cared about the boy's accomplishments.

The leader of the party stormed up to him. "You ran away again."

"No, I..."

"Shut up! We don't need any useless members! Get lost!" Not sparing a second to listen to excuses, the leader stormed off with his dander up.

The boy shrugged. He knew he wouldn't have been with them for long in any case. *But how am I supposed to make a living like this?* he mused, smiling wryly.

"Hey," someone called out just as he was about to leave.

He turned to see a boy about his age with straw-colored hair staring straight at him. With his slightly curly mane and slender, pointed nose, he gave off a strong-willed impression.

The red-haired boy's eyes wandered, confused. There didn't seem to be anyone else around. "Are you talking to me?"

"Yeah. You're really something."

"I...am? What do you mean?"

"What? Well...that sneak attack. I'm surprised you noticed it."

Once he realized he was being sincerely complimented, he became too bashful to manage any words. The flaxen-haired boy gave a lively smile and patted the red-haired boy on the shoulder.

"I like you! How about joining my party?"

○

The powerful swing of Belgrieve's axe split the wood in two. He retrieved the pieces from where they tumbled and tossed them onto the pile.

After lunch, Belgrieve had been silently devoting his time to splitting firewood. Once they were all stuck inside during the winter, keeping warm would be an irreplaceable necessity. The wood had been cut into logs the year before and dried out. Each household that didn't have the man power to procure its own firewood would be supplied enough to pass the winter, but

there was no harm in having extra. More wood meant more warmth, and this surplus was something each household had to prepare for itself.

Standing his axe against the stump that served as a chopping block, Belgrieve stretched his back while Mit and Graham slowly carried wood from the pile to the rack. Graham could carry several pieces at once, but Mit had to do it one at a time.

As he grabbed one, Mit looked up at the old elf.

“Grampa... Will these burn?”

“They will.”

“Will it be warm when they burn?”

“I’d hope so...”

“Grampa, do you like burning?”

“It’s...not something I particularly like.”

“Then do you hate it?”

“No. That’s not the problem.”

“Problem...?”

“On to the next one, Mit,” Graham said, tugging the boy’s head back just before he unconsciously began to munch on the piece of wood he was holding. Belgrieve chuckled at the sight.

Lately, Mit had been learning how to help out around the place, mostly by imitating whatever he saw. It was both heartwarming and a bit anxiety inducing, inasmuch as it meant that the adults had to keep a closer eye on him. He was even younger than he looked, and either because he had been malnourished or because he wasn’t actually human, he weighed shockingly little—which only encouraged their overprotectiveness.

Of course, it was mainly Graham who took on this role. The taciturn elf would stay near the similarly untalkative Mit, at times exchanging inconsequential words.

It took a day for the heavy rain to pass, and although the sludge it left behind was rather troublesome, the fall work had resumed once again. The wheat would be reaped after a few days in the sun, and the legumes would be harvested. The wheat would then be reduced to grains and dried again, while the beans would be sifted through every night, removing the small and bug-eaten ones.

Most of the bean husks would be piled up and left to compost into fertilizer, while the rest would be dried out for kindling. The wheat husks,

meanwhile, would be used to preserve the vegetables. The straw would become feed for the sheep, goats, and donkeys. Then, the ash from the hearth and the excrement of the livestock would return to the fields as fertilizer. Nothing was wasted, and the methods to ensure this had been passed down for many generations.

Taking a break from chopping and shelving firewood, Belgrieve took a deep breath and gazed upward. The sky was a clear blue color, as though the rain had been a dream. The birds and raptors traced ring-shaped paths high in the sky, scoping out insects and the small animals that ate them.

Mit and Graham walked hand in hand down the small path at the end of the yard. The old man should have been off on some kind of adventure by now, but here he was serving as the boy's guardian. A passing farmer gave a friendly greeting, and Graham reservedly returned the gesture.

As he watched over this scene warmly, Belgrieve suddenly felt a strong wind brushing against his skin from the north. He stood with a shudder.

"Winter is near."

He put the axe away and began cleaning up the field. He weeded out the withered summer seedlings and widely spread the fertilizer he'd composted from the previous year. Then he went through it with the spade and let the soil sleep. It would rest until spring when he would plant new vegetables.

Mit was already big enough to walk on his own. Back when Angeline was a baby, he had to work with her slung in a cloth over his back. Belgrieve basked in the nostalgia for a moment, though he also had the unhappy thought that this was a sign he was growing old.

He recalled how Angeline said she would be back by the fall when they had parted in Bordeaux, but he had yet to hear from her—not even a single letter, which was rather worrying. Of course, the last time she had come, it had been without warning. Perhaps this time would be the same. As an S-Rank adventurer, she was absolutely busier than he could ever imagine. This rationale helped him to lessen his anxiety.

Once Belgrieve was done with the field, he looked around to see if anyone needed his help. That was when a young man raced up the path from the village.

"Hey, Mr. Bell!"

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"I went out to the woods with Maggie and the rest of the gang, and we

came back with a doe thiiis big! Could you help butcher it?"

"I see. What condition is it in?"

"We already took its head off. And cut open its belly to remove the entrails. Right now, they're bleeding it out in the river."

*Good, they're growing up to be pretty robust,* Belgrieve thought as he followed the young man. He was led to a river that flowed just outside the village; this was where the villagers would do tasks that required more water than the well would provide.

There, he came upon the body of a headless deer with its belly cut open, which was submerged in the flowing water. Its blood trailed off downstream like ribbons. One of the youths held a hunting knife.

Marguerite looked on from the riverbank, her chest puffed out in pride.  
"How about that, Bell? That's a big one!"

"Yeah, color me impressed."

It was a large doe which had probably been fattening up for winter—a great haul that would make for a substantial amount of dried meat. This would bring cheer to the fall festival.

First, they would need to peel back the skin. The boy took great care not to damage it; once properly tanned, it could be used to make clothes and furniture. Belgrieve made no move to help, instead observing how much the child had grown, only intervening to offer timely instruction. Gradually, the carcass was field dressed into meat. He offered up a prayer in his heart.

○

Night had fallen over the cityscape, which was now illuminated by lantern light, and its streets filled with people hurrying home. After sunset, the wind became a tad too cold to call refreshing, and Angeline felt like putting on another layer. The freshly risen moon was a misty, pale-yellow color, casting its chilly light over the rooftops of every building in the capital.

During the day, Angeline had wandered all over the city, stocking up on various things in preparation for her return home. There were only a few days left before her departure, and she was checking over her luggage to ensure not a thing slipped past her. Naturally, she did not forget her souvenirs.

The more she looked at the gifts she would be bringing back, the more gleeful she felt. It was like her smile was stuck on her face.

“Heh... Heh heh... I’m going home. Just you wait, cowberries...”

Byaku frowned as he saw Angeline laughing over the lines of boxes.

“You’re acting like a complete degenerate.”

“Shut it, Bucky. I have a home to return to... What could be better than that?”

*This idiotic girl becomes even more of an idiot when her father’s concerned,* Byaku thought with a sigh.

Although Byaku seemed thoroughly disgusted, Charlotte was just as giddy as Angeline. Charlotte took a colorful woolen muffler out from her own luggage. She had bought the yarn and knit it herself. She seemed to be happy that something she had learned as part of her education in Lucrecia had proved useful.

“Sis! Do you think your dad will like this muffler?”

“Hm... Turnera is cold. I’m sure he’ll like it... Teach me how to knit too.”

“Of course! Hee hee...”

Byaku sighed again. “Your dad’s that old man with the red hair, right? What’s so good about him?”

Both Angeline and Charlotte stared at Byaku in tandem. Their piercing, serious eyes caused the boy to flinch back.

“Bucky... You’ll understand if you meet him.”

“That’s right! His hand was very, very warm!”

“You barely even met him...”

Why did she adore him so much? Byaku grew suspicious and a little intrigued by the sort of individual Belgrieve was. However, he was also a little fearful to meet him.

After several intense training sessions, Byaku had managed to contain his demonic powers better than before. Maria assured him he would be fine as long as he didn’t fight someone who was out of his league. However, that was only when he was consciously using his mana. He was more aware of it during battle, which made it easier to control. But when nothing was happening at all, he would be more likely to relapse.

For this reason, she had told him to do away with the invisible circles he perpetually kept up for self-defense. Byaku possessed little of his own mana; if he persisted in using spell sequences that had been designed to tap into the demon’s immense mana, there was a significant risk that he might subconsciously reconnect with the beast within. Perhaps he could maintain

control if he was aware it was happening, but he wouldn't be able to focus on that every hour of the day. In time, Maria could redesign his circles to be more efficient, but she did not have that luxury presently. Byaku was troubled by this, but he didn't feel like picking a fight over it without a good reason, so he assented to her advice instead.

Byaku had been ready to stay in Orphen until his training was finished, but this wasn't so bad either. He would surely have fewer occasions to fight in Turnera than in Orphen, so he wouldn't have to utilize his mana.

In the meantime, Angeline hoped that a laid-back lifestyle would do something to soften his perpetual cynicism. Perhaps then he would finally call her his sister. It didn't seem like she had to be in too much of a hurry with Charlotte—Lucrecia was still going through turbulent times, and they would not pursue her as far as distant Turnera. It was a little worrisome that the girl couldn't yet use magic to protect herself, but even if Miriam was a terrible teacher, she could at least impart the basics.

Though she relied on a special gemstone to use magic, Charlotte did have experience and training with it. If they borrowed a few grimoires from Maria, she could probably learn a bit on her own. At the very least, she would need to be able to hold out under attack until help arrived.

Angeline was thinking about the trip in her own way, although this didn't change the fact that she was ultimately in it to see Belgrieve. She had only just seen him in the spring, yet her homesickness was already boiling over beyond what she could control.

This time, they would hitch a ride rather than buy their own carriage. Plenty of caravans and peddlers would be headed to Turnera for the festival anyways.

"It's perfect, flawless... Sometimes I scare myself with my own genius," Angeline huffed proudly.

She sorted out her souvenirs. While shopping, she had picked out anything that remotely caught her interest, and before she realized it, she had collected quite a few of them. As she couldn't take all of them, she had to pick the cream of the crop, which was fun in and of itself.

That was when Anessa and Miriam arrived. They had gone off separately to take care of their own business during the day, but they would be accompanying her to Turnera once again, so they gathered in Angeline's room to discuss their travel plans.

As the two entered the room, they were startled and bemused to find the floor so littered there was nowhere to step.

“Wow, you went all out again.”

“We don’t have our own carriage this time. Can you carry that much?”

“I’m in the middle of choosing... Help me,” Angeline pleaded.

“So that’s why you called us...”

“All right, let’s take one for the team.”

The girls chatted as they went through the goods. It was understandable for Miriam, who always seemed to go along with Angeline’s schemes. However, even Anessa—who usually took a step back and snarked at her antics—was in on it. This was a bit surprising to Byaku.

“Hey... Hey, Anessa?”

“Hmm? What’s up, Byaku?”

“Are you with them on this? You want to see her dad that badly?”

“Mr. Bell? R-Right, well... Yes, I’d like to see him if I can. It...kinda gives me some peace of mind when he’s around.” Anessa bashfully laughed and scratched her cheek.

*Good grief.* Byaku shook his head, then silently leaned against the wall.

○

A man in a hat glared hard at Lionel. “Pardon me then,” he said. “You’d better not try to pull a fast one on us. We will find out.”

“O-Of course, sir...”

“Then we’re counting on you.”

“Understood.”

The man left, his mantle trailing behind him. He was a messenger from the lord of Orphen. Once the door clicked shut, Lionel held his head.

“Why... Why did it have to come now of all times...”

Beside him, Dortos unfolded his arms and stroked his beard. “It seems you can’t feign ignorance this time, Lionel.”

“It really is the worst. Ms. Ange’s already getting ready to go, isn’t she? Even if they wanted to come for me, they could have come sooner...”

“In fact, it would have been better if they came a few days later... Then it would be out of our hands.”

Dortos sighed as he glanced at the letter on the table. The letter itself had

arrived at the guild a short while back, but the messenger had come to ensure the guild had fully grasped its contents.

Cheborg tapped his finger against the table in irritation. “How small-minded can he be? That blasted lord’s acting on his own selfish whims! That ain’t what a man should do! Now what?” he ranted loudly.

“We can hear you. No need to shout.”

“Huh? What? You say something, Dortos?”

Lionel gritted his teeth and collapsed over his desk.

“Aww, I don’t want to... But I have to tell her...”

“There is nothing we can do. It is a pity, but we cannot sacrifice the entire guild for Ange alone,” Dortos said with a heartfelt sigh.

“But after causing us so much trouble over that demon incident, now they’re...”

“As I said, there’s nothing we can do. We were in on it this time. You won’t have to bear the responsibility alone.”

“Even so, I feel bad for Ange!” Cheborg angrily snatched the letter up, examining it from all angles before smacking it back down.

Although the envelope had already been unsealed, the emblem on the wax was clear as day: a great eagle bearing a sword—the symbol of Archduke Estogal, who reigned over the northern reaches of the empire.

# Chapter 46: The Cold Aura Angeline Emitted

The cold aura Angeline emitted made the guild office freeze over as if winter had come early. Lionel cowered, of course, but it was even getting to Dortos and Cheborg.

“Say that one more time.”

“S-So, I’m trying to tell you, Ms. Ange... It’s not from us. It’s Archduke Estogal...”

Angeline stomped her foot with a great *thud*. Lionel shuddered.

“And so what! I don’t care if he’s an archduke or not; he can’t possibly have the authority to stop me!”

Angeline chucked the crumpled-up letter onto the floor. While Lionel curled up with an “eep,” Dortos came forward to pacify her.

“You must calm down, Ange. This is not Lionel’s fault.”

“It’s not about whose fault it is, Silver! If you send me off to Estogal now, I won’t be back by winter! And then, I won’t be able to go to Turnera... The cowberries are waiting for me!”



Angeline fell to her knees in lament, holding her head. Everybody else exchanged glances, not knowing quite what to say.

It had all started with a letter that arrived from the guild the other day. The moment he saw it, Lionel was surprised by the seal—then even more astonished by the letter's contents. The seal belonged to Archduke Estogal, who governed the northern territory, and it hailed Angeline for her achievements in defeating the demon. Furthermore, it requested for Angeline to attend the autumn ball, where she would be bestowed a medal of honor.

Lionel, naturally, held his head. He was well aware of how Angeline was preparing for her return to Turnera, and he knew she was looking forward to it to an unnatural degree. He had already felt guilty for detaining her the last time she wanted to go and hesitated to inform her of this new development.

However, they were dealing with a prominent house of the empire. Even Angeline wouldn't come out of skipping out on her own confection ceremony unscathed. Even so, he tried his best to play dumb, as though the letter had never come—but after many a twist and turn, he had no choice left in the matter.

Angeline stepped up to Lionel, seething, and slapped a hand onto his desk.

"Anyways, I'm not going! Some noble's laurels... That's none of my business!"

Lionel looked like he was about to cry. "I know I'm in no place to say this...but I'm begging you, Ms. Ange... If Archduke Estogal starts glaring at us, these old men are done for..."

"Well nuts to that! I'm sure it'll be over once the guild master is axed! Enjoy your retirement!"

"I'll be axed in the literal sense... This old man doesn't want to die yet..."

Angeline turned to Dortos and Cheborg, but the two old men simply grimaced. She sorrowfully narrowed her eyes. "Old Man Silver, Muscle General—are you going to tell me the same thing...?"

Dortos paused for a moment. "The way the letter was sent is the problem. If it was addressed to you, then you could choose to go on your own discretion, and we would pretend that we never saw a thing. However, the letter was addressed to the guild, telling us to get you to the capital. It is no longer a problem for you alone, Ange."

"Ugh..." Angeline bit her lip. Whether by intent or coincidence, the guild would take the blame if she declined. Surely the guild itself wouldn't

disappear, but Lionel and the other members of the management staff might be replaced, and this would mean returning to their previous system.

Angeline didn't want that, and she felt sorry for Lionel and everyone else. Despite everything, she did love Orphen's guild.

Lionel timidly spoke up. "We could have covered it up if it was just the letter... But it seems they sent word to our local lord too. A messenger came to hammer the final nail into the coffin."

"Most of all, those nobles attach great importance to keeping up appearances," Dortos knowingly said. "Ange, we may be S-Rank adventurers, but we are no more than commoners as far as status is concerned. They won't take too kindly to a commoner declining an invitation. And it just had to be an archducal house; they won't stay silent if you smear mud in their face."

Angeline paused, then said, "But I can't help not liking this. Adventurers are those that love freedom."

"Hmm..." Dortos closed his eyes.

That was when Cheborg scratched his head and yelled, "Hey! Feckless, the lot of you! Now that it's come to it, just turn them down!"

"Huh? Wait, what are you saying, Mr. Cheborg?!"

"Who cares? That brat is just getting carried away again! Say they do come around to harass us later! Then we crush them and that's the end of it! Archduke house or not, their small fries are no match for us!"

"O-O-Of course we can't do that! Hey, you tell him, Mr. Dortos!" Lionel said.

"No... He has a point. I'm here, and so is Cheborg. We can probably drag Maria into it. We are not outmatched by the archduke's army. If we use this chance to show the difference in our power, then Orphen's guild can assert its independence..." Dortos replied.

"No, no, no! You want to turn Orphen into a battlefield?! In the first place, isn't the archduke's house your old hangout? Don't you have any reservations about going against them?"

"That'll work itself out," said Cheborg.

"Yes, I'm sure it will," Dortos echoed.

"It will not!"

While the other two were growing heated, Lionel was, on the contrary, turning pale. Paradoxically, as the room grew hotter, Angeline's ire began to

cool down.

She leaned forward. “Fine... I just have to go, right?”

“Huh? What? You say something, Ange?”

“I’ll go to Estogal. You don’t have to fight.”

“M-Ms. Ange...”

“Fighting them sounds interesting... But we don’t have to. My dad will be angry if we do...”

Cheborg struck his fists together, disappointed. “What a killjoy! I thought I’d finally be able to go on a rampage!”

“That’s not the problem here, Mr. Cheborg!” Lionel said, before sighing and looking at Angeline with pleading eyes. “Thank you, Ms. Ange... And sorry. I’ve already caused you so much trouble.”

“It’s fine... It’s not your fault. I’ll be there and back in no time.”

She turned on her heels, scooped up the letter she’d thrown down, and walked briskly out of the office.

Lionel heaved a deep sigh while Dortos and Cheborg furrowed their brows.

“My, my, Ange’s acting like an adult!”

“My thoughts exactly. I’m not sure if I should be happy or sad... But I can’t stand that archduke. He could have conferred that medal a long time ago.”

“I’ll agree with you there... I feel there must be some political motive... I just hope the guild can somehow support Ms. Ange.” Lionel scratched his head before turning back to Dortos and Cheborg. “Still, I’m sorry for making you two play the fool. Thanks to that, Ms. Ange could make the rational choice...”

There was a brief pause. “Huh?”

“Er...? Um, you *were* joking, right...? Right?” No one dared reply. “Hey! Don’t stay silent! Why are you looking away?!?”

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She stomped her way back to the lobby, where she was greeted by Charlotte’s surprised face.

“S-Sis... What’s wrong...?”

“Everything,” Angeline plainly declared as she fell into a chair. Byaku,

who was sitting across from her, lifted his face from his book.

“What’re you so angry about?”

“Turnera is on hold.”

This statement was enough for Charlotte to rush over to her side and grab her sleeve. “Wh-Why?! We were supposed to leave tomorrow...”

Sullenly, Angeline handed the girl the crumpled letter in her hands. Charlotte’s eyes widened as she read through it, and she frequently glanced up at Angeline before returning her eyes to the page.

“The archduke’s house? You’re going, sis?”

“I don’t want to. But if I don’t, I’ll be hurting the people of the guild. The other adventurers too.”

Byaku snapped his book shut. He looked rather amused. “Now that’s commendable. Didn’t think I’d hear that from daddy’s girl.”

“Shut up, Bucky... Cowberries...fresh cowberries...”

Her enraged face immediately turned to disappointment and despair. Angeline flopped down over the table.

“Are you okay...?” Charlotte asked, timidly rubbing Angeline’s back.

“Thank you, Char. But I can’t go to Turnera.”

“Then...what happens to me and Byaku?”

“That’s what I’m thinking about.”

Angeline lifted her teary face and sighed. Having Charlotte and Byaku stay in an Orphen inn was probably safest for them. They already had the guild’s assistance, and the reinstated S-Rank adventurers were quite reliable.

Estogal was unknown territory. They did not know the right places to flee in case of surprise attack, and they had no one there to rely on. Although the chances of an attack were low, she would regret it for the rest of her life if her negligence caused the two to lose their lives or be dragged off to Lucrecia.

Angeline closed her eyes for a moment, honing her ears to the guild’s clamor. Eventually, she rose to her feet.

“I’m going to talk it over with Anne and Merry.”

“M-Me too!” Charlotte grabbed Angeline by the hand. Angeline gripped back and gestured for Byaku to follow. Byaku stood with a slight smile.

“Is it that amusing to see your sister at her wits’ end, Bucky?” Angeline asked after a moment.

“Don’t call me Bucky. Well, it’s funny to see you work that empty head of yours from time to time,” Byaku said, chuckling. Angeline immediately

bopped a fist against his head.

“If you just used your teleportation magic...”

“I can’t use what I don’t have.”

Angeline led Charlotte off. The city was swept up in the morning bustle, and she could hear lively tunes here and there. Angeline kept ahold of Charlotte so that she wouldn’t get lost, weaving her way through the crowds.

“Sis?” Charlotte anxiously asked. “Are you okay? You don’t have to go if you don’t want to...”

“I would have turned them down if it was only my problem. But it isn’t.”

Charlotte cast down her gaze. She had been quite looking forward to her trip with Angeline; now, all the excitement from that morning had been erased.

*Curse you, Archduke Estogal,* Angeline thought as she gritted her teeth. She wanted to do something to get back at the man, but couldn’t think of anything.

This caused her to wonder, *What would Belgrieve do if he was in this situation?* Suddenly, she realized: *My dad wouldn’t be petty about it.*

*Right, this isn’t enough to break me. I’m my dad’s daughter,* she reassured herself, puffing out her chest.

“You can do it, Angeline...” she muttered as she picked up the pace.

Anessa and Miriam owned a house on a downtown street corner, close to both the orphanage and the market. It was also located right up against the slums, making it rather cheap despite its convenience.

Angeline knocked on the door. “It’s me!” she called out.

“What, Ange?” Anessa asked upon opening the door. “What’s wrong?”

“We have a problem.”

Anessa furrowed her brow and put a hand to her forehead. “Well, come in.”

The house was in quite a mess. There was unwashed dinnerware and unfolded laundry all about; it seemed they had neglected the housework while preparing for the trip. In the back room, Miriam sat groaning in front of her travel bag.

“Hmm... What to do, what to do...?”

“Merry.”

“Oh? What’s wrong, Ange? We leave tomorrow, right?”

“About that...”

Over the course of Angeline's explanation, her two party members went completely expressionless.

Finally, Miriam burst out, "What's his problem?! Medals? Fine! But it's been over a year since Ange beat up that bloody demon! Right, Anne?"

"Yeah... But there's no two ways about it. You can't really skip out on an archduke... You made a good decision, Ange." Anessa placed a hand on Angeline's head.

Angeline huffed. "I'm an adult after all... Though I'm sorry about you two."

"Well, that's that. What a shame..."

"Waaah... I wanted to see Mr. Bell..."

They were both visibly disappointed, but they understood the dangers of disregarding the archduke's summons and reluctantly decided to discuss their next steps. They brewed a pot of tea and sat around a table.

"A direct carriage to Estogal will take around half a month..." Angeline grumbled. "An entire month for the return trip."

"I doubt he'll let you go as soon as you get there. You'll have to stay a few days," Anessa added.

"What about Char and Bucky? Are you taking them?"

Angeline shook her head. "We don't have any allies there, and I won't have a feel for the land. It's too risky."

"But... But if you're not around, sis... I..."

Charlotte nervously clung to Angeline's arm. Angeline sighed and patted her on the head. "I can't protect you on my own. I'm not enough... Remember how Ms. Rosetta was injured last time?"

Charlotte squeezed even harder. Sister Rosetta's wounds had healed for the most part, but she still wasn't in peak condition. Although the sister laughed it off, both Angeline and Charlotte felt a sense of responsibility, and they would frequently visit her.

Although that attack had come suddenly, it was an event that reminded Angeline of her limitations. She was strong, but there was only so much she could do on her own. It was important to have others to rely on.

Thus, it was impossible to take Charlotte and Byaku. She wouldn't have minded if they were going sightseeing, but with the ceremony, she wouldn't be able to be around the two at all times.

Anessa tapped her fingers on the table. "What about me and Merry?"

Doesn't look like there's much point in having us tag along."

The letter specifically requested the Black-Haired Valkyrie, Angeline. She had, after all, been the one who defeated the demon, and there was no indication that her party members could attend with her.

"But if you two come, maybe we can take Char and Bucky," Angeline proposed. But Anessa wasn't so convinced.

"I don't know about that. The sneak attack was in close quarters, right? We're pretty confident we can win in a straight-up fight, but it might be a bit difficult to protect someone at the same time."

"Right—Ange can pick up on murderous intent and other stuff we can't. This is different from guarding a caravan."

"Hmm..."

They were an archer and a magician; both were generally far better suited for providing support. They could play a part in guarding a convoy on a battlefield, or during a journey. But they were not as adept as Ange at maintaining their guard during daily life, especially against some unknown evil organization or Lucrecia's Inquisition, either of whom would be far more formidable than bandits or fiends.

Angeline slouched back in her chair. "Then what?"

"If you're leaving Char behind, she might be better off having the two of us around. The guild people will help out, but they have their own jobs... Or are you going to be lonely?"

"Of course I won't be lonely... Who do you think I am?"

"Oh, I've got it. How about me, Anne, Char, and Bucky go to Turnera without you? Our preparations won't be wasted, and we get to see Mr. Bell too," Miriam said as a joke, only to wince once she caught sight of Angeline.

There were tears falling in large droplets from Angeline's eyes. She wiped away the ceaseless stream with the back of her hand and sniffled.

"*Hic...sniffle...* Don't leave me behind..."

"Ah! I'm sorry, I'm sorry! It was a joke! We'd never go to Turnera without you! There, there, good girl, good girl!"

Miriam rubbed Angeline's head and back in a panic. Even Charlotte had gotten a little teary-eyed.

Anessa heaved a deep sigh. "Merry, you..."

"I-I'm sorry, I tells ya! I didn't think she was going to cry!"

Angeline sobbed a bit longer, but eventually calmed down. Her eyes,

nose, and cheeks were red and her mouth was set in a sullen frown as she propped her head up with one hand.

“Then I’ll be going alone. Everyone hold down the fort in Orphen.”

“That might be for the best. You’re traveling light; you should be back quickly enough.”

“No stealing a march on me—you are not going to Turnera. Absolutely. Not. You got that, Merry...?”

Miriam’s cat ears twitched with every angry word, and she blinked her eyes, not knowing what to do.

“Aw, it was a joke...”

“Are you okay with that, Char? Byaku?” Anessa asked.

Charlotte gave a reserved nod. Byaku leaned against the wall, remaining silent. Perhaps that was his way of giving his assent.

Anessa nodded. “All right, then we’ll take charge over these two. Sorry it’s such a mess in here...”

“I’ll help you clean, Anne!”

“Ha ha, thanks. So, Ange. When are you leaving?”

“Tomorrow... I’m already prepared for a trip, though I’ll be leaving my gifts behind.”

“I see. Sounds about right.”

“Okay!” Miriam stood in desperation. “Let’s go to the usual pub! We’ll drink our cares away!”

“Your treat?”

“Ugh... Y-Yeah... Sure...?”

Angeline seemed to have regained some of her spirit as she stood with a chuckle. The world outside the window was filled with the red light of the setting sun.

# Chapter 47: The Rain Slapped against the Ground

The rain slapped against the ground, scattering into a misty spray. There were puddles forming here and there, and those unfortunate souls forced to go out in this weather moved with hastened feet. A red-haired boy waited for the rain to pass beneath the protruding eaves of a store, a basket full of freshly picked herbs held in one hand. The sudden downpour had drenched his hair, and every so often, he would have to brush his drooping bangs aside. Thankfully, it was still summer, though the warmth permeating through his sopping wet clothes was strangely off-putting.

The boy glanced around before heaving a troubled sigh. His other hand shifted its grip on a walking stick.

Eventually, the downpour relented. It hadn't stopped entirely, but it wasn't enough to douse him anymore, so the boy cautiously made his way out. His body shook each time his unfamiliar prosthetic foot hit the ground, and even that would have been beyond him without the stick. When he passed by a party of adventurers his age, they pointed at his back and laughed.

"Look, it's the eternal herb gatherer."

"Pathetic. Wouldn't want to end up like that."

The boy bit his lip and picked up his pace. Unfortunately, his false leg prevented him from going much faster. Suddenly, he heard a familiar voice call out his name—he turned to see a brown-haired boy rushing towards him. The red-haired boy looked surprised at first, but he quickly returned a friendly smile.

"Long time no see. You look well."

"Yeah, you..." the brown-haired boy began to say, but held his tongue as his eyes locked onto the wooden leg.

The red-haired boy chuckled. "How's work going for you? I'm sure you guys are doing just fine."

“What about you?”

“Me? Well, as you can see, I’m doing...what I can.” The boy chewed his words and hung his head.

“I... I would be pretty happy if you came back, you know... I’m sure they’d be happy too.”

“Hey now, I don’t wanna be a burden on anyone,” said the red-haired one with a bitter smile. He tapped his false foot against the ground. “Can’t even bait the enemy like this... You’re B-Rank now, right? Just one more push to the top. I wouldn’t want to hold you back.”

“But... But that’s...” The brown-haired boy looked like he was about to cry, so the red-haired boy gently stroked his hair.

“Don’t make that face. We’re both alive and kicking—isn’t that enough?”

“But... If you’re not around, I...”

The red-haired boy gave a troubled laugh and showed off the basket in his hand. “I’m in the middle of something. Gotta get these to the guild,” he said, tapping the brown-haired boy on the shoulder.

“Urgh...”

“Well then, good luck out there. Tell them I said hi.”

The red-haired boy turned and left before he could hear a response. Each time the vibrations passed through his wooden prosthetic, he could feel pain in parts that weren’t even there anymore. He knew that the brown-haired boy was still standing there, watching him. He gripped his cane harder.

“What’s the point in getting jealous?” he told himself. “I learned my own limits.”

When he saw the brown-haired boy—when he exchanged words with him and remembered the faces of his old party members—he felt a throbbing, black discomfort in the depths of his chest. He was fed up with himself—fed up with how he kept it down and plastered on a fake smile. Perhaps it was time to put it all behind him. The red-haired boy set off for the guild, not even noticing that the rain had picked up again.

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When he took a deep breath in and slowly exhaled, it came out as a white, dense fog, slowly melting away into the sky as if it were loath to depart.

The mornings were already growing cold. Most of the farmwork had been

completed, with only a few minor tasks left to attend to. Once the frost began to set in during the night, it was a sign that winter had cast its first stone at Turnera. With the winds so chilly, it wouldn't be strange if it began snowing as well.

Atop a hill before the sunrise, Belgrieve sat on a stone, calming his heart. His half-open eyes gazed blankly into the distance as his mind concentrated on his own breathing. The brisk air pierced his skin, yet he gradually stopped caring about it. Each breath began to feel extraordinarily long and drawn out.

Soon, he clearly sensed something warm swirling through his body. The boundary between his flesh and the air around it grew ambiguous, and it felt as though he could change his form to be whatever he wanted.

According to Graham, the quality and quantity of mana would increase during times of transition. Among these was the moment when night transitioned to day. The mana in the air, which grew denser at dusk, would melt away with the light of the rising sun. For a while now, Belgrieve had trained by taking this mana into his lungs through fine breathing control. A master could make a single breath feel like an eternity, though Belgrieve had yet to reach that point.

He had always been in a half-meditative state when he practiced his swings, so he grasped the sensation rather quickly. Now, he was in the process of expanding it, but this was not something that could be mastered in a day. He was only standing on the starting line.

Marguerite and Duncan sat a short distance away, but it seemed they weren't as focused and would fidget at times. Graham was pacing a ways off from the three of them, carrying Mit on his back. When he gently rocked the boy, Mit muttered something in return.

Eventually, the sun emerged and caused the frost on the leaves and grass to shine brilliantly. Belgrieve stood and stretched. The boundary between himself and the world returned in the blink of an eye, causing him to shudder at the morning cold.

“It’s pretty cold. Should we get going?”

Marguerite shot up, having been eagerly waiting for this moment. “Aw... This is hard. Hey, Bell, is there a trick to it?”

“Let’s see... Try not to think about wanting to leave early.”

“Ugh...” Marguerite pursed her lips.

Belgrieve chuckled and then led the group down the hill back to the

village. The fields of golden spring wheat had been reaped and plowed, leaving behind nothing more than brown soil. Potatoes and beans would be planted there in the new year, while the spring wheat had been sown in another vast field.

Each household was already awake and busily shifting about. The air was filled with the sounds of running water and knives against cutting boards. Today was the day of the fall festival, and in the town square, merchants and peddlers set up stalls to display their wares. The sudden rain had set back work several days, leaving the peddlers hanging until the day of the festival —but they seemed merry enough nevertheless. The villagers had barely finished their own work and felt as though the festival had come a bit early, though the youth were more enthusiastic. As Belgrieve walked about with his gaze wandering aimlessly, Duncan came up to him.

“Time flies, huh.”

“Yeah, winter is...almost here.”

The clouds would flow from the north roughly half a month after the festival, kicking Turnera’s winter off with a smattering of snow. Strangely, this was a constant year after year and precisely why the people of Turnera were so desperate to finish their work before the fall festival.

“It was hard for me to say, so I put it off for so long, but...”

“Hmm?”

“I’m...planning on leaving the village too.”

Belgrieve cocked his head to the side. “That’s quite sudden,” he said.

“Yes... It’s just far too comfortable here, you see. I was having trouble deciding the right time to go... But there are still several people I want to face.”

“And you can’t leave after the snow sets in.”

“Correct. It was on my mind when Maggie said she’d leave, but I couldn’t bring myself to say it.”

“Ha ha, well, I’m not going to stop you... Is everything all right with Hannah?”

“We spoke... I think I’m going to make my next adventure my last.”

“Hmm... Did you tell her to wait for you?” Seeing Duncan bashfully scratching his head, Belgrieve patted the man on the shoulder. “Don’t keep her waiting too long.”

“Ha ha, I’ll be careful,” Duncan replied with an awkward smile.

*It's going to get lonely around here,* Belgrieve thought.

He returned home and prepared breakfast. First, he warmed the leftover stew from the night before, then he stretched out the dough he had kneaded before he went out earlier and browned it in a pan.

He looked around the house, musing that he had grown accustomed to living with his rambunctious freeloaders, Marguerite and Duncan. The house would become just about silent without that rowdy duo around. The remaining residents—Graham, Mit, and himself—would be far too quiet.

Mit jumped onto his back and began clambering his way up. He was lighter than a basket of potatoes, and his bare feet were cool to the touch.

“Dad...”

“Oh, your feet are so cold, Mit.” Belgrieve smiled. He held Mit up with an arm around his ankles while the boy buried his face into Belgrieve’s hair and nuzzled him.

“Dad’s smell...”

“What are you trying to do...? Hey, it’s time for breakfast.”

It was the same table as ever, but it was quite a somber one knowing two of its members were leaving. Marguerite dunked her fried bread into the stew, her eyes narrowed pensively.

“So I’ll be saying goodbye to this flavor for a while... Ahh, for some reason, it feels like I’ve been here a real long time.”

“Ha ha ha, it’s like a blink of an eye now that it’s over, Maggie.”

“Right. This feels like more of a home to me than the Western Forest... Hey, Belgrieve?”

“Yes?” Belgrieve lifted his face. He had been wiping Mit’s mouth.

“How should I say this... Thanks for this and that. I think I’d be going through a fair deal of trouble if I hadn’t come here...”

“Ha ha, I’m sure you would have managed, right?”

“Y-You think so...? But it’s this sort of, you know...adventurer knowledge, yeah. I didn’t know any of that. Maybe someone would have tricked me.”

“That still would have been a good learning experience. But at the very least, I’ll say it was fun to have you around, Maggie.”

“Heh... Heh heh...” Marguerite awkwardly scratched her cheek. Then she slapped her knee. “All right! If I ever find that Satie girl, I’ll bring her back to Turnera!”

“Hey now... Don’t worry about that.”

“Don’t be shy!” Marguerite gleefully prodded at Belgrieve, who smiled wryly in return.

“Don’t get in over your head...” Graham said with a sigh. “The south is a different world from this village. If you go at it with that naive attitude, you’ll have the rug pulled out from under you.”

“I-I know that. Good grief, you can be so stubborn...”

Belgrieve and Duncan laughed aloud at the sight of Marguerite’s rosy-cheeked pout. After the meal, they each headed out for the square. People were already gathering, and as the traveling folk strummed their merry tunes, the village youth carried the statue of Vienna out from the church. Father Maurice restlessly directed them, at times bursting into hysterical shrieks. Each time, those witnessing these antics would break into laughter. It was the same scene every year.

Marguerite led Mit by the hand, her eyes wide as she looked upon the rows of wares. It seemed there were many things for sale that she had never seen in elven territory. The vendors seemed just as surprised to see the young elf.

Belgrieve wandered about searching for a traveler willing to give Marguerite a ride out of the village. There weren’t any wicked ones who would stop by Turnera, but Marguerite was still an elf, and humans would instinctively shy away from her. It would be best if he could find her passage with someone he knew well, but perhaps he would have to settle for a traveler he was barely acquainted with.

Come to think of it, Angeline had been clamoring over returning in the fall, but had ultimately never showed up. If she wasn’t here by this time of year, perhaps she wasn’t coming at all. She said she wanted to eat cowberries, but it was possible her work had caught up to her again.

As those thoughts occupied Belgrieve’s mind, someone called out to him.

“Mr. Belgrieve!”

He turned to see the blue-haired female peddler he had met the year before. She approached with a friendly grin and a polite bow of her head.

“Do you remember me? Last fall...”

“Yes, I do remember. As I recall, you helped out my daughter... I’m glad you look well.”

“Yes! Oh, and Ms. Angeline helped me out too... Hee hee, that’s great!

I'm happy you remembered me! I heard you played a big part in Bordeaux!"  
The blue-haired peddler energetically grabbed him by the hand.

Despite the strained smile on his face, Belgrieve amicably shook her hand.

"I didn't expect that news to spread... I could hardly say I did anything great. But anyways, have you heard any rumors about my daughter? She said she would be back this fall..."

"Oh, is that so? No, I haven't met up with her since last year... I'm sorry."

"Oh no, don't worry about it," Belgrieve said. Then the thought suddenly struck him. "Where are you planning to go after the festival?"

"I'll pass through Bordeaux on my way to Orphen. They enjoy the preserves made over here."

"Hmm... Pardon me for asking, but would your wagon have space for another?"

"Mine? Yes, that's quite all right. I often have to hire guards for long trips, so I make sure to save space for them. I arrived in a caravan this time, so I saved on the cost." She chuckled. "Are you planning a trip, Mr. Belgrieve? I'd happily take on someone as strong as you." She had witnessed Belgrieve taking on Helvetica's elite guards.

Belgrieve stroked his beard. "No, it's not for me. There's someone I'm hoping you'd take with you. She's even stronger than me."

"I...see," she replied, wide-eyed. "That's incredible... What sort of person is she?"

"Um... Hey, Maggie?" Belgrieve looked around, but the crowd was too thick to see her. He scratched his head. "I'm sorry. She should be nearby..."

The blue-haired peddler smiled sympathetically. "It's quite a crowd."

"Maggie?" Belgrieve walked a few steps and called again. The peddler shuffled after.

After wandering a bit, he noticed a commotion coming from one of the stalls. In front of it, Marguerite stooped down beside Mit. It seemed to be a lottery with various prizes.

"This... No, *this* one."

It was a box with a great number of strings sticking out of a hole. Marguerite carefully pinched one of the strings. She tugged it out, revealing the end of it had been dyed red. The stallkeeper rang a small bell.

"Congratulations, Ms. Elf!"

"Wow! You're really giving me this? Well, thanks!"

Marguerite's eyes were sparkling as she took the cheap-looking tin necklace. Even something so trifling looked like a priceless treasure to the oblivious elf princess. Mit watched from beside her, gnawing on the skewered meat in his hands.

She immediately draped her prize around her neck, grinning from ear to ear.

"Hee hee, how about that, Mit? Ain't that nice?"

"Nice?"

"Wait, that's my meat... Is it good?"

"Good!"

"Hey, Maggie," Belgrieve called out to her, beckoning.

Maggie led Mit along. She seemed to be having the time of her life; her cheeks were flushed rosy, and she was sampling all of the festivities. She was even looking after Mit, a heartwarming sight in Belgrieve's eyes.

"Oh, Bell. Need something?"

"I'd say you're the one who needs something. I get that you're having fun, but you should start by finding someone who'll take you to Orphen."

"Ah, right... Sorry."

"Ha ha, what are you apologizing to me for? You're going to make Graham angry."

"Ugh..."

The blue-haired peddler looked from Belgrieve to Marguerite, and then back. She seemed confused. "A-An elf...? Huh? This person?"

"Huh? Who the hell are you supposed to be?" Marguerite asked coarsely, with an intensely suspicious look on her face. The peddler squirmed and turned to Belgrieve with pleading eyes.

"Maggie," Belgrieve said. "Why are you trying to pick a fight with her? She's a peddler."

"Peddler... Oh! Are you headed south? Got a carriage?" Marguerite asked eagerly.

"Er, yes?"

"Um, look... Sorry for scaring you. If it's all right, could you take me with you? I know my way around a sword, so I could be your guard. Hey, how about it?"

"Er, um..." The peddler looked to Belgrieve with a troubled smile. "You're saying she's even stronger than you...?"

Belgrieve nodded. "She's a bit rough around the edges, but she's not a bad person. I guarantee you'll be far safer with her than with several average adventurers."

"Really... Um... Got it! I'm leaving in two days, if that's all right with you?"

"Hooray! Thank you! My name's Marguerite, by the way! Pleasure to meet you!"

Marguerite giddily took the peddler's hand and swung it around. The peddler flinched, perhaps because she was dealing with an elf, but her expression softened as she took in Marguerite's innocent smile. Mit looked up at them with a perplexed look on his face.

Marguerite excitedly showered her with questions, like "What sort of place is the southern capital?" and "What will the journey be like?" Although she looked rather troubled, the peddler provided thoughtful answers. Belgrieve laughed to himself as a cheer rose from the center of the square. It seemed that the statue of the Great Goddess had reached its destination in one piece.

The clattering of hooves heralded the village chief Hoffman, who led a horse along. The wagon fastened to its gorgeously decorated harness was filled with ears of spring wheat, potatoes, mountain fruit, and the rest of the fall harvest. The horse had been left behind by Angeline when she left, but Belgrieve had no use for it, so he had given it to Hoffman. It was now doing various tasks around the village. The children took the ears of corn and flowers and decorated the statue. The tunes from the traveling folk grew louder and merrier, and here and there, couples would take one another by the hand, forming a large circle with their dance.

*Come to think of it, Helvetica was here a year ago.* It felt as though time had passed in the blink of an eye, each day much the same as the last—though there had been many happenings crammed in between. Angeline had left in the spring, and then Belgrieve had followed her to Bordeaux; Duncan was in Turnera when he returned. Then Graham and Marguerite appeared; there was the aberration in the forest, and Mit... Belgrieve mulled over all of these events.

"It happened so fast..." He tapped his peg leg against the ground. The sun was climbing its way to its zenith, and the soil had already dried since the morning frost had melted. He took Mit from Marguerite and continued his

aimless patrol. Apple cider was being served and merry conversations filled the air. In the corner, he saw Duncan and Hannah sitting together.

*If they get along so well, does he really need another journey?* Belgrieve wondered. But Duncan was thinking about his life in his own way, and this was presumably the next step he needed to take to put an end to his wayfaring. Belgrieve convinced himself not to say anything unnecessary.

He recalled his own journey, once upon a time. As an adventurer, his travels had taken him from towns, to villages, and into dungeons. He had exchanged tales with his comrades; carried bags; and fought fiends, wild beasts, and bandits that attacked from time to time. He had taken on various roles, endured failures, and enjoyed victories. It had felt as though every day was radiant with possibility.

Mit tugged his hand. “Dad, grampa.”

“Hmm?”

Graham sat quietly at the edge of the square. He stood inconspicuously in the shadows of the trees. Belgrieve led Mit over to him.

“It’s lively,” Graham said, raising his face to meet Bell’s gaze.

“It’s like this every year.”

Mit leaped onto Graham, climbing up to his shoulder.

“Grampa, so high...”

“I see.”

Belgrieve took a seat beside him, observing the festival. He was used to this by now, but that made it all the more precious to him.

However, it certainly felt like something was lacking. It almost felt like he was back to the time when he first returned to the village—back when he was still full of regrets from leaving the adventuring trade behind. Was this his longing for adventure? No, that wasn’t it. It was his desire to confront his past. He needed to settle things with his younger self, who had thrown everything aside and run away. Now, all these years later, there was nothing on his mind but the past. He needed to look back if he ever wanted to face forward again.

“Bell,” said Graham.

Belgrieve cocked his head. “What is it, Graham?”

“You’re mulling over something.”

Belgrieve stared at him. He ran a hand through his beard. “Well, I’ll be... You saw right through me.”

“Speak, friend. If it’s something I can help with.”

“Thank you.” Belgrieve gave that some thought, choosing each word carefully as he told his tale.

○

The man in the hat slowly lifted his torso. He let out a great yawn and flexed his shoulders, his bones making cracking sounds beneath his thin layer of flesh.

The dungeon had no day or night and was filled with an ever-present chill. However, the man dressed lightly and only wore sandals on his otherwise bare feet. In spite of this, he did not so much as shiver. He tugged at his beard, looking ever so bored.

“What a terrible dream,” he muttered.

He stretched out his legs and looked at the ceiling. The torchlight flickered and squirmed, causing the shadows to dance in a lifelike manner. From above, he could faintly hear some sort of noise. Apparently, a ball or party or something would be held soon; many guests had been invited, and beautifully dressed people would soon be coming and going from the gorgeous place.

“I want to throw up,” the man muttered.

All those folks who put on such dazzling garments were pitch-black on the inside. He far preferred adventurers in that regard—and so he had fallen asleep, hoping to see a dream of those good old days. But all that had awaited him was a nightmare. Though he knew it wasn’t real, he felt as if the stench of blood still lingered in the depths of his nostrils from the time after those early, radiant days, when he struggled desperately for his place among the strong, and power called out to him. Those people grated on his soul, deepened his pessimism, and turned the man into a cynical mess. Back then, he had convinced himself that strength was what he needed to regain the days he had spent with his comrades.

“And this is where I ended up... *Sigh...*” he lamented, wrapping his arms around his knees.

He had tried various things to fill the hole in his heart, but now it felt as though none of it made a difference. Even so, when he did nothing, that terrible emptiness would strike.

In the midst of all this, only the memories of when he was a low-ranking novice shone brilliantly. Whenever he thought he should just die already, those memories would stop him.

“What should we have done? Hey, tell me, Bell...”

The man fell flat and took hold of a liquor bottle, but it was empty, just like all the rest. He tossed it at the wall, where it shattered, before tiredly lifting his finger and waving it in the air. The shattered fragments floated, and piece by piece, they reassembled themselves. The bottle had regained its original shape. But once the man lowered his finger, the force holding them together dissipated, and they fell to the ground in pieces once more.

“Once it’s shattered, it’s pointless to put it back together...” he murmured, adjusting his wide-brimmed hat.

That was when he heard a faint sound, and a figure appeared on the other side of the metal bars. It was a girl with olive-brown hair, around twelve or thirteen. She wore a tidy dress without a single stain—a terrible mismatch for the dungeon of cold stone she found herself in.

The man in the hat looked thoroughly fed up. “Here again... It’ll be a big deal if anyone spots you.”

“They’re busy. No one’s coming here today. They’re all frantically preparing for the ball. How noisy can they be?” Her voice was like the ringing of a bell, refined and clear—a pure sound that knew nothing of the taint of corruption.

The man sighed. “Why not stick with your fiancé, then? It’s cold down here.”

“You look colder than me, dressed like that!”

“I’m special. *You* will catch a cold.”

“A little risk is fine. I need a change of pace, now and then. Hey, tell me another story. I liked the one about the dragon in the dungeon.”

“A bottle of the strong stuff—then we’ll talk.”

The girl stood. She lifted the hem of her skirt as she raced up the stairs. Then, as if only just recalling, she turned and shouted, “I’ll be back soon! No falling asleep!”

Then, she was gone. Annoyed, the man lay back down, resting his hat over his face.

# **Chapter 48: It Took Several Days Jolted About in a Carriage**

It took several days of being jolted about in a carriage before Angeline arrived in Estogal City. It was different from the chaotic streets that made up Orphen; here, there was a sense of order and planning. It was closer to the empire, and imperial architecture comprised much of the cityscape. The walls lining the roads were freshly painted and were unmarred by conspicuous stains.

A large river cut straight through the center of the city. Once upon a time, the empire's northern subjugation force and the allied clans of the north fought a fierce battle from opposite banks. The victors—the imperial army—built a city that flourished in trade from that very river, and even now, ships big and small could be seen dotting its surface.

There were docks and landings here and there, lining the river all the way to the center of the city. Along the riverbank beside these structures, lines of houses were built atop wood bases that resembled small ships moored to one another. These were the dwellings of the people who made a living off seafaring and fishing.

"Hey, Gil... What do they do if the river overflows?" Angeline murmured, grimacing as the whistling wind battered her face.

Gil, the woman holding the reins, squinted at something. "Have a look over there."

Angeline followed her finger to the end of the docks and realized the houses were simply floating atop empty barrels, among other things. While they were currently roped down, the houses could be rowed if necessary.

Angeline gave a satisfied nod. "So they thought it out... But why go out of their way to build houses on the water?"

"Legend has it that their ancestors were mermaids. The more superstitious of the bunch believed it and decided to live right on the water."

"Really?"

“Of course not. Heh heh heh...”

Angeline pursed her lips and leaned her back into the wagon’s supports. She had thought she would be traveling alone, but Lionel’s old party member tagged along to carry her bags.

Her name was Gilmenja. She was an active AAA-Rank adventurer who kept her reddish-brown hair cut short. Although she was part of Lionel’s generation—meaning she had to be in her forties—she could have passed for being in her midtwenties.

In Lionel’s party, she had mainly handled supplies, scouting, and travel preparations—mostly support and behind-the-scenes work. Given her skill and quick wit, she had been chosen to go with Angeline, who would definitely need her help for those things. She was carefree and prone to say strange things quite frequently, but Angeline liked her quite a bit—if nothing else, she hadn’t been bored over the long journey.

The streets were wide enough for many wagons to come and go. This was the archduke’s own city, so it was frequently visited by nobles.

It was Angeline’s first time in Estogal. Even if her heart wasn’t really in it, she was still exhilarated to visit someplace new. Her rage at all her wasted excitement and preparations had been somewhat mollified over the course of their nearly half a month on the road.

However, whenever she thought back to Turnera’s scenery, the irritation and anger would simmer up again, and Estogal would suddenly seem uninteresting again by comparison.

“Have you ever been to Estogal, Gil?”

“I have. The northern subjugation force across the river. And on this bank, Barablien, hero of the clans. I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Did that really happen?”

“Around three hundred years ago, heh heh heh.”

“Three...”

“Well, let’s keep our jokes at that,” Gilmenja said. “Want to stop by the guild?”

Angeline shook her head. “I’m not here to work... No reason to visit Estogal’s guild.”

“Someone’s crabby. You’re wasting that cute face of yours.”

“I’m not cute.”

“You’re wasting that hideous face of yours.”

“You didn’t have to rephrase that..”

Angeline sullenly pressed her elbows into her knees and cupped her cheeks in her hands. Gilmenja prodded at her face, looking far too amused.

Eventually, they arrived at the inn. It was a large establishment frequented by adventurers, peddlers, and travelers, with space to keep the horses and wagon. The ball would be held in another three days; their travel plans had panned out so smoothly they arrived with too much time to spare. But it wasn’t like she would have accomplished anything by sulking around Orphen. Angeline forcefully convinced herself that it was best to complete all these troublesome things as quickly as possible.

She carried her bags to her room, then promptly brewed a cup of tea to calm herself. It was a room on the second floor with a good view of the river flowing right beneath her window.

Gilmenja stuffed her cheeks with sugar candy like a squirrel and said, “I’ll wait here. Why don’t you go ahead to the archduke’s place?”

“Huh... Why?”

“I mean, you’re their invited guest... How about you go and get a nice dress for the ball? They’ll treat you to a nice meal in a lovely room. I don’t see why not.”

“Then come with me. I’ll feel awkward alone...”

“That would probably be pointless. You were invited because you’ve got great achievements under your belt. Nobles don’t generally get along with adventurers.”

“Even though they bring a boatload of requests to us?”

“That’s just how nobles are. The way they see it, adventurers exist to be used. Heh heh heh.”

Feeling peevish, Angeline leaned back in her chair and downed her cup. “I can’t stand it. I really shouldn’t have come here...”

“Honestly, I think so too. Why are you here?”

“Good question... I guess because I thought it would cause trouble for everyone if I didn’t come...”

Gilmenja cackled. “You’re a good girl, Ange. Well, perhaps you’re right. We’re stronger in direct combat, but nobles know how to work behind the scenes: a bit of slander, scheming, and bribery, and they’ll have you cornered in no time... There are some things in the world that strength alone can’t solve.”

“What are nobles even around for, then?”

“They spring up all on their own. All over the place, especially when it rains. They pull gold and medals from their pockets to corrupt the lot of us. Heh heh heh.”

“That was a lie... Right?”

“Yep.”

Angeline let out a resigned sigh. Though they were nobles, Sasha, Seren, and Helvetica were good people. *If only all nobles were like that*, she thought. But the world did not work that way.

In any case, now that she was here, she would have to at least pay the archduke a visit. She didn’t know anything about medal conferment and whatnot, but if she just had to receive something, then she could just take it before the ball and be on her way. In fact, that seemed like the best solution.

Angeline stood. “All right, I’ll go have a look... But I don’t know the way. Guide me.”

“Fine. Not that I know the way either.”

“You don’t?”

“I do.”

Angeline frowned and silently poked at the more experienced adventurer. The two of them left the inn, walking down the streets on foot. A cold wind was blowing, mercilessly chapping their bare ears and noses.

“You brought the invitation, didn’t you?”

“Yeah.”

Angeline made sure of the envelope in her coat pocket. It was horribly crumpled, but still legible.

Gilmenja placed a hand on her shoulder. “Ange, I know you’ll hate every second of your time there, but no exploding. Just nod when you have to nod, speak only when needed, and make it through this. Then you can get back to Orphen.”

“Got it.”

“Also, keep your tone polite. It’s scary what happens if you make a noble angry.”

“That depends on the situation, ma’am.”

Under Gilmenja’s guidance, she followed the river a good distance before turning a corner. The path gradually began to slope up while the townscape around them grew quieter. Soon, it seemed as if every estate they walked past

was bigger than the last. Some even had small parade grounds for private armies, and they could hear soldiers focused on their training.

At the farthest and highest point was a conspicuously large and sturdy stone structure, surrounded by high walls like a fortress. Its deep history was apparent just at a glance.

When she turned around, she had a view of the entire bifurcated city from end to end. Presumably, this building had been repurposed from a fort meant to keep watch of the enemy across the river.

The large iron gates were left open, their role against intrusion instead taken up by tough-looking soldiers standing on either side of the entrance, their wide eyes glaring at all who came near. Perhaps in preparation for the ball, she could see what were probably servants helping with the gift-laden carriages of nobles, as well as dressmakers and purveyors of all manner of foods.

Angeline stood frozen for a while before finally going to one of the soldiers at the entrance.

“Excuse me.”

“What do you want? This is no place for the poor.” The soldier was clearly mocking her.

Angeline scoffed and silently held out her invitation. Although the soldier looked at her suspiciously, he was taken aback as he saw the seal on it, and even further surprised as he read the contents. He glanced up at Angeline.

“Th-The demon-slaying Black-Haired Valkyrie...?”

“You got a problem with that?”

“N-No... You may pass.”

The soldier stepped aside in a fluster.

Angeline frowned. “You can’t just let me in. I don’t know where to go from here.”

“Grr... I am just a gatekeeper. Go inside and ask a servant.”

“I see... Thank you.” Angeline gave a slight bow before turning back to Gilmenja. “I’m going... Are you sure you don’t want to come with me?”

Gilmenja chuckled. “Those gaudy places aren’t for me. I don’t want to pick a fight with any nobles, so I’ll be waiting in the inn. You take care.”

“Hmm... See you, then.”

Angeline strutted through the gate and found herself in a courtyard. The dirt was laid bare and marked with wheels where traffic was highest.

However, the rest was a fine lawn with well-maintained flower beds and trees. The colors were rather plain, given the season—but a number of the trees and bushes still had their flowers, and it was still a feast for the eyes.

Several structures—once watchtowers—were built right against the walls. In addition to this, there were rows of buildings made of wood, stone, and mortar—the servant lodgings, perhaps.

But passing by these buildings, she soon arrived at one far larger and more extravagant. It was the manor.

The massive double doors of the front entrance were, like the gates, left wide open, and she had a full view of the interior through the terraced entranceway. The foyer was constructed of beautiful, glossy marble; the Bordeaux estate had been splendid, but this was something else entirely.

Angeline stood there frozen, feeling completely overwhelmed and out of her element. She had no idea whom she could call out to. The nobles paying courtesy calls to the archduke sent her side glances and sneers as they whispered amongst themselves.

And then, someone finally called out to her: “Hey, you there.”

She glanced over to see a middle-aged man, presumably a servant.

“Who are you? How did you get in?”

“Do you work here, mister?”

“And what if I do? What is someone so shabby doing in the archduke’s estate?”

“I was invited. Where is the archduke?”

Angeline handed over the invitation, which was met with much scrutiny and surprise. “So you’re th-the Black-Haired Valkyrie... I heard the rumors, but you’re quite young...”

“Is that a problem?”

“No, it’s not. I apologize for my insolence. Please wait a moment.” The servant hastily ran back into the depths of the manor.

Angeline folded her arms and sighed. This was more tiring than she thought it would be. When she looked around, she found everyone in the building was dressed gorgeously. She was the only one in seedy street wear, which made her far too conspicuous. She never thought she would lose her nerve over something like that, but now that she actually faced this dilemma, she felt ashamed to be so mismatched.

“Nobles are a force to be reckoned with.”

She leaned against the outer wall and shut her eyes. It wasn't long before she heard footsteps approach her though. When she opened her eyes, she found the same servant standing before her.

"I informed them of your arrival. This way, please."

"Thanks..."

Angeline followed the servant into the manor. The moment she was within those walls, she felt like she might freeze up again. A massive chandelier hung from the ceiling of the entrance hall. It was crafted from glass, silver, and gold, and evidently shone not with lit candles but yellow shimestones.

It took several gold coins to buy just one shimestone, and this chandelier was adorned with a plethora of them. Angeline didn't know whether to feel impressed or disgusted, but it was nonetheless a dizzying sight. The polished marble beneath her feet glistened, and she would probably see her own reflection if she examined it closely enough. She couldn't help but be anxious that her shoes would scuff it.

They proceeded down a carpeted corridor and entered a room on the second floor.

"Wait here." The servant said something to the maid at the door before scurrying off.

The room wasn't too large, but it was tidy with subtle hints of tasteful décor all around. It seemed to be a guest room, and had an open door in the back through which she caught a glimpse of a bath.

Angeline sat fidgeting in an intricately carved chair with a soft cushion. It should have felt divine to sit there, but for some reason, she felt like bolting to her feet. Even when a maid poured a cup of tea for her, she was hesitant to bring the cup to her lips.

*I understand now—it's too pretty in here to feel relaxed. I see why Gilmenja didn't want to come.* Angeline nodded to herself. *It's no wonder nobles look down on adventurers, if their lives are spent in such places as this.* Though she had come to this conclusion, she still found it to be as absurd as it was logical.

"Yet we're all the same with our clothes off," she muttered. Though the nobility may have worn flashy garb and lived in gaudy mansions, all people would be the same if they were stripped naked and cast into the wilderness. And should such a thing ever befall Angeline, she would much rather return

to her seat in front of her father's hearth in Turnera, where the air smelled of straw and soot, than return to this unsettling place.

The door opened and a man who looked to be in his early twenties entered. Well-tailored clothes adorned his medium build; his hair, which he ran his fingers through, was a curly, ash-brown color.

The man stared at Angeline with appraising eyes. Although she found this quite unpleasant, she held her tongue and only betrayed her discomfort with her slightly furrowed brow.

"So you're Angeline, the Black-Haired Valkyrie?"

She silently nodded. The man frowned as he took a seat across the table from her and sullenly snapped his fingers. A maid hurried over to pour him a cup of tea.

"No need to be so cold. I went to a lot of trouble to suggest your conferment to my father, you know."

Angeline weighed her words before settling on a simple response: "Care to introduce yourself, then?"

"Such an insolent tone!"

"I am from the countryside, please excuse my coarse manners," Angeline said, bowing her head and concealing the unpleasant look on her face. Knowing that this was the man who had called her here, she felt an immense urge to immediately smack him upside the face. But that would just be asking for more trouble. She folded her hands over her lap where they could do no harm.

Though the man still seemed displeased, he quickly regained his composure. "Well, even if you are a mere adventurer, you did slay a demon after all! I will tolerate a degree of boorishness from you."

"How very magnanimous of you."

His good humor restored by Angeline's polite act, the man leaned back. "My name is Villard Estogal. Have you heard of me before?"

Angeline was about to shake her head, but she reconsidered and nodded instead. Villard's lips curled up into a triumphant smirk.

"Ha ha, so they know me even in a backwater like Orphen."

Truth be told, she hadn't the slightest clue who he was, but Angeline followed up with an ambivalent nod. Villard propped his elbow on the table and leaned forward.

"The demon was strong, yes?"

“Yes... It was strong.”

“I see... Well, that is good to hear.” Villard stood and began to pace the room. “Yes, a relief indeed. It would be a disgrace for me if I suggested accolades for someone who did not deserve them. However, if you defeated a powerful fiend, it only makes sense that medals should follow. Consider it an honor.”

“Of course...”

“Heh heh... This should give father a better impression of me... Like I’ll let my brother hog all the limelight.”

*Can this be over already?* Angeline sipped her tea with a sour expression. From what she could piece together, Villard had broached the topic of Angeline’s conferment to his father out of some sort of competition with his brother. She felt tired just knowing she would have to put up with a power struggle among nobles.

Her cup made a clicking sound as she set it down. “So...when will I get the medal? I believe it’s best to get these things done as soon as we have the chance.”

Villard looked slightly amazed at her suggestion. “The medal isn’t all there is to it. There is a magnificent ceremony to lend it the proper weight and dignity. Otherwise, no one would know who gave it to you. It would carry no honor whatsoever.”

*I don’t care if no one knows,* she nearly said. But she knew better, recalling Gilmenja’s words, and begrudgingly nodded instead. The upshot was that she could not leave until the ceremony was held at the ball.

Villard observed Angeline from head to toe before scoffing. “But, how should I put it... You’re a bit grimy. It would be like slathering dirt on my face if you attended the ball like that. Hey,” Villard said, calling to the maid. “You, look after her—get her into the bath, and give her a top-class dress. Don’t forget, she is my guest. You need to thoroughly groom her within three days. She’s on the slim side, so make sure she’s well-fed too! And teach her the bare minimum of etiquette. Do not bring me shame.”

“Certainly, milord.” The maid nodded.

With a satisfied chuckle, Villard turned back to Angeline. “I’m busy, you see. Stay here, and don’t cause too much trouble.”

And with that, he was off.

The moment the door clicked shut, Angeline could feel the power drain

from her body. She rarely felt this tired, even when facing fiends of the highest caliber. Although they were nobles all the same, Villard was completely different from the three Bordeaux sisters. Frankly, she felt like patting herself on the back for not exploding at him.

“Nobles are a force to be reckoned with,” Angeline muttered as the maid reached out to her.

“Um, would you like another cup?”

“Yes please.” She sipped from her refilled cup. This time, she had calmed down enough for the flavors to reach her. She took a deep breath before turning to the maid.

“So who was that guy anyways?”

“Huh? You don’t know?”

“No, nothing—just his name.”

The maid nodded. “Sir Villard is the archduke’s second son.”

“What do you think about him?” Angeline asked.

At this, the maid looked a little troubled, and her eyes wandered.

Angeline giggled. “Don’t worry... I’m an adventurer, not a spy.”

So the maid smiled back. “I guess so... Please keep this a secret.”

“Of course.”

According to the maid, Villard was a stereotypical noble brat. Because he had been born into his lofty station in life, he had little desire for money—unlike those who had to climb the social ladder. However, what he did have a strong craving for was power, and he was in competition with his eldest brother, Fernand.

Unfortunately for Villard, Fernand seemed to surpass him in every way, and his efforts to stand out had been largely in vain.

“Sir Villard was the one who first suggested your conferment, Madam Angeline. He proposed it as the archduke was searching for a centerpiece for the ball, I presume.”

*So that’s why it took a year,* Angeline thought with a sigh. The reason was so absurd she couldn’t even be angry about it.

“So he doesn’t get along with his brother?”

“I’m not so sure. It doesn’t look that way from my position...”

“Hmm... And it’s just two brothers?”

“No, they have a younger sister too. As well as a younger brother from a different mother. There are four siblings in total.”

Angeline propped up her head with her hand. She would likely be meeting all of them sooner or later. While she was staring off in a daze, the maid had begun briskly walking around her.

“What?”

“I was wondering what sort of dress would be best for you.”

“I’m not good with dresses.”

“You mustn’t say that, madam. I think you are perfectly suited for this; you just need some polishing to shine... Shall I draw the bath?”

“Please go easy on me.”

Angeline stood, wondering what her father was doing.

○

Angeline had arrived in Estogal around the same time that winter was setting in on Orphen. The first snow had fallen just the other day, blanketing the streets in white. However, like a swaying pendulum, it was followed by a streak of warm days that melted it all away. And then the cold wind would blow once more.

Like this, the cold and warm would compete until winter inevitably seized victory.

Angeline’s absence was not enough to hinder the efficacy of the guild’s operations, but the management team all knew her, and they all felt a bit lonely when she was away. As per usual, Yuri sat at the counter sorting paperwork as adventurers and clients livened up the guild. Her desk was only for high-ranking adventurers, so unlike the standard desk, she was not flooded with customers. She used her idle time to sort through files and do other basic office work.

“Hmm... A B-Rank fiend in a D-Rank field... *This goes here.*”

Data from old requests could occasionally prove useful down the line. She checked the contents of each report, classifying them into different piles. This formed a database of precedents to check against if anything strange happened later on. The uproar over the demon had shown a need for some sort of system.

While she was engaged with this work, Lionel unsteadily tottered his way over. The bags under his eyes were darker than usual, and his complexion even paler still. He almost looked sick enough to be hospitalized.

“Yuri... Could you get me the files on the...C-Rank dungeon near Asterinos...”

“Hold on, Leon. Are you all right?”

“Ha...ha ha... The guilt is getting to me... You think Ms. Ange’s all right? I hope Gil’s giving her adequate support...”

“Well, then you could have told her sooner. It’s cruel how you kept it a secret until the day before she went on holiday.”

“I was planning to tell them she was already gone. But it turns out the lord of Orphen got a letter too, and figured out she was still around...and really hammered it home to me before I could pretend I didn’t see anything. How can someone who isn’t even that strong be so scary?”

Yuri sighed. “There you go, taking it all upon yourself again. It’s good that you’re trying not to trouble anyone, but the outcome couldn’t have been more bothersome. Please put a little more thought into things.”

“You’re right... It’s a bad habit...” Lionel heaved a deep sigh.

At that moment, someone suddenly appeared and slammed a hand down on the counter.

“Excuse me!”

“Yesh?” Yuri blinked.

Ears as pointed as bamboo blades, and silver hair as soft as silk... The girl standing there could only be an elf. Although her eyes were burning with fighting spirit, the rest of her face was so beautiful it almost seemed unreal.

Faced with the rare beauty of the elven race suddenly appearing before them, the two experienced adventurers lost their words in spite of themselves. However, as though to undermine the first impression her appearance gave off, the elf girl went on a noisy tirade.

“Is this the desk? I’m here because I want to be an adventurer! What do I need to do?” she asked demandingly.

“Uh, um, this is the counter reserved for high-ranking adventurers...”

“I see! That sounds about right! I’m going to be S-Rank in no time!”

“Um, Ms. Elf...? There’s a process to everything...”

“A process?! Then make it quick! What do I need to do?”

As the elf leaned in, someone reached from behind and pulled her back by the shoulder. “Hey now, Maggie. I understand you’re excited, but that’s not how you ask for a favor.”

“Y-You think so?”

“I do. Do you see how troubled the nice receptionist looks?”

The middle-aged man who appeared from behind the elf gave a wry smile. He was adorned in a leather waistcoat beneath his mantle, his red hair was bundled behind his head, and he boasted a beard of the same fiery shade. By now, these traits were all too familiar to the guild staff.

Lionel and Yuri opened their mouths blankly.

“Y-Y-Y-You’re...?”

“Oh, pardon me.” The red-haired man walked up to the counter with an affable smile. His right leg made a peculiar tapping sound with each step. “My name is Belgrieve. I’m here to see my daughter, Angeline... Do you know where I might find her?”

# Chapter 49: You Need to Confront Your Past

*You need to confront your past*—this was the gist of Graham’s advice. “The past is where your worries lie. They stick to you like thorns; until you pluck them out, you can never truly conquer your past.”

“That’s...what I thought.” Belgrieve took a mouthful of hard cider and shut his eyes, relaxing to the sounds of the festival.

He had thought that the moment he began caring for Angeline was a complete departure from who he once was. From raising her, to seeing her off, and then welcoming her home again, his mind had been occupied with nothing but Angeline.

But now, there was no doubt remaining that Angeline had come into her own, and he was sure she could take care of herself—so his thoughts took an uncomfortable turn towards the introspective. The past he thought he had come to terms with now came back to him unbidden, and each time his thoughts strayed in that direction, he would feel his heart tightening.

He hadn’t gotten over it—he had simply been looking away from it.

Belgrieve hung his head. “But, you know... If Maggie and Duncan are leaving, then I can’t really go too...”

“Worried about Turnera?”

“Yeah.”

After all, the warping of the forest had happened while he was away in Bordeaux. It had worked out well enough because Duncan had been there to deal with the resultant fiends, but it was chilling to imagine what could have happened otherwise. It had been a rare event, to be sure, but there was still a possibility of a fiend emerging that was beyond what the village youth could handle. Even worse, if he left for Orphen now, it would be hard to return until spring. These thoughts weighed on him and made his feet feel leaden.

Graham silently mulled this over for a moment. “Then I just need to stay...”

“Huh?” Belgrieve lifted his face. “You’re going to stay in Turnera?”

There could be no greater guarantee of Turnera’s security than this.

Graham being there would offer Belgrieve more peace of mind than if he was staying himself, and he would have no reason to fear even if demons or dragons showed up. Moreover, the elf had already been accepted by the village. Some folks still held him in awe and trepidation because of his taciturn demeanor, but they did not treat him the worse for it.

Belgrieve could leave Graham to look after the house, and head to Orphen with Marguerite. He could meet Angeline, search for his old allies, and settle the score with his past. Greater excitement than he’d felt in years bubbled up inside as he connected these dots in his head.

“But...are you sure? Don’t you want to continue your own adventure?”

“I originally came here because I was chasing Marguerite. It was too risky to leave her alone.” Graham had a distant look in his eyes as he watched the dancing villagers. His gaze lingered on a girl laughing while several young men playfully tried to woo her. “From what she’s experienced here, she has learned to comport herself well enough... She should be fine without me hounding her.”

“I see... Maggie’s done a good bit of growing up.” Belgrieve smiled.

Graham’s eyes locked with Belgrieve’s. “That’s thanks to you, Bell. I want to return the favor.”

Belgrieve closed his eyes. “Thank you, Graham.” His ancient friend’s magnanimous gesture filled his heart with warmth.

Mit, sitting on Graham’s lap, looked up at Belgrieve with wonder. “Dad, going...?”

“Yeah... I’m going to see your sister.”

“Sis...”

“I have just one favor to ask...” Graham murmured.

“Hmm?”

“While you are on your journey... Might I look after Mit?”

“Feeling lonely?”

○

“Mr. Beeeell!” The moment Miriam spotted Belgrieve, she charged straight at him, grabbed his hand, and excitedly swung it around. “Why?

Why? Why? Hooray! It's Mr. Bell, really and truly!"

"Hey now, Merry... It hurts if you swing me around that much," Belgrieve said with a wry smile.

Although Miriam released him, she continued stamping her feet in excitement.

Anessa delivered a light chop to the crown of Miriam's head. "What are you doing?"

"I mean, it's Mr. Bell! You're excited too, don't hide it!"

"Er..." Anessa looked at Belgrieve with a slight blush gracing her cheeks before awkwardly looking at the ground. "I-It's been a while, Mr. Bell."

Belgrieve chuckled. "Yeah, it has been, Anne. You both look well."

"Thanks. Um... Did you get the, uh...letter?" Anessa mumbled.

Belgrieve tilted his head. "A letter? No..."

"It must have just missed you, then. You see, Ange..."

"She went to get her medal, right? I heard from Lionel. Seriously, I'm glad it's Estogal. I don't know what I'd do if she ended up leaving for Turn —" Belgrieve was suddenly dumbstruck at the sight of Lionel smoothly getting down on his hands and knees.

"You have my utmost apologies, Mr. Belgrieve. I know you must be angry, but if my life is enough to quell your rage, then..."

"N-No, not at all. Please raise your head, Lionel. It is a great honor to receive a medal from the archduke. As a father, I couldn't be prouder—I have no call to be angry."

"But your daughter truly...*truly* saved our guild. And instead of repaying her, we keep adding to her troubles..."

Belgrieve gave a troubled smile. He squatted down and placed a hand on Lionel's shoulder. "You did what you could. Those with power and authority often shoulder responsibilities to match. Otherwise, the rank itself would have lost all its worth. And if she could do whatever she wanted just because she's an S-Rank, it would diminish the dignity of adventurers as a whole. I'm happy that my daughter did not neglect this ceremony to see me. Thank you for being honest with her, Lionel."

"M-Mr. Belgrieve... I haven't done anything you should thank me for," Lionel said, bursting into tears.

Of course, there were those that ran amok precisely because of their lofty positions. This didn't just apply to adventurers—many nobles were like this

as well. The three Bordeaux sisters were the exception, not the norm.

Still, nobody could run away from the obligations of rank forever. Even if they couldn't stand it, there were just some things that adventurers couldn't easily ignore. Otherwise, the inevitable blowback would not only fall upon them, but on everyone around them. Belgrieve was happy to hear that Angeline had understood this and acted accordingly. And, as a father, he was genuinely pleased that her achievements had been recognized.

If the guild had covered for Angeline and let her go to Turnera, there definitely would have been problems down the road. The guild supported the livelihoods of many adventurers and addressed the concerns of the city's residents, and many of them would be impacted if the archduke impeded its operation. Even if the guild somehow came out on top in the end, Belgrieve wouldn't want things to go that far in the first place.

"What's this now? I thought the guild master was supposed to be someone amazing," Marguerite mused, seeing Lionel all choked up. "He's completely hopeless."

"*Hic...* I-I won't deny that..."

"Hey now, Maggie." Belgrieve frowned. "You can't say that."

"Ah... Sorry."

"It's okay, Mr. Belgrieve... What she said was true..."

Yuri giggled. "'Lost all its worth,' huh? Did you hear that, Leo?"

"Yes, I'll do my best." Lionel cast his gaze at the ground.

Meanwhile, Miriam stole a glance at Marguerite. "So, um, I was wondering if you'd introduce that elf over there."

"Oh, that's right. This is Marguerite. One thing led to another, and she ended up staying at my house for a while."

"Hmm, living with an elf..."

"That's life for you. She says she wants to be an adventurer, so I tagged along with her for the ride. Maggie, these girls are my daughter's party members. They're high-ranking and will be your seniors in the guild."

Marguerite puffed out her chest. "The name's Marguerite! Nice to meetcha! You can call me Maggie!"

"I'm Miriam. Call me Merry."

"And I'm Anessa. My friends call me Anne, but... Well, call me whatever."

"You got it! So you're both adventurers? Are you strong?"

“Well, we’re...decent, maybe? Me and Anne, we’re AAA-Rank for what it’s worth.”

“Aha! That’s really something! But I’ll catch up in no time!”

“Hmm... Are you that strong, Maggie?”

“You bet I am.”

As the girls began talking amongst themselves, Belgrieve turned back to Lionel. “And that’s the story. I know you’re busy, but I want to get her registered as a proper adventurer.”

“No, no, don’t concern yourself with that—she will naturally have first priority!”

“You don’t have to. It’s not like we’re in a hurry,” said Belgrieve.

With a giggle, Yuri called out to Marguerite. “All right Maggie, let’s get you signed up.”

“Hooray! Well then, Bell, I’ll be off for a bit!”

Yuri was about to lead Marguerite off when suddenly she remembered something and turned back. “Oh, and M-Mr. Belgrieve.”

“Yes?”

Her cheeks suddenly reddened. “I heard you were a bachelor, but...um... I’m not so sure about having your daughter, er...find a wife for you.”

“Huh?” Belgrieve replied, befuddled.

“I’m sorry, I know it’s none of my business! Please forget I said anything...”

She bashfully placed her hands to her cheeks and hurried off, Marguerite following after her.

With a troubled frown, Belgrieve looked to Anessa. “Wife...?”

“Well, er, Ange...”

“What about Ange?”

Anessa’s voice rose in a panic. “Um, Mr. Bell! There’s some people we want to introduce as well!”

“Huh? But what’s this talk about a wife...?”

“Right, Merry?!?”

“Right, right!”

Miriam pulled Charlotte and Byaku out from the back. When Belgrieve looked her way, Charlotte bashfully hid behind Byaku. She cautiously poked her head out halfway from behind the boy to take a peek. For some reason, Byaku seemed to be guarded.

Belgrieve squinted his eyes. “You’re...from Bordeaux?”

Charlotte opened and closed her mouth as she searched for the right words. “Um... My name is...Charlotte! Th-Thank you for saving me back then!” she said, blushing.

“Huh? Oh... I see. I’m glad you’re all right.”

Charlotte’s emotions finally reached a breaking point, and she rushed forth and leaped into Belgrieve’s chest. Surprised as he was, Belgrieve caught her.

“Wh-What’s wrong?”

Without a word, the girl nuzzled his chest with her face.

Bewildered, Belgrieve pasted on a smile as he looked to Anessa and Miriam for help. “Um...?”

“Ha ha... Well, a lot has happened...”

“You got that right. There are loads of things I want to tell you, Mr. Bell! Ah, but Ange might be angry if we say anything without her.”

“No, don’t worry about it. I’m sure Ange has plenty of stories of her own. But first, what’s this about finding me a wife?”

“Er,” Lionel reservedly cut in. “Um... Feel free to do as you like, but you might want to take this conversation elsewhere...”

Belgrieve looked around. They were still in the perpetually busy guild lobby and had attracted much attention and murmuring.

“Red hair...peg leg...”

“Is that the Red Ogre? The Black-Haired Valkyrie’s father and mentor...”

“Yeah, must be... Word is, he’s even stronger than the Valkyrie...”

“He came with an elf... Who exactly is he?”

“Just get an eyeful of that aura... He’s no ordinary guy...”

“The guild master did get down on his knees, after all...”

“Why is he holding a little girl?”

He was garnering a fair bit of attention, and he started to feel awkward standing there. It was then that he recalled that “the Red Ogre” was a famous name in Orphen’s guild.

“Thank you for the warning, Lionel... Let’s find a nice place once Maggie returns,” he said. There were plenty of things he was curious about. But first on the agenda was definitely this wife-finding business.



The air in the bathroom was filled with a nice, sweet scent. Medicinal herbs, dried flowers, and other aromatics were generously mixed into the hot water, dyeing it a light-green hue.

It was Angeline's first time having a bath like this. The tub in the bathroom attached to the guest room could fit up to two people at most, yet the room it was in was far too vast. Half of the space could have been sectioned off as a changing room, and it would still be larger than necessary. Most peculiarly, it was decorated with pots and paintings despite being a bathing area.

Angeline's mind was utterly calm as she steeped in the tub. The temperature was perfect, the fragrance divine, and she felt she might fall asleep at any moment. She had all but forgotten what she was there for.

She raised her hands out of the water and stared at them. The skin of her palms, which had grown rough and calloused from years of wielding a sword, had turned white here and there after soaking in the water. *Perhaps my hands are starting to get close to being like my father's*, she mused.

With this thought on her mind, she sunk down to her nose and exhaled a stream of bubbles. Her long, unbundled hair drifted freely around her like seaweed.

Three maids had thoroughly scrubbed her down from head to toe, and she felt more refreshed than ever before in her life—at least, it was certainly the *soapiest* she had ever been. Though the maids had used washcloths, they had effectively fondled her all over, and she felt as though she had lost a bit of dignity in the process. But *this wasn't too bad*.

Once she was clean, she had the maids leave until she was thoroughly warmed by the water. It would have been one thing if they were there to share the bath with her like she was used to, but having them waiting on her, fully clothed while she bathed naked in their sight, was an unsettling thought.

Through the bathwater, she could see her modest chest and hips. She was slender and solidly built, to put it nicely. Jiggling bits would only get in the way when she swung her sword. But Angeline was still at that age when she hoped to fill out more as a woman.

She put a hand to her chest, then to her hips, recalling Miriam and Helvetica. "No development whatsoever... But why?" she asked herself, frowning.

But there was no use in asking for what wasn't there. As she stood up

from the water, her floating strands of hair suddenly gained weight and clung to her body. She dried herself with a fluffy towel. This wasn't like the thin multipurpose rags she was used to, and she found it quite cozy to wrap around her like a blanket.

A maid, who probably heard the sound of her splashing around, called out from beyond the door.

"Are you done?"

"Yeah."

The door immediately swung open, and the maids were upon her. They carried along undergarments and dresses and seemed quite enthusiastic.

"Please try out these undergarments!"

"Ahh... She's so wonderfully slim—a diamond in the rough."

"Her hair is so pretty too. Do you think this style would suit her? For the ornaments, of course..."

"The dress color is an issue too. Should we go with chic cool tones, or bring out some warmth..."

"She's nice and toned, so nothing too loose."

"Moderate exposure might be more captivating... But too much will just make it vulgar."

"We have plenty of time. Now, madam, this way..."

Angeline was overwhelmed by the maids' momentum. "I'm starting to understand how you felt, Bucky," she muttered.

For a long while, they dressed her up in garments of all colors and styles, and though she was rather glum at first, Angeline gradually found herself getting into it. As she sat and stood in front of the large full-length mirror, the sun eventually kissed the horizon.

Though she had begun to enjoy herself, she was still weary from her long journey. She heaved a deep sigh and said, "Hey. I'm tired today. Can we continue this tomorrow?"

"Oh dear, just when it was starting to get interesting... But, as you wish."

"We've already decided our direction. I'm excited to see what we'll come up with tomorrow."

"Let me bring dinner then. Please be at ease, madam."

Merry as they were, the maids swiftly put the dresses away and left. Angeline flopped onto the fluffy sofa, now adorned in simple loungewear. Once she had taken a seat, she felt she wouldn't be standing up again and

realized she was far more tired than expected.

“These nobles are a force to be reckoned with,” she muttered yet again. *There are worlds out there I know absolutely nothing about.*

But as long as she could conquer her shame, it wasn’t so bad to wear pretty dresses. Angeline was at that age, after all. Not to mention she could distract herself from her sorrows as long as she immersed herself in diversions. As a matter of fact, most of her nervousness and irritation towards Villard had been quelled since their meeting.

Even the medal wasn’t so bad—perhaps Belgrieve would praise her if she brought it back with her. The timing had been terrible, and she did not have any personal interest in medals, but they were not a bad thing to have. Regardless of her feelings, they had to be valuable—otherwise people wouldn’t see them as such an honor to receive.

As she sat on the sofa, a little dazed, she heard a knock at the door.

“I’ve brought dinner.”

“Come in.”

The door opened and in came the maids with plates laden with food. There were four maids now, one more than when they had dressed her. The maids expertly set the table with deft hands and presented an absurd quantity of food, just as Villard had ordered.

As she shifted from the sofa to the table, she stared at it all as if it were a dream. Her gaze fell upon the new maid’s face, and she suddenly winced in shock.

Once the dishes were set, the maids formed a line beside the table.

“Allow us to serve you.”

“No, it’s, er...unsettling to be watched while eating. You can just go do your other jobs... Um... Just leave the maid on the right.”

The maids exchanged glances, but they nodded upon recalling that Angeline was not nobility. They left only the designated maid behind and made for the door. After the other three had left, the last remaining maid swiftly engaged the lock and grinned. “What a delicious-looking meal you have there.”

“What are you doing, Gil?”

Gilmenja giggled in her maid’s clothing. “A girl’s got to work, right? How does it look on me?” She lifted the hem of her skirt and performed an exaggerated curtsy.

Angeline was feeling something between relief and astonishment. In any case, she was rather tired.

“I’m surprised you managed to slip in.”

“It’s not hard when they’re all in such a flurry of activity, with people coming in left, right, and center. I used to be part of a traveling theater troupe before I became an adventurer, so I’m good at this sort of thing.”

“Hmm... Didn’t know that.”

“Well, that’s because it’s not true. Now, eat before your meal gets cold.”

Gilmenja uncorked a bottle of wine and filled a glass. By then, Angeline had given up and reached for a fork. She didn’t know the first thing about table manners, so she arbitrarily stuffed her cheeks, chewed, and washed it all down with wine.

As was to be expected of the food from an archduke’s larder, everything was delicious. Even after she’d eaten quite a bit, her hand kept reaching out for more. There was never a moment for her mouth to rest, and even as she chewed, she couldn’t help but sigh in admiration.

“Delish... Maybe I was hungrier than I thought.”

“You tell yourself that. So, thoughts? A bit different from what they serve in Orphen, right?”

“Yes, but delicious nonetheless.”

She munched on a dish of steamed vegetables topped with melted cheese, then wiped up the sauce left over from the grilled meat plate with a piece of bread. What seemed to be smoked river-fish stew had a unique scent, but it wasn’t unpleasant. There was paste made from liver and large mollusks grilled on the half shell with minced herbs. All of these were uncommon dishes in Orphen.

Angeline very quickly ate her fill and could feel her stomach bulging. But she felt a little happy. Things that irritated her while she was hungry seemed quite inconsequential on a full stomach. She suddenly felt rather drowsy, and her eyelids seemed extraordinarily heavy.

Gilmenja deftly and expertly collected the dinnerware, brewed a pot of tea, and poured a cup for Angeline.

“Was it to your tastes, madam?”

Her joking tone put a smile on Angeline’s face. “Yeah... Do nobles eat like this every day?”

“Not the poorer ones. But I’d wager the archdukes do. Actually, I imagine

they eat *far* better meals than what you were just served.”

*They really are incredible, those archduke folks,* Angeline thought as she sipped her tea. The food at the Bordeaux estate was tasty too, but compared to what she had just eaten, the plating and variety would have felt simple and lacking.

Gilmenja took a seat across from her. “So how was it? Are you starting to pick up on how to deal with nobles?”

“I’ve realized they’re people too... But the worlds we live in are very different. I can’t handle this. Just, no.”

“There’s no way around that. But going through it all once will change your outlook, hee hee hee.”

“Yeah... It might have been easier if you had been by my side, but then I wouldn’t have learned anything.”

If Gilmenja had been there to handle everything, Angeline likely would have hung back, pouting and grumbling over how she couldn’t stand nobles all the while. She would have gotten through it, but she wouldn’t have *experienced* anything.

Gilmenja’s expression softened a bit. “Now you’re getting it. Good girl, good girl. From what I could see through the keyhole, well... I’ll give you passing marks. If things went wrong, I’d have burst into the room, pretending there was a huge incident somewhere else in the house.”

Angeline felt her strength draining away. “You were watching...the whole time?”

“Who knows? Heh heh heh,” Gilmenja chuckled as she placed a hand on the table. “So anyway, I was out gathering information. Something seems fishy.”

“I see.”

Angeline already had a vague idea of what was going on. If only it ended at Villard’s idiotic vanity project... However, someone was apparently taking advantage of this opportunity to cook up some scheme. *Those nobles really like their power struggles,* Angeline thought. She was actually impressed by this though.

“Do you know who’s in on it?”

“Not at the moment. If you want to start raising suspicions, then anyone and everyone is suspicious. His brothers within the house, the prominent nobles, their relatives. Not to mention the crown prince himself was invited

to the ball.”

“Crown who?”

“The emperor’s son. And the next emperor if all works out.”

“Is this a special event?”

“It has to be.”

The Rhodesian Empire—which encompassed Estogal—was the largest power in the northern regions of the continent. Although Estogal was permitted self-governance as a grand duchy, the archduke still borrowed his authority from the emperor. Be they archdukes or kings, they were all mere subjects of the empire.

Judging by the majesty of the estate, Estogal was nothing to scoff at, but Rhodesia was mightier still. This was no ordinary ball—something shady had to be afoot if even the heir to the empire was invited.

A short while ago, Angeline would have thought nothing of it. But after realizing just how tiresome it was to talk to Villard, she shuddered at how much more draining it would be to speak to someone even higher and mightier.

“And my medal is the centerpiece of the ball?”

“So it seems. Don’t worry, you just have to stand there and give a gracious bow when they call for you. The nobles will do all the talking for you.”

“I can’t even imagine what it’ll look like...”

“It’s all an experience. Watch out, though. If your bow is off by even a single degree, that’s when the tomatoes start flying.”

“Huh?”

“Kidding. But you really should learn how to bow, for one thing.”

“Sounds like a pain.”

“Then don’t.”

“That’s not an option, is it?”

Angeline sullenly stood up, then flopped onto the sofa and stared at the ceiling.

Gilmenja giggled. “Want to start now?”

“Don’t wanna. I’m tired, so I’ll give it my all tomorrow.”

“It’s up to you. Well, I’ll support you from the shadows on the day of.”

And with that Gilmenja stood up and slipped into the shadows, hiding her presence as the sound of the doorknob clattering permeated the silence. The

door didn't open though; it had been locked. A few seconds later, there was a knock, and Angeline painstakingly rose to her feet.

"Who is it?"

"It's me! Me!" came a girl's voice.

Angeline had no idea who it was. She dragged herself over to the door.

"Me' doesn't really tell me much."

"Huh? You can't tell? It's me, Liselotte! Open the door!"

*Who?* Angeline glanced at Gilmenja, who emerged from the darkness and nodded with a grin. Their guest was not a villain, apparently.

Once Angeline opened the door, a twelve-year-old girl tumbled in. Her olive-brown hair was meticulously braided and set, and she wore a classy dress. Her face radiated a cute, youthful sense of innocence, giving off an air that was endearing and mischievous.

The girl looked up at Angeline with pouty, puffy cheeks.

"For crying out loud! Why didn't you open it right away?!"

"Right..." Angeline's eyes wandered when Gilmenja suddenly emerged from behind her and offered a respectful bow.

"Lady Liselotte, a good day to you."

"Hmph! Hey, you, brew us some tea!"

"As you wish."

Gilmenja immediately began pouring from a prepared teapot with an amused look on her face.

The girl called Liselotte took a seat at the dining table as if that was where she belonged. She smiled at Angeline, urging her to take the opposite seat.

"You're an adventurer, aren't you? Villard called you here."

"Yes, for what it's worth..." Angeline obliged, looking a little lost.

Gilmenja set down cups before each of them. "Madam, you sit before the daughter of the archduke, Lady Liselotte Estogal," Gilmenja explained in a tone that sounded rather theatrical given Angeline's awareness of her true nature.

"Oh, his daughter..." Angeline muttered.

"That's right!" Liselotte chortled. "Hey, Black-Haired Valkyrie? You see, I love hearing tales about adventurers! That's why I came to play. Tell me a story!"

"Hmm..."

*What now?* Ange thought. She was exhausted and wanted to sleep this

very instant. However, the girl's innocent eyes sparkled as they stared straight at her. It reminded her of herself back when she used to beg Belgrieve to tell his tales, and she couldn't find it in herself to turn her down.

With a resigned sigh, Angeline forced a smile onto her face. "Okay... What do you want to hear?"

"You're the demon slayer, right? What sort of fiend is a demon? Is it strong?"

"A demon... Yeah, it was...strong. This sort of wriggly shadow thing... It was about the same size as you."

"What?! That small?!"

"Yep... But it's especially dangerous if you let down your guard."

"Amazing... Hey, do demons have fangs?! Have you ever fought a dragon before?! Which one is stronger?!"

"That's a hard one... Dragons breathe fire, but the demon was a good deal faster."

Despite being a noblewoman, Liselotte did not put on airs in the slightest as she expressed her pure curiosity. And perhaps because of that, Angeline was beginning to unconsciously relax. Her reaction to everything was so exaggerated and overblown, but that just spurred Angeline on, as she was soon eager to see how the girl would react to the next tale. The yellow shinstone lighting the room kept her from noticing that it was growing dark outside.

Gilmenja giggled as she poured a second cup from the pot.  
"I'm glad you're getting along."

# Chapter 50: As Usual, the Guild Master's Office

As usual, the guild master's office was piled high with all sorts of documents, but some space had been cleared around the guest sofa and table. As a former adventurer, Belgrieve still felt a little nervous and diffident when he was urged to take a seat.

“I kinda feel bad, Lionel. No need to go so far for me.”

“Not at all! Orphen’s guild owes a great debt to Ms. Ange, and to her father as well. I haven’t even begun to repay the favor!”

“But I didn’t really do anything...”

“Your words are the reason Ms. Ange stayed to confront the demon. I really can’t thank you enough.”

“Regardless of what I told her...she’s the one who put in the work,” Belgrieve said, scratching his head.

His teachings had served as the impetus for Angeline to save Orphen—perhaps that was the truth of the matter, but he didn’t feel as though he had actually done anything himself. It felt uncomfortable to receive such undeserved praise; after all, it was Angeline who had taken a stand and fought. He was proud of her, but he wasn’t conceited enough to accept any of the credit for himself.

Graham and Mit had remained in Turnera, and he had parted with Duncan at Bordeaux—the man longed to head further east. Duncan intended to find a path through the mountains to the eastern federation, though he promised they would reunite in Turnera someday.

Belgrieve felt a profound sense of nostalgia on returning to Orphen after so long. He had only spent a few years there, but that time felt just as eventful as the twenty years that followed. After actually seeing the guild building and the downtown street leading up to it, his vague memories began to stir and become more concrete.

Anessa looked around the room before cocking her head to the side. “Mr.

Dortos and Mr. Cheborg aren't here today."

"Yes, well, they went off to strong-arm...I mean, to *pay their respects* to some of the nobles financing us. They're more persuasive than I am," Lionel admitted.

"I see," Anessa acknowledged.

*The Silverhead and the Destroyer...* Belgrieve was a bit awestruck. Both were already revered S-Ranks when he was an active adventurer. Back then, it had felt as though those men lived on a higher plane of existence. They were apparently getting along well with Angeline, so perhaps he would have the chance to speak with them while he was in Orphen. Belgrieve could feel his spirits lifting from the memory of the veneration and wonder he had felt so long ago.

"Um..." Charlotte chimed in. She stood fidgeting nearby, apparently too anxious to sit down any longer.

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"Can... Can I sit on your lap?"

Belgrieve blinked, taken aback. *I guess she's at that age where she wants to be pampered*, he thought, idly stroking his beard. "Go ahead."

Charlotte happily—albeit somewhat bashfully—sat down. "Hee hee... It's so warm."

"It's a cold day after all... So what are you two doing here?"

"Um...well..."

Charlotte took charge of explaining what had happened, with Anessa and Miriam contributing now and then: about what became of them after the chaos in Bordeaux, about the organization Byaku belonged to, about the Lucrecian Inquisition, and about Angeline taking it upon herself to protect the two children from both groups.

"I see... You've had it rough. Good job pulling through." He smiled as he pensively tousled his beard. He was delighted to hear of Angeline's growth and sympathized with Charlotte and Byaku's perseverance.

Charlotte silently leaned back and pressed her face into Belgrieve's coat. It seemed she was trying to hide her tears.

Though he had a wry smile on his face, Belgrieve casually patted her on the head. "Despite everything, you're still a kid, huh?"

"Char is starved for parental affection, Mr. Bell," Miriam said with a mischievous chuckle before turning to Byaku. "Are you sure you don't want

to be pampered, Bucky?"

"Why would I be happy to have an old man dote on me, you stupid cat?"

Miriam puffed up her cheeks. She thrust her finger out at the boy and looked to Belgrieve. "He's a sourpuss, he is. Please discipline him, Mr. Bell."

"I'm not sure if I'm the right guy for that," Belgrieve replied.

"Just stay out of it," Byaku grumbled. "It's none of your business."

"Ha ha, well, that's about right. Byaku, all this time, you protected Charlotte on your own, didn't you? There's nothing more for an old man like me to teach you."

"Tsk..." Byaku frowned and turned away.

Miriam and Anessa grinned.

"He's embarrassed."

"He sure is embarrassed."

"I ain't embarrassed!" Byaku roared.

Marguerite scowled and tapped him on the shoulder. "Hey, you don't gotta be so crabby."

"What's your problem? And what's it to you?"

"It's got loads to do with me, idiot... It's like I'm looking at myself, and it's so embarrassing I'm about to die here... Please, just give it a rest," Marguerite said, covering her reddened face with her hands. Belgrieve nearly burst into laughter. *Come to think of it, Marguerite had initially been hostile, driving off anyone who tried to approach.*

With another click of his tongue, Byaku fell silent. Anessa looked between Marguerite and Belgrieve, cocking her head curiously.

"Come to think of it, how did you two know each other?"

"That's right! Why are you so buddy-buddy?"

"We lived together for a bit. Of course we'd get along," Marguerite nonchalantly stated, snapping out of her embarrassment. Her phrasing made Belgrieve place a hand to his brow. As one might expect, everyone there seemed dumbfounded.

"L-Living together with an elf?"

"Hee hee, looks like Mr. Bell's quite the smooth operator... He's a good person, isn't he, Maggie?" Miriam grinned, prodding the elf.

Marguerite scratched her cheek. "Yeah, Bell's a good guy. What about it?"

"Maggie, they seem to think we were living alone together," Belgrieve

informed her.

After thinking for a brief moment, Marguerite suddenly burst into laughter. “Aha ha ha ha! No, you got it all wrong! We’re not like that, me and Bell! Not to mention my granduncle and Duncan were with us...and Mit too, can’t forget about Mit. It was a pretty lively place.”

Anessa looked at Belgrieve questioningly. “Mr. Bell, when did you get such a large family?”

“Well, this and that happened... I don’t even know where to begin.” He paused a moment, suddenly remembering. “Right, right, what’s this about finding me a bride? I believe Ms. Yuri said something about that...”

Anessa and Miriam exchanged a look and troubled smiles.

“That’s, well...”

“You should...probably ask A-Ange about that.”

Belgrieve already had a faint idea, given their reactions. Just as with his “Red Ogre” nickname, this was most likely one of Angeline’s ridiculous displays of daughterly affection. He sighed. Based on how Yuri put it, she seemed to be operating under the misunderstanding that Belgrieve had requested his daughter to find him a bride in Orphen.

He, of course, had been given no say on the matter, but Angeline did tend to develop tunnel vision whenever she got an idea in her head.

“What a troublesome girl... I’ll need to apologize to everyone she bothered about this.”

“You didn’t do anything wrong, Mr. Bell.”

“But hey, now that Mr. Bell’s here, he might have a chance. Don’t you want a wife, Mr. Bell?”

Marguerite giggled. “You’re barking up the wrong tree. Bell’s already got a gal in his heart.”

“Huh?!”

“Maggie... I keep telling you. It’s not like that...” Belgrieve sighed yet again, but the girls were leaning in, clearly interested.

“Who? Who? Who? Someone in Turnera?! Ah, maybe someone from his adventuring days?!”

“If that’s true... He must be incredibly faithful...”

“No, I’m telling you...” He scratched his head. *Girls sure like this sort of thing.*

Admittedly, he may have harbored faint feelings of affection while he was

young, but that was twenty years ago. At this point, it was all over and done with. He simply wanted to meet her and apologize for leaving without a word.

The girls urged him to talk, so he begrudgingly went on about what had happened after he returned to the village. Marguerite chimed in once he got to the matter of his increasing roster of housemates. Finally, he spoke of how he had come to Orphen to meet his old comrades and confront his past.

Miriam let out a longing sigh. “So a lot of things happened, huh, Mr. Bell.”

“Then...are you going to return as soon as you meet those old comrades?” Anessa sounded somewhat forlorn.

Belgrieve smiled. “No, in any case, I can’t return to Turnera until the snow melts. I’ll be here all winter, and I’m sure Ange will be back eventually.”

He never imagined he would be waiting for his daughter in Orphen as well. Anessa, Miriam, and Charlotte shared overjoyed faces.

“Then I’ll help you find your comrades!”

“Yes, that’s right. Let us do that much, at the very least.”

“Thank you...” Belgrieve said, smiling. “That would be a huge help. Though I don’t know if they’re still in Orphen.”

“Hmm... Are they still adventurers? What are their names?”

“Their names... Our leader was Percival. He was a fine swordsman. We had an elf named Satie, who could use magic and was also skilled with a sword. Then, there was Kasim; he was our magician, and the youngest member of the party.”

He reminisced as he spoke. *It’s been a while since I’ve said either Percival’s or Kasim’s name.* When he met his limits and returned to Turnera, there was a time when his heart would ache every time he remembered them, his fond memories at war with his self-loathing.

He intentionally kept their names from his tongue. Whenever Angeline pressed him for old stories, he would never call them by name. Perhaps he had been too scared to face his past. When Graham asked him about Satie, he was surprised at how smoothly he could talk about her. Perhaps that was the very reason he knew he had to go on this journey—he needed to settle the score with his past and move forward.

Anessa folded her arms. “Percival, Satie, Kasim...” she mumbled.

“Yeah...the names sound somewhat familiar...”

“That’s right! You were from the same generation, right guild master? Don’t you know them? Hey, guild master?”

All eyes gathered on Lionel. However, Lionel, who had heard it all, was struggling to keep up with everything he was learning. “Ms. Ange’s dad, and master, and a friend of the Paladin Graham, guardian of the elf princess... And on top of that, his party members were Percival, Satie, and Kasim? Mr. Belgrieve... Who are you, really?”

“L-Lionel?”

“Ah... Sorry,” Lionel hurriedly corrected his posture and cleared his throat. “Ahem, firstly, Mr. Percival... He is an S-Rank adventurer known as the Exalted Blade.”

Everyone save for Belgrieve and Marguerite was surprised.

Belgrieve happily tugged at his beard. “I see... I knew he’d make it big someday. He must have worked hard... He was also cheerful and reliable, always dragging us around with him.”

“Mr. Belgrieve, you were a member of the Exalted Blade’s party...” Lionel could barely manage to speak. He was so surprised he had reached a state of serenity.

Belgrieve chuckled dryly. “It was long before he got that grandiose name for himself, back when Percy and I were both E-Ranks.”

A sudden throbbing phantom pain came over his right leg. Belgrieve winced ever so slightly but quickly regained his composure.

“I’ve heard about the Exalted Blade before! I heard he slew the cyclops on Chitra Ridge and defeated the true-blooded vampire of the old castle! He’s incredibly strong!” Charlotte gushed, tugging at his clothes in excitement.

“Hmm, a vampire, huh? Not too shabby.” Marguerite folded her arms, sounding mildly impressed.

Even if Anessa and Miriam didn’t know the name Percival, they had evidently heard of the Exalted Blade before. Their eyes were spinning.

Lionel grasped his forehead. “He left Orphen about fifteen years ago... I heard he briefly stopped by the imperial capital, but no one knows where he went after that.”

“I see... Thank you.”

Lionel apologetically bowed his head. “On to Mr. Kasim... He is also an S-Rank adventurer, or a former S-Rank, anyways... He also joined the ranks

of the archmages. He is known as the Aether Buster.”

“Th-The Aether Buster?! I knew I’d heard the name Kasim somewhere before!” Miriam cried.

“Is he famous?”

“He’s an archmage! He devised a new system for parallel spell sequences that increased operational efficiency by thirty percent!”

That did not mean much to Belgrieve, but he had clearly accomplished something amazing.

“I see... Yeah, he was a real genius... But he was always hanging back, afraid of strangers even though he was so amiable... He was concerned for everyone, but liked his share of mischief too...” Belgrieve’s eyes trailed off, as though looking to some distant land.

Seeing this, Lionel’s voice only grew more apologetic. “And, well...he left Orphen for the imperial capital around twenty years ago. That was where he defeated the Hollow Lord and earned his S-Rank, and the legacy of the Aether Buster began... But a while after that, he returned his adventurer license. There was a bit of an uproar over how the Aether Buster had retired.”

“Retired, huh... Do you know where he is now?”

“No, he eventually disappeared without a trace...”

“Oh... I see.”

Belgrieve regretfully scratched his cheek. He didn’t think it would be easy to meet his comrades, but he never imagined it would be this hard. Raising his face, he hesitantly continued. “Then what about Satie...?”

“Elven adventurers were rare, so I do remember Ms. Satie. Not that I ever talked to her before... It seems she ultimately reached A-Rank.

Unfortunately...she left Orphen a little sooner than the other two. There aren’t even any rumors of her exploits after that...”

“Weren’t the three of them in the same party?” Belgrieve asked.

“No, by the time I learned about them, they had already gone their separate ways. I’d only heard rumors that they were once comrades... I never knew they were true.”

Belgrieve sighed. The three of them were no longer in Orphen. He had finally resolved to leave Turnera, but perhaps he had set out on a fool’s errand.

“I don’t know what to say...” Lionel spoke with heartfelt sincerity. “I’m sorry.”

“What are you apologizing for, Lionel? They are living people; they move around all on their own will, just like I did when I went to Turnera.”

A lonesome chuckle escaped Belgrieve’s lips. He couldn’t quite go as far as the imperial capital to find them. Even if he went there, there was no guarantee he would find them either. For the time being, he decided to be satisfied with the information he gained. However, it was concerning that they all went their separate ways. “Did something happen...?” he wondered.

In any case, it was still his first day back. It was far too soon to give up. For now, he would take his time gathering information as he waited for a joyous reunion with Angeline. That was, after all, a significant reason for his coming to Orphen.

At that point, he realized just how much he was looking forward to their reunion, even though he had just seen her in the spring. He was no longer in a position to laugh at Angeline’s overbearing affection now.

Miriam placed a hand on her chin, playing the detective.

“I’ve got it. That elf named Satie is Mr. Bell’s beloved.”

“Excellent deduction!” Marguerite replied.

*That topic immediately made its comeback, and Belgrieve was assailed by a barrage of questions.*

○

“Wow! Amazing!”

Liselotte leaned back into the sofa. The sun had already set outside, and the wind would occasionally rattle the window.

Stories of slaying monsters, of conquering dungeons, of failures Angeline could now look back on and laugh about... After partaking in many a tale, Liselotte seemed satisfied. She offered a grand reaction to every little detail and asked all sorts of questions. After getting into it, Angeline felt she had inadvertently talked for way too long, and the tea was incredibly refreshing for her throat.

“You’re amazing, Ange... You’re a girl, but you did so many things!”

“Yeah...”

“Hee hee, that was fun. Thank you! Hey, Ange, we’re friends, aren’t we?” Liselotte said, leaning in.

Angeline tiredly smiled. “Yes...friends.”

Liselotte reached out and happily grabbed her hand. “I always wanted adventurer friends! Hee hee, wonderful... Hey! I’ll show you my secret! Come on!”

Angeline was sleepy, but she was dragged to her feet by Liselotte’s enthusiasm. She glanced at Gilmenja, who winked back.

Grabbing a bottle of spirits from the shelf in the room, Liselotte instructed Angeline to wear a coat. She silently abided this.

“It’s very chilly out! You’ll catch a cold if you’re not careful!” Liselotte chided.

“Where are we going?”

“It’s a surprise!”

She followed Liselotte up and down the vast corridors of the mansion and out into a modest yard in the back. Unlike the front yard, it was neither decorated with gaudy ornaments nor well maintained. This seemed to be mainly a place for the servants to work.

Scattered snowflakes drifted through the air. She should have expected it upon leaving the magic-heated interior, but she found herself shivering nonetheless.

Liselotte crossed the yard and threw open a door on the towering, rampart-like stone wall. Perhaps it was an old armory, as she could make out dusty piles of unmaintained weapons in the back, behind piles of various other things. In short, it was being used for storage.

Another path stretched out from the furthest wall, and this small, tunnel-like corridor led to a set of stone stairs. It was pitch-black, with not a torch in sight. Liselotte pulled a necklace from the collar of her dress and tapped it, producing a faint light. It was a portable magic tool made from yellow shinestone, apparently.

They descended the steps slowly and carefully, eventually walking out into a wide-open space that was illuminated. There were torches blazing on the walls, lighting up several cells with barred metal doors. This had to be an underground dungeon, and not the kind an adventurer would want to delve into either.

It was completely different from the dazzling mansion above—this place was dark and cold. Nevertheless, the manor had originally been a fort, so it wasn’t all that strange for there to be a dungeon or two on the premises.

“Kasim! Kasim!” Liselotte called out in a loud whisper.

Beyond one of the rusted cell doors, an emaciated man lay faceup on the ground, a hat covering his face.

Liselotte, with lips pursed in childish anger, picked up a stone and tapped it against the bars. A dry sound echoed through the room.

“Get up already, Kasim! I brought alcohol!”

“Pipe down, will you?”

The man called Kasim languidly sat up and slid his hat back over his head. He had a tawny beard that grew out fiercely like the rest of his long mane.

“I told you not to come again.”

“Hmph! The only ones who can order me around are father and mother!”

“Well then, what a selfish girl you are. Good grief...” Kasim chuckled.

Angeline stared at him blankly. It was already the start of winter, and like the outside, the dungeon was cold enough to make her shiver. Both Liselotte and Angeline wore heavy coats over their dresses, and they still felt cold. Yet in spite of him being practically skin and bones, the man only wore a long-sleeved shirt and a pair of pants. His feet were barely covered by his sandals, yet he wasn’t shivering at all.

Kasim’s eyes shifted to Angeline. “You’re with a friend today.”

“That’s right! Angeline the Demonslayer! She’s an S-Rank adventurer!”

Kasim’s brow twitched. “Hmm... The rumored Black-Haired Valkyrie?”

“That’s right! Ange, this guy’s Kasim! He was an incredibly strong adventurer!”

“It’s all in the past,” Kasim said as he lay supine again. He sent a side glance to Liselotte. “Oh, just leave the alcohol there. You should get going. It’s cold.”

Liselotte pouted as she passed the bottle through the gaps in the cell bars. Even still, Kasim did not stir to retrieve it.

“Why do you have to be like this, Kasim?!”

“How did you end up here?” Angeline asked hesitantly.

Kasim rolled over on his side to face her. “You mean me?” he said, sounding terribly unconcerned. “They caught me dining and dashing. Then, I went on a bit of a rampage, and because they thought I was someone dangerous, I’ve been here ever since.”

“You’re lying, right? That’s a lie, right Kasim? You’re on a secret mission for our family, and you have to pretend to be a prisoner for that, right?”

“What gave you that idea? You’ve got quite the imagination, kid.” Kasim cackled as he reached a hand towards the bottle. Liselotte swiftly snatched it away, sticking out her tongue.

“You can’t have it if you’re going to be mean to me!”

Kasim sat up, then wearily waved a finger. The bottle began to move on its own, slipping from Liselotte’s grasp and floating through the bars. Kasim caught it and pulled the cork before drinking straight from the bottle.

“At least the liquor is good here.”

“Hey! That’s cheating!”

Liselotte pouted; meanwhile, Angeline looked on at the scene in shock. It seemed Kasim was a magician, and a considerably skilled one at that. She only retained a smattering of knowledge from what Miriam and Maria had taught her, but it was apparently very difficult to manipulate the mana in the air. Firing it off as a shock wave or giving it weight to crush a foe was simple enough, but fine motor manipulation required a supreme command of the craft. Only masters among masters would be able to levitate something as fragile as a wine bottle. She could not see any reason why this man hadn’t already escaped from his cell.

For a moment, she regretted the fact she had left her sword behind, but she could feel no hostility from Kasim. He was an enigma, but not a danger for the time being. Still, she raised her guard and repositioned herself so she could grab Liselotte and run at any moment.

Kasim seemed mildly amused at this display. “No need to be so scared. What will fighting you accomplish for me?” He spoke to her as though he considered her no more of a threat than a passing breeze.

Angeline furrowed her brow as Kasim took a swig from the bottle. “Don’t you want to get out?”

“Not really. I’ve got nothing to do out there.”

He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. The droplets stuck to his mustache glistened under the torchlight.

For some reason, this man gave off a terribly sad impression. His eyes looked as though he didn’t care whether he lived or died. There was a sort of desperation within his feigned indifference, and for some reason, it hurt to see him like that.

“What? Your sympathy doesn’t make me happy or anything,” Kasim said with a frown.

Angeline closed her eyes. “It’s not sympathy... It just feels like a waste.”

“Hmm.” Kasim took another mouthful. “A waste? What part of me?”

“I can’t say. But it feels like such a waste when I look at you.”

“Haw, haw, haw.” Kasim laughed, though it sounded sort of like he was gagging. His eyes glazed over. “You say some interesting things... But you might have a point. My life’s been quite a waste, to be completely honest... Hey, you—you’ve got friends, right? Treasure them.”

Liselotte looked between the two of them, perplexed. “What is this?” she asked. “Is this something only adventurers understand...?”

“Hmm... Not exactly. Let’s go, Liz. It’s starting to get cold.”

“Oh, you’re right. Kasim’s not in a talking mood today, so there’s nothing to do here.” Liselotte sighed as she grabbed Angeline’s hand. “Wow, your hand is freezing!”

“Yours isn’t much better. Let’s go, you’ll catch a cold...”

“Okay. See you later, Kasim. I’ll be back soon!”

“Ha ha, I’d really prefer it if you didn’t.”

As they walked off, Angeline took another glance at Kasim over her shoulder. The man was absentmindedly staring at the wall, watching the flickering torch shadows dance.

# Chapter 51: The Mulled Wine Was Sweet and Carried a Nostalgic Scent

The mulled wine was sweet and carried a nostalgic scent. The wine Angeline had brought back as a gift was good, but partaking of a hot drink in an Orphen pub enhanced the flavor with warm memories. Perhaps the taste wasn't *exactly* what it had once been, but sitting here now, that hardly mattered.

After leaving the guild, Belgrieve was led to the pub—the same one Angeline frequented. It was as lively as ever, and he did not look out of place in the slightest. This took a load off his mind, though Marguerite did get her fair share of odd looks as an elf.

Belgrieve calmly took in his surroundings. He fondly remembered the boisterous clamor. He was always drinking at places like this when he was an active adventurer. This was not the exact tavern he had gone to, but every gathering spot for adventurers had a rather similar atmosphere.

“Try this one. It’s Ange’s favorite,” Miriam proclaimed as she urged him to try the sautéed duck that was set out before them. The skin was nicely fried and fragrant, covered in a visible sheen.

“It looks delicious.”

“Hee hee, that bird we had in Turnera was good too.”

“Elaenia?”

“Right, right, that one.”

“The juiciness of that one was amazing,” Anessa said with a chuckle. “Merry, make sure you don’t get any on your hat this time. We don’t have any spares.”

“Pfft! Heh heh heh heh! Wouldn’t you say so, Mr. Bell?”

Belgrieve scratched his head. “Don’t tease me. I didn’t know...”

Charlotte tilted her head. “What about a hat? Did something happen?”

“Well... This and that.”

Marguerite, who had been entranced by the meat, lifted her face. “What?

Now you're getting me curious. Out with it.”

“Heh heh, I'll tell you next time. Ah, Mr. Bell. Have some before it gets cold.”

“Thanks.”

Juice gushed from the duck meat with every bite. *I see... After growing up on elenia, Angeline would definitely love this*, Belgrieve thought.

Suddenly, a group of several men entered the pub and started talking loudly.

“Hey look! There's an elf!”

“Now that's rare! First I've ever seen one!”

“Having fun, girls?”

“Hey, elf missy. How about a drink, my treat?”

“Huh? You sure?” Marguerite cheerfully smiled, but Anessa grabbed her shoulder.

“Maggie, you can't accept those invitations.”

“Really? Back in Turnera...”

“This place is different from Turnera, Maggie. I told you not to follow anyone you don't know,” Belgrieve reminded her. He then turned to the men who had invited her. “I'm sorry, she's a bit oblivious. Can you call it a day?”

The men chortled. “You her guardian or something? What do you think you're doing, old man? You properly swing a sword with that peg leg of yours?”

“Now that I get a better look at 'em, they're all fine as hell. Hey, girls, it'll be more fun with us. Come over.”

“You're in the way. Get lost, old man.”

“Now, now, how about we calm down. We're in a pub; you wouldn't want to trouble the other customers.”

Though Belgrieve attempted to pacify them, Miriam took a different route. She folded her arms behind her head, a thin smile on her lips as she rocked her chair.

“Well look at that. You picked a fight with the Red Ogre. Don't blame me for what happens to you.”

“Huh...? Red Ogre...?”

They looked at Belgrieve blankly until one of them froze at the realization. “I-I've heard of him before! He's supposed to be the Black-Haired Valkyrie's father and teacher...”

“Right, they said he had a peg leg and red hair... F-For real?! What is he doing in Orphen?!”

“N-No, I’m not that...”

Anessa mischievously smirked. “You need to pick your fights better. He’s pretty strong.”

“Wait, Anne, don’t—”

“Once he draws his sword, he won’t stop until everyone’s dead on the ground. How long will you hold up?”

“Wh-What are you talking about, Merry...?”

“Hey! Now that I’ve got a look at ‘em, they’re the Black-Haired Valkyrie’s party members!”

“Crap! He’s the real deal! It’s the real Red Ogre!”

“Sorry about all that!”

“Wait, seriously, I’m not...”

But they would not listen to what Belgrieve had to say, and took off before he could finish. The customers who had seen this exchange looked at one another and began whispering.

“That’s the Red Ogre...”

“They say he’s stronger than the Valkyrie...”

“I heard the guild master was begging on his knees again...”

“That’s nothing new. But he was crying this time...”

“What did he do to the poor guy...? Father and daughter, they’re both extraordinary.”

Belgrieve could feel himself cringing. Evidently, the day’s events had already been exaggerated.

“I don’t want to stand out like this... Especially not on half-truths...”

“Hee hee, sorry. But it was pretty refreshing.”

“Aren’t you glad it didn’t become a fight? And you really are strong, Mr. Bell.”

“That’s not true... Good grief...”

*I’m concerned about what happens next.* He sighed. Marguerite was already looking at him with wonder.

“I never knew you were a famous guy, Bell!”

“I’m not...”

He could feel the surrounding gazes growing stronger, but there was no use worrying about that now. He collected himself and returned to his meal.

As of yet, he had not found any leads on his old comrades' whereabouts. He never expected they would be a cinch to find, but it was a little disappointing that he couldn't even reach the starting point. Still, one thing was for certain—they had all racked up their own exploits. It was concerning how they each went their separate ways, but he had no way of knowing why. He could only use his imagination, and he knew it wouldn't be anything good. If it was his fault, he knew he had to find and talk to them.

Lionel said he would dedicate the guild's resources to the search. Although Belgrieve turned him down, for once in his life the guild master would not concede. It was ultimately Belgrieve who folded and accepted his assistance, though he managed to add a condition that the search would not impede the guild's normal operations.

"Was this place around when you were active?" Anessa asked.

Belgrieve folded his arms and thought for a moment. Some shops had disappeared—the pub he had gone to so often was one of them—while others had sprung up from what had once been empty lots. The city had changed considerably from the last time Belgrieve had visited.

Once upon a time, he used to walk all over town to find the best deals for equipment, so he thought he would know his way around—but those memories were not proving very useful.

Belgrieve smiled wryly. "I don't really know. It's been twenty years, so my memories are a bit fuzzy. The streets have changed a bit too."

"If it's twenty years, we were around," said a voice from behind. Belgrieve turned with a start, and there stood the master of the pub.

"Though it was my old man running it," the master said as he placed a platter of sausages boiled with pickled turnips on the table. He appraised Belgrieve from head to toe. "You're the black-haired girl's father?"

"Yeah. I hear my daughter's a frequent customer here."

The master sighed. "Personally, I think you should find your own wife, instead of putting your daughter up to it."

"Huh...?"

"Not that it's any of my business..."

The master disappeared behind the counter, leaving Belgrieve with his mouth hanging open.

"It's spread that far," he muttered in a daze.

"E-Even the master knows... Why?" Miriam choked out.

“What is Ange thinking... Did she ask him for advice or something?” Anessa asked.

Both of them seemed just as surprised as Bell.

Marguerite grinned. “Ange sounds like an interesting girl. I can’t wait to meet her.”

“It looks like there are loads of people due for an explanation...”

“You sure you didn’t raise her wrong?” Byaku chuckled.

“I wouldn’t go *that* far, but... Well, you’ve got me there.” Belgrieve gave up on defending his parenting and sipped his mulled wine, which was tepid by now.

They left the pub after their meal and walked out into a harsh winter breeze which blew uncomfortably on their warm bodies.

Belgrieve had intended to meet up with Angeline and rely on her for lodging. But Angeline had left for the archduke’s city. It felt as though he was completely lost, but apparently, Angeline had entrusted her room key to Anessa.

“She said you never know what might happen.”

“Hmm...”

She couldn’t possibly have anticipated this situation, but it worked out nicely. He decided to sleep there during his stay in Orphen. He could maintain her room until she returned.

He paid his respects to the proprietor alongside Anessa and Miriam and offered an explanation before being led to the room. Once the lamp flicked on, the room filled with a dull light.

The girls turned to leave once they knew he was situated.

“Well then, Mr. Bell. See you tomorrow.”

“Good night!”

“Thanks, both of you. You have to listen to what they say, Maggie.”

“I know, I know! Night, Bell!”

After seeing the three of them off, he took in the room once more. It was small and hardly had anything in it—a kitchen counter, cupboards and a pantry, a dining table surrounded by four chairs, a dresser for clothes, a small bookshelf, a shelf for her adventurer equipment, a sofa, and a small desk with a built-in drawer.

The bed was a little on the larger side—the better for her to sleep comfortably, he supposed—but otherwise, there was nothing in the way of

decorations in this room that would have indicated it belonged to a girl living alone. And yet, that was distinctly befitting of Angeline.

Byaku and Charlotte had moved to Anessa and Miriam's house, so the room hadn't been used for a while. There was a large mess of gifts she had intended to bring to Turnera next to the wall, but the space was otherwise kept in proper order on the whole. Apart from a thin layer of dust that had built up in the occupant's absence, there was nothing of particular note.

Belgrieve nodded, a sense of relief coming over him. "That's good to know... She keeps it tidy."

"Sis doesn't really keep enough things to make a mess out of, father!" Charlotte said, tugging on his sleeve.

"So it seems... But are you sure you want to stay here? Wouldn't you be better off with—"

"I want to stay here!" She grabbed his arm before he could finish.

Marguerite had gone off to Anessa and Miriam's house. At first, they had proposed separating the boys and girls, but Charlotte insisted she wanted to be with Belgrieve and remained in the room.

Belgrieve sent a troubled look to Byaku. "What should we do?"

"Don't ask me," Byaku curtly replied from where he was sprawled out on the sofa.

Belgrieve sighed and lifted the mattress off the bed. He brought it to the window, where he patted off the dust. "How did the three of you sleep when Ange was around?"

"Byaku was always on the sofa! I slept with sis!"

"Hmm..."

Then as order dictated, he would be sleeping with Charlotte. He didn't really mind that, but when he looked at Byaku, the boy was faceup in an uncomfortable-looking posture using his arms as pillows. It worried him.

"Byaku... I'll take the sofa. Sleep on the bed with Char."

"Huh?" Byaku turned a peeved face to Belgrieve. "Why's that...? Mind your own business."

"Don't be like that. You'll grow up with a crooked back if you sleep like that at your age."

"Why should I care? In the first place, your body's too big for the sofa."

"Right... I guess you have a point."

"Can't you tell by looking? Are you an idiot?"

“Fine, fine. Then the three of us can sleep together.”

Belgrieve whispered something in Charlotte’s ear before briskly making his way to the sofa and hoisting Byaku up.

Byaku’s eyes darted left and right as he shouted, “What are you doing?!”

“You’re too light. Are you eating right?”

“Shut up! Let go!”

“Yeah, yeah.”

Belgrieve tossed him onto the bed—there was a loud thud as he collided with the mattress, and as soon as he was down, Charlotte pulled a blanket over him.

“Got you!”

“Bitch! You’re all out to get me!”

As he poked his head out from the covers, Belgrieve prodded him in the forehead. “Bad words can become a habit. Let your mouth spoil and your heart will surely follow.”

“And so what?!”

Belgrieve smirked and ruffled up Byaku’s hair. “I’m telling you to pipe down and go to sleep.”

○

The morning sun filtered into the room through the thin curtains. Angeline stirred restlessly in bed until she eventually awakened. Her long hair was a billowing mess, and the hem of her nightgown was all crumpled up.

She had been fine when she first got into bed. But then she found it hard to settle down for some reason, and the night ended with her tossing and turning. Still, her memory was rather fuzzy, so she had to imagine she slept at least a little bit.

Yesterday, she had come to this large manor, had a tiresome run-in with Villard, been changed into all sorts of clothes, talked to Liselotte, and been introduced to a mysterious man named Kasim. On waking, it felt as though it had all been a dream.

“If it was a dream, I’d have preferred to wake up in Turnera instead of Estogal,” Angeline muttered to herself. She buried her face into the pillow, finding herself sinking in far more than with the pillows she was used to. The intricate cloth felt silky against her skin.

“Hmm... Too soft.”

The bed at the Bordeaux estate had been soft as well, but that was still within Angeline’s comfort zone. This was something else entirely—it was so soft it was off-putting. The bed in her room in Orphen was hard, while the one in her home in Turnera was just a sheet draped over hay. Anything this far removed just made it harder to sleep.

*Then do the nobles who get used to these soft ones become unable to sleep on hard beds? Habit is a harsh mistress,* Angeline mused.

She did not return to sleep; instead, she idly rolled back and forth, testing out the sensation of the mattress until there was a knocking at the door.

“Good morning, Madam Angeline. Are you awake?”

Angeline sluggishly sat up and rose from the bed.

“I’m awake,” she replied, and the maids flocked into the room.

Gilmenja was nowhere to be seen; Angeline wondered what could have happened to her. Perhaps she was at work gathering information within the manor.

Seeing Angeline’s vacant expression, the maids giggled in amusement.

“Heh heh, did you sleep well?”

“Honestly, no.”

“Oh dear... Would you care for breakfast then?”

“Sure, why not... I mean, that sounds lovely.”

“Then we must get you dressed first.”

“Your hair needs to be combed.”

“Now, now, this way please, madam.”

“Right...”

Led before a full-length mirror, Angeline was surrounded by maids. Her hair was straightened and she was swiftly changed out of her nightgown. Angeline didn’t quite know how to react, so she went along with their antics, but this was definitely unfamiliar territory. It was more awkward than it was unpleasant.

After dressing came breakfast. It was a light meal this time, but it still gave off a sense of elegance. The bread was not the usual scorched, hard loaf; it was fluffy, soft, and white, and served alongside lightly cooked eggs and blanched vegetables and a soup that seemed to contain strips of smoked meats and squash.

Angeline polished it all off without hesitation. “Will I have to try on

clothes again today?” she asked, sipping her after-meal tea.

“Yes, but we decided on most of the details yesterday. We’ll narrow it down even further today. Your hair is beautiful, and your skin is so smooth. It isn’t often that we come across a better model. In this, if nothing else, I believe you shine brighter than most nobles.”

“You think so...?”

Angeline fidgeted and blushed. She didn’t *hate* to hear that, but it just didn’t feel right. She was accustomed to receiving praise as an adventurer, but it was somewhat flustering to be praised as a woman. Yesterday, Angeline had been so confused that the oddness hadn’t really struck her, but now that she had settled in, her embarrassment grew to an unwanted degree.

Once again, she was changed into and out of all sorts of outfits. It seemed they had shied away from brighter colors, and were going for calm, cool tones. It was a little interesting to see her own transformations, but the process was still exhausting. This was a completely different kind of fatigue from what she felt when fighting fiends.

It was only just before noon when her dress was finally decided upon. The maids squealed, satisfied with their work as they left to prepare lunch.

Angeline sunk into the sofa and let the strength drain from her body.

She muttered to herself, “Do those nobles do this sort of thing every day...?”

“Not exactly.”

“Hwah?!”

The sudden reply caused Angeline’s head to snap to the side. Gilmenja, in her maid uniform, stood by the sofa with a grin.

Angeline sighed. “Don’t surprise me like that...”

“I wouldn’t consider myself particularly stealthy. You must be really tired if that was enough to surprise you.”

“Yeah... I’m pretty confident in my stamina. I wonder why.”

“It’s because of the high-class energy. When the masses take on this energy, it tires them out.”

“You’re joking, right? Never mind, I think I know exactly what you mean.”

“You’ll need to learn how to shrug it off. Heh heh heh.” Gilmenja chuckled as she placed a cup of tea in front of Angeline. “Well, just take a deep breath. It’s almost noon.”

“I see... What about the afternoon? Will I learn etiquette?”

“That’s right. Also, you’ll need to learn how to offer a prayer to Great Vienna. It is a ceremony, after all.”

“Hmm, a prayer... Wait, what? I have to do *that*?!”

“Not really. Honestly, you just need to learn how to bow and walk.”

“Don’t scare me... Why do I need to learn how to walk?”

“I mean, when you’re wearing such a lovely dress, you can’t just strut out before the archduke like you usually do. You need to be graceful and gentle, you get what I’m saying?”

“That’s just not me.”

“Yeah, I know. But hey, they’ll overlook a few mistakes. You’re here as an adventurer, Ange.”

“Then I wish I could dress like one...”

“If you would please direct those complaints to the young master Villard, and not me.” Gilmenja offered an exaggerated bow, causing Angeline’s expression to soften.

Lunch consisted of a fluffy omelet, steamed potatoes, roasted chicken thigh, and steamed river fish sprinkled with spices. Every meal she partook of seemed completely different from the last, and Angeline was both amazed and perplexed that they had assembled such a varied selection. Just one tasty meal was already good enough for her, and instead of wasting money on such a variety, she wouldn’t have minded eating the same thing a few times.

“It’s tasty, but...it feels kinda wasteful to me. It’s the same for the mansion. I don’t think it has to be this big...”

“This is all a show of power.”

“Power?” Angeline cocked her head.

Gilmenja nodded. “Look here, I can assemble such a variety. Can’t you see the extravagant things I can arrange so easily?” Assets naturally tie directly to power. Do you remember how you froze up when you entered this estate? This opulence is a certain form of intimidation, heh heh heh.”

“So that’s it...”

To make matters worse, this was an archduke’s house. The manor was made to intimidate fellow nobles; Angeline was completely out of her depth.

“This may be more troublesome than a high-ranking fiend.”

“It’s all about getting used to it. It’s a mindset.” Gilmenja chuckled, then stared intently at Angeline. “That’s not a bad dress you’ve got there. The

hairstyle is nice too. You've become quite cute.”

“Y-You think so...?”

Angeline bashfully pinched the train of her dress. It was a soft, calming piece with a greenish blue as the base color. The ornamentation was kept to a minimum, though there were accents at the important points, and it was luxurious enough to not come off as tasteless. Her exposed shoulders made her feel a little restless, but there was not much she could do about that.

Part of her hair had been plaited at the top, while the rest was left dangling to emphasize its beautiful length. A light hair ornament was fastened to the braid, and when Angeline stood in front of the mirror, there was a moment where even she herself did not know who she was looking at.

“This is a little embarrassing... Do you think dad would praise me if he saw me like this?”

“Yeah, I’m sure even your dad would be down for the count. He might even be moved to tears.”

“Honest...? Tee hee...”

“You might get some marriage proposals from nobles. What would you do then?”

“No way. I’ll turn them down.”

Angeline puffed out her cheeks. It would definitely be suffocating to marry a noble. In any case, it was high time for her to start learning etiquette. Angeline declared she would first need a change of pace, and decided to take a walk around the mansion.



“You’ll need to know the layout if anything happens,” Gilmenja said with a smirk.

“That’s not why I’m heading out... Come to think of it, did you learn anything new?”

“Nothing about the archduke. He’s apparently hard to please, but a wise ruler. His children might need special attention, though. The eldest son doesn’t seem like an idiot, so you can’t take him lightly. The second son is an idiot, so there’s no telling what he’ll do. The third son is a bit of a mystery.”

“What about Liz?”

“That young lass poses no danger. You’d be better off focusing on her fiancé.”

“I see.”

Angeline felt relieved. Liselotte was just as pure as she seemed. She hadn’t been concerned, but if something dark lay behind that innocent face, she knew she wouldn’t trust anyone anymore.

Angeline stretched out and rolled her shoulders.

“All right... Let’s scope out the enemy’s movements.”

“Allow me to accompany you, milady.”

“This is getting a little interesting.”

The two shared a light laugh as they left the room.

# Chapter 52: The Brown-Haired Boy Chased

The brown-haired boy chased after the red-haired boy's smooth stride.

"Wait a sec. Don't leave me behind, I say!"

The red-haired boy looked back with a smile. "It's because you keep getting distracted. Did you get enough sleep?"

"I couldn't help myself... There was an interesting grimoire."

"That's going to be a problem. You won't recover your strength if you don't sleep right."

"You're way too earnest, that's the *real* problem here," the brown-haired boy said, pouting. The red-haired one smiled wryly.

The two boys were out shopping. They had used most of their supplies in the previous day's dungeon exploration and had come to restock.

Most of this shopping was left up to the red-haired boy. His innate cautiousness helped him consider everything that would be necessary, and he would visit several stores to get everything at the cheapest prices. This time, they mostly needed enchanted tools, so the party's mage accompanied him.

They stopped by various stores, from the main road to the back alleys. The brown-haired boy was best at discerning the quality of enchanted items, and the red-haired boy had no hesitation in his step as he dragged him from one store to the next.

"You're pretty amazing, knowing this many shops," said the brown-haired boy.

"Ha ha, I just picked it up when I was wandering about looking for the cheapest prices. In short, I'm poor." The red-haired boy chuckled, and the brown-haired boy laughed along.

Orphen was a large city and there were stores that didn't even have signboards. Some were clearly illegal as well, but it was an adventurer's nature to use whatever was available. As they saw it, there was no point in being overly scrupulous and avoiding such shops if it meant losing your life.

Their shopping spree lasted from morning to noon. By then, the streets were filled with people and a fine scent filled the air—this was the time of day the pop-up stalls waited for.

“Hey,” the brown-haired boy said, audibly gulping. “I’m pretty hungry.”

“Hold out a bit longer. I only have the party wallet today.”

“A little wouldn’t hurt, right?”

“No. Buy it with your own money.”

“I mean, I blew it all on that grimoire yesterday...”

“Then blame yourself...”

“Grrr... What about how you wasted our funds on that escape scroll?”

“You never know when you might need one. They’re rare, so you have to buy them when you see them.”

Their most expensive haul had been a scroll from a shady shop in an alleyway. It was a tool that could be used to invoke a spell simply by spreading it open and channeling magic into it. Scrolls came with various effects, and the one he bought was one that would allow an immediate exit from a dungeon. The limited supply made them incredibly expensive. Although the brown-haired boy’s inspection ensured it wasn’t fake, it still used up nearly all of their party’s funds.

“I don’t think we’ll ever be in such a pinch.”

“An adventurer can never be too sure.”

“Aw, you’re too fussy... I’m hungry.”

The brown-haired boy sent him scornful eyes, and the red-haired boy smiled wryly in return. He had been entrusted with the party’s money and didn’t want to waste too much of it. Though perhaps he didn’t need to be so strict about it—he was feeling quite famished himself, and he could just transfer some coins from his own wallet later.

“You leave me no choice.” The red-haired boy pinched two copper coins from the party wallet and handed them over. “Just this once.”

“I knew you’d understand! I’ll be right back.”

The brown-haired boy confidently made for the stalls. The red-haired boy leaned against the side of a building and waited.

○

“I see... As I thought, Ange has been acting on her own whims...” Yuri

said.

“Yes. I’m glad that she’s concerned for me, but unfortunately, she has quite an imagination, and she let it run wild.”

“That’s a relief, though. Mr. Belgrieve, you’re a good father just like Ange said.”

“No, I’m nothing special.”

“That’s not true!” Charlotte chimed in. “Dad is a wonderful person!”

“Charlotte’s warmed right up to you,” Yuri observed, chuckling.

After waking up in the morning, Belgrieve started by cleaning Angeline’s room. He wiped off the thin layer of dust, then went through the piles of gifts and sorted them. The muffler Charlotte had knit went straight to him.

Once the morning had passed, he headed to the guild to look for information on past adventurers, as well as to correct a few misunderstandings.

It seemed Yuri didn’t harbor any ill feelings towards Belgrieve. However, going off of Angeline’s attitude whenever she spoke about him, Yuri had suspected that the girl was oblivious to her father’s faults and was lionizing him.

“I’m sorry for doubting you, but I didn’t know a thing about you, after all.”

“Ha ha ha, naturally so. Caution is a necessary quality for an adventurer. Don’t worry about it.”

“That’s good to hear. I’ll resolve the misunderstanding with my friends, okay... Oh?”

Yuri blinked. Belgrieve turned to see a muscular old man with a military cap on his head approaching him with an air of immense intensity. The man was smiling from ear to ear.

“Finally here, are you? Red hair, peg leg—you’re that guy! Belgrieve the Red Ogre! Gah ha ha ha! I’ve been looking forward to meeting you!”

The man snatched up Belgrieve’s hand and shook it so forcefully he thought it might come off.

Belgrieve knew this man. He wasn’t this old last he saw him, but his characteristic appearance, clothes, and personality left little room for doubt. Belgrieve smiled.

“It is an honor, Cheborg the Destroyer.”

“Oh, you know me? Ga ha ha!”

Cheborg gleefully pumped Belgrieve's arm a few more times, which Belgrieve did not resist. He was happy to see an adventurer he once admired up close, though it was bad on his joints.

"Mr. Cheborg," Yuri anxiously said. "If you shake him too much..."

"Huh? What? You say something, Yuri?" he asked with his booming voice.

As Belgrieve gave a strained laugh, someone grabbed Cheborg's shoulder from behind.

"Hey, Cheborg. Keep your absurd strength in check."

"What are you talking about, Dortos? It's the Red Ogre! The Red Ogre! You can't ask me not to be excited!"

"Just release him... Good grief, sorry about this idiot. My name is Dortos. I cannot thank you enough for everything Ange has done for me. It is a pleasure to meet you, Belgrieve," Dortos said with a courteous bow.

Belgrieve reservedly lowered his head at yet another living legend. "Not at all. I should be thanking you for looking after my girl... It is an honor to meet you, Silverhead Dortos."

"By now, I'm just an old man," Dortos replied, laughing.

These two had both already reached the pinnacle of fame when Belgrieve was in his youth. While it was rather delightful to meet them on friendly terms like this, it also felt as though none of this was real. Overpowered by Cheborg's intensity, Charlotte was hiding behind him.

"It's all right. Did that startle you?" Belgrieve said, patting her on the head.

"What's this, what's this? Looks like those brats are pretty fond of you!"

"Brats?" Belgrieve doubtfully looked back at Charlotte, who was hiding behind him, and Byaku, who was keeping his distance from them.

Dortos stroked his beard and explained, "Those two exchanged blows with Cheborg and Lionel before. The guild doesn't really care about it, but it seems they're afraid of Cheborg."

"I'm being friendly as I know how! Hey, Belgrieve! Ange's a good girl! Tell me the secret to raising a child! The brats at my place are so cruel to me! Lately, my grandkids keep saying I'm too noisy! It's enough to make a man cry!"

"I haven't really done anything special..."

Dortos sighed and shook his head. "Cheborg, that's because you are

noisy.”

“Huh? What’s that? You say something, Dortos?” Cheborg asked loudly.

“I’m telling you not to shout just because you’re losing your hearing!”

Both men seemed to be on the same wavelength. Both seemed openhearted and unpretentious. Perhaps that pressure they seemed to give off in his younger years had just been a youthful fantasy.

“Still, after you came all this way to Orphen, I’m sorry we couldn’t keep Ange around. It’s our fault...” Dortos said, his brow furrowed in remorse.

“That’s right, about that—I’m really sorry, Belgrieve! I was thinking about picking a fight with the archduke, but Lionel was on the fence about it!”

“N-Not at all,” Belgrieve replied, bewildered. “I’m not mad about it. Ange is being recognized for her achievements.”

After staring at him silently for a second, Dortos and Cheborg exchanged a look and laughed.

“Wah ha ha ha! You’re more mature than us, it seems!”

“Exactly! No wonder Ange’s such a good kid! Gah ha ha ha!” Cheborg laughed and placed a hand on Belgrieve’s shoulder. “I like you! Let’s spar! I’m interested in the swordsmanship of the Red Ogre!”

“Huh?”

“I’d like to ask the same. A sword that surpasses even Ange’s... I want to burn that sight into my memory.”

“I’m really not anything like that...” Belgrieve shrunk back ashamedly, but he was shocked to find that a part of him welcomed their challenge. He longed to test out the breathing technique Graham had taught him, and the sword style that had emerged from it.

He could have a match with the Silverhead and the Destroyer, both the peak of their craft. There was nothing more that a swordsman could ask for. Belgrieve cast his gaze downwards for a moment before raising his head.

“Very well. I’m not sure if I’ll meet your expectations, but...”

“Ga ha hah! It’s settled then! To the training hall!”

And so Belgrieve was dragged away. Charlotte hurried behind and anxiously grabbed him by the sleeve.

“Will you be okay...?”

“I’ll be fine. Probably.”

They were followed by a crowd of intrigued eavesdroppers. *This is*

*becoming a big deal*, Belgrieve nervously thought.

○

“Now, now,” Gilmenja said with a grin. “You need to hold your skirt up, or you’ll step all over the hem.”

“Grr... Why are dresses so hard to walk in...”

After leaving the room, Angeline was immediately thrown into a hard match with an unfamiliar dress. With each step, it seemed as though she would step on the edge and trip over.

She was supposed to hold up the skirt, but she apparently wasn’t supposed to lift it too far. This seemed unnecessarily difficult. What’s more, she was wearing high-heeled shoes and felt like she was going to sprain her ankles. She was happy to wear beautiful clothing, but she definitely would never get used to this. She had grown far too accustomed to her adventurer gear, which was designed with mobility in mind.

Guards lined the halls. While they would glance at Angeline as she passed by, they remained where they were, completely motionless. *They’re quite something*, Angeline observed, rather impressed.

“Don’t they get tired standing around like that?”

Gilmenja giggled behind her. “Those people, see—they have supports running down their backs and legs where you can’t see them. They lean their weight on them; that’s what lets them remain so motionless.”

“I knew something was up.”

“No, that was a lie. Aren’t they amazing?”

Angeline pouted and picked up the pace, only to nearly trip again. It was then that someone came from around the corner and grabbed her before she could fall.

“Whoa there... Are you all right?”

“I’m sorry...” Angeline said, lifting her gaze.

She saw a tall man with ash-brown hair, seemingly in his mid to late twenties. He had handsome features—a long face with a refined-looking nose and a well-groomed mustache beneath it—but his eyes were sharp, and he gave off an impression that put Angeline on guard.

The man smiled kindly as he stood Angeline back on her feet.

“Where might you be going, little lady?”

“Yeah, well... Nowhere in...” Before she could bluntly put him off, Gilmenja prodded her in the side. Angeline hurriedly corrected her posture as the false maid courteously lowered her head.

“Good day, Sir Fernand.”

Angeline stared at him. This towering man was apparently the heir to the house, Fernand Estogal. Angeline subtly bowed her head as well.

With a smile, Fernand stroked his mustache and looked at Angeline. “I’ve never seen your face before. I don’t think I would ever forget someone as beautiful as you, but if it’s all right, would you tell me your name?”

She was flustered by his shameless, piercing eyes. “It’s Angeline...sir,” she answered in a hushed whisper.

“My word!” Fernand gave a pleasant smile. “This is a surprise! To think such a lovely lady was the rumored demon-slaying Black-Haired Valkyrie!” He took Angeline by the hand gracefully. “Allow me to escort you. Where were you trying to go?”

“Um, er... Just for a walk...”

“I see! A fine day for that. You would likely prefer the yard to the manor. This way, if you will.”

And with that, Fernand locked arms with her and began walking. She didn’t know if it was all right to shake him off, so Angeline hurriedly matched his pace. It was shocking to her just how much easier it was to move now that she had an arm to lean her weight onto.

He was a man, and yet he smelled nice. Angeline looked up at him.

Although Fernand had been looking ahead with a nonchalant face, he suddenly glanced at Angeline and smiled. She hurriedly looked away. It was the first time Angeline was interacting with a man like this. He was so unfamiliar that it gave her a creeping discomfort. She could tell that Gilmenja was containing her laughter behind them.

After passing through several corridors and down a flight of stairs, they were finally outside. The air was cold, but this chill was perhaps a lingering remnant of the morning frost. The sunlight shone down warmly and made it far more bearable.

Angeline raised her arms out and took a deep breath. All the time she had spent in the heated mansion made this cold air refreshing as it filled her lungs.

“An unreserved gesture.” Fernand chuckled. “But that is charming as

well.”

Angeline quickly lowered her arms. “My apologies.”

“No, don’t worry about it. I would not demand a noble’s etiquette from an adventurer,” he said.

*I see, he’s very different from Villard.* Angeline acknowledged his words with a nod. He clearly knew how to appeal to another person. This was precisely why Angeline was wary of him—she didn’t want to be swept up in his rhythm. However, she didn’t know how to act around a noble, putting her at quite a significant disadvantage.

Fernand evidently picked up on her inner turmoil. “You don’t have to be so scared. I’m not going to eat you or anything.”

“Right...”

“Still, what could Villard be doing...? He leaves his precious guest behind without an escort. What a brother he is.”

Fernand urged her towards the chairs at the end of the yard. They surrounded a round table by a line of well-maintained shrubs. Crimson flowers bloomed from the trees, filling the air with a faintly sweet scent.

Angeline took a seat and Fernand sat beside her, staring at her curiously.

“How do you feel about the estate? An S-Rank adventurer like you must be invited to noble houses quite often.”

“No... It’s my, um, first time coming to a place this extravagant.”

“I see, ha ha ha. It seems we can maintain our dignity then!” Fernand let out a hearty laugh.

*When he laughs, his eyes resemble Liz’s a bit,* Angeline thought.

“Pardon me.” Gilmenja brought out tea with an unconcerned look on her face. She glanced at Angeline with a wink.

“Villard isn’t the best brother,” Fernand said as he took a cup. “But it was a fine decision to invite you. The conferment ceremony shall brighten up with someone as beautiful as you.”

“I see...”

A part of her felt like he was overdoing it with the compliments. However, the excess praise softened her expression whether she liked it or not. She hung her head to conceal this.

*I’d rather hear those words from my dad. That’s right, dad’s never seen me wearing a dress like this. I know my chest and hips are lacking, but the contours of my body are soft enough—surely, I can’t look too bad. My hair’s*

*even a bit stylish now too. I'm sure he'd be surprised to see it now. Would he call me beautiful? It would be nice if he were pleased to see how much I've grown.*

Angeline's expression relaxed as she mulled things over.

"Angeline? Are you listening, Angeline?" Fernand sounded puzzled.

"Ah, I'm sorry." Angeline lifted her face.

"You look tired. Well, have some tea. We had to import it all the way from Tyldes. The fragrance is a little different. Can you tell?"

"It...smells nice."

Angeline did notice it smelled different from the tea she drank in the guest room. It seemed that goods from all over the world gathered in this manor.

Suddenly, she sensed someone approaching.

"If it isn't my brother."

She turned towards the voice and caught sight of a tall and thin man in his early twenties. His long hair was a bit darker than that of Fernand or Villard, and it was bundled behind his head. He was followed by soldiers in armor.

Fernand smiled faintly. "Francois."

"You look well. What are you doing out here?"

"I'm escorting the ball's guest of honor," Fernand said, glancing at Angeline, who lightly bowed to the man called Francois.

"I'm Angeline...sir."

"Hmm, so you're the Black-Haired Valkyrie?" Francois remarked, placing a hand to his chin. "My name's Francois."

"He's my youngest brother."

"I see... It is a pleasure..."

With that, she had met all three brothers of the house.

"You don't have to be so wary of him," Fernand cackled. "He arbitrarily decided to take over the mansion's security, so he looks at everyone with suspicion. We don't have any intruders, do we, Francois?"

"I couldn't say. With so many people coming and going, it wouldn't be strange if a few weird ones were mixed in," Francois said, looking at Angeline with a callous smile. Gilmenja looked amused, while Fernand sipped at his tea.

"In any case, you're quite busy so early in the day. What are you planning on doing with so many soldiers?"

"As I just said. With so many people, there may be some uninvited guests

mixed in. It is never a bad thing to be cautious.”

“Ha ha, you may be right. But don’t scare the guests, okay? Father would not approve.”

“Then allow me to offer some advice as well: don’t spend all your time chasing skirts.”

Though they were brothers, there seemed to be quite a tense air between them. Francois had to be the brother Gilmenja had mentioned, the one born to a different mother. Perhaps this was why they seemed to be at each other’s throats.

Francois looked at Angeline and sneered. “Now, Angeline was it? Don’t get in over your head just because you were invited here. You might trip where you least expect it.”

“Of course...”

*This guy has something against me,* Angeline thought. But this was also part of dealing with nobles. If she looked at it that way, it was bearable enough.

She was taking a sip of tea to calm herself when someone raced up calling her name. “Ange! I didn’t think I’d find you here!”

“Liz... I mean, milady Liselotte.”

“Hey! We’re friends, you don’t have to act like a stranger!”

Liselotte cheerfully embraced Angeline’s arm.

Fernand chuckled. “Hey, Liz. Don’t be too rowdy, it’s immodest.”

“Oh, Fernand, Francois. Good day to you!” Liselotte held up the hem of her skirt in an elegant curtsy.

Having the only person she could let her hair down around apart from Gilmenja present took a considerable load off of Angeline’s mind. Liselotte sat beside her playfully swinging her legs.

“You’re incredible, Ange! You’re really beautiful when you’re wearing a proper dress!”

“Hmm... Thanks... I mean, thank you most kindly?” Angeline rephrased herself after glancing at Francois’s scowl.

“No!” Liselotte pouted. “Don’t be so distant!”

“Sometimes we need to uphold appearances, Liz. Please understand,” Fernand admonished her gently.

“I don’t wanna! I especially don’t want to hear that from you, Fernand! After you act so overly familiar with every beautiful woman!”

“Well, you’ve got me there,” Fernand said with a bitter smile.

At that moment, another figure joined the fray—it was a man, gasping for breath as he leaned on the table for support.

“Liz! It’s troublesome when you race off on your own!”

“Oh, Ozzie... You say I’m ‘racing,’ but maybe it’s just that you’re too slow?”

“Good grief... Ah, Fernand, Francois, you both look well.”

The man called Ozzie straightened his clothes and bowed. He was a man with reddish-blond hair who looked to be eighteen at most.

Francois smiled. “Yes, very well. Is that disappointing for you, Oswald?”

“Ha ha, your jokes are always so harsh...” Oswald smiled with his mouth but glared fiercely with his eyes.

“Ozzie!” Liselotte spoke in the same tone as ever. “This is Ange! She’s an amazing adventurer! Ange, this is Ozzie! We’re engaged!”

Oswald looked at Angeline dubiously, and Angeline lightly nodded back. Though Oswald was momentarily entranced by her appearance, he made a displeased face.

“So you’re the one filling Liz’s head with nonsense. She’s a noble, you know. I would really appreciate it if you didn’t lead her astray.”

“Yes, I’m sorry...”

“Hey! You can’t say that, Ozzie!”

Fernand laughed. “Liz won’t leave you over something like that. And isn’t it your job as her fiancé to keep her, Oswald? If she runs away, that’s your fault.”

“Hmm... That’s true.”

“Oswald has a point. A mere adventurer shouldn’t get carried away,” Francois said.

Liselotte poutingly slammed her palms against the table. “Hey! Ange’s getting a medal, right? And father recognizes her! If you insult Ange, it’s like insulting father! Isn’t that right?!?”

“Ack!”

“Well... That’s true.”

“Ha ha ha, as expected of Liz. I can never beat you,” Fernand admitted with good humor.

It seemed even scheming men were no match for Liselotte’s innocence. Angeline smiled.

After chatting a bit, all of them eventually went their separate ways. Angeline returned to her room with Gilmenja, considerably more tired than she had hoped to be.

She sat on the sofa and let her body hang limply.

“Scoundrels, the lot of them... These nobles really are a force to be reckoned with.”

There were Fernand and Francois of course, and even Oswald seemed to have ulterior motives. They seemed to be keeping each other in check, and she felt anxious just listening from the sidelines. Villard couldn’t hope to compete with any of them. He was completely out of the loop, and even she began to feel sorry for him.

“Good job. It was the right decision to stay silent—better than saying something you shouldn’t. Well, you’ve got a good look at all the dangerous ones now, heh heh heh.”

Gilmenja produced wine from the shelf and filled a glass for Angeline, who chugged it in one gulp and let out a deep sigh.

“All that remains is the archduke himself and the crown prince, I guess.”

“Precisely. Let’s hope nothing happens. As long as we can make it through the ball, then it’s none of our business how messy the politics are within the archduke’s estate.”

“Yeah... You’re right.”

The wine helped her calm down a bit. Her body was worn out after wearing that dress and those shoes that were far too difficult to walk in. She grimaced as she lifted up the skirt.

“You have to...dance at a ball, right? I’m supposed to dance in this?”

“That’s right. You’re pretty cute right now, so I’m sure the noble gentlemen will invite you for a dance or two.”

Angeline tiredly entrusted her body to the cushions. “Am I being punished for something? Another glass, please...”

Gilmenja happily poured her another. This one, too, was polished off in one swig, after which Angeline closed her eyes. An image of Belgrieve passed through her mind. “I want to see dad.”

“Do you have a grasp on the nature of this place yet? Then we should start practicing etiquette.”

Angeline scowled. “Can’t I start tomorrow?”

“You can’t. Tomorrow’s the real deal. At least learn to walk without

falling down.”

“Grr...”

Angeline sat in silence for a while but eventually gave in.

# Chapter 53: The Training Hall Had a Dirt Floor

The training hall had a dirt floor, but it had been tread on by so many adventurers that it had become firm and steady. Belgrieve tested it a few times with his left foot before gripping the hilt of his sword.

He remembered using these grounds a number of times when he was an active adventurer. For a small fee, guild instructors would come and teach the basics of combat. He recalled how when he first started out, he would scrape together what meager money he had in a desperate bid to learn his craft. In hindsight, he didn't know if it had been useful or not, but he would have done anything back then to learn. Now, he struggled to recall if he had been as driven back then as when he had been taught by Graham; he could at least acknowledge that he had taken up his recent training with furious resolve. *And here I thought I had mellowed with age,* Belgrieve thought self-deprecatingly.

He took in a slow breath and gradually let it out. Each time he inhaled, he took in the energy from the earth beneath him; each time he exhaled, he allowed the energy from the skies above to come down upon him. Each cycle would cause the mana within him to spiral, which made his inorganic right leg feel like it had blood flowing through it.

Cheborg seemed elated. "Hey now, I can see your sword aura rising right before my eyes! Now ain't that interesting!" He laughed heartily as he smacked his fists together. The burst of his mana rolled along the ground like a strong gust of wind, raising dust clouds and ruffling the hair of the curious onlookers.

Belgrieve felt a tingling in his spine. This was not fear—he was delighted to face a formidable foe. After having convinced himself he would live the rest of his life as a farmer, he had never thought he would feel this joy again.

"Maybe I just don't know when to give up..." he muttered sardonically and drew his sword. Though it was well used, its sharp, honed steel tip

seemed to emit a faint flickering light.

Dortos nodded and raised his spear up high. “Are you ready?”

“You bet!” Cheborg replied.

“I am,” Belgrieve answered simply.

Dortos lowered his spear, giving them the signal to begin.

Instantly, Cheborg kicked off the ground. He closed in with the violent force of a blast wave. “Try this on for size!” His fist shot forth like a cannon shell. It was thrust through the air so swiftly that Belgrieve could practically hear it coming.

Belgrieve swiftly readied his sword to intercept it. He stepped with his right leg out front, his left planted firmly on the ground. His blade clashed against the fist, and mana surged out as the two forces collided.

From the tip of his blade to the tips of his toes, Belgrieve had bundled every mana line as one to transmit the might of the blow through his foot into the ground. The dirt of the training ground shook and the onlookers were astir.

“Oh!” Cheborg exclaimed. “You took it head-on! Not bad!”

“There’s still more where that came from!”

Belgrieve grimaced at the numbness in his arms. If he had greater mastery of the skill, he would have been able to completely divert the force. Although he had managed to stop it, Cheborg’s fist had been so immense that the impact jolted through his whole body. It had been a bit too reckless to not evade it.

In response to the next punch, he kicked off with his left leg, pivoting off of his peg leg to parry. Cheborg nearly toppled over, but he put a hand to the ground, pushed off, spun, and landed on his feet.

“As expected of Ange’s old man! Then how about this?” Cheborg thrust out his fists. The magic-sequence tattoos running up his arms burst into light and created an immense shock wave.

Channeling mana into his blade, Belgrieve unleashed a single sharp vertical slash. The wave clashed with the mana and dispersed in a mighty gale. This was a foe it would be presumptuous to hold back against—or rather, it would take Cheborg holding back for Belgrieve to even stand a chance at emerging victorious.

Belgrieve could feel his lips curling into a smile and his blood racing. *Since when was I able to match blows with an S-Rank adventurer?* He had

surprised himself at his performance. *Is it because of Graham's training? Without that, I wouldn't have even been standing after the first blow.*

In any case, overthinking would dull his blade. He reaffirmed his grip on the hilt and parried Cheborg's next punch with as little movement as he could. He looked for a chance to counterattack between blows, but he had no time to go on the offensive—as expected of an S-Rank adventurer. But even that was reassuring; he wanted to abandon himself to the joy of battle.

Cheborg would approach with intensity, and Belgrieve would skillfully match his movements. The battle seemed fierce and never-ending, neither side conceding in the slightest. But ultimately, it was Belgrieve who fell to one knee.

His nervousness and fatigue had made his breathing erratic. Too often, he had become so impatient that he took his attention off of the flow of his mana. *I've still got a long way to go*, he thought.

*No, shouldn't I be happy that I was able to fight so well against a living legend? It looks like I still have at least enough skill to make it as an adventurer.* Not that he intended to make a comeback, but he had been living side by side with his blade for a long time, and he was genuinely happy he had not been completely overwhelmed.

In any case, taking large breaths had helped him to cool off and think more rationally. “Don’t get in over your head. You don’t have a drop of strength left in your body,” he muttered softly to himself.

He had stepped into a realm beyond his wildest dreams, but it was something completely unexpected which caused him to stumble. Though it seemed he had been battling on even footing with Cheborg, the man was not even winded. Angeline, who could fight shoulder to shoulder with these old veterans, was still far off in the distance from him. He had come to the point where he could just barely make out her back.

He needed to make his body more accustomed to these sword skills; perhaps then, he could go a little further. “And see somewhere new, huh...”

He suddenly recalled the elf girl’s silver hair from so long ago. Belgrieve stood with a deep sigh and sheathed his sword.

“Ga ha ha ha!” Cheborg came up and patted him on the shoulder. “I’ve experienced the blade of the Red Ogre! There aren’t many people out there who can keep up with me for so long! You really are Ange’s dad!”

Dortos soon joined him. “That was splendid. Your steps were shaky

around the end, but I'm surprised that someone could maintain only the minimum necessary movements for so long. But your sword style is defensive. Quite different from Ange..."

Belgrieve collected his breath and said, "I only taught her the basics. I'd imagine she obtained most of her skills in the time she spent here."

"Yes... But I do see how she took great inspiration from your style. To think such skill was hidden in far-off Turnera... Are you self-taught?"

"Yes, though I've found a good master recently. Honestly, I thought I'd reached my limit, but thanks to him, I've come a bit further."

The moment Belgrieve mentioned Graham's name, Dortos and Cheborg were taken aback. "Hey now, you learned from the Paladin? Ga ha ha ha! No wonder you're so strong!"

"I didn't know he was still alive... He was what we both aspired to be. Right, Cheborg?"

"Ga ha ha! Whenever I asked him for a match, he would take me down without breaking a sweat! Good times!"

Graham had apparently been an adventurer of a generation before their time. Back when they were young, the old man had already solidified his reputation as an adventurer. Belgrieve felt a peculiar bond with them that spanned time.

Cheborg cheerily wrapped a hand around Belgrieve's shoulder. "Now how about a few stories over a drink? My treat!"

"Yes, you should rest yourself for today. When you're in peak condition, I would like a match with you myself."

"Ha ha, please go easy on me... C'mon Char, Byaku."

Charlotte excitedly raced over on Belgrieve's call. "Amazing! You really are strong! I was surprised!"

"Cheborg merely matched my skill level..."

"That's not true at all! You really are Ange's dad!" Charlotte happily embraced his arm.

Behind them, Byaku folded his arms, a troubled look on his face. "I thought that stupid woman was just exaggerating...but you're the real deal," he said with a sigh.

The adventurers who had stayed to watch were in an uproar.



After dinner, Angeline lay prone on the bed. Her calves were stiff. *I didn't think I'd get like this just from practicing how to walk and curtsey. Those nobles have it rough*, she thought. "I'm glad I'm an adventurer."

She rolled faceup, getting a view of the glimmering ornaments on the ceiling. Outside the window, the sun was beginning to set, and she could see the twinkling of the first stars. But she could not make out much else—the room was brighter than outside, and the window was largely obscured by her own reflection.

The ball was tomorrow and the manor was noisy with preparations, as well as the measures being taken to entertain the guests that were already there. And yet this room was strangely quiet. Together with her fatigue, the silence made her feel strangely lonely.

Liselotte did not seem to be coming; perhaps she had business with another guest. Gilmenja had gone to check on other things, and Angeline had told the maids they didn't have to follow her around. That left her as the only one in the room.

She rolled over again and rubbed her cheeks against the soft blanket. When she kept quiet, she could hear the beating of her own heart. There seemed to be people walking down the hall, just one wall away. But the sound was so quiet and faint, she still felt as though she had been cut off from the world.

"It's only until tomorrow."

Angeline abruptly rose, headed to the sofa, and stuffed her cheeks with the sugar candy left on the table. It wasn't like the rough candies with large grains in Orphen. These ones melted the moment they hit her tongue. She could discern a subtle sense of class even in these small details.

She sat on the sofa and let her mind wander, having nothing else to do. *The noble life is quite boring despite all the troubles*, she thought. Even if they did have all sorts of things to be busy about, these were things that Angeline could not even imagine. In any case, it was a completely different business from fighting off fiends, or exploring dungeons, or tending the fields, or splitting firewood, or shearing sheep, and so on.

"I'd rather be doing any of that..."

She much preferred moving her body around. So she stood and stretched and considered going for a walk. It wasn't like she had anything better to do, and everyone was busily moving around. No one would scold her for

wandering alone.

Earlier in the day, she had been apprehended by Fernand and forced to share a table with his eccentric brothers, without a moment's respite. This time, she was going to walk wherever she wanted. After all, she wouldn't have another opportunity to explore the archduke's estate.

Once she was out of the room, she found the halls were bustling with maids and servants going to and fro, and she could occasionally spot the nobles they were attending to. The ball was an opportunity for social intercourse; connections were quite important to nobles, and the ones who arrived in advance were already delivering gifts to their more influential neighbors.

Angeline pinched the edges of her skirt and tested the feeling of slowly walking in her high heels. It would be hard for anyone to see her as anything but a noble lady when she did so. But this graceful gait did not suit her in the slightest—never mind the shoes—and to her great frustration, it took her far longer to get anywhere than normal. This was despite Angeline being a fast learner. At the very least, her afternoon lessons had allowed her to walk without any risk of falling.

Now that she could walk without having to focus on her feet, she could look around and admit that the archduke's manor was indeed gorgeous. She had been overwhelmed and unsettled when she first arrived, but now she was accustomed enough to inspect each decoration curiously.

Her feet unknowingly carried her closer and closer to the back of the estate. There, the stonework that had been used when the manor was a fort still remained, and unlike the front portions that had been gorgeously decorated, these parts had a simple, rustic feel to them.

“This is more calming for me.”

She walked down these stone corridors and peered into the boisterous kitchen. It was filled with a great many chefs, and the air rang with the clinking of kitchen utensils and plates clattering against one another. The steam from the pots and smoke from the stoves billowed out so that it was a bit hard to see what was going on. But this sort of noisiness was far from the atmosphere around those high-class nobles, and somewhat reassuring.

“I’m sorry, coming through!”

A waiter with a large tray hurriedly slipped past Angeline. *I wouldn’t want to get in their way*, Angeline thought. She was about to leave when an

elderly man who looked to be the head chef anxiously reached out to her.

“Um, my lady... If you’re here that must mean you found something...unsatisfactory with your meal...”

It seemed her dress made him think she was a noble lady. Angeline hurriedly shook her head. “No, um... Thank you for the delicious food.”

“Huh...? You came here to say that?”

“Yes, well...” she replied ambiguously.

The chef looked moved to the core as he lowered his head. Then he turned and shouted at the kitchen. “Everyone! A noble lady personally came to commend your efforts! Be grateful!”

Everybody working stopped what they were doing and began bowing their heads to her.

Angeline panicked. “Um, er, if you’re busy, then don’t worry about it... Pardon me.”

She did not listen to their pleas for her to stop as she hurried away from the kitchen. It felt quite strange to consider that she looked like a noble.

As she wandered aimlessly a while longer, she unwittingly came upon a familiar path and headed out into the yard as she had the night before. She could see the stairs leading to the dungeon where she had met Kasim.

“Is he still around?”

Angeline warily took in her surroundings. Although the people of the mansion were busy, it seemed no one had any business back here.

She descended the stairs. Her pointed heels let out a tapping sound each time they struck the stone steps. The further down she went, the louder they would echo against the walls and ceiling. When she reached the bottom, she found it was lit in the same dim, flickering torchlight.

The iron bars glistened in the brisk air. But the man who was supposed to be behind them was gone. Only a few sets of rusted fetters were left stretching out from the wall.

“Where did he go?”

Angeline stood in front of the bars for a while, but ultimately shrugged and turned. Once she was back at ground level, she better understood just how cold the dungeon had been. Perhaps it would have been nice and cool in the summer.

“I should head back.”

It wasn’t as though she had left her room to meet Kasim. But if he was

unavailable, there really wasn't anything else for her to do.

"Not that I have anything to talk to him about..." Angeline muttered. Still, she was strangely curious about the man called Kasim. "Is this...love?"

*Yeah, right, definitely not.* Angeline chuckled.

She heard the clattering of armor from further down the corridor. Her head snapped up, and she saw Francois leading a party of soldiers. Francois's eyes narrowed as he recognized her.

"Oh dear... It looks like a rat has snuck in. What are you doing here?"

"I got lost... This place is way too big," Angeline hesitantly said.

Francois sneered. "Fine, I'll leave it at that."

"Sure..." Angeline bowed and was about to leave. But before she knew it, the soldiers had entered a battle formation on both sides of the corridor. One in black armor—who seemed to be their leader—glared at her fiercely.

"Hey," Francois scolded. "Don't stare at a lady like that."

"Yes, sir," the leader said with a bowed head.

Angeline swiftly appraised her foes, judging their abilities from their stances and auras. She quickly concluded she could beat them all even if they came at her simultaneously. She lightly snorted. Although she hadn't brought her weapon, that was hardly an issue.

Seeing Angeline ready herself, Francois laughed.

"No need to be on guard. I don't think I can fight you and win."

"What do you want with me?"

"Nothing really. You got lost on your own. I was not looking to run into you. But, well..." Francois placed a hand on her shoulder. "I do sympathize. It must be hard, going along with the whims of my stupid brother."

His voice was gentle, but it had a ring to it as though he didn't trust her in the slightest. Angeline barely restrained her urge to brush away his hand. She glared back at him instead, and responded in a low voice, "Thank you for your concern. But I just have to hold out through tomorrow."

"Hmm, you're right... So how was it? How do you like the archduke's estate? Or is this nothing to an S-Rank adventurer?"

"I would rather not answer..."

Francois put more strength into his grip; Angeline immediately grabbed his wrist and tore his hand away. Although the soldiers reached for their swords, Francois signaled for them to stand down.

"Nicely done. S-Rank adventurers really are something else."

Angeline released him, a sour expression on her face. “Whatever you’re trying to pull, leave it at that.”

“Heh heh... Don’t be so angry.” Francois grinned, waving around his aching hand. “It’s quite hard to be born to a mistress, you know. I’m the odd one out in the house, a tumor... Do you understand how I feel? After all, adventurers are shunned by the world at large.”

“You’re wrong... Please do not lump us together.”

“I see. I should have seen it coming. The S-Ranks are the greatest elites. Different from the rest of that worthless lot. Hey—do you understand how it feels to struggle and struggle and never get anywhere? Heh heh, I can’t stand it.” He peered into Angeline’s face with a fearsome smile. Angeline stared back until finally, Francois burst into satisfied laughter. “Heh...heh heh heh... I’ve prepared some entertainment for you. Look forward to tomorrow’s ball.”

He turned. The soldiers swiftly straightened their postures and followed him away, their footsteps eventually fading from her hearing. Angeline let out a deep sigh.

“Why does he have to take his frustration out on me?”

She felt quite fed up as she shambled off. *What did he mean by entertainment?* she wondered. It was hard to imagine he had hired a special band or comedian for her. It likely wouldn’t be anything good, but even if he intended to attack her, she could deal with those soldiers no matter how many he threw at her. As long as he instigated it, she could get back at him in kind and claim self-defense.

Even so, Francois’s intentions were unknown. Meanwhile Fernand was a flirt, but he was not someone to trust. The archduke’s household was incredibly troublesome.

“Good grief... Keep your infighting to yourselves, please...” she muttered as she walked. She suddenly realized that she had come to yet another unfamiliar place. “Drat... I really am lost.”

*This isn’t like me,* she thought as she pressed a hand to her brow. Coming here had completely thrown her off her pace. She looked around restlessly. She had evidently returned from the back of the estate, as there were beautiful ornaments decorating the ceiling and pottery on display.

In the back of the manor, she could generally tell what each room was used for, but here, everything was covered in a glittering veneer. Perhaps she might have recognized something if she had been here before, but this was a

completely unfamiliar place. She had no recollection of any of the ornamentation or furnishings.

As she folded her arms, wondering what to do, she sensed someone rushing towards her. “Why, you are quite the lovely lady. What brings you to this part of the manor?”

Angeline nearly burst into laughter once she saw who it was. Villard was standing, smiling from ear to ear.

“It is already late, my dear. You may be within our estate, but I could not possibly allow someone as beautiful as you to walk around unattended. It may be presumptuous of me to ask, but would you like me to escort you somewhere?”

“No, um...”

“Oh, no need to be reserved. I am Villard. Villard Estogal. Have you heard of me? Ha ha ha.”

“Pfft! Aha... Aha ha ha ha!” Angeline finally burst into laughter; she laughed so hard her shoulders were shaking, and she couldn’t hold it in even if she wanted to.

Villard looked at her blankly. “M-Milady? Is there something on my face?”

“Ha ha ha ha! I mean... Um, you really don’t recognize me? Sir?”

“Huh?” Villard stared at her suspiciously before recognition dawned on him and his eyes suddenly snapped wide open. “Y-Y-Y-You! What are you doing here?!?”

“Pfft... If you’re seducing an adventurer, you must have a lot of free time on your hands...Your Highness.”

“W-Wrong! You have it wrong! Hey, don’t look at me like that!” Villard went on to shout something incomprehensible at the servants waiting behind him. His face was red as he struggled to piece his words together, but it was unclear what he was trying to say. Once he had collected himself, he turned back to her. “Yes, that’s completely wrong! I didn’t mistake you or anything like that. I was just trying to tease you... No, I mean to say... Ah, for crying out loud!”

He pointed straight at Angeline. “It’s your fault for being too beautiful! Hmph!”

And with that, Villard stormed off, his servants trailing after him with thinly veiled smiles.

For a while, Angeline couldn't contain her laughter. She dropped down, holding her stomach until finally, she took a deep breath.

"Ah... He's no good... Ha ha..."

He could never be a match for Fernand or Francois like that. He was so stupid, it was almost endearing.

"Not that I *don't* hate him," she muttered, before a sudden realization dawned on her. "Ah... I should have asked him where my room is."

## Chapter 54: The Alcohol in Orphen Was Stronger

The alcohol in Orphen was stronger than what Belgrieve had grown used to in Turnera. The next day, he found himself sighing as he held his aching head. Yesterday, he'd been dragged around by the two veteran fighters, and ingested a good deal of drink in the process. The two larger-than-life men continued chugging glass after glass, and perhaps Belgrieve had been inspired by them. He didn't quite remember; all he did know was that he had drunk quite a bit.

The same volume of Turnera's cider would not have carried over to the next day. Incidentally, that really went to show just how much of a lightweight Graham was, but that was a different matter. In any case, the beverages in the capital were high quality and strong.

But just because he was hungover, that didn't mean he regretted drinking. He got to hear tales of battle and valor, and of the exploits of his old comrades who had become S-Rank adventurers. He even heard of Angeline's adventures in Orphen; the tales seemed to come in endless supply. That was, perhaps, precisely why he had drunk so much.

Charlotte slept faceup beside him. Whatever she was dreaming of, she looked incredibly happy about it, and she was mumbling something under her breath. Byaku was supposed to be sleeping on the other side of her, but he had already woken up and was reading a book on the sofa.

Belgrieve shook his head. "Phew... Morning, Byaku."

"Hm..." Byaku barely lifted his scowling face to greet him. "You drank too much, old man."

"Ha ha, sorry about that. I let loose a bit too much."

He equipped his peg leg with a wry smile, then went to wash his face in the sink. He felt a bit refreshed. The sun had already risen outside the window. The main road was as crowded as ever, and the clamor could be heard from the lodging house, which was tucked away in the alleys.

“I overslept... But I guess that doesn’t matter.”

It wasn’t noon yet. He had a sparring match scheduled with Dortos, but he was better off getting over his hangover first. *I told Angeline to drink in moderation, but I’m hardly one to talk*, he thought as he scratched his head.

Byaku silently poured a cup of tea and set it on the table.

“Here.”

“Oh, thanks.”

“Hmph...”

Belgrieve sat across from the boy, who angrily returned his eyes to his book.

“What are you reading?”

“What’s it to you?”

“Is it interesting?”

“Not particularly.”

Belgrieve leaned forward to get a better look at the book. It seemed to be fiction.

“Did Ange leave that behind?”

“Who cares?”

“Ha ha, no need to be so cold. Keep creasing your brow, and it will be stuck like that.” Belgrieve reached out and poked Byaku in the forehead.

“Stop it.” Byaku glowered, batting his hand away.

“Yeah, yeah. You really are cheeky.” Belgrieve chuckled, patting Byaku on the head. Though he poutingly stuck out his lips, Byaku went along with it.

“Now then, you must be hungry. Want me to make something?”

“There’s nothing to make. We never went shopping.”

*Now that he mentions it...* Yesterday, Belgrieve had intended to go shopping on his way back from the guild. Instead, he was apprehended at the pub and lost track of time after that. *We can’t eat out every day...* But they had little choice in the matter now. He decided he would do a bit of shopping while they were out for their next meal.

Belgrieve returned to the bed to wake Charlotte. “Char, wake up. It’s morning.”

“Mmm...” Charlotte turned over and groaned. She buried her face into the pillow. “Ugh...”

“The sun is already up.”

Sighing, Belgrieve stuck his hands under her arms and lifted her up. She had tagged along with the drinking party, staying up as long as he had, and still looked very sleepy. As he set her feet down on the floor, Charlotte rubbed her eyes and looked up at him absentmindedly.

“Good...morning, dad...”

“Yeah, morning. Don’t sleep too much, or you won’t be able to sleep at night.”

“Hmm...”

Charlotte shambled over to him and hugged him. She still seemed drowsy. He picked her up and carried her to the sink. She swayed back and forth as she splashed water onto her face.

As he prepared her clothes for her, Belgrieve worked out the day’s schedule in his head.

First, he would go to the guild and talk to Dortos about the mock battle. He wasn’t in peak condition, so it would have to either be in the evening or another day. Then, he would find someplace to have brunch and buy food supplies. He needed enough ingredients to cook for himself. This was different from Turnera, where he could manage if he headed out into the field.

He recalled the conversations he had had the night before. Dortos and Cheborg did seem to remember the Exalted Blade, Percival. Unfortunately, they did not have much recollection of Kasim, who only became an S-Rank after he left, or Satie, who had disappeared before that. According to them, Percival had been quite unsociable, and they hardly interacted. He seemed to be searching for something, and he would use the guild’s requests as an excuse to travel all over the land. They had never seen him smile; he was always taciturn and had an unapproachable air about him.

“He used to be cheerful, and always had a fearless smile on his face...”  
Belgrieve felt a throbbing pain in his chest. Perhaps the fact he left without a word had become a sharp thorn stuck deep into Percival’s heart. He had thought he was the only one hurting, but perhaps they had it worse off than him.

He heaved a deep sigh. “Que será, será. But...”

Perhaps there was something else he could have done. It seemed he had committed a grave mistake while he was young and foolish. However, he couldn’t spend every waking moment trapped in bygone days. No one could

live in the past no matter who they were. There was nothing he could do about what had already happened; he had to shoulder it and move on.

Once Charlotte had washed her face and changed clothes, she grabbed Belgrieve's hand.

"I'm up, dad. Let's go!"

"Sounds like a plan. C'mon, Byaku."

"I wonder what sis is doing right around now. I'm sure she's wearing a lovely dress. She's beautiful, so she must look stunning!"

"Ange in a dress... I can't picture it."

Come to think of it, he couldn't remember ever buying Angeline any fashionable clothing. *I wasn't the best dad to her.* Belgrieve frowned. Even if such clothes rarely ever came to Turnera, it was inherently difficult for a single father to raise his daughter like a girl. Perhaps that was why Angeline became an adventurer.

"What is she doing now...?" Belgrieve muttered before opening the door.

○

"I'm tired. I want to go home..." Angeline propped her head up in her hands and let out a deep sigh.

It was finally the day of the ball, and the mansion was packed with people from the wee hours of the morning. Everyone strutted about gracefully in gaudy attire.

The festivities occupied the great hall as well as the garden. There were tables set here and there, lined with food and drink, with music from bands so large they could not even be compared to the musicians of the roaming folk that she remembered from her youth.

Angeline thought she could hole up in her room and hide until it was time to receive her medal, but the maids had barged in, dropped her into the bath, got her into the dress, styled her hair—and this time, even applied makeup. She usually never wore anything of the sort and couldn't get used to the feeling of having something smeared over her face. She would unconsciously rub at it with her hands, and the maids had to stop her time and again.

She could have put up with that much. However, come afternoon, Villard arrived to drag her out. He had been so angry the night before, but now he was in high spirits. Evidently, he was quite proud that the adventurer he had

suggested had turned out so comely. He dragged Angeline by the hand, bragging about her to all sorts of nobles.

It was the same thing again and again, and she was sick of it. For now, she rested in a chair in a corner of the hall.

Gilmenja, in her usual maid outfit, brought over a bottle of wine and poured her a glass.

“You look tired.”

“Gil... Hear me out. These nobles are a pain...”

“Of course they are. But you have become an expert at curtsying, if I do say so myself. Nicely done, nicely done.”

“That doesn’t make me happy...” Angeline said before gulping down her wine.

Each time Villard introduced her, Angeline would lift up her skirt just as she had been taught. The men would be charmed and ask her to dance—which she would decline—while the ladies would scoff at her. It was quite tiresome to deal with all of them.

After narrowly escaping, she wearily watched from afar.

The band played beautiful tunes, but the rhythm wasn’t nearly as lively as the tunes of the roaming folk. *How am I supposed to dance like this?* she wondered. As a child in Turnera, she would romp around to those cheerful and lively songs. Belgrieve was terrible at dancing because of his leg, and she recalled the troubled face he made when she made him dance anyways. Still, they danced together, and she would swing from his arms.

The strength drained from her with every new memory, until a cheerful call snapped her back to it.

“Ange!”

“Oh... Liz.”

Liselotte energetically raced over and grabbed her arm. “What’s wrong? You look tired.”

“Yeah, I am... I’m not used to these sorts of things.”

“Really? I thought this would be easy as pie for an S-Rank adventurer.”

“That’s not true... Whether we’re S-Ranks or nobles, we’re all human.” Angeline chuckled and stroked Liselotte’s head.

She heard a few more small footsteps approaching. A handful of girls around Liselotte’s age, if not a bit younger, appeared.

“Seriously, Liz. I hate it when you run off on your own!”

“Ah, I’m sorry! This lady here’s Angeline! She’s an incredible adventurer who beat down a demon.”

The girls surrounded Angeline in amazement.

“Wow! Someone so beautiful can defeat a demon!”

“How did you do it? With a sword or spear?”

“Hmm... Oh, I use a sword. Though I don’t have it with me right now.”

“Your skin is so smooth! Do you use lotion?”

“No, I’ve never used it before.”

“Huh?!”

“Does being an adventurer make your skin smooth?”

“How nice. I can’t get these freckles to go away.”

“You’re all right, you’re very cute as you are.”

“Hey, Ange! Tell me a story! What happened to that evil dragon in the boglands?”

Although she wasn’t quite in the mood, Angeline could not win against those curious eyes. Sure, they were pestering her, but this was far less draining than dealing with anyone else. *If only the nobles were this simple and sincere*, she lamented, before grimacing at the image of Villard, Francois, and Fernand looking at her with such sparkling eyes.

“Now I feel sick.”

*The world just never goes my way, does it?*

As she was telling her tale, someone barged through the crowd yelling, “Liz!”

It was Liselotte’s fiancé, Oswald.

“I was wondering where you’d gone. What are you doing—” Oswald paused as he caught sight of Angeline. She had just been in a dress with her hair done the day before. Today, she had makeup added to that, making her an even more arresting beauty.

Angeline cocked her head, but suddenly realized what she had to do. She stood up and curtsied. “Good day...”

“Right...” Oswald averted his eyes.

His arm was grabbed by Liz, who was puffing out her cheeks. “That’s no good, Ozzie! You can’t cheat no matter how beautiful Ange is!”

“Y-You have it all wrong, I’ve only got eyes for you, Liz...” Oswald stammered as he patted her head.

The other girls giggled and poked at one another. They were still young,

but they did like gossiping over these things. Although Angeline was quite indignant, and the compliment hadn't made her happy in the slightest.

Liselotte still wanted to hear the story, so Oswald joined in. With a sip of wine, Angeline gradually continued. Soon, it wasn't just the girls, but Oswald too cheering her on. Just because he was a noble, that didn't mean he didn't long for adventure.

"Amazing. Adventurers are surprising..."

Angeline cynically smirked. "It's an honor to hear that from a noble...my liege."

"No need to put it like that. I'm at the bottom of the pecking order. I can hardly hold myself together without my pride as a noble." Oswald closed his eyes and sighed.

Liselotte chuckled. "You're going to be my husband. Stop sounding so weak willed!"

"Yeah, sorry, Liz..."

*I think I just saw a glimpse of their future.* Angeline found herself smiling.

A cheer rose all of a sudden, and the tune changed. She heard the clear and strong singing voice of a woman. Even Angeline, who had found the past performances to be boring and lifeless, could feel her heart shake at the voice.

One of the girls stood with stars in her eyes. "This voice... It's Canta Rosa!"

"Wow! It really is her! As expected of an archduke! Let's go, Liz!"

The girls raced off, and Liselotte stood to join them. "No getting lost this time, okay, Ozzie? See you later, Ange!" Then she was gone.

Oswald hurried to his feet, but the girls had disappeared into the crowd in the blink of an eye, and he gave up on following and sat back down.

"Is she famous?"

"Oh, you mean Canta Rosa? She's a renowned songstress from Dadan. Although this is my first time hearing her... She is quite incredible. There are hardly any opportunities to hear her perform, but I guess that's the archduke for you."

"Yeah."

For a while, the two silently turned their attention to the performance. The music made her want to hear from up close, but if she moved around, perhaps she would get involved with someone troublesome, so she remained where she was.

“Hey... You’re getting hitched to Liz because you like her, right...sir?”

“You don’t know how to speak formally, do you... Of course I adore her.”

“I see. That’s good to hear...”

“Did you think it was political?” Oswald sullenly asked her. He was almost as old as Angeline—perhaps a year younger—but when he made that face, it was clear he still had some childlike innocence in him.

Angeline shrugged. “I don’t know too much about nobility...”

“Oh. That makes sense... Well, I can’t say there were no political motives. I come from a line of nobles of the robe without any territory, so my mother and father were cheering on our engagement.”

“You sure they weren’t just happy about their son getting engaged...Your Highness?”

“Ha ha, you weren’t joking. You really don’t know anything about nobles.”

“Yep, and I’m not interested either, milord.”

“Was there any point in tacking an honorific onto *that* one?” Oswald let out an amazed laugh. He glanced at the wine bottle on the table, noticed it was empty, and called a nearby waiter. He received two glasses and offered one to Angeline.

“All that talking must have made you thirsty, right?”

“Thank...you very much. You’re not as arrogant as I thought.”

“That’s just how I am. I think that’s why I get along with Liz.”

“Even though you were smitten with me?”

“Well, of course, it’s human nature for beautiful things to catch the eye. But the one I adore is Liz. She is sweet, graceful, and innocent... And she cares about me without any ulterior motives,” Oswald muttered in a rapturous trance.

*I see.* He had been putting on airs when he approached her in the garden the other day, but this was his true nature. Perhaps his slight inebriation had played a part in uncovering it.

Oswald sipped his wine and chuckled. “Adventurers fight a bloody battle with fiends. In a sense, they’re quite easy to understand.”

“That’s not all we do. Sir.”

“Maybe not. But it’s not just adventurers whose hands are covered in blood. Nobles are covered in the blood of other nobles. Sometimes in the blood of family, even.”

“Are you talking about your soon-to-be brothers-in-law?”

Oswald’s brow twitched. “You’re sharp... But it’s not going to happen. I may have a chance against Villard, but definitely not against Fernand or Francois. I don’t consider myself a fool, but...”

“Why not just get along with your family?”

“Of course, I want to. But for nobles, see...”

Angeline cut him off by sandwiching his cheeks between her hands. “No. If you get into a power struggle with your brothers, Liz is the one who will be saddest in the end. She’s important to you, isn’t she? Then you have to treasure her... So don’t even think about it.”

“Well...”

His cheeks were slightly red, and his eyes were darting around.

Angeline released him. “What is it that you value? Your house? Your status? Your ambition?”

“No...”

“Now go to your beloved fiancée.”

“You’re right...” Oswald unsteadily rose to his feet and shambled into the dancing crowd.

Angeline caught her breath and slouched onto the chair. “Nobles sure are a pain...”

“You got that right.”

“Hwah!?” Angeline turned with a start.

There stood Gilmenja. *Come to think of it, she’s been standing there since she poured the first glass of wine,* Angeline thought as she put a hand to her chest.

“Don’t sneak up on me like that.”

“That was a good thing you did there. You may have just cleared away one of the dark clouds that would eventually loom over the archduke’s household.”

“You’re making a big deal out of it.” Angeline sighed and planted her elbow on the table.

The song was over, but the music carried on. Gradually, the setting sun tinted the skies in shades of red, and the shadows stretched longer. *How long until the ceremony?*

A slim and tall shadow loomed over her. “Hey, you look bored.”

Another invitation to dance? Angeline lifted her face, feeling thoroughly

fed up. Her eyes widened ever so slightly.

The man looked to be in his midtwenties and was surprisingly beautiful. His silky hair—an almost amber shade of blond—was neatly combed. His face was refined and rather androgynous, and though his eyes were kind, they seemed to be capable of a piercing insight. There couldn't have been anyone else who suited white clothing so well. Oswald had said it was only human nature for beautiful things to catch the eye. It irritated her that she could no longer deny this.

The man smiled as he took Angeline's hand. "It's a waste for someone as beautiful as you to be making herself scarce in a corner. How about a dance?"

"No, um..."

"Now come on. I'll take the lead."

"Hey, wait..."

He was so forceful. And yet his motions were so natural that before she knew it, she was up on her feet with a hand around his shoulder. She was setting her feet down in steps that were foreign to her.

She had missed the right time to shake him off, and now she desperately tried to match his pace. He watched her with a refreshing smile.

Although Angeline was mostly focused on her own steps, each time she raised her face, her eyes would meet his. This was quite unbearable. It was annoying to go along with his antics, and yet as she struggled to keep balance, she was gradually picking up the dance. The man magnificently covered for her every inadequacy.

By the time she noticed it, she was in the center of the hall.

The two of them naturally drew attention, and soon those around them were sighing and marveling at this dancing pair.

"How beautiful..."

"The black-haired lass seems unaccustomed to dancing..."

"But she has a strange, wild charm to her."

"Haven't I seen that man somewhere before...?"

Before long, the band wrapped up their tune. Angeline was brought to a stop, and she breathed a sigh of relief. The man patted her shoulder with a smile.



“That was fun.”

“Sure...”

*At least one of us had fun then.* Angeline pouted.

That was when Fernand approached them.

“Ha ha ha, splendid! Just when I thought I’d lost sight of you, I find you with our shrewd guest of honor!”

“She’s a nice one, isn’t she? I especially like how she absolutely loathes me. She’s far more appealing than the girls who try to ensnare me at every turn.” The blond man chuckled. “I like you. What’s your name?”

“It’s...Angeline, sir.”

Angeline offered a quick curtsy. Fernand gave a pleasant laugh, while the blond man smiled, satisfied.

He turned to Fernand. “So when will the ceremony be?”

“It shouldn’t be long now. We are setting the stage.”

Angeline tilted her head as Villard raced over to them in a hurry. “Y-Y-Your Highness! Did the girl do anything to offend you?”

“Hello, Villard. Worry not, she just tagged along for a bit of dancing.”

“Ha... Ha ha ha, I see! She may be rough around the edges, but her appearance is without peer. I’m actually the one who called her here, and—”

“You’re being rude, Villard. Stand down.”

“Y-Yes Fernand...”

Fernand stepped in right before Villard could begin to boast, and he reluctantly retreated.

With a dubious look on her face, Angeline asked him, “Hey, who is he? Sir?”

“Y-You fool! You don’t even know who he is?! This gentleman is the eldest son of the emperor and heir to the throne, Prince Benjamin! M-My apologies, Your Highness! She is but a lowborn adventurer!”

“Prince Benjamin...? This guy?”

Benjamin smiled widely at her. “A pleasure, Angeline.”

“Now, ladies and gentlemen!” Fernand called out. “The ceremony will start soon. If everyone would gather in the hall!”

## Chapter 55: The Hall Was Illuminated

The hall was illuminated by several chandeliers suspended from the high ceiling. The sheen of their yellow shimestones reflected off the marble floor below, where many guests had gathered.

At the back of the hall was a slightly elevated platform lined with chairs, behind which the banners of the empire and the dukedom hung in an alternating pattern. A man past his prime sat in the center. There was already a speckling of white in his brown hair, wrinkles were carved deep into his face, and his complexion was a little pale—perhaps from some ailment. Still, his back was ramrod straight, his eyes piercing, and his bearing reflecting the dignity of an archduke of the empire. Crown Prince Benjamin sat beside him, then Fernand, and Liselotte at the end. On the archduke's other side sat a woman who seemed to be the archduchess, then Villard, then Francois.

Angeline was directed to sit in a chair to the right of the dais. This was apparently a place for prominent nobles—those with connections to the archducal household—and guests of honor.

Oswald sat beside her. He seemed to be considerably inebriated by now; he was swaying slightly from side to side, his eyes blinking drowsily. Though he was engaged to Liz, they had yet to marry, so he was not allowed to sit among the family.

Angeline stared absentmindedly at the members of the household, and her eyes met with Benjamin's along the way. The prince smiled and winked, causing her to sullenly look the other way. Certainly, he was beautiful enough that she was the one who grew embarrassed by staring at him, yet this also meant she did not feel any connection or kinship in the slightest.

"Hey... What sort of person is the crown prince?" Angeline whispered.

Oswald furrowed his brow. "You have to call him His Highness... As you can see, he is peerlessly handsome. And that's not all—he's skilled with both the pen and the sword, and he has charisma to spare. In fact, his presence is so overwhelming there wasn't even a power struggle for his position. Fernand is nothing to scoff at, but His Highness is something else entirely."

“Hmm... So he’s like a perfect superhuman.”

“My thoughts exactly. There really are some amazing people in the world. But, you know...” Oswald lowered his voice and softly whispered into Angeline’s ear. She could smell the alcohol on his breath. “Just a few years ago, they used to call him an outrageous imbecile. He really was quite the libertine, using his looks to make countless women wait upon him, and he spent money like crazy.”

“And he changed?”

“He did, yes. It happened all of a sudden, and no one would dare call him a fool nowadays.”

Angeline took another good look at Benjamin. The prince seemed to be discussing something with the archduke, his mannerisms the very epitome of elegance. *So he’s like the alpha wolf among the nobles*, Angeline thought, thinking the analogy strangely fitting.

Eventually the clamor died down, and Fernand stood up.

“Ladies, gentlemen, you have my deepest gratitude for gathering here today. Seeing our dear friends in good health is truly a delight. Are you enjoying the ball? It reflects well on the prestige of the archducal house that so many of you have gathered from near and far.”

With a clear voice that carried throughout the hall, he smoothly offered cheerful greetings before introducing the members of his household and Prince Benjamin. As the eldest son of the archduke, he carried himself with grace, while his words and gestures created a sense of intimacy with all who heard him.

From there, a wide swath of people stepped up to pay their respects. Some inquired about the archduke’s health, and others would turn to the crowd to give their own address after giving their greetings. But their words would always sing the praise of the grand duchy and the empire.

*This is blatant pandering.* Angeline leaned back in her chair with a sigh. The endless spiels were making her so terribly sleepy. She wondered if this was really how a ceremony was supposed to be.

Angeline was about to nod off when she felt an elbow poking into her side. She glanced over to see not Oswald, but a peculiar woman sitting beside her. She wore a violet dress and gave off an exotic charm.

Angeline cocked her head curiously before realization dawned on her. “Wait... Gil?” she whispered.

“Does it look nice on me? Aha ha ha.” Gilmenja cackled, having completely become one with her noblewoman disguise. Not knowing whether to be amazed or fed up with her antics, Angeline was exhausted nonetheless.

“Where’s Oswald?”

“He nodded right off, so I had him leave the stage, heh heh heh.”

“You’re as stealthy as ever, Gil...”

“Let me stop you there. I am now the noble Countess Clementine. Please get that right.”

“Oh, my apologies,” Angeline replied, giggling.

Gilmenja leaned in and whispered, “Now, it’s almost time for your medal. The stupid second son will give a speech before calling you. Just calm down and walk up to him slowly.”

“Is something going to happen?”

“I can’t say with certainty. But there’s something fishy about the third son. He is so concerned about his illegitimacy that a dark passion burns in his chest. His mother died giving birth to him. It does seem he harbors ill feelings against the entire archducal household. He’s a ‘glass half-empty’ kind of guy.”

Angeline grimaced as she recalled her chance run-in with Francois the night before. He had ominously declared that he had prepared “entertainment.” Perhaps he intended to find a way to make a laughingstock out of Angeline; that would certainly smear mud on Villard’s face since Villard had invited her to begin with. That would in turn potentially raise his own standing within the house. It was roundabout, petty, and completely unnecessary.

*This is going to be a pain,* Angeline thought with a sigh. Even if Francois wanted to prance around as the ultimate pessimist, she really wished he wouldn’t drag others down with him.

Gilmenja’s tone turned a bit serious. “Ange—I can’t help you once you’re out in front of the archduke. I know it will be difficult, but no matter what happens, you cannot lose sight of yourself. Forget about all these oblivious nobles, just remember everyone in Orphen. They know all your good points.”

“Yeah... I’ll be fine. Thank you, Gil.”

*That’s right. Why do I have to care about the opinions of people who don’t even know me?* Angeline nodded.

Gilmenja smiled and prodded at her. “That’s ‘Countess’ to you.”

“Oh, right...”

They shared a stealthy laugh.

Gradually, the skies began to darken, and all the lights in the hall made the courtyard seem far darker by contrast. The servants began hanging up lanterns and yellow shonestones here and there to provide some ambience.

The greetings seemed to be wrapping up. Fernand gave a closing remark before glancing at Angeline. Startled, Angeline quickly corrected her posture. Fernand smiled before turning ahead to conclude his speech.

“Now then, we have called a most singular guest today. Although there are many hailed as heroes in this world, few can claim to have defeated a demon. But don’t take it from me. My brother Villard is more fit for the job of introducing her.”

Fernand slickly pulled back while Villard hastened to the front. Unlike Fernand, he prattled on at a breakneck pace. There was little grace to be found in his words, nor did he have any levity. It was as if he was speaking for dear life, and it was anxiety inducing just to listen to him.

Angeline folded her arms. “He really is hopeless...”

“You don’t have to be so mean to him. He is doing his best,” Gilmenja whispered in her ear with a smirk as Villard turned towards them.

“Without further ado! Come, Angeline!”

Angeline glanced at Gilmenja, who chuckled at the display before patting Ange on the back. “Go get ’em.”

“Yeah.”

Angeline rose and walked just as she had practiced. Her masterful movements elicited longing sighs from the gallery.

Villard proudly stuck out his chest and looked over the hall. “Behold! The beautiful Black-Haired Valkyrie, Angeline! Despite her lovely appearance, she has slain a demon with those very hands! A hero truly deserving of a medal for her efforts!”

Angeline silently lowered her head as applause burst out from all over. Liselotte, who was happily watching from the side, lightly waved her hand. Angeline answered this with a smile as she pinched her skirt and performed a polite curtsy to the archduke.

This elderly man—ruler of the grand duchy, and a high noble of the empire—stared at her with piercing eyes. Though his gaze had seemed so

strong from afar, it gave off a strangely sad feeling when she was closer. She wondered if it was because he had to bear the burden of his station, weightier than that of the assembled nobility. It was as though he was enveloped in isolation.

Villard urged her to take a step towards him.

“Now, father! Bestow upon this hero the medal she deserves!”

The archduke nodded and was about to stand when another voice cut in.

“Please wait.”

Villard turned with a shocked look on his face, only to turn visibly red in anger. “Stand down, Francois! You’re before father...before the archduke!”

“No need to shout, Villard,” Francois calmly declared over a chuckle.

Fernand frowned, clearly disapproving but contained as he said, “Francois. You are impeding the ceremony. You must have a reason.”

“Naturally.” Francois walked to center stage. “They say she defeated a demon. That is, indeed, a wonderful accomplishment. If it is true, that is.”

“What?! You’re saying she’s lying?!” Villard closed in on his brother in a huff.

However, Francois nonchalantly fended him off. “I’m saying I want to make sure. From what I heard, it has been over a year since she hunted down the demon. It would not be strange for the story to have been distorted by now. Adventurers do tend to exaggerate their deeds,” he said, his gaze turning to Angeline.

Angeline silently stared back at them. There were undoubtedly adventurers who inflated their own achievements to gain more work and fame. “The Thunderclap,” or rather, the thug she ran into at the pub in Bordeaux, was a good example.

However, one could never reach the higher echelons of adventurers without the skill to match. As an S-Rank, there was no reason or point for Angeline to do anything of the sort. Of course, Francois should have known that and was presumably showing contempt to her regardless. Many of the noble visitors already had a tendency to look down on adventurers, and just as many agreed with Francois’s words.

“Don’t be stupid!” Villard interjected heatedly. “I made sure to look into it properly before I called her here. Are you trying to smear my good name with false allegations?!”

“Calm down, brother. I’m not telling you to stop the ceremony. I’m just

saying I want to confirm the truth.” And with that, Francois turned to the gallery. “Now, how may we go about proving an adventurer’s tales of glory? Yes, the fastest way would be to see their skills firsthand. Unfortunately, no ordinary opponent would be a match for one who claims to have defeated a demon. To that end, I have found the perfect opponent to bring out her full abilities. Do you know of him? The one who defeated the Hollow Lord, the nightmare that plagued the empire—the great Aether Buster.”

The crowd was astir. Suddenly, the rattling of armor could be heard above the din, and then Liselotte gasped.

Angeline looked over to see the soldiers leading Kasim, who unsteadily shambled his way into the hall. He still wore the same tattered shirt, trousers, and derby hat, looking as seedy as ever.

As his sandals audibly slapped against the floor, Kasim looked at Angeline with a grin. “Hey, fancy meeting you here.”

Villard scoffed, apparently taking Kasim’s appearance as a personal insult. “This vagabond is the Aether Buster? You’re funnier than I gave you credit for, Francois! You’d even delude yourself to bring me down!”

Francois ignored his brother’s words and exchanged a look with the soldiers. The men who brought the magician in suddenly drew their swords and slashed at him from both sides. There were screams, and some jumped to their feet in shock.

But the blades had all stopped in the air before they could reach Kasim. The soldiers broke into a cold sweat as they tried putting in more and more strength, but their swords would not budge an inch.

Wearily, Kasim waved a single finger. All of a sudden, those same soldiers were lifted into the air and spun several times before uneventfully falling to the ground. Their eyes spun as they groaned, too dizzy to stand.

Kasim sighed. “What a wasted effort...”

“You’ve got to start small.” Francois grinned.

His face stiff, Villard screamed, “Enough! How... How’s that supposed to prove he’s the real Aether Buster?!”

“Yes, my thoughts exactly. That’s why I’ll start by proving just that. You do know about Hart Langer’s Spear, the grand magic that took out the Hollow Lord, don’t you?” he asked, before commanding Kasim: “Do it.”

Kasim tiresomely scratched his head, but eventually directed a hand to the open air and wiggled his fingers.

“May the threads of power gather into a cord at my fingertips and shatter the jaws of distant oppression.”

The space around him glimmered and distorted, gradually shaping itself into a spiraling pattern. It was not long before it had become a tornado, its center gravitating towards his hand as it condensed into a cylindrical shape. A strong wind rocked the curtains and sent the seated nobles into a panic.

Kasim shook his head and looked at Francois. “You want me to fire this off? It’ll blow the ceiling away.”

“Well, hold on. Do you need any more proof, Villard?”

Villard was left dumbfounded, unable to form any response, so Fernand answered for him. “We understand, Francois. Now, Aether Buster, it would be quite troublesome if you damaged the estate. We know you’re the genuine article, so tuck away your claws.”

Kasim lowered his hand. The swirls of mana and the winds all died down as if they had never existed, and to the amazed spectators, it was as though it had all been a dream.

A cheerful laugh echoed through the hall. Crown Prince Benjamin seemed enthralled. “Now this is interesting! Yes, truth be told, I also wondered how such a lovely lady defeated a demon! If you would be so kind, I would love to see her abilities firsthand!”

“Just as I thought,” said Francois. “Now we have His Highness’s approval! Black-Haired Valkyrie—this is your chance to show what you can do. Struggle with all your might.”

At Francois’s prompting, the captain walked over and held out a sword to Angeline. She stood there without a word. *What a terrible farce*, she thought. She failed to see any meaning in this.

She had not fought her way up as an adventurer to entertain these nobles, nor did her power exist to show off. Just as Belgrieve had taught her, she had grown strong to protect the powerless, and to survive to laugh another day with her comrades. Belgrieve even praised her for it. Letting herself be treated as a sideshow would be an insult to everyone she held dear.

She felt heat in the pit of her stomach.

“What’s wrong?” Francois looked at her dubiously. “Are you getting cold feet? Was it just a lie that you defeated a demon?”

“Take it,” the captain sneered, shoving his sword at her.

Angeline furrowed her brow as she took it. Then, just when it seemed as

though she would draw the blade from its sheath, she slammed it onto the floor.

“I don’t need it!” She stamped her foot, her fighting spirit exuding from every pore on her body. The air shook as cracks radiated out from her pointed heel across the marble floor. The captain nervously backed off, and all apart from Kasim swallowed their breath in terror.

She glared at Francois, whose shoulder had inadvertently flinched back—but otherwise he courageously stood his ground. He tried his best to glare back at her, but the corners of his lips were quivering.

“Insolent...”

“Listen well! My sword is not for your entertainment! It is to protect the powerless and exterminate vile fiends!” She looked at the crown prince and archduke as she went on. “Adventurers have their own pride! The pride of those who wield swords and wager their lives! If a noble’s pride is to lead the people, an adventurer’s pride is to protect them! You want me to make a pointless spectacle of it?! What point is there in this farce of a power struggle?!”

She swung her fist, raising a gale with her bare hand.

“A fake? A coward? If you want to laugh at me, then laugh! It’s none of my concern if you believe I beat a demon or not! What honor is there in receiving a medal over *this*? I’ll be the first one to refuse it! If you’re nobles, then why don’t you act with some honor?!”

The area froze over in silence. Francois gritted his teeth and shook. Flustered, Villard looked back and forth between Angeline and the archduke. Kasim alone had an amused look on his face.

Planting his cane against the floor, the archduke rose from his seat. Fernand regained his presence of mind and swiftly offered him a shoulder for support.

“Precisely...” he spoke in a hoarse, but strong voice. “This is completely pointless. Francois, what were you expecting to gain from this battle? Were you hoping to derive glee from seeing the man you brought crush your brother’s champion?”

“F-Father, I simply wanted to know if...” Francois tried to say something but ultimately gave up, unable to find the words.

The elderly archduke looked at Angeline with tender eyes, nodding ever so slightly in gratitude. The nobles were astir.

“Angeline, you are a proud girl... I ask that you forgive my sons for their grave discourtesies.”

Angeline silently bowed back.

Straightening his back, the archduke turned to the gallery of nobles. “It pains me that an adventurer needed to teach us of true nobility...but we must take this lesson to heart. We clad ourselves in resplendent garb, but what do we truly have to be so proud of? That is what we must ask ourselves... Thank you, Angeline. And please, accept this medal. It would have no better place than over your virtuous heart... Is that all right with you, Your Highness?”

Benjamin chuckled and shrugged. “Now I know, it’s not the sword but the heart that proves authenticity. I have no doubt now that she took out a demon. I have no objections—she deserves a medal.”

“Will you accept it, Angeline?”

Angeline kneeled before him. “I humbly accept it, Your Excellency.”

Liselotte stood with wonder on her face and clapped her hands together. This prompted applause from the crowd, and soon the hall was filled with the rolling thunder of countless hands. The archduke personally approached Angeline and placed the golden medallion around her neck with a smile.

“It is good to know that someone like you remains in the grand duchy... I’m sorry you had to take such a long trip.”

“It is an honor.”

“Please tell me one thing. Where did you learn your honor? Did you have a good master?”

Angeline stuck out her chest and answered, “I learned it from my father.”

“I see. You have a splendid father.”

“Indeed! He is the best father in the world!”

The archduke smiled wider, but he looked a bit lonely as he patted Angeline on the shoulder. He turned to the nobles. “Let’s end the ceremony at that. Go, enjoy the banquet while it lasts... Fernand, if you will.”

Fernand, who was supporting his father by the shoulder, waved his hand, and the band began its performance. The nobles left their seats with relieved faces and quickly began chatting and dancing. The archduke left with Fernand and the archduchess, while Francois sprinted away with humiliation all over his face. And before Ange realized it, Kasim had already disappeared.

Liselotte flew at Angeline and locked her in a hug.



“Ange! Ange! You really are amazing! I was so moved!”

“Liz...” Ange replied with a sigh. “I’m tired...”

It seemed she was not the only one, as Villard seemed moved to near tears. “Well done, well done! Thanks to that, I can hold my head high!”

“Right...”

“What do you mean ‘well done,’ Villard?!?” demanded Liselotte. “She saved you! Aren’t some thanks in order?”

“W-Well, Liz, you know...”

“No ifs, ands, or buts! Stupid Villard! Get lost!”

Liselotte waved him away, and he reluctantly retreated.

“Thank you, Liz.” Angeline giggled.

“Oh, it’s fine! That brother of mine still doesn’t get it after everything you said!”

Liselotte angrily puffed out her cheeks. *Looks like the youngest daughter is far wiser than the stupid second son*, Angeline thought.

○

In a room in the soldier station illuminated by lamplight, Francois slammed a fist onto the table.

“To hell with a noble’s pride! A mere adventurer is getting too big for her britches!”

“Sir, get a hold of yourself,” the flaxen-haired captain advised. “It’s not over yet.”

“Silence! Dammit, humiliating me like that... Don’t think you’ll get away in one piece.”

“Just give up on her.”

Francois glared at the source of the voice. Kasim sat on the ground, his back against the wall. He had a rather pleasant look on his face.

“She’s not bad, pulling off such candidness in front of the archduke... You’re no match for her.”

Francois indignantly screwed up his face and walked over to the magician. “Don’t speak as if you are omniscient! How could you know *anything* of the pain of never having your abilities fairly judged, simply for being illegitimate? Where is the pride to be had in that?!?”

“Ha ha, you say you detest the archducal house, but you cling to your

noble status at every turn. I don't know about being illegitimate or anything, but if you really hate them, you should leave and make a name for yourself."

"Silence! Dammit... If it's going to be like this...I should have made him fire Hart Langer's Spear..." Francois muttered.

He had felt a sense of inferiority from birth. Simply because he was not born from the duke's lawful wife, he was seen as below the imbecile Villard, and birth was something that could not be changed no matter how much effort was expended. Soon, this sense of inferiority turned to hatred, and in his twisted heart, his family became the target of his ire.

His pessimism grew day by day, and rather than acting out of any desire for power, he spent every day thinking about how he could inflict the greatest despair upon them. He had taken in so many common-born soldiers by now that he could plan and stage a coup d'état at any moment. But that wouldn't be good enough. He *needed* to plunge them all into the depths of fear when they had reveled for so long at the heights of society. The ball was the perfect opportunity for that, and he had held the greatest trump card—Kasim.

If Angeline and Kasim had fought there, he intended to have Kasim fire off his magic and sentence the entire hall to oblivion while his soldiers would occupy the manor. As long as that loathsome archduke and his family—and all those nobles that supported them—disappeared altogether, perhaps his world would be a bit more serene.

After that, he would have been the sole remaining heir to the archduke's throne. He wasn't interested in power, but like anyone else, he did want to see what he could do with his talents. If the commoners didn't like him, he didn't mind being executed at the end of it.

What he hadn't expected was for Angeline to decline the battle. He had overlooked one simple detail, but that mistake had brought it all to naught—he had looked down on adventurers. The remembrance of it irritated him all the more.

*A mere adventurer...* he thought, biting his lip.

"Hello, Francois."

A sudden, cheerful voice caught him off guard. Francois glanced over to see Crown Prince Benjamin walk into the room with an affable smile.

Francois hurriedly stood straight and saluted. "Wh-What brings you here, Your Highness?"

"That was a real shame, wasn't it? Even after you came out with such a

splendid proposal.” Benjamin cackled as he grabbed a chair and sat down.

Francois stared at him with suspicion. “What do you mean by that?”

“I wanted to see a battle between the Black-Haired Valkyrie and the Aether Buster,” Benjamin admitted with a shrug. “It ended with some lip service and a pretty bow on top, but I’d like to believe that true strength is important as well. You weren’t wrong in what you said.”

“Oh...” Francois cracked a smile. “If His Highness agrees...”

“Of course I do. You rarely get to see two S-Rank adventurers fight to the death.” The crown prince looked at Kasim. “Right? You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

“I don’t care either way,” Kasim groaned. “But hey, she looks like she could end me if she tried...”

With a satisfied smile, Benjamin turned back to Francois. His eyes looked unnaturally beautiful, and Francois found himself swallowing his breath. “How about it? You simply have to clear away the little girl who shamed you. You have the Aether Buster, for crying out loud. Don’t worry, just do what you will. I’ll be there, behind you.”

“If that is your wish, sire...”

Benjamin stood. “I expect great things from you, Francois. Do try to entertain me.”

And with that, he was gone. Francois saw him off reverently, but once Benjamin was gone, a ferocious smile crossed his lips. “You’re not going to stop me if I have His Highness’s seal of approval...are you?”

“Certainly not.” The captain grinned.

The station grew rowdy with the sound of clanging armor and weapons.

## Chapter 56: After Angeline Slipped Out of Her Dress

After Angeline slipped out of her dress, removed the makeup, and changed into her usual adventurer gear, she felt strangely refreshed. She didn't have to stagger around in her high heels or worry about stepping on her skirt.

"You really had me on edge there." Gilmenja—in her maid disguise once more—gave a troubled laugh. "I didn't know what was going to happen for a second there."

"I'm sorry, Gil. But I couldn't stand it."

"Yeah, I guess it's easier said than done... But you did your best, Ange. You almost made me cry at my age. No, maybe it's *because* of my age..."

"So anyway, since I can't return to Turnera... I'm thinking of writing a letter. Do you think my dad will praise me?" she asked, tapping the gold medal around her neck.

Gilmenja giggled. "Of course he will! He'll definitely say he's proud of you. He might be so overjoyed, he'll head straight to Orphen to see you, heh heh heh."

"Hmm..." *If only*, Angeline thought.

"But will letters reach Turnera in the winter?"

"Ah, right." Angeline pouted. But there was no way around it—she would have to tell him the story the next time she visited.

Gilmenja turned with a smile. "I'm going to miss this costume, but I'll head to the inn and get my things. Are you sure about this? You could always leave tomorrow morning."

"I don't want to. I like Liz, but I hate everyone else." Angeline stuck out her tongue.

And then, Angeline was left alone in her room. By speaking so sharply before the archduke, she had—in a sense—splendidly fulfilled her role as the centerpiece of the ball. Once the ceremony was over, she brushed off all the

nobles inviting her to dance and headed straight to her room. She had her medal now and no longer had any business anywhere near the estate. Though she had grown a bit fond of the fluffy bed, it was still too unsettling.

It was now around early evening, and the yard and hall were still brimming with tunes. They would most likely continue on into the dead of night. She did not hate lively places, but she preferred exchanging a lively drink among adventurers.

Angeline took a deep breath and looked around. It hadn't been long, but it felt like forever since she had arrived in Estogal—perhaps because so much had happened. For the duration of her time there, it had felt as though it had been nothing but detestable experiences, but now that it was over, she could look back and find it strangely intriguing.

*Even if I can't stand the place, I've been quite bold, if I do say so myself,* she thought. Thankfully, Archduke Estogal had turned out to be a tolerant man; had he been as small-minded as Villard, there was no telling what might have happened.

*I was a bit short-tempered*, she realized, feeling a bit remorseful. But she was confident she had done nothing wrong. She held her chest high and smacked her hands against her cheeks. When she picked up her bag to confirm her meager belongings were all accounted for, she noticed someone peeping into the room.

“Ange?”

Liselotte was staring through the open door.

Angeline smiled. “Long time no see, Liz.”

“Are you leaving?”

“Yeah. Thank you for everything... You helped more than you can imagine.”

Liz nervously entered before suddenly hugging Angeline.

“I don’t want you to go! Stay longer! There are so many more stories I want to hear!”

Angeline stooped down with a wry smile and patted her on the head. “I would love to tell them, but I can’t settle down in a noble’s estate... And I insulted the nobles at the ceremony too.”

“Those weren’t insults! You told the truth! Even father praised you for it, so you’ll be just fine! So...stay a little longer...”

Liselotte buried her teary-eyed face into Angeline’s chest. Angeline had

grown astonishingly fond of the innocent and inquisitive girl, but she had no desire to prolong her stay. The longer she dallied, the harder it would be to leave.

“Aha ha... Look after your mom and dad, okay? How about you come around to Orphen one of these days...?”

“Ange...”

“That crying face doesn’t suit you... We’ll see each other again. Okay?”

“Yeah... You’re right! A noble mustn’t be so quick to show her tears!”

Liselotte smiled, her nose red, and she clung to Angeline again. This time, Angeline hugged her back. After staying like that a while, she lifted her face and pointed at the dress that had been crudely folded over the sofa.

“I know! I’ll give you that dress! Take it!”

“Huh...? I’d feel bad, though—I won’t even have any chances to wear it...”

“It’s fine! It’s proof of our friendship, okay? You looked wonderful in it!”

“I-I see...”

She would never get used to wearing it, but she had received a lot of praise when she did. In spite of her misgivings, she had come to enjoy all the compliments, and all the while, she had wanted Belgrieve to see her in it. Perhaps Gilmenja was right, and he really would cry tears of joy.

“All right... Fine. I’ll take you up on that offer.”

“Yeah!”

Angeline folded it neatly this time and tucked it into her bag.

“Then... I’m going.”

“Take care! You have to tell me stories again!”

“Yeah. It’s a promise...” They linked pinkies and shared a smile.

After parting with Liselotte, Angeline headed towards the entrance parlor, which was on the opposite side of the manor from the hall, and relatively quiet by comparison. It seemed no one wanted to leave just yet. Several sentries stood around, looking terribly bored, and there were plenty of carriages crowding around the front of the estate. *How are there still so many people here?*

She weaved her way between the carriages on her way to the gate. The further she followed their furrowed tracks, the fewer carriages there were. The servant and guest quarters lining each side of the lane had lights in their windows, but there were hardly any people around. It was dead silent;

everyone was busy in the manor.

The stars twinkled in the sky while the cold wind stroked her cheeks. The music sounded rather dreary in the distance.

“It’s quiet,” she observed. It was as though all the noise and hustle and bustle from earlier had never happened. Angeline let out a long breath and watched the white haze drift away.

Once she approached the gate, however, the presence she felt suddenly thickened. She swiftly looked around to see armed soldiers forming a circle around her.

“What do you want?”

“Don’t play dumb, vile adventurer,” the captain said with a resentful front as he gripped the hilt of his sword. Angeline placed her bags on the ground and grabbed her own sword. Her sharp eyes glared at him.

“Stop now, before I start to believe you jokers mean business.”

“You’re taking this in stride.” Francois emerged from the darkness. He had a ghastly smile and made no attempt to conceal his hostility.

“Is this some petty revenge?” Angeline sighed. “You’re not a child anymore.”

“Silence. You will never understand. The nobles never had any honor. They have nothing but their attachment to their wealth and power... And what can honor accomplish? All those rose-tinted words, they make me want to vomit, you do-good grifter.”

“‘Grifter’... What are you, stupid? How could I be a grifter and a do-gooder at the same time?”

“Quit being coy with me... You don’t even like the aristocracy. To go on and speak about pride and nobility—it’s all just a scam, is it not?”

“The nobles I like all hold pride in their stations. They are noble, but not arrogant. Liz and even your father were like that... Why can you only see it through such a warped lens? Your father loves you, doesn’t he?”

“Father has never loved me!” Francois shouted. “Oh, you’re so special, aren’t you! Rambling on about your father being your pride and such nonsense! Just looking at you makes me want to vomit!”

“Sir.” The captain stepped forward with his sword. “If you would give the order.”

“Very well...” Angeline said, resigned.

“Stop... Do you think you can beat me?” a voice called out.

A chill raced down Angeline's spine, and she frantically turned the other way. There was Kasim; he had the same slovenly bearing as ever, but she could see absolutely no angle of attack that would prevail against him.

Kasim roughly scratched his head and sighed. "Why did it have to come to this, huh...?"

"That should be my line..." Angeline retorted. "Are you serious?"

"Not like I have anything better to do."

There was a tumultuous swirl of mana, and Angeline shuddered as she recalled the grand magic she had seen in the hall. Even she wasn't confident that she could withstand that without collapsing.

*It's been a while.* Ange gulped. The fact that he could command grand magic meant that Kasim was just as skilled as Maria. To make matters worse, his abilities were completely unknown to her. As she stood to face him, she felt overwhelmed by his presence.

She looked around. She was surrounded by Francois's lapdogs, cutting off her escape routes. These soldiers were hardly an obstruction, but if she focused too much on them, she might concede Kasim an opportunity to strike.

Angeline slowly drew her sword.

"I don't want to fight you, Mr. Kasim."

"That so? I think you could do a pretty good job of killing me..."

"You...want to die? Why?"

"I'm a coward, you see. I'm scared of death—can't help it. But living is such a pain. If I'm going to die anyways, I'd like to go out giving it my all against someone stronger than me. Heh heh, look at me, making excuses again."

"Enough... Liz will be sad if you die."

"Then shut up and let me kill you. Between you and me, whose death would make that runt the saddest?" Kasim said with a laugh.

Angeline bit her lip. "Why do you listen to the likes of him?"

"Why do you think? Humans tend to act irrationally in the depths of despair. It's like you're not you anymore, and then you're sympathizing with your own sad self, perhaps? Or maybe it's like you're trying to atone for something or other."

"Even when you're so strong? You don't have to drive yourself into a corner..."

“Heh heh heh...” Kasim chuckled, stroking his beard. “You sure are young.”

“What?” Angeline asked.

“I used to think like that, once upon a time—that you could do anything as long as you’re strong.”

“Is that wrong...?”

“It’s completely wrong. In fact, most things in the world you can’t do a thing about, regardless of strength.”

“Like what?”

“Well let’s see.” Kasim narrowed his eyes. “For instance... Say you got a friend battered by grief. But the thing is, he’s a really swell guy who’s doing everything he can to make it seem like that ain’t how it is. But you know, all too well. So it’s painful, and you have to apologize, but you can’t.” He stared straight at Angeline. “When that happens, no matter how strong your sword is, no matter what magic you can manipulate, it’s all pointless. What you need isn’t strength. It has to be something else.”

Angeline fell into a pensive silence. That definitely wasn’t a problem that could be solved by defeating a fiend. She didn’t know whom Kasim was talking about, but the sorrow that lingered in his words was palpable.

Kasim slowly went on, as though he was retreading his past. “But still, I had to get strong. Couldn’t think of anything else. I was young and stupid, and I thought, if only I was stronger, if only I climbed higher, I would find my answer... But I was just fooling myself, telling myself I was at least doing *something* about it.”

“That’s...” Angeline wanted to say something but failed to find the right words.

And so, Kasim shook his head. He was smiling, yet his face was filled with misery.

“The point is, all sorts of things just stopped mattering to me. When that happens, you know... It becomes a lot more comfortable doing bad than good.”

Angeline pursed her lips and glared at him. *You’re wrong*, she wanted to say. But it seemed so terribly difficult to explain to him why. Kasim was far too resigned to accept any justification she could think of.

The stream of his mana grew stronger and stronger, blowing like a storm centered around him. The surrounding shrubs, bushes, trees, and flags all

rustled and flapped loudly, while Angeline's long black hair whipped around behind her.

He was strong, top-class among all the foes she had fought in her life. There weren't many opponents out there who could make her think, "I might lose this." Against this opponent, she could easily picture herself lying in a pool of her own blood, while Kasim's apparent confidence belied any fear of death. The unknown was scarier than anything—precisely why Angeline was now seized by fear.

*I'm fine*, she told herself. *He's nothing compared to dad*. She took in a deep breath and sharpened her gaze. "Have it your way, then... I'm not going to die here!"

"I'm fine with dying. Come at me."

Kasim casually lifted his hands. He used one to hold down his hat, while smoothly swinging the other in the air like he was conducting an orchestra. The swirls of his mana grew even more forceful, the winds stinging as they scraped against her skin.

"Ha... Ha ha ha ha ha!" Francois, in the grip of madness, burst into laughter. "How wonderful! That's the Aether Buster for you!" He turned to Angeline and spat, "Don't worry! You won't be lonely in hell! I'll send your friends in Orphen and that 'world's best dad' of yours after you!"

Those words sent her into a rage. She yelled back, "Shut up! My dad would never lose to you! Aether Buster? Not a chance! You wouldn't last a second against the Red Ogre, Belgrieve!"

Then suddenly, the billowing winds were gone. The dust and the leaves torn from their branches lingered a moment before settling. It went without saying that Francois, the soldiers, and Angeline were all taken aback.

Angeline looked blankly at Kasim, who lowered his arms and stood petrified. It hadn't just been his mana—even his hostility had completely vanished to the point where she found it uncanny.

"Huh... Is something—" She was cut off as Kasim rushed up to her at a tremendous pace and grabbed her shoulders. Though she was startled, she felt no ill intent and so stayed her blade.

Kasim began shaking her. "Wh-Wh-Wh-What did you just say?! Bell?! Did you say Belgrieve?!"

"Wh-What...? I did... So?"

"You did! I knew it! I didn't mishear you! Does Belgrieve have red hair?!"

Is he missing his right leg?!"

He cupped her face in his hands and brought her so close their noses were nearly touching, and his long, pointed beard tickled her face. Angeline lowered her sword arm and nodded.



“That’s right... You know him?”

“Of course I do! He’s the best adventurer I know! He’s... He’s your dad?!”

“Yeah. He is.”

“Ha ha... Ha ha ha ha! Ah, seriously!” He roughly tapped Angeline on the head. “You shoulda started with that!”

“That... That’s my line!”

“How’s Bell doing? He’s still kicking, right? Is he well? If he’s got a daughter, does he have a wife? Who’d he end up marrying, eh? And what’s all this ‘Red Ogre’ business?”

“H-Hey... One at a time... My dad is doing well. He’s lived in Turnera for a long time.”

“Turnera... I see. So that’s it...”

Kasim retreated a step, then another, before falling to his knees in tears. And yet, even though he was crying, he smiled from the depths of his heart. This was a complete shift from his prior face of misery.

“So you’re alive and well, Bell... You’ve got such a big daughter...”

In her confusion, Angeline placed a hand on his shoulder. “Mr. Kasim, you knew dad? How?”

“Of course I know him! He’s my...friend. But I guess he might not think so.” A lonely smile crossed his face as he looked up at her. “He never told you anything about me?”

“No... Um, then that friend you were talking about...”

“Pretty much. Heh heh, I see... So he still hasn’t forgiven me...”

Ange snappishly struck him upside the cheek. “I don’t know what happened between you, but my dad is not the petty sort of man who would dwell on the past forever.”

“Ha ha... I guess so. That’s the sense I get when I look at you.” Kasim stood and began ruffling Angeline’s hair. “No more killing, enough of all that! Hey! Tell me more about Bell! Who did he end up marrying? You don’t look like him at all!”

“I was adopted...”

“Hey!” Francois cried out. “What are you doing?! Hurry and kill her already! Are you listening, Aether Buster?!”

“Shut up! We’re having an important discussion here!” roared Kasim as he brandished his hand. A sudden and immense gust wrapped around

Francois and his followers.

“Wh-Whoooooooooa?!”

They were lifted up in the air in a whirling, tumbling tempest for a few moments before being blasted sky-high, as though they had been shot out of a cannon.

Angeline winced. “Huh... Wait, are they going to be all right?”

“I tossed them in the river. If they die from the cold, it just means they didn’t train enough, heh heh heh... Ah, that was a close one. I almost killed my friend’s daughter.”

“I might have won.”

“No doubt about that! You’re pretty strong, you are!” Kasim amicably laughed and wrapped an arm around Angeline’s shoulder. “Are you leaving tonight? Then I’m going with you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Don’t worry about it, just tell me about Bell already. I’ll share some old stories about him too! That sound fair enough, Angeline?” Kasim happily placed his derby hat on Angeline’s head.

Adjusting its brim with a strained smile, Angeline conceded. “Fine. If it’s about dad, I can talk until daybreak.”

“That’s what I like to hear! A good day it is! ‘Bell’s alive,’ she says! Now onwards to reclaim the past I left behind!”

○

As Angeline left the archduke’s estate, a figure stood atop the roof of the guesthouse. He stared intently at the confrontation that took place in front of the gate, but seeing as the squabbling ended without any actual fighting, he shook his head. Those beautiful gold locks and white clothes belonged to the crown prince Benjamin.

Benjamin shrugged with half a smile. “Now that’s a letdown... I got my hopes up twice and was let down both times. What a tease.”

“That was unexpected. I thought we would be able to see more definitive results if we pitted her against the Aether Buster.”

A man in a white robe stood behind Benjamin. He wore his hood down over his eyes.

Benjamin chuckled. “Yes, old Ba’al was beaten down surprisingly easily

after he lost his affection. I guess Solomon's designs really are perfect. If we take out something that seems completely unnecessary, it all falls apart."

"There is little we can do. Much of his work cannot be deciphered with modern technology."

"But is she really one of ours? I held her in my arms and looked at her up close, but I still haven't even the faintest idea."

"Who can say... If she's a success, then she wouldn't give off any hint of the homunculus within her. On the contrary, this is a promising sign."

"Good grief." Benjamin shook his head. "What are we supposed to do if we don't even know if she's a success or not...? But she's the first woman who wasn't fazed by this guy's face. She's an interesting one."

"Her ego must have a very strong foundation. It would be worth looking into. If she's dependent on someone, it may be interesting to see what happens when that pillar crumbles."

"But you'll need to find that key first, to see if she's a real one or not."

"There's no need to hurry; no one will ever catch up to us, in any case. Our closest contender took out the ones who previously possessed the Aether Buster. And soon, he will be erased by the Inquisition. Only that elf remains a thorn in our side..."

Benjamin seemed quite amused. "So our rivals in pursuing Solomon's research are vanishing one by one. But where's the fun without a bit of competition?"

"I have no interest in making a sport of it."

"I find it more exciting with a few obstacles in the way. You need to learn to play around a bit."

"Play, huh... Is taking on that form a sort of game to you, then?"

"It's pretty nice, you know. It's allowed me to walk around quite a bit easier. Now then, what shall we do about little Francois? I wouldn't want him going around saying the crown prince instigated him."

The robed man turned. "I'll go. You keep playing your part."

"You too, Schwartz."

The robed man vanished like a mirage. Benjamin remained standing there a while longer before similarly fading away.

# Chapter 57: Byaku Opened His Eyes

Byaku opened his eyes in response to a light touch on the back.

“Are you starting to understand it?”

“Just a little.”

The boy stood. He took a deep breath and looked at his hand, which he repeatedly opened and clenched to confirm the sensation in his fingertips.

It had been almost a month since Belgrieve had come to Orphen. The air grew colder by the day, and he was certain it was already snowing copiously in Turnera.

If Percival, Satie, and Kasim were still out there adventuring, he thought he might catch wind of some intel or rumors. Thus, Belgrieve visited the guild every day to catch up on current events and scan old request forms to follow their trails. He also walked around town and conversed with the owners of pubs and vendors of adventurer equipment, as well as the occasional traveling peddler.

However, he had yet to come across anything promising. Perhaps that was only natural, since they had all left Orphen over a decade ago.

In his free time, he would take on the challenges of those who wished to test their strength against the Red Ogre. Belgrieve had no objections to sparring, and he could feel his own movements being further refined as he crossed blades with opponents who utilized all manner of tactics.

Belgrieve’s sword style was purely defensive. It was a style he was forced to work out from scratch after losing his right leg, and because of this, it fit him perfectly. But his was still a self-taught sword. When trial and error had inevitably reached its limit, it was Graham’s instruction that opened the path to a higher level. Now, he realized that his defensive style was full of unnecessary movement, as if all sorts of coincidences had intersected to produce his blade arts. The realization of this was quite a peculiar feeling.

Breath training to improve mana circulation was, naturally, effective for magicians as well. Ever since he had learned that a demon dwelled in Byaku’s body, and that he relied on that demon for much of his mana,

Belgrieve would make time every day to instruct Byaku in the method. If the boy could learn to use his own nondemonic mana more efficiently, he would not need to restrict himself as much.

Belgrieve placed a hand on Byaku's head. "You should be better than me at handling mana. As long as you pick up the feeling, you'll figure it out in no time."

"You don't have to pat my head over every little thing," Byaku said sullenly, though he made no attempts to remove Belgrieve's hand.

They were still in Angeline's room. Belgrieve had made himself quite at home in the last month, and the pantry shelves were now fully stocked. Belgrieve even bought a simple bed for Byaku, the boy grumbling all the while. Now, Belgrieve and Charlotte slept on the bigger bed and Byaku on the small one beside it.

*He's going through that phase,* thought Belgrieve.

At the same time, this normal, rebellious teenage angst was quite endearing to Belgrieve. Despite all the demon business, Byaku was still an ordinary boy.

Belgrieve donned his mantle and draped the muffler he got from Charlotte around his neck.

"All right, let's head to the guild, then."

"Are you ever going to make any progress?"

"I don't know... But it's better than doing nothing." Belgrieve kneaded his beard with a smile as he left the room.

Angeline's room was on the second floor. He exited to a wooden deck and descended a flight of stairs to the road below. Once on street level, he took off the cloth he had wrapped around his peg leg. Though he had initially walked with it exposed, it apparently made a loud tapping sound on the floor, and a complaint came from the resident downstairs.

The sky was covered in a veil of clouds, and it looked like it would snow any minute now. It wasn't as bad as Turnera, but it was still too cold for comfort. Belgrieve pulled the muffler up over his mouth.

*Will Angeline be back soon?* he wondered.

It would take roughly half a month to reach Estogal City by carriage. Belgrieve had arrived in Orphen around the time Angeline should have arrived in Estogal, so if nothing went wrong, she would presumably be on the way back already.

In any case, there was no use in fretting over it. Belgrieve hastened his steps to the guild building.

There weren't many people in the lobby. Fewer formal requests came in when the cold grew harsher; these were instead replaced by odd jobs, such as snow shoveling and fetching groceries. Most full-fledged adventurers would disregard them, but beginners strapped for cash and kids in their teens would still take them on. Adventurers came in all sorts.

Yuri smiled as he arrived at the counter. "Good to see you, Mr. Bell."

"Working hard again, I see. I'm sorry I keep bothering you..."

"Oh, no. This much is nothing. In fact, I'm sorry I can't be of any more help..."

"You're already doing plenty. Thank you."

Yuri blushed bashfully. Then, from behind her, a voice called out: "Father!"

Charlotte raced over and softly clung to Belgrieve's leg. She was bundled up in a fluffy winter coat and knit cap.

"Oh, Char. Have you been a good girl?"

"Of course! Oh, I bought another ball of yarn! I think I'll make you a sweater this time!"

"Ha ha, I'll look forward to it."

"Byaku! Are you practicing properly?"

"Of course. But I don't see why that's your business."

"There you go again with your snark," Belgrieve said, poking him in the head. Byaku pouted and turned away.

"Oh, it's Mr. Bell."

"Mr. Bell. Are you already done practicing with Byaku?"

When Belgrieve looked up, he saw that Anessa and Miriam had come and now stood alongside Charlotte.

"Yeah, we're good for today. Thanks for taking Char, both of you."

"No worries, we were coming here anyways..."

"Right, right. And Char's got a good set of eyes on her, you know."

The two of them had taken Charlotte to go shopping. Meditation was quiet and boring, and Belgrieve thought she would have more fun with the girls; it seemed he had been correct. He smiled as he saw Charlotte frolicking about so freely.

She was apparently being targeted, and he wanted her to learn magic as

well. However, after hearing of Charlotte and Byaku's travels, Belgrieve considered the pressure the ten-year-old girl had been shouldering and decided to put it off—he wanted to give her a chance to play. It was true that she would eventually need to learn to protect herself. But she had suffered as no little girl should, losing her parents to unreasonable misfortune, becoming a zealot for Solomon in her obsessive pursuit of vengeance, and traveling tirelessly since then. Her magic training could wait.

Perhaps Charlotte could never take back what she had done in Bordeaux, and it was a good thing to regret her actions. But she could not remain a prisoner to her past forever.

"It's an adult's job to protect children," he muttered. At any rate, he was at least up to the task of lifting this child's burdens.

It was around then that Marguerite came up in her usual hurry. "Oh, what's this? What's everyone gathered for?" Marguerite chuckled as she placed her basket in front of Yuri. It was filled to the brim with winter herbs and berries. "I went to gather materials! Appraise them for me!"

"Now look here, Maggie. I know I've said this several times before, but this is the exclusive counter for high-ranking adventurers. Please use the other one..."

"It's not like it really matters."

"No can do. If you want to use this counter, then please do your best to rise through the ranks."

"Tsk, fine. Have it your way." Marguerite begrudgingly conceded.

Belgrieve peeked into her basket and was rather impressed. "You're doing good, Maggie."

"Aren't I? It's almost too easy."

"It might feel that way. But you need to keep practicing until you can properly hold back your strength, okay?"

"I know, I know! I'm practicing, I am!" she said, puffing her cheeks poutingly.

Upon becoming an adventurer, Marguerite had promptly taken on all the requests she could, from low-ranking fiend exterminations to dungeon exploration to gathering materials. Though she wanted to skip over all the tedious work to take on powerful fiends, Belgrieve would not let her. The way he saw it, she needed to learn the basics one step at a time, or she would grow too conceited and set herself up for a fall.

Marguerite had already fallen into a crisis because of her pride once before, and while she had initially been quite reluctant to go through the standard process, it seemed she was beginning to enjoy it. This all came down to her new discovery: as long as she always tried to find something new in what she was doing, anything could turn out to be relatively fun.

“Then I’m gonna go get it appraised over there.”

“Yeah, see you soon.”

Marguerite walked off to the low-ranking counter with her yield.

“I want to continue my investigation where I left off yesterday,” Belgrieve said to Yuri.

“Yes, of course. Go right ahead.”

“I’ll be looking through some documents, so...”

“Yeah! I’ll wait with Anne and Merry! And Byaku too!” Charlotte energetically replied while Byaku kept his silence.

Belgrieve stepped behind the counter and began looking through the documents stored in the back. The archive, though not a separate room, was conveniently in a blind spot, so he did not have to worry about unwanted attention as he looked through the old files. Very rarely, he would come across requests his old party members had taken, but the files were hardly well organized. After looking through the first file several times with a gimlet eye to be sure there was nothing of note, he returned it and moved on to the next.

It had begun to snow outside, and the people who came in now had a white dusting of frost on their clothes which melted as they walked about. There was also snow on the wind that blew into the building, settling as water droplets all over.

Belgrieve stretched, having finished going through a number of files to no avail. He wasn’t terrible at this sort of work, but it had been so long since he’d last done it that he now found it wearisome.

His ears perked up to a commotion brewing outside. When he popped his face out, he saw Angeline standing there with a tired look on her face, discussing something with the other girls. A woman with reddish-brown hair and a lanky man in a derby hat stood beside her.

“Agh,” Angeline groaned, raising a weary hand. “I’m tired...but I’m back...”

“Ha ha, glad to have you back. And you too, Ms. Gil.”

“I’m not particularly tired, by the way, heh heh heh.”

“Hey, hey, Ange. There’s something really important I have to tell you.”

“Can it wait...? After I give my report, I want to go home and sleep...”

“It’ll knock your socks right off! Trust me!”

“That’s right, sis! You’ll be shocked!”

“Yeah, yeah. Later...”

“Well, in any case, welcome back, Ange.”

“Thanks, Anne... But I’d have liked to hear that from dad.” Angeline let out a deep sigh.

“Really?” Belgrieve responded as he briskly made his way out. “Then welcome back, Ange.”

“Yeah, I’m home, dad... Dad?” Angeline’s head shot up and her eyes widened.

“How was Estogal?” Belgrieve asked with a chuckle. “You went to get a medal, right?”

“Dad!”

Angeline jumped at him with the force of a leaping hare, and Belgrieve instinctively braced his legs to catch her.

“Dad, dad, dad, dad!”

“Ha ha, what’s all this now? What a troublesome girl...”

“Dad, dad!”

“I know, I know.”

“If she’s calling you ‘dad’... You must be Mr. Belgrieve.”

“Yes, I am... What about you?”

“Dad, dad, dad, dad!”

“My name is Gilmenja. I’m sorry I kept your daughter away for a while...”

“Oh, so you’re... I heard you looked after her, and I’m grateful for that. She must have been quite a handful...”

“Dad, dad, dad, dad, dad!”

“Calm down, Ange!”

“Dad!”

Angeline buried her face in his chest and took in a deep breath. Otherwise, it seemed her mouth moved all on its own. Though he smiled wryly, Belgrieve patted her on the head.

“You really make a big deal out of everything.” Miriam giggled. “I guess

you can't help it. You thought you could go home, then you couldn't. Then you thought you wouldn't see him at all, and now here we are."

"You're like a dog that misses its master," Byaku snarked.

Belgrieve scratched his head. "What am I to do with you...?"

And so she remained there, stuck fast to him for a while longer. But she eventually lifted her head to say, "Hey, why?! What are you doing in Orphen, dad?"

"Hmm... I thought it would be good to come and see you."

"I'm so happy! Hee hee... It's dad! It's dad! Bonfires and straw...the smell of Turnera!" Angeline nuzzled him several times before her face lit up. She finally remembered. "So, you know—the thing is—I met one of your old friends in Estogal!"

Belgrieve was speechless for a moment. "Huh?!"

"He said he wanted to see you, so I brought him to Orphen! I thought I'd take him back to Turnera in spring! Um..."

Angeline restlessly scanned the area and tilted her head. Then, she saw Gilmenja grinning and pointing at the man in the hat squatting down and curling up, doing his best to hide.

Angeline grabbed his shoulder. "What are you doing?"

"I mean... I wasn't told he'd be in Orphen... I'm not ready yet..."

"Well, it's a bit late for that!" Angeline forcefully dragged him to his feet and shoved him in front of Belgrieve.

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes and observed the man's face closely.

"Is that you...Kasim?"

"Heh...heh heh..."

Kasim scratched his head all over. His eyes glistened; his shoulders stiffened. His mouth was quivering, but he didn't know what to say. But he eventually mustered some words in the smallest voice imaginable.

"You grew out your beard, Bell."

"Ha ha... So did you," Belgrieve said with an exhausted smile.



They were in what was apparently a break room for guild staff. There were several tables and chairs, but—perhaps because it was peak work hours—there was no one else around.

Belgrieve and Kasim sat across from each other at one of these tables. They wanted to talk for a bit, just the two of them. But Belgrieve found himself a little troubled on where to begin and how. Kasim seemed to be in quite the same boat, his eyes wandering restlessly.

“How should I say this...” Kasim finally opened his mouth. “Now that I’m actually here, I don’t even know where to begin.”

“Right...”

“So, you hanging in there?”

“More or less... You?”

“I, well...” Kasim cast down his eyes.

Belgrieve scratched his cheek. “I hear you quit adventuring. Even though you got to S-Rank.”

“Yeah... It started feeling... What’s the right word... *Empty*. Yeah, that’s it, and...” He cut himself off and looked at Belgrieve with a bitter smile. “Maybe I shouldn’t tell you about this one. You might take it the wrong way.”

“Not at all... Please tell me. What happened to Percy and Satie? Did something happen to you three after I left for Turnera?”

Kasim stayed silent for a while. Eventually, he said, “We... Well, we decided we were going to get strong. So we did; we got stronger, we climbed higher, we were taking on harder jobs... Um, we thought we might find a way to get your leg back.”

“Hmm...?”

“Don’t laugh at us, okay? We were young and stupid. We all knew you were desperately trying to put on a smile through all the pain. But we didn’t know what to do. We were scared that one wrong word would make you shut off your heart forever.”

“I see... So that’s why...”

“Yeah... So we worked our way up the ladder. If we were strong, if we found a way to regrow your leg, we thought you’d come back. Percy believed it more than the rest of us. He, well, he...”

Kasim struggled for words, but Belgrieve shook his head.

“It was no one’s fault,” Belgrieve said. “We were in the wrong place at the wrong time. That’s all it is.”

“I see...” Kasim pulled his hat down over his eyes. “Anyways, we went out to search for how to restore your missing piece.”

“If only something like that existed.”

“Yeah, you got that right, Bell—it doesn’t. Even if it does, it’s taboo. One way would restore your leg in exchange for going insane. Another would cause the leg to eat away at your body until you were someone else entirely. It was just that—the same thing, again and again... Heh heh, magic’s really nothing special. They hailed me as an archmage or something, but I couldn’t even restore my friend’s leg.”

A miserable smile persisted on Kasim’s face.

“Percy was smiling less and less—and after you disappeared, I never saw his smile again. Satie would often look off into the distance. Just the three of us... Well, you know, we were all pretty willful. Strong personality types and all that. We got along because you’d always step in when things got real bad.”

“That’s not...” Belgrieve began to say before stopping himself, wondering if there was any point in acting humble this late in the game.

“So while we were looking for you, every trivial thing would become an argument. One day, Satie just up and left, and that was the end of it. Me and Percy went our separate ways. I don’t know what happened to the two of them since. Ironic, ain’t it? Everyone wanted to save you, but the three of us grew to hate each other.”

“Kasim...”

“It’s fine, Bell. Just hear me out. Even so, I didn’t give up. Percy didn’t either. He became an S-Rank adventurer in Orphen. I felt there wasn’t anything more I could find in Orphen, so I left for the imperial capital and became an S-Rank there. I hung out with a few crazy people to learn forbidden arts. There was a time when I joined hands with the folks researching the demons. There was a time they used me too. And a time I tricked myself—I indulged a misplaced sense of superiority, knowing I was only *letting* them use me. The thing is, I could distract myself as long as I was doing something. When I succeeded, I would idiotically imagine you, Percy, and Satie suddenly coming around and telling me I did a good job.”

A crazed smile crossed Kasim’s face.

“You see... I had talent, so all sorts of things went well. I developed new magic, became an archmage, but ironically...”

His fingers began tapping against the table.

“That’s not what I wanted to be. The more I was praised for my accomplishments, the emptier I felt. Whenever I could devote myself to

something, it was just to divert my attention. I'd completely lost sight of what I wanted. My heart, well, it was wasting away. I was like a snowball rolling down a hill, and before I knew it, I was past the point of no return. By the time I realized it, I had nothing."

He went on and on, his words escaping him with hardly a pause for breath.

"Time had stopped for me... Even though the years were passing by, I was still just a dumb kid inside, heh heh." He wiped his tears with the palm of his hand, a sad smile gracing his features. "Ange's a good kid... She's your daughter, no doubt about that. When I hear her talk about you, I just know you did right by her. You really are amazing."

Belgrieve stood and grasped Kasim's shoulder from across the table. "I'm sorry. It's all my fault you've gone through such painful memories."

"That's not true! You were the one hurting the most! Just one leg, and then they were talking behind your back! Laughing at you! We...couldn't stop it..." Kasim began to sob. "You're incredible... Even as your leg was being torn off, you got out that scroll and saved us. If you hadn't, then..."

"Hey, Kasim," Belgrieve said calmly. "Honestly, I... I was envious of the three of you."

"Huh...?"

"Your talents were all on another level. I knew I would never beat Percy or Satie with a sword, and I would never beat your wits either." Belgrieve closed his eyes. "You were all so full of confidence, and I felt like I didn't belong. Day in and day out, you'd all remind me there was a realm I would never reach no matter how much effort I put in. That's why I was always walking in place. Because I could never recognize my own value."

"You're wrong! That's—"

"But because I lost my leg, I was able to move forward." He stared straight at Kasim. "I met Ange."

"Ange..."

"If I hadn't lost my leg, I would have continued in Orphen as an adventurer. Then, I never would have found her up in the mountains of my hometown."

"Ha...ha ha... I guess so! She really is a good girl, after all!"

"Isn't she? She's my pride and joy. I don't know how many coincidences had to overlap to bring her to me. But today, I met you because of her. Maybe

I should even be thankful for my losses.” Belgrieve slowly lowered his eyes to the sword at his hip. “I’ve gotten better with this thing than I ever was in my adventuring days. I might continue getting stronger even at my age.”

“Heh, heh heh. You serious? That’s something...”

“I couldn’t believe it myself... Hey, Kasim. I’m the same. I’ve thought time and time again what I’d do if I’d followed a different path in life. But we can’t live in the past no matter what we do. We have to shoulder the past and walk with our eyes on the future.”

“Yeah...”

“You shouldered far too much of the past. I tried my best not to look at it. But we need to meet somewhere halfway. That’s why I came to Orphen.”

“I guess that’s...right. I wanted to reclaim the past I left behind...”

Belgrieve smiled and held out a hand. “I’m glad I got to see you again, Kasim. I’m sorry I put you through so much. And thank you.”

“I... I’m sorry... I’m so sorry, Bell! Thank you!”

Kasim used one hand to pull his hat down to conceal his sobbing face, and the other to firmly grip Belgrieve’s hand. They remained like that a while more, silently. But before they knew it, they were both on their feet laughing.

Kasim wiped away his tears and said, “Once a Bell, always a Bell!”

“Maybe so. But you changed way too much. I didn’t even know who you were at first.”

“Aha ha ha... I’ve already gotten used to this look.” Kasim joyfully tugged at his beard.

“I get it. Once you’ve made a habit of fiddling with it, you just can’t shave it anymore!”

“Right, right!” Kasim smiled, and then, with a sigh, he patted Belgrieve on the shoulder. “Hey, Bell. Forgive Percy, would you? He felt a lot of responsibility in his own way...”

“Of course. I want to meet him and talk. And Satie too, of course. Would you help me look for them?”

“Of course I will! I can’t wait! The four of us, together again!”

“I wonder what he’s like now. Do you think he’s grown out a beard?”

“You never know. He might have gone bald already... Oh, that’s right...” Kasim faintly grimaced before patting Belgrieve on the back. “Let me tell you one thing, Bell! You’re one of the best adventurers I know! An adventurer’s worth isn’t in his sword. I’ve been in plenty of parties, and

fought with all sorts of people, but I never met anyone as observant, or so casually considerate, or so good at preparing thoroughly before we headed out.”

“Hey, isn’t that taking it a bit too far...” Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his cheek.

With a dry laugh, Kasim began shaking Belgrieve around.



“Heh heh, I knew it! I’m no good with all the sappy stuff! Let’s go drink some of the good stuff!”

When they left the room, Angeline was immediately upon them.

“Are you done? Did you talk?”

“Yeah, thanks, Ange. We owe it all to you.”

“Heh heh heh. You weren’t wrong, Ange. Your dad really is the best!”

“Isn’t he? Hey, hey, dad. I have lots of things to tell you too!”

“Yeah, that’s right. Your dad has a lot to talk about.” Belgrieve’s smile turned mischievous as he grabbed Angeline by the shoulder. “What’s this about trying to find me a wife?”

“Huh?”

“I’ve gotten plenty of scoldings, you know. All sorts of people are telling me not to leave that to my daughter.”

“Um, er...that’s...”

Seeing Angeline fall into dismay, Belgrieve chuckled.

“Just kidding. But I really did have to go around apologizing. There won’t be a next time, okay?”

“Ouch... Sorry...”

Belgrieve placed a hand on her head. “Good girl. All right, let’s celebrate with some food and drink.”

A gust of wind blew a dazzling whorl of snow through the open doorway.

## Extra: Daily Buildup

There was a roaring sound as the wind ravaged the outside of the house. From time to time, loud thwacking noises would come from the shutters over the windows, either from rattling on their hinges or from something smacking against them. Angeline—who was now five years old—raised a startled face and leaned her back against Belgrieve.

A red fire blazed in the hearth before her. Outside of winter, it would be rare to see the fireplace blazing fiercely enough to give off such impressive flames. Wood needed to be economized in frigid Turnera, but frugality could be taken too far if it led to illness.

“Are you cold?” Belgrieve asked.

Angeline shook her head. Her back had been the coldest part, but now it was nice and warm as she sat on Belgrieve’s knees.

There was hardly any work to do outside during the winter. At most, they would need to shovel the piling snow off the roof and roads, but there was no reason to venture out to the fields.

Angeline looked at a bean from top to bottom before tossing it onto a plate. She was sorting the fine ones from the misshapen and bug-eaten ones. These were the sorts of simple tasks she would do to spend the winter. Other jobs included selecting vegetable seeds, spinning sheep wool into yarn, and using that yarn to knit various things. The other seasons would have them busily moving around outside, while winter was the calm before that storm of activity.

For a moment, Belgrieve could have sworn he had heard a faint tapping at the door.

Angeline raised her head and looked at him. “Someone’s here.”

“Hmm?” Belgrieve stood and ventured to the door. But after opening it a crack, he shrugged and returned.

“No one’s there.”

“Huh... But I heard it.”

“I see...” Belgrieve’s eyes wandered as he mulled it over. He sat back

down and set Angeline back on his lap. “On these cold winter days, sometimes the wild ones will knock on your door.”

Angeline looked over her shoulder at him. “Fiends?”

“No, not fiends. Fiends aren’t that polite. Faeries and spirits...sometimes ghosts too. You close the door once you know no one’s there, but if you wait a bit longer, they’ll knock on it again.”

Angeline grimaced as she recalled the mischievous faeries that would often tease her in the forest.

“Now, now,” Belgrieve said, chuckling. “Back to work.”

Angeline hurriedly tossed the next bean on the plate, but it bounced off the rim and fell onto the floor.

Someone knocking on the door—she was fine with faeries, but she hoped it wasn’t a ghost. After all, she couldn’t cut ghosts with a sword. Faeries only did mischief, but ghosts would stare with faces full of resentment. They would definitely be terrifying.

That was when there was another knocking. Not the same feeble one from before—it sounded like someone was smacking a clenched fist against the wood. Angeline jumped up and clung to Belgrieve, who stared dubiously at the entrance.

A muffled voice called out, “Hey, Bell!”

“Oh, it’s just Kerry.”

Angeline patted her chest in relief as Belgrieve stood to welcome him in. The window rattled and she was on her toes again.

○

Thinking back on it now, it had surely been the wind. However, it really had sounded like knocking, and as a child, she would cower at the thought that someone might be peering in through the gap in the doorframe.

Kasim set down his cup, an amused look on his face. “So you were once a normal kid. Heh heh heh.”

Angeline puffed out her cheeks. “You would have thought so too if you heard it, Mr. Kasim. Right, dad?”

“She’s got a point. It did sound like a knock at the door.”

“Hmm, that so? I’ve never been north in the winter.”

“But you’ve been there other times?” Anessa asked.

Kasim nodded and tossed a roasted bean in his mouth. “I’ve been to elven territory in the summer. Went through Checkpoint Haril—the forests grew

thicker the further I went, and it was refreshingly cool even in the summer heat. It was pretty strange.”

“Hmm? So you went to our place. Must have been boring, right?” Marguerite interjected.

“You’re just saying that because you grew up there. It wasn’t half bad, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Hmm, you think so?” Marguerite asked with a furrowed brow.

Belgrieve chuckled. “Elven territory is teeming with wildlife. You’ve really been all around, Kasim.”

“Pretty much. I thought they might have something to fix that leg of yours. But I couldn’t go too far into those woods—that’s a quick way to never be seen again. Elves might be able to tell one place from another, but us humans can’t make heads or tails of it. I gave up and turned back before I was completely out of my depth.”

According to Kasim, the elves would occasionally appear around Haril for trade but were otherwise an enigma. The forests were deep, and it was said that they had a will of their own. Apparently, wanderers would lose their way even if they marked their paths. Only the elves who were born there could reliably navigate from one place to the next.

Miriam nodded, fascinated, and looked at Marguerite.

“You don’t get lost, Maggie?”

“Yeah, in fact, I have no idea how you could get lost in the woods of all places. This Orphen place is far more convoluted.”

“Yeah, I won’t defend Orphen. People get lost here too,” Belgrieve said.

Angeline nodded. Back when she first came to the city, there were far too many times when she realized she had no idea where she was. Even after living here for five years, there were still places she had never been to before. Both the forest and the city were labyrinthine.

An unexpected reunion with Belgrieve had blown away all her fatigue. Angeline, now on cloud nine, promptly led them all to the usual pub. It was a shame that Belgrieve already seemed acquainted with the place, but she was happy to surround a table with her beloved father and her comrades. Each drink would lift her spirits even higher.

Angeline pressed herself against Belgrieve’s shoulder. “What’s it like to be in Orphen after so long, dad?”

“Ha ha, it’s not so different from the last time I was here. Just as busy and

lively... Right, Kasim?"

"That's about right. But it's a bit more decrepit than I remember. I get the feeling the guild walls used to be whiter."

"Were they...? Maybe there were. But I get the feeling my memory's been prettied up over time."

"That might be it. It's like everything was glistening back then."

"We were in a trance. Back then, we were living like every moment was our last."

"Yeah. We never even asked each other about our pasts. It was always about what we would do tomorrow, and what we'd do after that. Our eyes were on the future."

The two middle-aged men stared into the distance at times gone by. Kasim's eyes were even a bit bleary.

"These old codgers," Byaku muttered.

"Right. What are you guys getting so sappy about?" Marguerite lightly kicked Belgrieve's leg under the table. However, she instead ended up striking Charlotte, who was sitting on her lap, and the little girl yelped.

"What are you doing, Maggie?!"

"Huh? I hit you? Sorry, sorry."

"Seriously, what are you doing?" Belgrieve let out a resigned laugh as he lifted Charlotte and corrected her position.

Charlotte was sitting where Angeline used to sit before. It felt like her family had grown. She was overjoyed, and she grinned from ear to ear as she embraced Belgrieve's arm.

"What's wrong, Ange? Are you drunk?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Well, it's not the first time Ange's fawned over you, Mr. Bell."

"She's already cheered up..."

Miriam and Anessa exchanged a look and a smile.

"Ah, can't get enough of this stuff," Kasim said before ordering another drink. "Heh heh, I never thought I'd be able to drink in a good mood again."

"That's good to hear, but hey, don't overdo it."

"Yeah, you gotta leave some for me."

"That's not what I meant, Maggie."

"It's fine, dad. We're drinking our fill today—in celebration of you coming to Orphen and all. And meeting Mr. Kasim," Angeline said, slapping

her hands on the table. He would be quite a spoilsport to stop her now, so Belgrieve smiled and twisted the hairs of his beard.

Thinking this would be as good a chance as any, he had brought along the money he had once received from House Bordeaux as a thank-you gift for Angeline and handed it over to her. Angeline was never pressed for cash to begin with, so she immediately reached in to cover their drinks—not that they were going to be drinking a hundred gold coins' worth.

A sudden snapping noise drew his eyes to the hearth, where the dry moss covering the log that had been thrown into the fire began to crackle and burn.

Kasim wiped off his drenched beard and said, “It’s colder here than in Estogal. Even colder in Turnera, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right. Everything’s pure white as far as you can see, and there are icicles *this* big growing from the eaves,” Angeline explained, reminiscing over the scenes she saw as a child. *It’s about time for the snow to settle back in Turnera*, she thought.

○

It was rare to see a clear sky in Turnera, and the lingering gray clouds would inevitably cover the town with their snowy payload. Even so, there were times when the clouds would drift away and reveal the sun.

On such days, the children would rush out all at once, racing through the white townscape without their coats. They pranced about so vigorously that some sweated up a storm even as their breath came out a foggy white. The adults worried that they might catch a cold, but remembering back to such days from their youth, they watched over the scene with a chuckle.

It was one of those days where the clouds parted just before noon, giving the sun its chance to shine after so long. The dangling icicles glimmered like dazzling gemstones in the light, almost blindingly. Five-year-old Angeline plucked one off, then began running around with it in hand.

“Cold!”

“Don’t hold it too long, or you’ll get frostbite.”

The snow had piled up all over the yard. The snowman Angeline had made a while back had fattened up quite a bit under the fresh sheets of snow. Belgrieve picked up a shovel and began to clear a path. It took quite some time before he got to the dirt underneath, and once he was done, Angeline stabbed her icicle spear into the resultant mound of snow.

It was a relatively warm day, the temperature helped by the sunlight as

well as the mild wind; just shoveling the snow was enough for Belgrieve to break a sweat. He glanced at the woodpile and noted how much it had decreased. He had done his best to use the firewood sparingly, but the colder it was, the faster supplies would run out. There was still plenty left in the village's communal stockpile, but that was to be reserved for the weak and elderly. He was healthy and better off for some exercise, so he decided to expand his patrol to the forest and pick up some withered branches while he was there.

“Ange, I’m going to get some firewood.”

“Me too!” Angeline’s face lit up. She had been lining up snowballs on the ground.

Producing a sled from the shed, Belgrieve ushered Angeline aboard and began pulling. The thin tracks of sled runners sliced through the round imprints of his snowshoes. Angeline gleefully turned this way and that, taking in everything around them.

When the wind blew, it would pick up a fine glistening spray of snow from the trees and houses. The air was cold and crisp, and on such a clear day, she could see all the way to the western and northern mountain ridges that were usually obscured by the downpour. The mountains were all pure white in their snowy coats and blinding to look at.

They left the fields and entered the woods under boughs coated in snow, a white layer covering the long, sprawling branches, each strung with crystalline icicles. The trees that kept their leaves in the winter were covered much thicker than the ones that lost them, and the snow would come tumbling down with a thud when the wind shook their branches. Belgrieve needed to be mindful of what was above him whenever he wanted to pull a withered branch from the snow.

The snow that built on these leafy branches was important to the forest. The buildup would eventually break off the weak, dying branches that could not sustain the weight, letting in light through the thick canopy. Then, the saplings that had been growing modestly in the shade of the large trees would suddenly experience a growth spurt. Where the sunlight fell, new foliage would spring up, different from the kind that grew in the shade, and the ecosystem would flourish with their abundance.

*Right, it might not just be snow. Maybe a branch will come falling on us.*

“Ange, I know I keep saying this, but mind your—” He heard a thud

behind him and a shriek. He turned to see Angeline completely covered in snow at the foot of a tree. As she attempted to pull out a branch, a clump had evidently fallen on her. He couldn't help but laugh after seeing that she was uninjured.

"Wow, that did a number on you. I told you to be careful of what's above you, didn't I?"

"Urgh..."

Angeline shambled over, nearly tripping over the snow, and clung to him. Belgrieve brushed the snow off her head and shoulders. *Thank god it was just snow*, he thought. Some of the branches that fell were thicker than his arms. Although those were the very sorts of branches he was looking to use as fuel, they could prove quite dangerous.

"Looks like it's going to snow again before sunset..." he said with a sigh as he looked at the thick clouds slowly gliding in from the north. The haziness beneath them was most likely the falling snow. The clouds had already reached the tops of the mountains, and the winds already felt colder.

Belgrieve snapped the larger branches against his leg or cut them down to size while Angeline stacked the pieces on the sled. The final pile of wood was fastened with rope so it wouldn't collapse, and then they were on their way back home. Angeline picked up a stick just right for her hands and swung it around.

"I found my sword!"

"Oh, that's a nice one. Will you slay fiends with it?"

"Yeah! I'll take down a dragon!"

"Ha ha ha... My daughter, a dragon slayer. Imagine that."

Belgrieve patted her, and she beamed back.

Perhaps admiring the way Belgrieve practiced swinging his swords, now and then she would try to pick up the sword on her own. It was too heavy for her, and that always put her in a bad mood, but a stick looked to be just about right. She was already play-fighting with the other children. *I remember swinging around a stick when I was her age*. It was a memory both fond and a bit embarrassing to Belgrieve.

Angeline could already handle a knife, able to peel fruit skins and strip the bark from branches for kindling. She was active and healthy, and so Belgrieve contemplated buying her a dagger the next time a peddler visited in spring. There weren't many opportunities to fight in Turnera, but she would

have a hard time if she didn't know her way around a blade.

The sun stopped shining before they were back in the village, and the snow came falling down in larger clumps, perhaps due to the temperature. But as night drew nearer, it gradually shifted to powder, and by midnight, it would be back to the same bone-chilling cold.

He carried Angeline on his back; she had latched onto him along the way back. By the time he returned home, the snow was falling so heavily that it clouded his vision. Even the ground he had shoveled earlier was covered again. Angeline shook her head to scatter the snow from it.

“Cold.”

“Yeah, let's go inside. I'll get you a cup of warm tea.”

“Yeah!”

He laid some wood over the embers in the hearth. The branches he had just retrieved were still too damp to use, so he piled them beside the fire to dry. He used the boiling pot of water to brew a floral tea, warmed a bit of the morning's bread over the fire, and slathered it with some of the apple jam he rarely cracked open. Angeline's face lit up.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah, you worked hard today.”

After biting into the sweet bread, Angeline hoisted up her steaming cup in both hands and began blowing on it. Her ears and nose were red, and soon she let out a sneeze.

○

“Achoo...” Angeline sneezed as she lay curled up in bed. Her “hug pillow” Charlotte mumbled something while Belgrieve stood and walked up to the bed to drape the disheveled cover back over them. The girls remained soundly asleep.

Kasim set a cup on the table. “Aah, look at that sloppy look on her face. I traveled with her for almost half a month, and I never saw her like that.”

“Ha ha, she's having a hard time going independent.”

“Heh heh heh, say what you want, but you're pretty happy to see her too.” Kasim continued laughing as he picked up the teapot and poured himself his second cup.

Their celebratory supper had continued until midnight. On the way back to Angeline's room, the snow had sprinkled down softly. Angeline had been giddily guzzling quite a bit of wine until they left, and she walked on

teetering legs until she finally ended up on Belgrieve's back. She had kept a firm grip on him, and it had been quite difficult to peel her off and tuck her into bed. But now, she didn't seem to have a care in the world.

Belgrieve took a sip of tea and sighed. The excessive alcohol consumption made the tea taste far better than it should have.

"It's strange. I never thought we'd meet again like this."

"You've got that right. I'd have never imagined that the adventurer coming for her medal was your daughter."

"Right. We'd never have met again without her."

*I don't know why, but that makes me strangely happy*, Belgrieve thought with a smile.

Kasim stroked his beard. "Heh heh, what a doting father you are. But I quite like that sort of thing."

"I...feel kinda bad, you know. I was living in peace when you were all going through so much."

"Don't say that. We're here together again, and that's what matters. I mean, I'll admit I let myself go for a bit, but now it's like I can relax my shoulders."

"I see. I'll take your word for it."

Belgrieve closed his eyes. He couldn't deny he had felt a bit gloomy when Kasim told him about how his past comrades had fallen out and gone their separate ways. Of course, he was happy to see Kasim again, but he could not erase the past.

Still, there was little he would accomplish by occupying himself with regrets. He had to live in the present and future; perhaps he could shoulder the past, but he could not be a prisoner to it. That was why he had come all the way to Orphen, and how he could acknowledge that their reunion was thanks to Angeline. Now that he had seen the past, there was no time to brood over it.

"What are you making that uneasy face for?"

"No, it's nothing." Belgrieve picked up his cup with a wry smile.

Kasim narrowed his eyes doubtfully, then looked out the window and said, "It's really coming down now."

The snow was indeed falling in large flakes. Beyond their faint reflections in the faintly frosted glass, it drifted down and caught the room's light along the way.

“No wonder I was feeling cold. Want me to shut the curtains?”

“No, don’t worry about it. We can do that before we sleep.”

“Got it.”

If it was like this in Orphen, it had to be pure white in Turnera. *How are Graham and Mit doing?* Belgrieve wondered over his tea. But while it was hard to spend the winter in Turnera, Graham had lived in elven territory, where the cold was even more fierce. Perhaps there was no need to worry about it after all.

Kasim stared at the window. Looking at his profile, Belgrieve got the feeling his nose used to be a bit more pointed. The lamplight emphasized the wrinkles on his brow and under his eyes. Even without his scraggly beard, the mischievous boy from his memories had grown up.

Noticing Belgrieve’s appraising eyes, Kasim looked at him curiously.

“What?”

“Well... We’ve gotten old. Both of us.”

“Ah... Aha ha ha, of course we have. It’s been twenty years... No, a little more than that. Got to be. I’m over forty, you know.”

“I see. Even our youngest is in his forties now... Then I’m really getting old,” Belgrieve mused.

“You were two years older, right?”

“Yep, me and Percy were the same age. Satie was one year younger.”

“Right, right. You felt kinda like an older brother, but Percy and Satie didn’t really give off that same impression of being older than me.”

“It’s because you were all in over your heads. Where did all that baseless confidence come from?”

“Hey, that’s youth for you. I can’t imagine being like that at my age.”

“I guess everything looked so new to us back then.” No doubt their hopes and dreams had become a powerful force moving them forward. Now that he had spread his roots in a farming town, he looked back fondly on his old zeal and vigor.

Lying on his simple bed, Byaku turned over in his sleep. Belgrieve glanced at him and casually adjusted the boy’s blanket.

“But I guess the passage of time doesn’t get to your core as long as you keep moving,” Belgrieve mused.

“Nah, that’s not true. Every time you run out of breath, it feels like you’ve gotten that much older. The way I see it, you’re still young while you have

the stamina and willpower to run without thinking about it. Nowadays, I'm stopping all the time to look back."

"You might be right about that."

"I am. Back then, the idea of stopping to look back felt crazy. But now, my eyes turn more to the past than to the future."

"I guess so. Yeah, that must be it."

That was simply how radiant those old days used to be. *It's strange, the past I look back at has become my motivation to move forward*, Belgrieve thought as he tousled his beard.

Kasim hesitated a moment before pouring himself another cup of tea. "Ha, I drank too much."

"Yeah, I overdid it a bit. I should call it a night."

"Heh heh, those young'uns are a bad influence on us. So how's Turnera? It's gotta be a nice place, right?"

"It's my home; I wouldn't call it good or bad. But it's the place where I can calm down."

"I see. I heard a few things from Ange, like how you'd head out to the forest and river, just the two of you. Glowgrass, was it? The kind you sent floating down the river—she talked about going to pick it."

"Do you want to join us one of these days? It's even colder than it is here."

"I'd love to go. My journey's been so, so very long. I just want somewhere to rest my bones."

"It's busier than you'd think, out in the countryside. We have to work every day."

"Hmm... Even in the winter?"

"That's right. We sort beans and spin yarn. There are all sorts of things to do."

"Not bad. That sounds like fun." Kasim's laughter turned into yawning.

The wind rattled the window, and though it had completely frosted over, they could tell that the snow was falling even more fiercely beyond it. Yet unlike the rain, it settled without a sound.



The more the snow piled up, the more it seemed to drain all sound away. This effect was more striking as the night drew on. The sound of each breath and the slight shifting of cloth became far more pronounced.

Hardly any outdoor work was done during Turnera's short winter days amidst the ceaseless snowfall. Instead, they would occupy themselves with jobs that entailed calm, focused work, such as weaving baskets from vines gathered in the fall, spinning wool into yarn, and knitting. Families would sit together in front of the fire, chatting as their hands were occupied with such tasks. It could be said that this was a period of rest from the busy farmwork required in the other seasons.

Sitting beside Belgrieve, turning a spindle, Angeline sullenly pouted.

"I can't do it well."

"Hmm? Oh."

The yarn had been wound unevenly, with bulges and dips. When it wasn't spun or fed properly, it became a bumpy, irregular thread. A small difference in the process could greatly change the quality of the yarn.

Belgrieve picked up the yarn Angeline had spun and gave it a tug.

"Yep, it's not breaking. That's a good sign. Calm down and try one more time. Send the wool in at the same speed as before and keep a slow, steady hand."

"Got it."

Angeline's face turned serious as she began to wind the spindle. Her expression was so amusing that he couldn't contain his laughter, and Angeline turned to him pointedly.

"What?"

"Hmm? I was thinking you were working hard."

"I'm very serious. Don't laugh."

"Sorry, sorry."

Angeline scoffed and turned back to the wool. *That's right, I can't laugh when she's taking it seriously*, Belgrieve thought. Nevertheless, he felt a smile tugging at his cheeks, and he took great care to school his expression.

Under the faint lamplight and in the glow of the flickering fireplace, the spindle turned round and round. She slowly lifted her left hand, clutching the wool. Little by little, she fed it into the rotation, spinning the scattered threads into one.

"How does it look?"

"That one turned out nicely."

She stopped the spindle and wrapped up the completed yarn. It wasn't perfect, but it was far tidier than her last attempt.

“I think you did well.”

“Hmph...”

Even so, Angeline seemed quite dissatisfied when she compared her work with what Belgrieve had spun. She got back to work with a conflicted look on her face.

The fireplace snapped and the flames danced.

*It's good to have some ambition,* Belgrieve thought with a wry smile. The turning spindle was like a top suspended from a string. When its turning grew too weak, he would wind it with a hand against his outer thigh, then rest it between his legs. With one hand, he held up the tufts of wool, and with the other, he directed them. Just like that, yarn was born right between his fingers.

It was already night, and they needed to prepare for bed soon. But suddenly, he heard an echoing howl from outside the window. Belgrieve cocked his head. Outside sounds rarely carried when it was snowing so heavily. He stood and opened the door a crack to check.

“Do you want to go on a walk, Ange?”

“A walk?”

Her drowsiness was gone, and Angeline promptly tossed her spindle aside. She put on her coat, muffler, and knit cap. Once outside, even the slightest breath created a smoky-looking plume in the air.

The soft snow that had only just fallen that day had already frozen and solidified. There was a crisp crunching sound of crushed snowflakes underfoot with every step, and the sensation resounded through his shoes all the way to his head.

The snow had stopped. The clouds had drifted away, a clear winter sky hung overhead, and the world was illuminated in moonlight.

“Incredible.”

Angeline excitedly tugged at Belgrieve’s hand. “The moon!”

“Yeah, it’s bright.”

They hadn’t had a moonlit night for a while. It was on the way out, just a sliver off from full. Still, it was big and bright enough that they did not need lanterns.

*I’m glad we didn’t tuck in early,* Belgrieve thought as he took in the beautiful night. Many houses would turn in early to conserve lamp oil, and Belgrieve’s was usually one of them. They had only stayed up this late

because Angeline had been so invested in her spinning.

These clear nights were precious and rare. Though there were times when it wasn't snowing, the sky was generally covered in clouds. Now, the moon shone brightly, and the stars glistened all around it as if in a stubborn attempt to outshine it. The winter night sky was quite lively.

Every surface as far as the eye could see was covered in snow and glowed a pale blue under the moon. Flashes of silver would flicker where the snow had frozen over. He had grown very accustomed to living in Turnera, but this sight was beautiful enough to draw a longing sigh out of him nevertheless.

Angeline gleefully raced ahead, tripping through the snow all the while. Her shadow trailed behind, longer than she was tall.

"Dad!" She turned and waved. "This way!"

"I'm coming."

He followed slowly with long, cautious steps. Angeline's bounding voice seemed to resound endlessly through the fields of snow.

○

*I recognize the feel of this bed, but why is it so much narrower?* Angeline wondered as she cracked open her eyes. A dim light filtered into the room through the shut curtains.

She sat up, her half-asleep eyes aimlessly scanning around. Charlotte was sleeping beside her, and Belgrieve lay next to Charlotte.

*That's right, dad came to Orphen,* she recalled. Her head was still addled from all the alcohol. She reached out and pinched the man's beard. When she tugged it, he muttered something before turning over and facing the other way.

Kasim lay faceup on the sofa, snoring loudly with his cap resting over his face.

"Hee hee..."

She felt strangely happy. In spite of her forced trip to Estogal ruining her vacation, she was now glad it happened. A chill ran down her spine just from the thought of what it would have been like if she had left for Turnera only to have just missed him.

The brisk morning air seemed to be leaking in from somewhere, so she lay down again and pulled up the warm and ever-so-comfortable covers.

She heard a rustling noise and raised her face to see that Byaku was awake. He scratched his white bedhead as he blearily looked around the

room, scowling as he noted Kasim's snoring.

"So he's the one making all the noise."

"Morning, Bucky."

"Huh? Oh... What? Is no one else up yet?"

"Quiet. Let them sleep."

"Hmph."

Byaku slowly stood, picked up the teapot, and began boiling water with the deftness of having done it a hundred times before. Angeline lay back down, a slight smile gracing her features. She couldn't wait to spend her first day in Orphen with Belgrieve—but for now, she would sleep.

She clung to Belgrieve, Charlotte sandwiched in between them, and closed her eyes. Beyond Charlotte's sweet scent, she could smell straw and bonfires. This way, she would surely dream of Turnera.

# Afterword

Here I am, writing an afterword again.

I've said it before, but I think we could really do away with the whole afterword thing. As an author, they're just a pain to write. But when I sit down like this and start writing, I have between a thousand and two thousand words down before I know it. While I keep complaining, perhaps I'm actually raring to write it. Are these really even "afterwords" in the first place? Let's not think about it.

Now then, the author's circumstances aside, I'm shocked that we actually reached volume 4. I was sure it would get axed somewhere down the line, and Belgrieve and the other characters would be thrown out onto the street. In fact, this author was actually looking forward to it, but this series just isn't getting canceled. This is definitely your fault for buying it. It's all of your faults. How should I put this—thank you.

I'm not writing about where the story's headed, out of respect for those folks who read the afterword before the book, but I think it would be accurate to say that everything up to volume 3 was merely a prologue.

It might be hard to believe, but forty-two-year-old Belgrieve is the primary protagonist, and his story is the root of it. Him chasing his past is one of the main themes, but as the author, I want to say it's not good for him to dwell on his past mistakes for too long.

It's about him chasing after his mistakes, which is quite honestly pretty bland for a story. It would have nothing going for it without Master toi8's illustrations. The author's indecipherable ramblings are essentially the concrete from which the illustrations bloom, and I hope the readers keep looking forward to them.

For starters, the cover is nice. It's bright. It's cheerful. Belgrieve is in his work clothes, holding Mit, and Marguerite is there too. Marguerite is cute. Mit is cute. Belgrieve is...same old, same old. It might just be me, but it feels like this old man is getting younger volume to volume. The author's growing older and dumber year after year, but this bloke's rejuvenating. How

irritating.

Some say that those that are constantly taking on new challenges stay young despite the years. The body aside, the spirit continues to renew itself. In that regard, Belgrieve really is getting back to his youth. Perhaps his spirit is influencing his body. It is quite annoying.

In any case, this means that the author needs to try new things too.

The readers are going to grow tired of this novel any day now, so how about we go, “out with the old, in with the new.” We’ll sweep away all those elderly characters and have this series be reborn full of enthusiastic younger women.

The author wanted to stab Belgrieve in the gut from volume 1. He already sent several assassins, yet somehow, they never reached him. Someone gets in their way and does them in before they get the chance. Now it’s come to this—the author had a revelation. It is impossible to kill him off in the main story, but the afterword is a different beast.

There will be no plot armor. The story can simply be left to Urushibara-san’s lovely manga adaptation (currently serialized in Comic Earth Star).

My apologies to my editor M-san, but Belgrieve is now dead. Next volume will feature the adventures of Magical Girl Marvelous☆Angeline. I don’t know if it will be interesting or not.

Now first, let’s set the scene.

As Belgrieve walks through the crowded street, the skilled assassin approaches. The wise man hides a tree in the forest—this is the basis of assassination. It is not wise to challenge a competent swordsman one-on-one. So he blends in and waits for his chance to take him by surprise.

Among the throngs, he approaches from down the street. Belgrieve is out shopping with Charlotte—his attention is elsewhere. This is his opportunity. He grips a well-honed knife beneath his coat. Lurching, pretending to be a little tipsy, he stumbles into—

The doorbell rings.

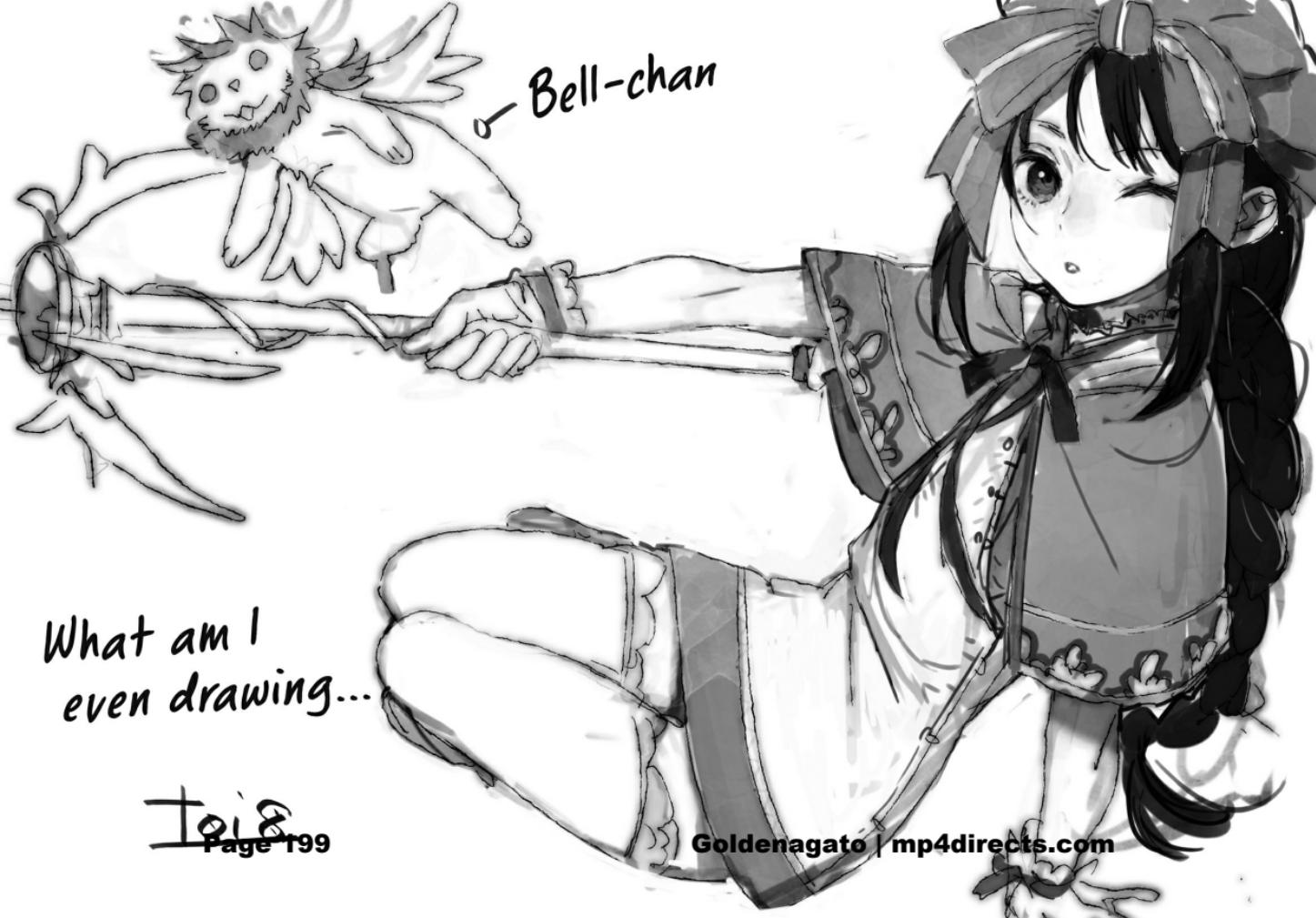
“What? We were finally getting to the good part.”

The author stands and heads for the door. *Who could it be at this ungodly hour?*

As he opens the door, his eyes lock onto a braid of black hair swaying in the wind. His skin bursts into goose bumps at this mysterious intimidation. Suddenly, he hears the sound of something slicing through the wind.

“I should have known it was you.”

Mojikakiya, January 2019



Bell-chan

What am I  
even drawing...

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# Bonus Short Stories

## Extra: The Night Before

The wind blew through the trees, rustling the thick patches of verdant leaves. Here and there, the faint glow of pale blue and green lights would surface in the darkness, making it look as though the gnarled trunks were floating in a sea of nothingness.

The winds were blowing towards a large building—though it was perhaps a stretch to call it that, for it was “constructed” of trees that had grown and enmeshed with each other to form natural pillars and beams. Their leaves and branches overlapped to form the walls and the roof. The door was a massive stiff leaf, while the windows were thin crystal. As a whole, it looked as if it was a single great tree.

Fireflies fluttered through the dusk, their bioluminescence briefly dotting the building in places before fading away. From time to time, they would illuminate a humanoid figure, but these beings moved quietly, without a word. And then, there was a thud, as if someone was trying to break through the silence itself. There were three people in one of the rooms, one of whom was an elven maiden with her silver hair crudely tied back, and long ears like bamboo leaves. She pounded her clenched fist on the table.

“But why...? You always act like I’m beneath your notice. Why do you suddenly care now?!”

She glared angrily at the man who sat before her, who returned her gaze with sharp, sorrowful eyes.

“You’re always like this...” the girl continued in a huff. “You don’t give a damn about me, until you decide to put on this fatherly-act!”

“Marguerite, I...”

“Enough excuses! I’m sick of them!”

Marguerite slammed the table again. Her father and the woman beside him exchanged a look.

“Maggie... Calm down...”

“Shut up! Father, mother, why don’t you just worry about the western tribe you love so much! Forget about me!”

Heedless of any further words, Marguerite burst from the room, seething inside and past the limits of her patience. Her robe fluttered behind her as she stormed away.

A little down the hall, through a faintly illuminated doorway, was the kitchen, where many elven women were hard at work tidying up. They blinked as Marguerite barged in.

“What’s wrong, princess?”

“Nothing,” she curtly replied. She reached for a shelf and grabbed a large bundle wrapped in leaves.

“Oh... What are you going to do with that lembas? Did you not have enough for dinner?”

“It’s a snack,” Marguerite said, tucking away several of the leaf-wrapped parcels before leaving. Although the women exchanged looks, it was evidently not the first time the elven princess had done this. Sighing, they got back to work.

Meanwhile, Marguerite hastened to her bedroom, which was littered with books and strange tools. There were a number of maps tacked to the walls.

“I’m sick of this.”

She violently threw off her robe and stuffed the parcels of lembas into a bag. She reached for a slender sword hanging on the wall and donned the fur cardigan hanging beside it.

This had been another in a long series of fights, and a big one too. *Why does father have to be so hard-headed?* Just remembering their quarrel filled her with disgust.

Though he was an elf, Marguerite’s grand-uncle was hailed as a hero in the human world. She had admired him all through her childhood, and his stories of adventure had deepened her yearning for the outside world. Consequently, she had come to disdain the peaceful life of her tribe as a bore. If there were any prospect of things changing, she could have put up with it, but it seemed that the forest would remain unchanged for the next hundred years.

She wasn’t going to spend her life as a bird in a cage. If no one here could understand her, she felt no obligation to stay. She picked up her belongings and slipped out of the room. As the night drew on, a heavy silence descended

with it. Of course, the elven territory could hardly ever be described as lively. Everyone was calm and quiet, and they would rarely raise their voices even in the most heated arguments. They were all serenely waiting to die—that was how it seemed to Marguerite.

Once she was outside she felt a gentle breeze on her face. A faint blue light cast a shadow at her feet.

For some reason, she suddenly found it hard to breathe. She placed a hand on her chest, taking in a deep breath. Soon, she would leave the place where she had been raised as a princess. Though her heart was elated, she could admit to herself that she was feeling anxious. Even so, she could not contain her longing for distant lands, for a world far away.

She lithely slipped between the trees, taking care not to make a sound. The darkness did wonders concealing her form.

Suddenly, she looked over her shoulder to the great tree of royalty where she was born and raised. She glanced at one of the windows, and through the thin crystal pane, she could see her father. He was looking out, even after their fight he was ever the king of the western forest. He maintained his full composure, and Marguerite hated that about him. The sight of him did nothing to quell her desire to run away; it spurred her further.

For a moment, it seemed as though their eyes locked. Marguerite, startled, hid behind a tree.

“There’s no way he can see me,” she whispered to herself. “Not when it’s this dark.”

Carefully, she poked her head out to look at him again. Her father was looking in her direction, but she couldn’t tell if he could see her. Perhaps he was simply gazing at the forest. It felt idiotic to stop for something like this.

Marguerite took a deep breath and turned her back.

“You’ll have to really see me one of these days. I’ll make sure of that.”

She raced off. Even after she was out of sight, her father continued staring at the forest.

The wind blew and rustled the trees.

## Extra: On the Road

The small, one-horse wagon rattled down the road, bound for Estogal. Gilmenja held the reins, while Angeline slouched against the railing behind

her, staring at the distant scenery.

A leisurely ride from Orphen to Estogal City would take roughly half a month. Perhaps they would arrive sooner if they made haste, but they were headed there for the ball and nothing more. Arriving early would be pointless. Thus they chose to take their time.

Usually, a laid-back journey would be a bit more enjoyable, but now that her vacation had been ruined, Angeline was not in the best of moods.

Gilmenja, who had taken on a supporting role for this journey, looked over her shoulder with her usual grin.

“Someone’s crabby. Empty stomach getting to you?”

“Not exactly...” Angeline said, sullenly resting her chin on the wagon’s edge. The wagon would jump every time it hit a stone, and the impact would ring from her jaw to the top of her head and make the scenery vibrate.

Gilmenja lightly tossed something over to Angeline, who caught it one-handed without looking. It was a baked sweet with dried fruits kneaded into the dough.

Scowling, Angeline nevertheless scarfed it down. She could feel the moisture draining from her mouth. “Do you have any water?”

“Nope.”

“Really...?”

“We’d be doomed if I didn’t.” Gilmenja tossed over a bottle.

It had been about a week since they had left Orphen. It was supposed to grow warmer the further south they headed, but this was mitigated by the encroaching winter. Some days, there would be snow and ice mixed in with the rain, and the winds would mercilessly stab against their skin.

After quenching her thirst, Angeline pulled up the blanket draped over her shoulders so that it covered her head. Just the day before, they had endured the sleet-filled rain, and everything in sight was damp and dreary.

“How long to Estogal, Gil?”

“We’re making good time. We should be there tomorrow.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Kidding. We’re around halfway there, tee hee.”

Angeline puffed her cheeks out and leaned against the railing again. Gilmenja’s antics were nothing new — she was always casually lying. Angeline gave up fretting over it and focused on the scenery.

She could see windmills in the distance, and beyond them, mountains

adorned in the reds and yellows of their autumnal forests. Soon the leaves would start to fall. In Turnera, autumn would already be at its peak, and a carpet of leaves would have already spread over the forest floor.

Indeed, it would be time to prepare for the autumn festival. It was around this time of year that she would have searched the mountains for cowberries and akebia, and rummaged through the fallen leaves for mushrooms. Though the skies would be dark and gray in winter, they would remain a piercing clear blue up until the autumn festival. The birds would yet be seen tracing circular paths above, and from across brooks, she would often see bears foraging in preparation for their hibernation.

Crawling towards the driver's bench, Angeline took a seat and huddled into Gilmenja's side.

For once, the ever-smug Gilmenja was mildly taken aback. "What?"

"It's nothing," said Angeline, though she nestled even closer. She was feeling terribly lonely and felt compelled to stick close to someone. Though Gilmenja was bemused by the strange look on Angeline's face, she sensed something was up with the girl. Regaining her composure, she prodded at Angeline's shoulder.

"I could never replace your father, heh heh."

"I know that. No one could replace him..."

"Hmm, well seeing as you're clinging to me like this, I must be standing in for someone. Now who could that be?"

"Don't be mean."

Gilmenja cackled.

A peddler's wagon rolled on a little ahead of them. The two wagons were traveling at the same speed, so theirs was tracing the wheel ruts of the peddler's vehicle. Further ahead was a coach which seated many more passengers, and from it the faint tunes of troubadours rode the wind.

Many traveling performers and traders would already be in Turnera for the festival. As a child, Angeline enjoyed their dramatic songs and performances. Her eyes would glimmer at the tales of S-Rank adventurers hunting down dragons and other high-ranking fiends. They were different from Belgrieve's tales—those were more grounded in reality—but still, they stirred her heart.

Now they would be singing of her exploits. Her cheeks had flushed crimson when she had heard a minstrel singing a song of demon-slaying in

the last town they had stopped in. It was a little unsettling to hear the Black-Haired Valkyrie's name invoked with such fanfare.

It was because of her renown that her trip home was suddenly canceled, and she had been summoned to the archduke's stronghold instead. The powers she had gained out of her desire to be praised by Belgrieve had come back to bite her. Angeline pouted, leaning even more of her weight against Gilmenja.

"You're heavy, Ange. Do you like me that much?"

"That's not it..."

She didn't quite understand it herself, but this was far more comfortable than hugging her own knees in a corner would have been.

Gilmenja grinned as she ruffled the girl's hair. "Pull yourself together. We'll reach the next town soon."

"Urgh..."

Angeline sullenly looked down the road, taking in the sight of the other carriages and the grass waving by the roadside. The view was splendid, but she saw no signs of any village.

"What's wrong? Heh heh."

Gilmenja peered into her face, looking amused as ever.

*Another lie,* thought Angeline. But she knew she would be teased if she said anything about it.

## Extra: Departure

The stunning colors of autumn had settled over Turnera. Blazing reds and invigorating yellows covered the mountain, with the evergreens in their midst providing a break for the eyes. But soon, around the time of the autumn festival, a cold wind would begin to blow from the north and scatter the leaves from their branches. These fallen leaves would cover the forest floor, and mushrooms would begin poking through the gaps.

The cowberries would be gone by then, eaten by birds, beasts, and whatever else craved them. Any red berries that remained would be trampled underfoot, their burst skins swarming with insects.

Belgrieve led Mit through the forest before the break of dawn, to the top of a high, scenic vista just outside of the village. As the morning sun began to shine over the village, they could see chimney smoke melting away into the

crisp autumn sky. The festival had already come and gone, but some peddlers and performers weren't yet ready to leave, so the village square was like a subdued echo of the prior festive atmosphere.

Mit tugged at Belgrieve's cloak. "Dad...hold..."

"Oh, you're tired already?"

He lifted the boy into his arms. Mit squirmed until he had his arms firmly wrapped around Belgrieve's neck.

*I didn't think I'd ever go on an adventure again,* Belgrieve thought as he closed his eyes. But he knew it was time to make amends with his past. It was sudden, and he would be lying if he said he was entirely ready for it. The familiar scenery calmed his heart, but it was also tinged with the sadness of knowing he wouldn't see it again for a long while.

He took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the brisk air that already carried a hint of winter.

"We should get going."

"Hmm."

He climbed down the hill with Mit in his arms, to find Marguerite sitting in the wagon, excitedly chatting with the blue-haired peddler. Graham stood to the side.

"Huh? You've never seen the salmon surging upstream? It's amazing, I tell you. Come at the right time, and the entire river is covered front-to-end with the things. You don't even have to catch them; the unlucky ones get pushed up against the banks, and you can just reach out and grab them like this." Marguerite mimed grabbing a fish.

The peddler giggled. "Fishing with your bare hands... Hee hee, how very wild. I always thought elves were a bit...well, 'mystical' is how I'd put it."

"What're you talking about? We all got to eat to live. Right, grand-uncle?"

"Indeed... We also build houses, forage for food, and make clothing. We aren't very different from humans."

Mit waddled his way over and jumped at Graham.

"Grampa..."

"Ah, Bell. Finally here."

Marguerite jumped up expectantly. "What were you doing? We're all ready to go."

"Sorry. I was feeling a little homesick already," Belgrieve scratched his

head with a wry smile. He looked around. “Where’s Duncan?”

“You were taking so long he decided to go on a walk with Hannah.” Marguerite grinned, her arms folded behind her head.

With a troubled look, Belgrieve apologized once more, this time to the peddler. “I’m sorry for delaying your departure.”

“Don’t worry. I just need to reach Rodina today. We have plenty of time, don’t worry,” she said, waving her hand dismissively.

The weather had been fine from the early morning, and although the wind was cold, the skies were blue as far as the eye could see. The peddler shuddered at a particularly cold gust.

“It sure gets cold up here. Are you all right dressed like that, Marguerite?”

Apart from her fur cardigan, Marguerite was adorned in no more than a cloth wrap over her chest and short pants, unsparingly exposing her fair elven skin. She certainly looked like she should be cold, but the girl simply cocked her head.

“Not really. It’s even colder where I come from.”

“Wow, that’s really something,” said the peddler, disbelief on her face as she rubbed her hands together for warmth.

The songs of the roaming folk were carried on the wind. The sun gradually ascended, though it wouldn’t reach the height it did in the summer months. Some time passed before Duncan returned with Hannah.

“Drat, I held you up...”

“No, it’s my fault for wandering off. Did you say your goodbyes?”

“Far from a goodbye.” Duncan’s bearded face blushed while Hannah giggled bashfully.

They had already loaded their luggage the day before so that they would be ready to depart as soon as everyone had gathered. Marguerite gleefully hopped aboard the carriage, and Duncan was soon to follow.

Belgrieve glanced around. His eyes met with Graham, who held Mit in his arms.

“Mit, you have to listen to what grandpa says, okay?”

“Yeah...”

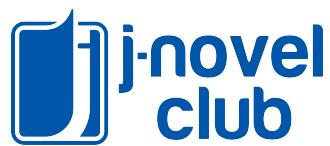
“Take care, Bell. Look after Marguerite for me.”

“I will. And I’m counting on you to look after Turnera.”

He climbed aboard. The peddler took the reins and, urging the horse on, they slowly began their journey. The villagers loitering around the square

waved as they passed; Marguerite leaned out to wave at them in return.

The wind at their back carried on it the bleating of goats and the chirping of birds, the sounds of children playing, and the strumming of lutes.



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My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer: Volume  
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by MOJIKAKIYA

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