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

8

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

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

- VOLUME 8 -

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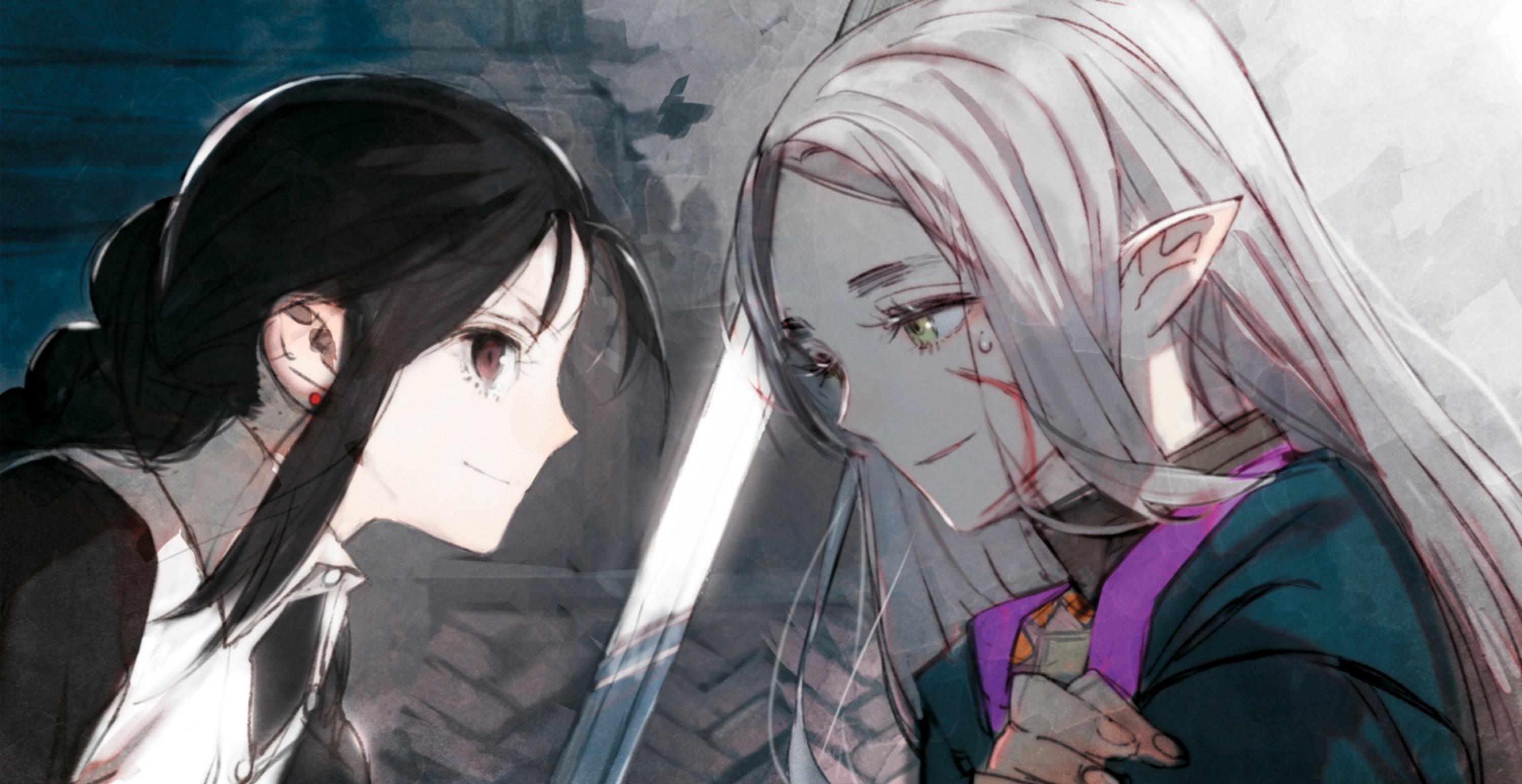
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[J-NOVEL CLUB]



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

Author MOJIKAKIYA Illustrations: 2016





CHARACTERS



◆ Belgrieve ◆

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



◆ Angeline ◆

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



◆ Anessa ◆

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



◆ Miriam ◆

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



◆ Kasim ◆

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



◆ Percival ◆

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



◆ Benjamin ◆

The crown prince of Rhodesia who is seemingly immaculate in every way. Whether it be penmanship, swordsmanship, looks, or charisma, he has it all.



WORLD MAP



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

Estogal City

Imperial Capital

Findale

Hot Springs

To Lucrecia

To Dadan

Checkpoint

Istafar

Earth Navel

Nyndia Mountains

Tyldes



STORY

With everyone from Turnera seeing them off, Belgrieve, Angeline, and their comrades set off for a dangerous zone known only to a select few—the Earth Navel—where he hoped to find his former comrade, Percival.

After so many years spent farming he is completely unaccustomed to traveling and his body was tested to its limits. But through everyone's efforts they ultimately reached their destination.

Yet the man he found there hadn't the slightest vestige of the cheerful boy he once knew. Percival had grown cold and savage after blaming himself for so many years and had shut away his heart.

Upon discovering him like this Belgrieve took a swing with his fist. The two men broke into a fight completely unbefitting their age—and yet, by the end of it, their bond had been reforged.

“Sorry it took so long, Percy. Thank you for staying alive. I'm glad I got to see you again.”

“Same here... Thank you, Bell. For coming to see me.”

The two men were friends once more.



CHAPTER 98

ONLY A SINGLE ROOM WAS STILL ILLUMINATED

Only a single room was still illuminated in the extravagant palace. A chandelier of intricate glasswork and expensive shimestones cast its uneven light down over the room's furnishings, which were classy in their simplicity. An uncannily handsome man with well-groomed golden blond hair sat there. He was none other than Prince Benjamin, heir to Rhodesia, the great power that dominated the northwest part of the continent. The prince gazed into a crystal ball which was so large it would take two hands to carry it. The ball gave off a slight glow from its resting place on the table, and he could see a faint figure within.

"Hmm. So where are you right now?"

The figure answered.

Benjamin chuckled in amusement, crossing one leg over the other. "All the way out there? Despite your complaints, you really are a man of action. So, find anything interesting...? Oh, is that so?"

He planted an elbow against his crossed legs and propped up his head in the palm of his hand, and leaned in. "Looks like things are starting to move... Heh heh, it's getting interesting. But come back here when you can. It's getting so busy for me—oh, don't be like that, good grief."

A gust of wind caused the thin glass in the windowpane to rattle. Another figure emerged from the shadows. There was no mistaking him—it was Francois, third son of Archduke Estogal. However, he was completely expressionless, and his skin had a ghastly pallor.

"It is time, Your Highness."

"Hmm? Oh... Then, until next time."

The glow faded from the crystal and Benjamin stood.

"Was that Sir Schwartz?"

"You bet it was. He's always so quick to take action; that's what I like about him. Heh heh! Perhaps you remember her? The Black-Haired Valkyrie, I mean. All sorts of things are starting to move with her at the center."

Francois's brow twitched.

"Oh, don't be so livid. You'll have your chance to get back at her someday," Benjamin said, grinning.

"How gracious of you..."

An uncanny smile spread across Francois's previously expressionless face. As he courteously bowed his head, Benjamin slipped past him and exited the room. Francois immediately turned to follow behind him.

○

A dusty wind blew through the Earth Navel. Although there were thin clouds spanning the sky, they were too insubstantial to blot out the sun. Unpleasantly hot air seemed to rise from the ground.

With his coat removed, Percival revealed his fearsomely trained physique. His muscles were astonishingly well-defined even through his shirt, but they were not simply bulging. He had trimmed down through real combat, giving him the impression of well-tempered steel.

Percival clenched his fist, took a deep breath, and looked at Belgrieve. "Ready?"

"Yeah." Standing across from him, Belgrieve took a stance as well. They were both empty-handed, their sharp eyes not letting the slightest movement slip by. Belgrieve was so tense, it was like he could feel the blood flowing through his body with each breath.

His left leg slightly shifted—and the next moment, Percival was lunging at him. With the same motion as his step, Percival thrust out the heel of his palm. It looked like Belgrieve had taken a direct hit to his left shoulder.

But Belgrieve lifted his left leg, allowing his right peg leg to act as a pivot point. His body twisted like an opening door. Percival's fist merely pushed Belgrieve out of the way before being thrown into the empty air behind him.

As soon as Belgrieve's left foot touched down, he braced his legs and raised a fist to strike from above. However, the moment Percival realized his blow had been parried, he immediately shifted his stance, grabbing Belgrieve's arm before he could punch.

"I see... That's something you could never do with a real ankle. Not bad."

"Ha ha... It's pointless if you grab me, though."

Percival grinned before pulling Belgrieve's arm towards him. As Belgrieve's stance crumbled, Percival gave his hip a light push, which sent him tumbling backwards.

"And you're not as stable as you should be. Work on that."

"Good grief... Whatever it is, I don't think I'll ever beat you."

"Of course you won't. But I'm going to get rid of your handicap once and for all by beating out every one of your weaknesses. That's how I'm going to take responsibility," Percival said with a chuckle.

Belgrieve sat up, a wry smile on his face as he scratched his head. "Be gentle with me... You never learned how to hold back."

"What are you on about? You're not gonna learn anything through half measures. I suspect it was even harsher to train under the Paladin," said Percival as he put his coat back on.

Belgrieve shrugged. "I didn't spar with Graham much... He taught me how to meditate and circulate mana. That got me to work some of the inefficiencies out of my movements."

"Oh, I see. Even more reason to work on your technique—we can't just cover up your defects; we need to turn them into strengths. If I might say so, you've still got a fair bit of waste."

"I don't expect myself to compare to an S-Rank adventurer..."

"Ha! You're going to disappoint little Ange like that, *Mr. Red Ogre*."

"Ugh..." Belgrieve irritably twisted his beard.

Percival gave a jolly laugh, draping his cape over his shoulders. "Let's get going." Belgrieve nodded and stood.

Though it seemed Percival had regained some of his long-lost cheer, he could be reckless and unexpectedly coarse at times, still seeming rather disjointed. After such a long slump, perhaps it would have been strange for him to recover so easily. Percival himself was painfully aware of this, so he tried to be jovial to an excessive degree as he searched for some equilibrium within himself. At least, that was how it seemed to Belgrieve; it was possible that Percival was just awkward.

The mass fiend outbreak of the big wave still raged on. There wasn't a day spent without combat. However, it seemed the peak was already behind them, and the frequency of S-Rank fiends like the bahamut and fallen faunus was on the decline. Now, more adventurers would descend to the depths of the hole in search of better materials.

However, even with more adventurers challenging the depths, the stone building was still lively. Those that had come at the start had yet to withdraw, and they were now joined by others who had missed peak season due to bad timing. On top of that, more merchants were beginning to show up for their materials. It seemed the number of residents was steadily on the rise. There used to be some room between partitioned living spaces, but now one camp was pressed up right against another, and it wasn't rare to sleep just a thin cloth away from a complete stranger.

Pushing aside a partition to enter the campsite, Belgrieve found Ishmael staring closely at what looked to be a small fragment of stone. He was gazing at it through a magnifying tube so small it would have fit in the palm of the magician's hand.

Noticing the two of them, Ishmael looked up. "Welcome back."

"What's that?" Percival asked, squinting as he took a seat.

"Dragonspar. As expected of the Earth Navel, the quality is excellent. Do you want to look?"

Percival shrugged and made no move to do so, but Belgrieve took the stone and looked

through the magnifying tube. Inside the transparent, crystalline material, he could see a number of small granules which glistened like mica.

"Is this different from a magic crystal?"

"Yes. I called it 'spar' but it's not a naturally occurring stone. You can only find it in dragon dens. The bodily fluids of a dragon crystallize as they react with mana."

"Hmm, interesting... What is it used for?"

"It can be made into a lens. Once properly refined, the light that passes through gains magical properties. There was an experiment I wanted to conduct using that."

Belgrieve didn't understand the specifics, but it seemed the dragonspar would be used to make a tool of sorts. *Magicians are amazing*, he thought as he returned the stone to Ishmael before going to start a pot of floral tea over the fire. He honed his ears to the sounds of distant battle—another fiend must have risen from the depths.

Angeline and the others had gone out. They still had the request from Istafar's guild master to fulfill, so they were out gathering materials. Percival hadn't felt all too inclined to help with that, and Belgrieve had only come to meet his old comrade and was less keen on battling. Thus, they had both stayed behind.

"Do you think they're all right...?" Belgrieve murmured as he shifted the wood in the fire.

"Don't worry. She's strong," Percival replied, taking a sip of tea.

Belgrieve chuckled. "Coming from you, that's a relief to hear."

"It's not like all S-Rank adventurers are made equal. Some are stronger than others. And Ange is undoubtedly strong. You need not concern yourself about that. She has Kasim too."

"I see... Still, that's a complicated topic. I've always seen all the high-ranking adventurers as being on another plane of existence. I guess it makes sense that there's tiers among them too."

"The highest rank in the guild used to be A, you know," said Ishmael. "But gradually, a difference in strength began to emerge among those in the same rank. AA was added,

then AAA, and most recently, S. You could call it a lack of foresight, but perhaps adventurers are evolving... It's possible a brand-new rank will be added one of these days."

"I didn't know that... Not that it has anything to do with me."

"This coming from the guy who fought it out with an S-Rank fiend! You sure you're not going senile, Bell?" Percival teased with a grin on his face.

Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his head. "That was thanks to Graham's sword... Just borrowed strength. It doesn't speak to my own abilities."

"I guess some things never change... Hey, Bell, I'm not gonna tell you to puff out your chest, but you should at least judge yourself fairly. You're so observant about everything else, yet you're blind when it comes to yourself. That's not like you. *Cough, hack...*"

"Hmm..." Belgrieve closed his eyes and mulled over Percival's words. Perhaps it was true—even without Graham's sword, he was skilled enough to put up a fight against high-ranking adventurers. However, he definitely wasn't *winning* those fights. He had a long losing streak against Orphen's adventurers, and even against Sasha, he would most assuredly lose still. He had only grown stronger compared to his past self.

"In the first place... it's not like I want to be reinstated as an adventurer," he muttered, bringing the cup to his lips. Once he had settled things with his past, he would return to his quiet life of tending to his fields in Turnera. Then, his skill with the blade would be irrelevant.

Percival tucked away his sachet and leaned back against a nearby wall. "Adventurers, huh..." he sighed. "Good grief. I grew obsessed with getting to the top, but it's nothing special now that I think about it."

"Hey now... Then what are you going to do after we find Satie? Retire and become a farmer or something?"

"Ha ha! Not a bad idea, but..." Percival sat up straight, folding his arms over his knees. With sharp eyes, he stared into the burning fire. "The black fiend. That's the one thing I must cut down with my own two hands. Otherwise, I'll never find rest."

"You don't have to be so fixated on it, Percy. I don't want to see you seething in

vengeance."

"Sorry, Bell, but I've got to put my foot down. It's what I need to move on... Well, after we find Satie, that is." With that, Percival yawned and roughly stretched out his legs.

Belgrieve set down his cup and folded his arms. "Satie disappeared early on, right...?"

"Yeah. My attitude didn't help keep her around." Percival roughly scratched his head. "She vanished shortly after we became A-Rank... The difficulty level of our requests shot up a good bit, so we were tackling one hard job after another without taking a proper break. Kasim went along with it, but I argued with Satie sometimes. The fatigue was getting to me, and I said some horrible things to her. I don't know if she'll forgive me if I apologize, but... I still have to say it."

"I'm sure Satie will understand. She's strong."

"I hope so."

"It must be difficult—finding one person in this whole wide world," Ishmael chimed in, taking the kettle for himself.

"It is... But she's out there somewhere, between the same earth and the same sky," Belgrieve said, taking another sip.

○

Duncan's axe swung down and bit into the shaggy head of a fiend, but by then it had already been rendered practically immobile by the tattered mess its four limbs had become. As expected of a member of Angeline's party, Anessa had accurately destroyed them one by one with her arrows, each of which had a spell sequence carved into it. Though they could be used like any other arrows, she could also make them detonate on impact by pouring some mana into them before firing.

Standing beside the unmoving fiend, Duncan caught his breath. "What a bothersome one," he muttered.

"Good going, Duncan... Are there any left?" Angeline scanned the area with sword in hand. There were battles still raging around them, but things had calmed down somewhat.

Lately, rather than a single powerful fiend lording it over the battlefield, it was more common for large hordes to crawl their ways out of the abyss. Since more adventurers had come, their numbers roughly matched those of the fiends. However, battles could now become so chaotic that it was hard to get a grasp of what was going on.

Marguerite nimbly made her way over to them. "All clear on my side. There were a lot, but they were nothing special," she boasted.

"Uh... This pelt is one of the things we need, right?" Miriam asked, trotting after Marguerite.

Anessa, who stood beside Angeline, produced a note from her breast pocket. "Hmm... Yep, the hairy hide of a pimentel. Do we have the right fiend, though?"

"You got it, you got it. No worries there," Kasim assured them, joining them from another skirmish. He was accompanied by Yakumo and Lucille.

"The fiends are losing momentum," said Yakumo. "The big wave might be over soon."

"It wasn't so bad at all..." Angeline observed. She sheathed her sword and stretched out her limbs.

Yakumo rested her spear over her shoulder, smiling awkwardly. "Honestly, the difficulty was insane this year... But it might not have felt that way with so many high-ranking adventurers around. It's easy to take care of the leftovers."

"As the people of the past used to say, '*Once, there was a fight between snipe and clam. As the snipe tried to peck, the clam clamped on its beak, and neither conceded a single inch. And in the end, only the passing fisherman prospered,*'" Lucille recited.

"That was way too long, fool. I don't even know what you're trying to say." Yakumo prodded Lucile with the butt end of her spear.

"Hee hee..." Angeline giggled. "What do you two plan to do once the wave is over?"

"Hmm, what to do? We don't have any plans... What about you?"

"That depends on dad, I guess."

"We'll go look for Satie. What else?" Kasim asked.

Marguerite folded her hands behind her head. “But you ain’t got a clue where she is. Maureen didn’t know either. How are you supposed to search without any leads?”

“I mean, we found Mr. Percy without any leads, so Ms. Satie might just fall into our lap,” Miriam suggested. “You never know.”

“But that was mostly because Yakumo and Lucille knew the guy... Yeah, I want to reunite Mr. Bell with Satie, but... Well, maybe the high-rankers here have some information?” Anessa wondered, groaning.

“In any case, we must first complete the request from Istafar’s guild master,” Duncan reminded them, stroking his beard.

“Yeah... Sorry you got dragged into this, Mr. Duncan.”

“Ha ha ha! What are you saying, Ange? I am profiting enough just by witnessing your exceptional bladework firsthand.”

“Um... Thanks.” Angeline faintly blushed, scratching her head.

The wave of fiends had ended. Some adventurers had begun to field dress the mounds of corpses all around, while others sat and rested their weary bodies, weapons still in hand.

Anessa pulled out a knife. “We don’t need more than one, right? So you reckon this one will do?”

“Yeah. One of these... And that vial of blood from the lesser dragon...”

Angeline looked at the note, going over each item. They had gathered most of them already, but there was still one thing left—the husk of a great armored beetle. This was an insectoid fiend several times the size of a human; the fiend would grow larger each time it shed its carapace. The sturdy, scratch-resistant husks it left behind could be processed into high-quality armor and accessories. They could also be used to make tools for magic experiments. Given that they were after a discarded husk, it was pointless to wait for the fiend to crawl out of the pit. They would need to search for it themselves.

Angeline folded the note and tucked it away. “We might need to go exploring...”

"You mean, diving in there? Sure, let's go!" Marguerite said with palpable excitement.

Miriam leaned against her staff. "Sure, but let's rest for today. It's risky to do it after fighting so many powerful fiends, I tell you."

"Huh? I've still got some energy left in me."

"No can do, princess." Yakumo held Marguerite back with a wry smile. "A battle does excite one's spirit. But your body may not feel the same way. If you press on unaware, you could slip up at a crucial moment."

"Hmm... You think so...?" Marguerite rolled her shoulders and wiggled her toes to confirm her body's condition. Sure enough, the area from the backs of her heels to the backs of her calves felt strangely heavy. Eventually, she was satisfied and nodded.

Angeline prodded at her teasingly. "Dad and grandpa would have scolded you if they were around..."

"Sh-Shut it," Marguerite retorted, turning away. Her comrades shared a laugh.

"There's only the husk left, right?" Kasim asked as he adjusted his cap. "We can go down tomorrow."

"Yeah... You done, Anne?"

"Wait, give me a sec... All right." Anessa inspected the skillfully stripped hide front and back before rolling it up and tucking it under one arm. "What do we do about the meat?"

"This one doesn't taste good," said Lucille.

Yakumo nodded. "Leave it be; the others will find some use for it. It's not worth our time to butcher it ourselves. And we still have plenty of bahamut meat left."

"Then I guess we're leaving it. Let's get back already and have a drink. I'm starving."

"Quickly then. If another wave comes while we're dawdling, I'd hate to have to turn a blind eye to it," Duncan said with a grand laugh before beginning to walk back to their lodgings. Angeline took a brief look around before she joined him.

There were still several adventurers lingering around, seemingly weighing whether they'd dive into the abyss after resting or wait for the next wave to begin. Angeline's party would not be joining them either way. They passed through the battlefield and returned to the lodgings.

They soon reached the cloth partition of their camp, behind which they could hear a conversation going on. Entering, they found Belgrieve and Touya seated across the fire from each other. Percival was by the wall, while Ishmael was inspecting a stone fragment.

"That's interesting... Then the Paladin really was elven royalty?"

"Not that he seemed proud of it. He doesn't say much, but he's a good guy."

"Still, I'm jealous. I'd like to meet him someday... I've only heard stories from Maureen."

"Ha ha! Feel free to drop by anytime. Oh, welcome back, Ange. I'm glad you're all right."

"Oh, Ms. Angeline, good to see you. Don't mind me."

"Hmm... Where's Maureen?"

"Oh, she's wandering around somewhere. She's always making a racket about how hungry she is."

"She does always seem peckish," Marguerite acknowledged, chuckling.

Angeline could feel her expression relaxing. She circled around behind Belgrieve and placed a hand on his shoulder. "We were just talking about finding something to eat."

"Right, it's around that time... Percy, are you sleeping?"

"No, I'm awake. Food, huh?" Percival opened his eyes with a yawn, stretching his arms above himself. "So, did you find all those materials you were after?"

"Nah, one left," said Kasim. "Something we'll have to climb down to get, so we're saving it for tomorrow."

"What is it?"

“The husk of a great armored beetle.”

“Oh, that one. Very well, I’ll assist you tomorrow.”

Percival had been swinging his sword at the Earth Navel for a long time, so he was very knowledgeable about the depths of the abyss. He claimed to have a good idea as to where they might find that husk.

“That’s good,” Belgrieve said, sounding relieved. “I know I can count on you, Percy. Please keep her safe.”

“What are you talking about? You’re coming too.”

“Huh?”

“Of course you are. Protecting my back is your job. Right, Kasim?”

“He has a point. You can’t stop now, Bell.” Kasim beamed.

Angeline tugged at Belgrieve’s coat, a radiant smile on her face. She seemed so happy she could hardly contain herself. “Dad!”

“Ugh... How can I say no to that?” Belgrieve conceded with a resigned smile.



CHAPTER 99

THE STAIRS CONTINUED EVER DOWNWARD

The stairs—barely wide enough for one person to slip by another—continued ever downward, tracing along the rock face. In some places, the steps were carved into the cavern itself, while in others, appropriately sized stonework had apparently been hauled in from elsewhere. It clearly wasn't a natural formation either way, but no one had the slightest idea who could have built stairs all the way down there. Perhaps they were from the ancient era when a kingdom still ruled the region. That knowledge had been lost to time long ago. With each step down, Belgrieve's peg leg tapped audibly against the stone.

Eventually, Percival, who was guiding their way, stopped and turned to address the party. “The fog will grow thicker a little farther down. Don’t let it distract you. Concentrate intently on your feet and the steps beneath them. Otherwise, you’ll be blasted away to somewhere else.”

“Somewhere else?” Marguerite asked with a quizzical tilt of her head. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Is the fog like a forced warp trap or something?” Anessa pondered.

“It’s not *that* strong. It’s just dangerous if you’re not focused. Well, if you’re worried, you’re better off holding on to the clothes of whoever’s in front of you. How are things in the back, Bell?”

“All good. It doesn’t look like the fiends ever climb up the stairs.”

“Oh, come to think of it, is there something special about them?” Kasim asked.

Percival shrugged. “I don’t know. But I suspect the fiends may use the fog to warp out of the hole. I can’t imagine them clambering all the way up. They ain’t *that* diligent.”

I see... If we knew how to use the teleporting fog, we might be able to warp wherever we want. Perhaps the fiends have learned the trick to it. Though it’s probably only possible for the high-ranking fiends of the Earth Navel, Belgrieve reasoned.

His thoughts were interrupted by the feeling of a slight tugging on his mantle. He turned to see that Angeline had taken hold of him. "Now we'll be okay..."

"Ha ha! I guess so." Belgrieve smiled and patted her on the head. Their party included three S-Rank adventurers—Percival, Kasim, and Angeline—as well as Anessa, Miriam, Marguerite, and Belgrieve himself, making it a seven-person expedition. *This is quite the magnificent party*, he mused.

As for the rest: Duncan was scheduled to duel with a skilled adventurer, while Ishmael had gathered most of the materials he needed and had no reason to venture into the depths. Yakumo and Lucille dropped out, citing fatigue. Touya and Maureen, for their part, had not been with their group to begin with.

As they proceeded onward, the light from above gradually grew fainter. When Belgrieve looked up, he could see the sky narrowing bit by bit, and his field of view grew misty as a strange fog began to appear around them. He steadied himself with a deep breath and focused on the feeling of the stone beneath his feet. Eventually, the stairs couldn't be seen at all. A little farther onward, the pure white fog had completely enshrouded them. Though the fog itself was white, at times it would glow in all seven colors of the rainbow, perhaps from catching the light at an odd angle. The stairs proceeded onward still, and he had no idea how far they had yet to go before reaching the bottom.

"It's been a while since I formed a party... Might even be my first time doing so down here..." Percival murmured.

When he was alone, it made no difference to him where the fog sent him, but he was growing anxious now that he had so many comrades. He tried to recall how it had felt when he was once a party leader, dragging several members along with him. He scowled as he smacked his hands against his cheeks.

"All right... Keep moving. Even if you do get warped, don't panic. It won't send you too far."

"Percy?"

"Yes, Bell?"

"Don't get too worked up. Or you might be the only one of us blasted off."

Marguerite failed to contain her laughter, and the other girls were soon laughing along with her. Percival awkwardly glanced away. "You always hit where it hurts."

"Heh heh heh! Don't worry, I can find you even if you get warped away," Kasim crowed.

"I'm not gonna, you goon. What are you so smug about, anyways? You already got blasted last time."

"That one was Ange's fault, I tell you."

"Objection..."

"Huh? What's up? What happened?"

"Kasim was milling around, so he was the only one sent somewhere else."

"Wrong, I say. You surprised me when you overtook me, so I was just dazed for a second."

Everyone seemed a bit more relaxed after that exchange, and after laughing about it for a bit, they resolved to enter the thick of the fog. From the outside, it seemed completely opaque, but once Belgrieve was within, he could see the silhouettes of the others nearby. It was hazy, but Belgrieve could still see his own feet, and so long as they were all careful, they could all navigate the steps without trouble by periodically calling out to one another as they safely descended.

Perhaps owing to the fog, or something else entirely, the stones were a little damp now. The tip of his peg leg threatened to slip out from beneath him, and Belgrieve had to exercise even more caution than before. The others seemed to have a similarly hard time keeping their footings. Angeline shifted her grip from Belgrieve's mantle to his arm, while Miriam nestled up to the opposite side of him, leaning her weight against him when it got especially dangerous. Thus, he had to be all the more careful not to slip—if he did, he would drag the other two with him. His mind was especially focused on his prosthetic, and he took each step with great care, but it didn't seem like the end was anywhere in sight.

"How about it, Percy? Is it going to be much longer?" he asked, speaking into the white void ahead. He could hear Percy answer from ahead of him.

"We should be out soon... Hey, Maggie. Watch out. Don't fall."

"I'm not falling! And don't you get warped away, Percy!"

"Now you've said it..." Percival's jovial laughter echoed back to Belgrieve.

Angeline strengthened her grip on his arm. "Are you feeling distracted...?"

"I don't think so. We should be fine; we're not in any hurry."

"There's a dip ahead, Mr. Bell," Miriam said as she prodded the next step with the butt of her staff.

In this fashion, they eventually emerged from the fog. Their vision cleared suddenly, but the lack of any sunlight in the depths left them in dismal darkness.

Looking back to where they had come from, the fog looked like a gray and fluffy ceiling spread flat along a fixed plane. It was like a boundary line separating the abyss from the outside world. By now, they had nearly reached the bottom of the stairs. Ahead of Belgrieve, Percival had made it to solid ground and had already lit a lantern. Belgrieve's eyes frantically looked around to see if anyone had gone missing.

"Yeah, looks like we're fine..." He relaxed a bit as he caught his breath. His hair and mantle were both uncomfortably sodden from the fog, and it had likewise caused Miriam's hair to curl. She was hard at work brushing it straight with a frown on her face.

"Looks like we made it without incident," Percival said with a satisfied nod. "Now, it should take an hour to get to the great armored beetle's habitat on foot. I doubt anyone will stray from the group, but there's no telling where a fiend may come from. Stay on your... What are you laughing about?"

Kasim—who had been doubled over in barely suppressed laughter—met his gaze. "Well, you *used* to say things like that. But once the hunt was on, you and Satie would both rush off and leave Bell in the dust, all pale-faced. Right, Bell?"

"You got that right. It was all 'Be careful' and 'Stay on your toes' before the search. But soon enough, you'd get distracted, rush ahead recklessly, and whatnot..."

"Yeah, yeah, shut it. Chalk it up to youthful indiscretion and let it go," Percival said, dismissively waving them off. He looked irritated, though his face was tinged with red.

With a cheeky grin, Angeline puffed out her chest. “That’s never happened to me... Right?”

“Hmm? Well, I guess. Ange never charges in without thinking,” Anessa conceded.

Miriam nodded too, but Marguerite looked rather surprised. “Really? Ange seems like the type to charge in without stopping.”

“I am my father’s daughter—I’m cautious and deliberate, naturally,” Angeline boasted, turning to Percival dramatically as if to rub it in his face.

Percival merely smiled and ruffled her hair. “Good kid. You better treasure Bell’s teachings, okay?”

“H-Huh...?” Angeline had been trying to tease him, so the unexpected compliment left her feeling a little bashful.

Marguerite grinned and prodded at her shoulder. “What are you blushing about?”

“Shut... Shut up...”

Anessa and Miriam exchanged glances and broke into giggling.

Meanwhile, Belgrieve drew Graham’s greatsword from its scabbard. The blade glowed faintly and quietly growled. “Now then, Percy, what’s our formation?”

“I’ll take the lead. Bell, you’re the rear guard. We’ll have Kasim in the center with Anne and Merry in support. Ange and Maggie, you’ll be in front too, but keep a close watch left and right to prevent anything from getting around us.”

Belgrieve was impressed to see Percival promptly issue orders. “You’ve grown—you’re really doing your job as a leader.”

“I can’t be a total disappointment, right?” Percival answered before turning to face the darkness ahead.

In his mind, Belgrieve could see the adult overlapping with the boy who used to drag them around, and he couldn’t help from grinning.

The atmosphere’s a bit different from the last time I was down here, Angeline observed.

This was partly because Percival wasn't nearly as tense, but more than anything else, it was because she was with Belgrieve now. Sure, they were in the midst of a den of powerful fiends, and this was no place to let her guard down—but even taking that into consideration, she felt rather carefree.

As he walked ahead of her, Percival's back seemed large and reliable. He had cast away most of that monstrous bearing he had when they first met—at least, with respect to their party. When he was exploring the dungeon, he still gave off an imposing presence that seemed to intimidate all of the fiends around them. Even though their party had traveled a fair distance into the abyss from where they had started, they hadn't yet been attacked. At times, a fiend would steal a glimpse of them from afar, but without otherwise attempting anything more aggressive than that.

Marguerite, walking beside Angeline, looked bored out of her mind. "Nothing's coming at us."

"Well, I doubt they'll pick a fight they know they can't win..."

"It's boring, you gotta admit. But an adventurer should be avoiding fights when they can, right?"

"Yeah."

"An adventurer should not be adventurous"—it was quite the strange adage. However, if one wanted to *keep* adventuring, then it only made sense to avoid as many life-threatening situations as possible. The thrill of toeing the line between life and death was not all there was to adventure. To challenge dangers was unavoidable, but only after taking the utmost precautions to ensure they would not be scathed by the experience. Only those who could accomplish this would survive to become first-rate adventurers. *And the Earth Navel is full of nothing but those sorts of adventurers,* Angeline realized.

It was rather curious to think about. The adventurers at the Navel had gathered from all over the continent, a multitude comprising all races and dressed in diverse garbs. But they had all started out somewhere—they had all gone through hell and high water, and had heroic tales to tell—just like Percival and Kasim.

I'm still young. I think I've experienced a few things, but there's a big difference between twenty years old and forty. I wonder what stories I'll have when I'm that old... Angeline

couldn't really picture that.

They ventured onward for a while as the gently sloping hill to their left grew steeper and steeper until it had become a sheer cliff; the hill to their right also became sheer not long after that. The path ahead was lined with thin, tapering rocks that shot up like pillars, their tips piercing the mist above like a forest of stone pillar trees. Visibility would not be as favorable as it had been for much longer.

Percival stopped, pulling out his sachet.

"Cough... Just a little farther. Once we're through, it will be an hour to our destination."

Belgrieve looked ahead. "There's something lurking in the shadows of the pillars."

"Good eye. It's the best place to catch us off guard, after all. Everyone look out, and pay attention to the top of the cliff too."

Angeline adjusted the sword hanging from her waist. The presences of fiends were growing even more numerous than before. She could feel their watchful eyes and their malice stabbing at her skin.

"Goblins," Percival said, narrowing his eyes. "They're waiting in ambush."

"Goblins? The D-Rank fiends?" Anessa queried, sounding disappointed.

Goblins were humanoid fiends. They were hardly a threat individually, but they were smart enough to use simple tools and prone to forming hordes, which put them at D-Rank.

Percival grinned. "You'll find the goblins down here are far smarter than the ones in the outside world. I won't say they're at human level, but they're close. Coordination, traps, projectiles—they do it all. Don't underestimate them just because they're goblins."

It was said that the only thing keeping fiends at bay was their lack of intelligence compared to humans. If they ever developed sentience on top of their monstrous strength, humanity would stand no chance. The goblins here had nearly reached that point. However, according to Percival, these menacing creatures still ranked at the bottom of the hole's hierarchy. With their humanoid builds, their physical capabilities fell short of other beasts.

"They're no match for me..." Angeline scoffed as she placed a hand on her hilt. This would be no different than fighting a great horde of bandits. As long as she didn't make light of them, there was absolutely no way she would lose.

"Let's go." Percival brandished his sword ahead, and in that same moment, Kasim unleashed a bolt of magic. An inhuman shriek issued from out of the darkness of the pillars. The three sword fighters needed no more invitation than that to race ahead and confront the enemy.

With the sure knowledge that Belgrieve was behind her, Angeline refined her technique and forwent any unnecessary flourishes. She bisected the first shadow to lurch forth from the pillars. It had been a tad shorter than her, albeit very muscular. Several more of its ilk shambled out after it. Each was equipped with a weapon and wore cobbled-together armor comprised of mismatched styles and materials. Marguerite slew three with a single strike, while Percival had raced ahead leaving numerous corpses in his wake.

Once Angeline's eyes adjusted to the darkness, she realized just how many goblins they were up against. Though the fiends initially seemed ready to flee in the face of the party's swift response, they were nevertheless capable of surviving the brutality of the Earth Navel. The goblins regrouped with militaristic discipline and, bellowing out war cries, surrounded the three sword fighters with goblin spearmen, while goblin archers drew their bows in their back ranks.

Angeline stepped forth with her legs braced and her sword ready to defend, but at that moment, a rain of magic bolts and arrows slew the goblin archers. The spear-wielding goblins, deprived of their ranged support, hesitated for a moment. With a thunderous roar, bolts of lightning struck several armor-clad goblins and instantly burned them to a crisp.

"Don't stop! Scatter them!" With a swing of his sword, Percival mowed down the rest of their encirclement and advanced on the rest, no hesitation in his stride. It might have appeared to be a reckless bull rush, but he had complete trust in his allies to watch his back.

It's because dad is here, Angeline realized, unaware of the smile on her lips. Adjusting her grip on her sword, she chased after Percival, winding her way through the treelike stone spindles.

"Percy! The right cliff!" Belgrieve called out behind them.

Angeline turned in alarm to see a platoon of goblins riding atop wolves come bounding down the sheer cliff, turning all the force of their plummet into momentum for a charge. She had been so occupied with what was ahead of her, she hadn't noticed the flanking maneuver until Belgrieve pointed it out.

Percival only spared a quick glance at the cliff. "Ange, Maggie, get back! Kasim!"

"You got it!" With a violent torrent of mana, Kasim's spell was launched before the goblin riders had reached the bottom of the cliffs. It was a simple spell that sundered a few footholds ahead of the goblin riders. One misstep on such a sheer cliff was enough to spell death. Goblins and wolves fell together, some even taking fatal wounds from their own weapons and armor slamming into them on impact. Their cries of anguish filled the air.

Suddenly, Angeline heard an explosion ringing out behind her. She turned to see that Belgrieve had drawn Graham's sword. Its shock wave blasted away the goblins that had circled behind her before she had realized it.

"Bell! Are those the only ones behind us?" Percival called out.

"For now! But is this really where you want to make a stand?" Belgrieve shouted back.

The gaps between the towering spikes were growing narrower and narrower, and it was becoming a hindrance when Angeline wanted to swing her sword.

"What now, Percy? Should we pull back...?"

"No, their numbers are down. The leader should show up soon. If we can crush him, the others will flee," Percival explained. He looked ahead, his sword at the ready.

Marguerite squinted. "Hey, a strange one's coming out!"

The fiend was as tall as a human—taller than Angeline, in fact. At a glance, it was clearly wearing armor of a higher caliber than the others, and it wielded a masterfully crafted sword and shield. It was hard to recognize it as a goblin at all.

"That *is* a goblin... Right? Not an ogre?"

"Yeah, a goblin variant—must have taken the equipment of some poor sap who kicked the bucket down here. Now then... Let's see what our young'uns can do," Percival said, grinning mischievously. He struck down a goblin that charged them but otherwise showed no intention of taking a step from where he was.

Angeline and Marguerite exchanged a look.

"How should we do this?"

"Early bird gets the worm!" Marguerite answered before racing ahead, leaving Angeline to catch up.

There were still goblins around, but with the magic and arrows flying from behind, as well as Percival's intimidating presence, they didn't come anywhere near the duo. With no significant obstacles to slow her charge, Marguerite thrust with her rapier. It was a splendid strike, even in Angeline's eyes. The two would compete as rivals, and within her heart of hearts, Angeline recognized Marguerite's skill. It looked like the rapier would slip through one of the joints in the armor...

But the goblin swordsman nimbly dodged just enough that the rapier's blade scraped against the armor's surface instead.

Marguerite smiled. "Ha ha! Just how I like 'em!"

"Out of the way, Maggie." Angeline leaped over Marguerite, using the momentum of her descent to forcefully swing down with her sword, but the goblin swiftly backed off, hiding its body behind its shield in a defensive stance. Without skipping a beat, Angeline used the shield as a foothold to launch herself behind her goblin foe, turning to face it the moment she landed. "Hmm... Not bad."

"Hey, you missed. Not doing so hot, eh, Ange?" Marguerite teased from the other side of the goblin.

"Just testing the waters..." Angeline grumbled. She raised her sword and stepped in to engage again while Marguerite took a swipe at their foe from the opposite side. The goblin swordsman turned its sword towards Ange and its shield towards Marguerite, seemingly intent on intercepting both attacks without retreating.

Angeline intended to slip past its blade and aim for its arm, but the goblin managed to retract its sword fast enough to catch Angeline's blow. On the opposite side,

Marguerite's rapier was locked against the shield.

The moment their blades clashed, the symbols carved into the goblin's sword began to glow faintly. A bizarre force traveled down Angeline's blade, through the hilt, and into her arm, nearly causing her to drop her weapon from the numbing sensation.

"What...?" She had only been blocked; the goblin had not struck back at her. *Did those symbols on the sword redirect the force that should have gone to the goblin's hands instead?* In spite of perishing, the sword's former owner must have been a capable enough adventurer to tackle the abyss. This was no doubt a formidable weapon. "Maggie, watch out for the sword!"

"The shield too. The impact was reflected right back at me." Marguerite scowled, shaking off the pain in her hands.

We'll be overwhelmed if we prolong this. Our foe isn't that skilled with a blade, but it's a pain when he returns our own attacks, Angeline reasoned. If she could just find the right opportunity, she could lop off its head, and that would be the end of it. Angeline glared as she searched for her chance.

"Ange, get back!" Belgrieve suddenly called out from behind her.

Angeline frantically looked around. Percival, who had been keeping the other goblins at bay, had immediately heeded Belgrieve's warning and was already retreating. She hadn't realized it, but their back line was quite a bit farther off than it had been before.

"We're pulling back, Maggie!" Angeline took off like the wind, and this time it was Marguerite who was trailing behind.

She could now hear a rumbling sound from on high. The gashes that had been carved into the cliffside to thwart the cavalry charge had done more than just that. Not a moment later, a large chunk of stone came crashing down in a rockslide that crushed the goblins at the base of the cliff and momentarily cut off the goblin swordsman from his companions.

Angeline glanced up at the cliff. The largest rocks and clumps of dirt had already fallen, and now only fine grains of soil continued to slide down the surface. It wouldn't crumble any more than that. She turned to Marguerite. "Should we sync up?"

"You go for the head," Marguerite said, grinning. Angeline nodded.

The enraged goblin swordsman rushed for them with his sword raised high. The girls bounded forth at once—Angeline in the lead and Marguerite hot on her heels. Angeline's horizontal strike intercepted the goblin's swinging blade. This time, Angeline was ready to divert the impact, sending it coursing away as a burst of mana that rippled around them like wind.

Marguerite jumped over both of them. She nimbly twisted her body, stabbing her slender rapier blade down into the goblin's unguarded nape while she was still in midair. The blade accurately struck through the seam in the armor, piercing the flesh and bone beneath it. The goblin swordsman let out a scream. Seeing her foe freeze for that brief instant, Angeline immediately closed in and swung her sword—and with that, she had taken the swordsman's head.

The swordsman's body collapsed just as Marguerite landed. Its sword slipped from its hand, clanging as it hit the ground. Any remaining goblin stragglers slipped away like a receding tide.

"Nice, Maggie..." Angeline said breathlessly.

"Hmph, not bad yourself." Marguerite roughly patted Angeline on the shoulder.

Percival chuckled. "Good going, both of you. I'm glad to see you're both so skilled."

"Course we are, stupid. This is no place for old men." Marguerite stuck out her tongue at Percival as Angeline giggled.

Kasim awkwardly scratched at his cheek and pointed at the debris. "Did I do that?"

"Yeah. Looks like you tipped a delicate balance. A little jolt was enough to send it crashing down," Belgrieve explained as he surveyed the battlefield before sheathing his sword.

Percival patted him on the back. "Looks like your eyes are as sharp as ever. You picked up on that quickly."

"You're all too reckless... What would you have done if I hadn't spotted the avalanche?"

"I knew you would. That's just how it is, right, Kasim?"

"Yeah. Bell notices that sort of thing. That's just Bell for you."

"Please don't get your hopes up. I'm long retired..." Belgrieve smiled wryly. Percival forcefully patted him on the shoulder.

"Now let's go," Percival boomed. "Just a little farther."

Thus, their party was on their way again. There was no hint of any other fiends around, and their journey was rather relaxed as a result. Belgrieve and Kasim joined Percival at the vanguard to discuss something while Angeline fell back to chat with Anessa and Miriam.

"How were things back here?" Angeline inquired.

"Mr. Bell handled the rear guard while we focused on supporting you. There were enough of us to provide backup to every one of the vanguard. But Mr. Bell did give orders now and then, and it was quite easy to fight," said Anessa.

"Yeah!" Miriam chimed in. "It was like that on the way here too. Having someone watching over the entire battlefield lets you focus on yourself. It's refreshing, to say the least."

So dad's providing perfect support while we're fighting out front... It certainly wasn't a job that took center stage, and once the battle was over, it could easily be forgotten unless someone explicitly pointed it out. But having someone like that around would make a world of difference to the outcome.

"Mr. Percy and Mr. Kasim both look pretty happy, in any case," Miriam noted. "Looks like Mr. Bell's also more lively than usual. They truly are good friends."

"Yep. I'm glad we got them back together."

"Friends, huh? Sounds nice," Marguerite muttered behind them, her hands locked behind her head.

With a cackle, Miriam prodded her on the shoulder. "What are you talking about, Maggie? You've got us."

"What...? O-Of course! Heh heh..." Marguerite happily laughed and scratched her cheek.

Angeline mused that they made for a charming scene indeed as she turned to look

ahead again at the backs of her father and his friends. She was glad that they could reunite and that they could reconcile...

At least, she *should* have been, yet there was a strange, indescribable feeling in her chest. She had never seen Belgrieve laughing like that before. She had lived with him so long as his daughter, and she had been so sure she knew everything there was to know about him that there seemed to be no side of him that was inscrutable to her. But the sight of Belgrieve having such carefree fun with old friends was a side of him she had no recollection of.

The two of them had traveled together and watched over one another's back. Angeline completely trusted Belgrieve, and Belgrieve trusted her too. Yet the trust those three old friends shared felt different from the trust between her and her father. She honestly didn't know how she ought to feel, but she was gripped by a vague, irritable envy at the fact that she simply didn't have that with him, throbbing and aching in her chest. Even after they successfully collected the great beetle husk, Angeline's heart felt constricted by these peculiar feelings.

CHAPTER 100

EVER SINCE RETURNING TO THE SURFACE

Ever since returning to the surface, Angeline had seemed somewhat distracted. Belgrieve worried that she might have been struck by miasma or something of the sort.

However, Angeline's problem was less material than that, and furthermore, it wasn't something she could consult with Belgrieve directly about. She couldn't possibly tell him, "It's somewhat bothersome to me when you get along with your old friends." So she played it off with a smile and stewed over it even harder.

Now that they had auspiciously gathered all the materials requested by Istafar's guild master, Oliver, it was about time they made their departure from the Earth Navel. The big wave was settling down as well; here and there, they would spot groups of adventurers preparing to leave with wagons piled so high with materials it was unclear how they planned to actually move them. Other groups arrived to replace them, having timed their journeys to avoid the dangers of the big wave. It seemed to be the most active the gates had been since their arrival.

Amidst this hustle and bustle, Angeline had gone to an open-air bar with only the girls. She sat around a table with Anessa, Miriam, and Marguerite. It was a bit of a celebration of their efforts, though, for her own part, Angeline found it hard to be with Belgrieve or the other men and saw it as a reprieve.

"You're acting a bit strange, Ange. It's not like you at all." Marguerite was staring at her as she chased a meat kebab down with ale.

Angeline sighed heavily. "I'm aware. I just don't know what to do about it."

"About what?" Miriam asked, her gaze on Angeline as she sipped from a soup bowl.

"How should I put it...?"

"It feels like this has happened before," Anessa remarked, pouring a beverage for herself. "What was it again? Right—it was when we were taking Char back to Turnera."

Yes, that had been a similar episode. Back then, her funk had started with the mention of her real parents, and she had grown anxious that Belgrieve was hiding something from her. But it was different now—this time, she felt she was being incredibly selfish, and that only made her feel worse.

She had tagged along on this journey, convincing herself she was doing it for Belgrieve's sake. But once Belgrieve had completed his objective of reuniting with his old friend, she could not share in his joy. Instead, she was overcome by the feeling of being left in the dust—never mind that Belgrieve himself hadn't changed in the slightest towards her.

"I said it was for dad... But I was only thinking about myself."

Perhaps things would be different now if she had been more conscious of her selfish motives at the outset. When she had been searching for a wife for Belgrieve, she was partially driven by her own desire for a mother, and that made things clear and simple. With Charlotte, Byaku, and even Mit, she considered herself their big sister, so no issues arose there. But this time, she honest-to-goodness thought she was doing it all for Belgrieve.

Both Kasim and Percival knew a side to him she didn't. They had a history they could laugh about—and it was *that* which made her so horrendously envious now. Until now, she had always monopolized his attention, and now that it was being taken away from her, she had come to realize just how foul she was as a human being. Therein lay the source of her present depression.

Marguerite, who had gone off to fetch another bottle of ale from the barkeep, plopped into her seat once more. "What, are you jealous of Kasim and Percy or something?"

"Ugh... Am I? But I don't hate either of them..." And truly, she didn't. It might have been easier if she did.

Anessa frowned. "I don't think it's anything to get jealous over... You know Mr. Bell in a way they don't. And hey, I doubt Mr. Bell would hate *you* over something like that."

"I know, I know, but..." Angeline trailed off. She drained her cup before splaying herself flat over the table.

Anessa sighed. "Well, it's just for now, trust me. Things are changing so fast, it's only natural to feel confused."

"It's all about getting used to it, it is. Don't let it get to you. It makes me feel bad when I see you like that." Marguerite punctuated her remarks with a chuckle as she slapped Angeline on the back.

Is this really just a passing mood? Will I ever really get used to it? Angeline didn't know. All she could do was sigh and pour herself a new cup.

Though Angeline was down in the dumps, the other three were not similarly afflicted. As the alcohol entered their systems, they became quite effervescent, and soon enough, Angeline found that her drink was taking the edge off as well.

In the midst of their merrymaking, a shadow crossed over Angeline. "Oh?" somebody said. Maureen stood there skillfully holding multiple plates in her hands, each piled high with food. "You're all together today, I see."

"And you're alone?"

"No, I'm with... Huh? Touya? Hello?" Maureen frantically looked around. The boy in question appeared with his own overburdened plate, coming from the opposite direction. "Oh, there you are. Seriously, what were you doing?"

"That's my line. Why are you always going off on your..." Touya suddenly noticed Angeline's group and gave a haggard laugh. "Ah, it's a pleasure."

Maureen, who had been afflicted by her usual hearty appetite, had just come back from buying all sorts of food from the market and was ready to dig in. They were hardly strangers by now, so she joined them at their table and shared some of her haul with the rest of them. This included grilled meat, a soup of vegetables and offal, a soft and abundantly juicy fruit, a thin bread brushed with jam, and a strangely jiggly transparent substance, among others. There was such a variety of foods, it was hard to believe this had all come from fiends.

"It's the marrow of a bone giant, apparently. It's interesting that there's actually something edible you can get from a fiend composed purely of bone."

"Ms. Maureen, did you intend to eat all of this with Touya?" Miriam asked.

Maureen shook her head. "Touya doesn't eat very much. It was mostly for me."

"I'm surprised you can eat all this... I couldn't." Marguerite brought a cup to her mouth,

flabbergasted.

"Yeah, that's normal," Touya said with a sigh. "Maureen, don't eat too much or we'll be flat broke."

"What are you talking about? We've been earning loads these past few days. And we've finished that request from Salazar, so this much is nothing."

"Well, you have a point, *sigh*... In any case, the big wave's over. We need to get ready to go home."

Touya took a bite of a piece of meat, chewing on it as he leaned back in his chair.

"Hey, by Salazar, do you mean the archmage?" Miriam asked, setting her now-empty cup down.

"Oh, you know him?"

"Of course I do! Snake-Eyes Salazar! I've read his thesis on space-time sorcery so many times... Not that it helped me with my own magic at all."

"Is he famous? If he's an archmage, that makes him the same as Kasim, right?"

"That's the highest title a magician can get. Like it or not, you learn about them in magic studies. The revolutionary sequence Mr. Kasim formulated for parallel processing is also amazing, you know."

"Hmm, I thought Kasim was just an idiot who got carried away. I guess not."

"Maggie, you just said something incredibly rude..."

"Did I?"

"You look a little down, Ms. Angeline... Did something happen?"

Angeline had been stealing an absentminded, sidelong glance at the rest of her high-spirited party when Touya's inquiry snapped her to her senses.

"Hmm... It's nothing..."

“Something on your mind? Ah, this one’s a treat!”

“Don’t talk with your mouth full, Maureen... Anyways, is it something you’d like to talk about?”

“Honestly... I don’t know.” Angeline had a problem, yes, but it was not a problem in want of a solution. She simply hated her own selfishness, and she didn’t believe there was anyone who could provide an answer to her worries.

Marguerite set her mug down with a clink. “Bell—ah, that’s her old man—anyways, he’s getting along with his old friends, and she can’t stand it.”

“It’s not that I can’t stand it, exactly...” Angeline pouted at Marguerite’s outspokenness, though she was at a loss to point out anything amiss with the explanation.

“Mr. Belgrieve, huh...” Touya mused. “But you’re father and daughter, right? I doubt meeting some old friends is going to throw a wrench in your relationship...”

“Logically, yes...” Angeline begrudgingly admitted.

Seeing her so sullen, Touya gave an amused chuckle. “Ha ha ha! But you have it nice. You get along with your dad well enough to think of it like that.”

“Hmm...? You don’t get along with yours, Touya?” Angeline asked.

Touya blinked, taken aback. “Yeah... I guess not.”

“Hmm, same here. I hate my dad,” Marguerite chimed in, a skewer bobbing up and down in her mouth.

“Well, in my case, I haven’t seen him for a few years,” Touya said with a bitter smile.

“You don’t want to see him?”

“Well... No. I don’t want to see him.”

“You’ve got to get along. You’re family.” It was terribly ironic for Angeline to say that, under the circumstances. But she said it anyway, as though she was trying to convince herself as well.

Touya's laughter was tinged with sadness. "I might have thought so if he were someone like Mr. Belgrieve..."

"Touya..." Maureen murmured, looking oddly concerned.

But Touya shook his head as though to rid himself of such thoughts and forced a smile before tossing another morsel of meat into his mouth. "Ah, sorry, sorry—forget I said anything. So what are you all doing after this? Returning to your usual base of operations?"

Angeline kept her peace, so Anessa answered in her stead. "We're not really sure; depends on Mr. Bell, really. There's another person we're searching for."

"You did mention that. Satie, right? There aren't too many elven adventurers out there, so she shouldn't be too hard to find."

"But you don't know about her either, right, Maureen?"

"Well, elven territory's a big place. The east and west have completely different cultures with hardly any exchange between them, and even within either domain, you could go your entire life without meeting any one elf in particular if you live in different settlements."

"I know, right? First off, the elves are all gloomy shut-ins, I tell you! Nothing but 'logic' this, 'common sense' that. It's stupid."

"Aha ha ha! Now you've said it, milady! Gloomy shut-ins! Aha ha ha—*hack, hack!* *Cough, cough, cough!*" Maureen covered her mouth as she gagged on a piece of half-eaten food lodged in her throat.

"Eep!" Marguerite yelped, jumping out of her seat. "Get a hold of yourself!"

"What are you doing...?" Anessa tiredly said, bringing her cup to her mouth. "Well, elven territory covers most of the north, so it's understandable."

Miriam took a bite of fruit and wiped the juice dripping from the corners of her mouth. "Where do you two usually work from?"

"We used to be based in Lun-tu, a town in Keatai, but we've been in the imperial capital since last year," Touya answered.

"The capital, huh? So you're returning there after this?"

"That's right. That magician, Salazar, asked for a few materials... Right, maybe Salazar could tell you something about the person you're looking for? He has the magic of clairvoyance, right?"

"Huh? Come to think of it, I believe so. He should be able to, but that doesn't mean he actually will... *Nom, nom.*"

"Is he stubborn...?" Angeline asked.

Touya thought about how to answer. "It's not that he's stubborn... More like, he's an oddball. There are times I have no idea what he's even saying."

"Ah, sounds like an archmage to me." Miriam giggled.

Angeline propped her head up in her hand and mulled it all over. If Touya's words were to be believed, that could certainly be a valuable lead. They had already found Percival, and once they found Satie, Belgrieve's journey would be over. *But what will happen after that?*

Until now, Angeline had helped Belgrieve without a doubt in her mind. Now that she was aware of the gulf between her rationality and her emotions, her feet started to feel leaden. She didn't know whether she would be able to feel genuinely happy when they met Satie or if she would be mired in envy and irritability once more. Angeline didn't know what to believe anymore. *How could I have ever said I was doing it for dad? Why am I like this?* She stewed in these thoughts until a finger poked her in the cheek—it was Anessa, reaching across the table.

"What are you scowling for? Frown too much and your face will stick like that."

"Gah..." Angeline laid her chin on the table, exhausted. She put a hand on her hairpiece, feeling the cold metal with her fingertips. She knew she shouldn't think so hard about it and that there was no use in pondering questions with no answers. She was merely stuffing more and more into the molten cauldron of her thoughts, getting nothing out of it for her trouble.

In any case, she was not the one who would decide their next destination. She decided not to think about anything she didn't have to. As everyone was telling her, it would surely all work out in due time.

Sighing, Angeline reached for her empty cup.

○

The smoke from Yakumo's pipe trailed away in a billowing line just above her head. When she breathed out a puff, it would pour forth from her mouth and melt into the air. "The big wave is over already... Thankfully, it ended without incident."

"Where's Ange?" Lucille asked.

Belgrieve looked up from the map he was inspecting. "The girls went out on their own. They need a good change of pace every now and then."

"I see."

"So, what are you going to do now?" Percival asked as he leaned against the wall.

Lucille blinked absentmindedly and turned to Yakumo. "What now, Yakki?"

"What now, indeed? We're drifters, and we've filled our pockets. Maybe Buryou? It's been a while."

"Seafood, baby. I want some sushi."

"Buryou, huh? That's on the eastern tip of the continent, isn't it?" Belgrieve asked.

Yakumo nodded. "It is. It's also my birthplace."

"Then you'll have to leave Khalifa and pass through Tyldes and Keatai?" Kasim suggested.

Yakumo stuck the pipe between her lips, her eyes wandering. "That would be the simplest path. We could follow the mountains down from Istafar and head straight to Keatai, but then, we'd have to cross another mountain range when we get there."

"There are all sorts of routes... But whichever you choose, you're leaving this place?"

"Yes, we don't need to hide any longer. And there's nothing to do here but fight."

"Yeah," Kasim agreed, stretching his muscles. "Well, the food's not bad, but it's like

we're living in a dungeon. Too suffocating, too stiff."

Percival scoffed. "Pathetic. It's nothing once you get used to it."

"You're living proof, I guess." Belgrieve chuckled.

Lucille lifted the kettle to pour herself some tea. "Where are you going after this?" she asked. "What will you do?"

"Well, we're going to search for Satie. Right, Bell?" Kasim asked, stroking his beard.

But Belgrieve closed his eyes and slowly shook his head. "No... I gave it some thought, but I think I'll return to Turnera."

"Huh...? Why? I mean, if you go back now, there's no telling when you'll be able to leave next. Are you sure?"

"Well, I want to see Satie too, of course. But I have Mit to consider."

Kasim furrowed his brow and scratched his cheek. "You mean that request from gramps?"

Belgrieve nodded, producing the mana crystal of the á bao a qu from his breast pocket. "We got this thanks to Ange and Percy. I know I can count on Graham, but you know what happened last time. I don't want to take too long. Satie is important to me... But so is Turnera. I'm sorry," Belgrieve said, looking crestfallen.

Kasim shut his mouth, looking troubled as he twisted his beard.

"Either reclaim the past or the present." Percival straightened his back. "I see you're living in the present, Bell."

"It's nothing quite so lofty. I just bear the responsibility for sheltering Mit in Turnera..." Belgrieve explained. "Though I feel bad for leaving Satie," he mumbled beneath his breath.

Yakumo exhaled another puff of smoke before making her suggestion. "How about you leave that crystal with us?"

"What?"

"It's as I said it, isn't it? We're vagrants, living each day without a goal. Whether we go to Buryou or Turnera, what difference does it make? Though there's not much I can do if you don't trust us..."

"No, no, that's not what I meant..." Belgrieve said, flustered at this bolt from the blue.

"That's my girl," Lucille exclaimed, grabbing Yakumo by the shoulder. "Time to make some 'trowel' plans!"

"Quit messing around. So, how about it?"

"I think it's a good idea," Duncan opined, flipping the partition to enter their encampment. He had come bearing food from the stalls. "I was thinking of going to Turnera myself. Graham would be more understanding with me around."

"Oh, right, you're already friends with gramps. That would simplify things."

"Of course, we shared the same house for a while! Ha ha ha!"

"Oh, that is reassuring. I've seen your skill firsthand, and I would be delighted to have you guiding us."

"That works out perfectly. I can trust you to get the job done," Percival said, snapping a branch and tossing it in the fire.

"Heh heh," Yakumo chuckled. "You've changed indeed. You trust me now, do you?"

"*Lean on me,*' mister."

"Quit teasing me... In any case, we can search for Satie without reservation, then."

Though everyone else was getting excited, Belgrieve stared blankly for a while. But when Percival tapped him on the shoulder, he realized his part in it all. "But... Are you sure? You're bending over backwards to accommodate us..."

"I didn't say I'd do it for free. I'm talking about a job. The terms are for us to transport this stone to Turnera. The fee is up for discussion... But you've looked after us, and I consider us friends. I'll give you a discount, heh heh."

"Translation—she likes the cut of your jib, so she's agreeing to help you under the

pretense of work, baby..."

"Enough out of you." Yakumo prodded Lucille in the side of her head, her cheeks reddening slightly. Percival broke out in laughter.

Meanwhile, Belgrieve scratched his head. He definitely trusted Yakumo and Lucille to do the job—they were skilled and quick-witted. Adding Duncan only made it even more promising.

Belgrieve had a vague inkling that once he returned to Turnera, he might never leave again. His body had been crying out in protest just for the effort of reaching the Earth Navel, even collapsing in fever. Perhaps he had gotten cold feet and had just been using the crystal as an excuse to go home. If so, his journey was as good as over once he returned to his home sweet home—that would be it.

With the culmination of this journey, Belgrieve had half given up on finding Satie, but to his surprise, so many people were reaching out a helping hand, praying for his quest to go well. He felt ashamed for desiring to go home, even subconsciously. He felt the corners of his shut eyes grow warm. "I'm sorry... And thank you. You're a huge help."

"Ah, save it. I'm not a saint."

"Who said anything about you being a saint? It's just 'a job,' right?"

"Ah, silence. Hey, Lucille, where did you put my flask?"

"As the people of the past would say: '*What's yours is mine, and what's mine is mine.*'"

"You drank it all again, fool!"

"Eep!"

"Hey! Don't come over here, it's cramped."

Lucille crashed straight into Kasim as she dodged out of the way, bowling the both of them over. The campsite was rowdy and cheerful, and Belgrieve likewise felt a weight lifted from his shoulders. If his companions were going so far for him, he would have to find Satie no matter what.

With renewed determination, Belgrieve folded his arms and pondered where they

might find a lead. So far, it had been like trying to grasp at the clouds.

As Belgrieve gave himself over to his thoughts, the merry uproar around him had turned into a drinking contest. When Ishmael returned from outside their camp, his eyes widened in shock. "Wh-What exactly is going on here...?"

CHAPTER 101

FINDALE WAS A LIVELY PLACE

Findale was a lively place, owing to its proximity to the capital of Rhodesia. It functioned as a relay point for merchants coming to the capital from every part of the world and bearing with them both goods and cheer. The streets were lined with all sorts of stalls packed in tightly, and a tarp of wares was spread out before every otherwise vacant wall. Traveling folk would put on street performances and play their tunes to entertain passersby—to receive the occasional tip, of course.

A woman came to a stop in front of a fishmonger's stall managed by an older woman. The fishmonger smiled, wiping the sweat from her brow before greeting her customer. "Morning, Mabel. Out shopping again?"

Mabel cheerfully nodded. "Yeah, could I get a basket of those little fish? Oh, some of these salt-cured ones too."

"Coming right up! I really appreciate all these large purchases. Is the diner running well?"

"Thanks to you."

"I'd stop by if I weren't so busy. Just can't find the time."

"Don't worry about it. You've got your own shop to manage."

While the two of them engaged in their friendly chatter, a unit of men clad in the uniform of the imperial military marched towards them. Their approach was heralded by the thunderous drumbeat of their marching feet on the ground, kicking up a cloud of dust.

"You, there."

"Yes?" Mabel turned, and there stood Francois, the third son of Archduke Estogal. Behind him was a tall man in a black coat, and the imperial soldiers stood at the ready nearby.

The black-coated man had a rather strange look to him. His long hair—pulled into a tight bun behind his head—was likely brown originally, but its color had faded over the years, and it was now streaked with white. In spite of what the deep-set wrinkles on his face might suggest, he appeared to be only in his late forties or early fifties. An old blade scar ran from his right eye to his chin.

The fishmonger reverently bowed her head. “Wh-What’s an imperial official doing all the... I mean, what business brings you here, sir?”

But Francois did not spare her a second glance. He looked Mabel up and down before saying, “You are Mabel of the Green Grass Eatery, correct?”

“Y-Yes, I am... Um, do you need something from me?”

“I see. You shall be executed for treason against the empire,” he declared, gesturing to her with a nod of his head. One of his soldiers swiftly stepped forth and, drawing his sword, clove through Mabel from her shoulder to her breasts. Blood sprayed through the air, punctuated by the fishmonger’s scream.

Mabel’s corpse fell backwards to the ground before she even had the chance to cry out. Bystanders stopped in shock, murmuring among themselves and stealing furtive looks at the tragedy.

“Now we wait...” Francois said, looking down at the corpse. Blood seeped from the gash in her torso, soaking through her clothes and pooling on the ground.

The fishmonger, cowering and cringing, managed to ask a question. “S-Sir... What... What did she do to deserve this?”

“It is as I said—treason. There is no Green Grass Eatery. It doesn’t exist.”

“H-Huh? Then...”

“Silence—it does not concern you. Don’t stick your nose where it doesn’t belong.”

The pale-faced fishmonger fled into the back of the shop. The acrid stench of fresh blood had begun to permeate, further agitating the crowd.

Francois narrowed his eyes. “I guess it wasn’t here.”

"No, wait," the tall man interjected, stopping Francois before he could leave.

Mabel's corpse rose from the ground as if being pulled up by strings. The contours of her body faded away into a kind of mist that was suddenly blown away by the wind, and where once was the woman Mabel, there now stood a tall elven woman. Her beautiful, waist-length silver hair was tied at the end, and she wore a beige robe over a layered eastern garment made of hemp cloth. Her features were as fine as any other elf, but her eyebrows were thick and unruly, giving her a strong-willed impression.

She placed a hand on her brow and shook her head as though she had just woken up from slumber. No wound marred her flesh; the blood that had been pooling on the ground was now gone. "Well, I'll be..." she muttered.

Francois grinned. "Found you. You'll be coming with us!"

The soldiers immediately surrounded her with their swords and spears at the ready. After glancing around at all of them, the elf made a slight movement with her hand, and a moment later, all of the soldiers fell to the ground with loud cries. Blood flowed from their hands, arms, and legs, and their weapons clattered to the ground. The onlookers quickly scattered, screaming for their lives.

Francois glared at her as he reached for the sword at his hip. "I guess it won't be that easy..."

"Wait. This is my job," the tall man interrupted, pushing Francois aside to confront the glaring elf.



“I haven’t seen you before... A friend of theirs?”

“I have no obligation to answer.” He drew his sword—a long, wide, cutlass, though it was missing a pointed tip.

The elf took a deep breath before appraising him. “A wound on the right eye and a cutlass... Hector the Executioner. To think you’d become the lapdog of someone like him—you’re bringing shame to all S-Rank adventurers.”

“Enough talk. Either come quietly or prepare to lose a limb. Choose.”

“I choose neither!” The elf woman waved her hand. The force of an impact raced down Hector’s cutlass as though he had just blocked the swing of a sword. Hector’s eyes opened wide as he took a strong step forward to push back against this unseen force, managing to maneuver his cutlass around the attack and swing through. But the elf evaded, nimbly leaping from the ground and landing on the protruding eave of a nearby shop.

“No! She’s getting away!” Francois shouted angrily.

“Not on my watch!” Hector stabbed his cutlass into the ground. The sword pierced the stone easily despite its missing tip. All of a sudden, his shadow blurred like the surface of a rippling pond, and from the darkness came three skeletal warriors in armor and bearing weapons. They raced up the wall in pursuit of the elf, and the first slashed down at her with its blade.

“Hmph!” The elf woman held out her arm. Before it could touch her, the blade stopped as though colliding with an invisible weapon of her own. She swung her arms crosswise before her as though she were swinging two swords. Instantly, the skeletons were sliced into ribbons, armor and all, and they melted away into fog.

But Hector hadn’t been idle. With a great leap, he flew past the eave and sliced down from on high. The elf immediately crossed her arms, catching his cutlass between her two invisible swords. The roof tiles grated against each other beneath her feet, and her arms creaked at the joints.

“So heavy!”

“Got you!” Twisting his body, Hector landed a kick on the elf’s flank. Her stance crumbled and she was sent toppling upside down from the rooftop. However, she

managed to right herself at the last second, though she still ended up colliding into one of the fishmonger's stands, turning over a basket and scattering fish across the ground.

"Ow, ow... Sorry, lady..." But she wasn't given a second to rest as Hector's blade swung down at her once more. The elf immediately leaped aside, though not without a sharp gash being drawn from her left shoulder to her bicep and losing a worrying amount of blood.

"Your leg is next."

The elf retreated with a backwards leap, but Hector was in dogged pursuit, and his sword arced through the air as he swung for her leg. The elven woman thrust out her arm, her invisible sword locking with the cutlass blade, but a look of anguish crossed her face as blood seeped from her wound. Noticing her momentary flinch, Hector jumped past her defense and delivered a kick to her shoulder.

"Argh!" She immediately fell to one knee. Hector, looming over her with cold eyes, pressed the edge of his cutlass to her neck. His expression made it clear just how dispassionate he was. "You were a letdown."

"Ha... That's the Executioner for you... You're not going to let me escape that easily."

"Save your breath; you can't run from me. Be thankful I am not here to kill you."

"Aha ha! How scary... Then I guess I have to blow you sky high."

The air suddenly changed. Hector's eyes widened—he could sense the invisible blade coming at him, this time accompanied with an aura of bloodlust incomparable to any attack that had come before it. He lurched back to avoid it, buffeted by the air as it just barely whizzed past him.

Though Hector raised his guard in preparation for a follow-up strike, he quickly realized that was a mistake.

"Dammit!"

"Good day, you scoundrels!" In an instant, the elf was already several paces away, a mischievous smile on her face as she placed a hand on her chest. Her form shifted and blurred like a mirage, and then she was gone.

Hector clicked his tongue as he sheathed his blade, yet his lips curled in a cruel smile.
“She was hiding her claws... Though only for a moment, she made me feel defeat.”

Francois glared at him indignantly. “You insolent...”

“Heh heh... To think she would know teleportation magic. It’s been a long time since I’ve hunted such amusing game.”

“Quit acting so carefree... It took this long to find her, and now it’s all for naught. Worse yet, we’ve made her wary of us!”

“But she is not going to hide herself away. Don’t be so impatient.”

Hector’s coat trailed behind him as he turned. Francois looked around bitterly before barking at the dazed soldiers collapsed on the ground. “How long are you going to daydream for?! On your feet!”

The soldiers hurriedly stood and retrieved their dropped armaments.

○

The season had turned to fall by the time they descended from the Earth Navel to Istafar. But they were still deep within southern lands, so it was warm while the sun was out, and coats became unbearable when it was at its zenith. Back home, Turnera would have already waved goodbye to its short summer period, the surrounding mountains would be dyed in yellows and reds, and every household would be busily preparing for winter.

Yakumo stuffed her hands into her pockets and frowned. “We cannot head north once the snow covers the ground. If we want to reach Turnera, we must make haste.”

“Hmm... I’m sorry, looks like we’re rushing you.”

“It is part of the job. No worries, no worries.” Yakumo chuckled as she inserted the stem of her pipe between her lips. Meanwhile, Angeline drank down a cup of juice and let out a languid “Phew.”

Their party had grown. On top of the people they had come to the Earth Navel with, they were now joined by Percival, Yakumo, and Lucille, as well as Touya and Maureen. Because their party was now pretty massive and they had departed at the same time

as many other adventurers along the same path, it was possible to take turns keeping watch. Thus, they finished this leg of the journey with little effort.

When they had first traveled that way, Belgrieve had exhausted himself as the party's strategist, enemy detector, and lookout, among other things, but this time he had been surrounded by capable adventurers who could take over those roles and didn't need to exhaust himself. Nevertheless, he was a farmer first and foremost, and life on the road was a wearisome one for him.

"From here, it would be fastest to head north to Khalifa, then to pass through the Yobem checkpoint, perhaps," Kasim suggested.

Duncan nodded. "Yes, the road to Khalifa is well maintained, and it shouldn't be a long journey for a fast horse."

"Khalifa, huh..." Percival muttered. "I was wandering around there some time ago. It was a lively place."

"I passed through on my way here," Duncan said, stroking his beard. "It's still very lively. I suspect it's just as populous as Orphen."

"What's the mood there? Is it like Istafar?" Marguerite asked eagerly, deeply intrigued.

Khalifa was a large metropolis situated where Tyldes's main eastern trade route intersected with its southbound one. Periodically, all of the kings and representatives of Tyldes's clans and ethnic groups would convene there in a great council. It was—de facto and de jure—the heart of the nation. To the west of Khalifa was the Dukedom of Estogal, while Istafar was to the south. North led to a checkpoint to elven territory, and to the east lay Keatai. It was a place at the intersection of many peoples, resulting in a rather unique culture of its own. It was also home to a dizzying number of people that rivaled Orphen's population, which was the greatest city of northern Estogal. But unlike Orphen, the admixture of cultures resulted in a plethora of different routines and manners of dress, and beastmen were a more common sight there. This kaleidoscopic abundance of peoples was said to make the city feel even more overwhelming than Orphen.

Though the heart of Khalifa was a city of tall, stone buildings, everything outside of that consisted of tents of all shapes and sizes. There were many different tribes in Tyldes, and most were nomadic; in fact, those that settled in one place were the

minority. Thus, they would erect their own tents around the perimeter and live out of them. The forest of tents formed an ever-shifting residential district as well as a bustling marketplace.

“Perhaps it would be best described as a massive campsite,” said Duncan.

“Right,” Percival agreed, nodding. “A noisy place. If you like hustle and bustle, you won’t be bored.”

“Hmm, sounds nice. I’d love to stop by.”

“Then, Maggie, are you returning to Turnera with Duncan...?”

“Why are you so keen on kicking me out?!” Marguerite cried, prodding poutingly at Angeline. Anessa and Miriam giggled, while Duncan gave a thunderous laugh.

“Now, now, we must be back before the snow falls, so we won’t have time to explore the city.”

Yakumo grinned as she tapped the ash from her pipe. “Heh heh... Duncan’s got even more reason to hurry. He’s keeping someone waiting.”

“Uh... R-Right.” Duncan bashfully scratched his cheek.

Marguerite cackled. “Yeah, Hannah’s waiting!”

Angeline nodded. “I see, so it’s Hannah... Treat her right.” Naturally, Angeline had known Hannah from a young age, as well as Hannah’s husband before his passing. Angeline recalled how lonely Hannah seemed after he was gone, so she welcomed this development in her love life now.

Yakumo filled her pipe with fresh herbs. “It’s nice, having someone like that in your life.”

“Mr. Bell and Mr. Duncan are the same,” Lucille observed.

Angeline tilted her head. “The same?”

“They’re both on a journey to meet someone, across the lands in search of love.”

"H-Huh..." Duncan murmured.

Yakumo chuckled at the sight of his bashful behavior. "Ah, love. I should follow their example."

"You're going to get married?" Lucille asked in complete disbelief.

Yakumo scowled and poked at Lucille. "What's with that look?"

Percival broke into a coughing fit, seemingly out of laughter. "Good grief, you two get along."

"Don't they?" Miriam nodded.

"You've got a friend in me," Lucille sang.

"Away with you." Yakumo swatted at the hand Lucille had wrapped around her shoulder, but the girl was undeterred and nestled the tip of her nose against that same shoulder. Yakumo looked at her with a furrowed brow.

"What are you clinging to me for? It's unpleasant."

"I mean, we don't have anyone dear enough to go on a journey for. We're both lonely."

"Speak for yourself. I'm not lonely."

"You really do get along..." Angeline giggled, but she felt a little depressed too. While she could be sincerely delighted for someone else's happiness, she now found herself envious at the thought of the one she loved most in the world finding such happiness.

These thoughts must have clouded her expression, as Anessa looked at her curiously.
"What's wrong?"

"N-Nothing..." Angeline said, bringing her cup to her lips to play it off.

They were currently sitting in the dining hall of the inn they were staying at. It was packed with rowdy customers. Although some would approach Marguerite, their attention drawn to her elven beauty, they would immediately run off with one glare from Percival.

Yakumo looked around. "So, what will you be doing while we go to Turnera, then?"

"If I recall correctly, we were going to look for a lead in the imperial capital," said Marguerite.

Percival sipped at his juice. "If that kid's words are to be believed..."

"He's probably telling the truth," said Kasim. "I know old Snake-Eyes Salazar too."

"You're acquainted?"

"Nah, we just talked a bit a long time ago—as fellow archmages, you know. But, well, I'll admit he's smart, but he didn't seem to take any interest in anything anyone else was doing. I don't know if he'll help you or not..."

"He's that sort of person, huh? Sounds like trouble," Percival remarked, leaning back in his chair.

Kasim nodded. "Yep. If he was the kind of guy who'd help search for someone, I'd certainly have asked him to find Bell for me. But it's hard to even talk to him about anything. Inevitably, he makes any conversation about himself."

"What, are all archmages like that?"

"Of course not. Just look at me, right here. Aren't I a decent, stand-up guy?"

"Are you now...?" Marguerite teased with a grin, her fingertips tapping against the table.

Kasim smiled back, twiddling his fingers. In the next moment, Marguerite's hair was floating and twisting itself into knots. Marguerite frantically grabbed at it, trying to contain the chaos. "What are you doing, stupid!?"

"Heh heh heh... Show some respect for your elders."

"Well... If I had to say, he's probably not *that* decent—Kasim, I mean."

"Ah, look! Now you even have Percy saying it! Well, I won't deny that most archmages can be a bit stubborn. Right, Merry?"

"Absolutely! Our old hag's driven me up the wall with her stubbornness!"

"Oh c'mon... You want me to tell Maria what you just said?"

"Go right ahead. I'm just telling it like it is," Miriam retorted, unmoved by the threat of tattling. Anessa simply shook her head.

Angeline polished off another cup of juice and said, "That's why we're getting Touya to introduce us."

"Right, let's hope all goes well. But are they really on such good terms with Salazar...? Heh heh heh. You'll be surprised when you see him for the first time. I think there's worth in just seeing the guy."

"Huh? What's he like, what's he like?"

"That's a secret. Isn't it more fun this way?" Kasim cackled, declining to satisfy Miriam's bursting curiosity.

"Then our next destination is the imperial capital! Heh heh, can't wait to see it!" Marguerite declared enthusiastically.

"How far is that from Istafar?"

Anessa spread out a map. Istafar was in Tyldean territory, but it was near the Dadan Empire and Lucrecia. Heading west along the mountains would take them to Lucrecia and the Rhodesian Empire. The roads there were spacious, and plenty of peddlers used the route. Presumably, it would take them less than a month to reach the border. From there, they would hop from one town to the next until they reached the capital of Rhodesia.

"The path to the capital is well maintained, thanks to all the merchants from the east, so the journey will not be a harsh one. Right, Ishmael?" Duncan asked as he stacked up their empty plates.

"Indeed, there are public stagecoaches you can use and plenty of jobs you can take guarding merchants and caravans."

"You're returning to the capital too, Ishmael?" Anessa asked.

"Yes." Ishmael nodded. "It will be an easy journey if I travel alongside you."

"As the people of the past would say, '*No road is long with good company. A shame I have none.*'"

"You pipe down."

They would need to be with Touya and Maureen to meet with Salazar. *Looks like we'll continue traveling with a hefty party*, thought Angeline.

"I hope you can find Satie, mister," Lucille said, pulling down her cap.

"I'd love it if it worked out like that. But I'm not that hopeful," Percival replied.

Yakumo fidgeted. "You can hardly tell around here, but winter is near. If you're going to the capital, you won't be back in Turnera until spring."

"It was winter when we first met in Orphen," said Lucille.

"Now that you mention it, you're right," Angeline said, nodding.

They had first met Yakumo and Lucille around the end of winter, on one leg of the journey back to Turnera. It later came to light that they had been after Charlotte, so this meeting hadn't been coincidental.

Lucille's nose perked up. "I'm happy I can see Char... She has a very nice scent."

"Do you think they're doing all right?" *Maybe she's grown back her hair since getting it cut in Bordeaux*, Angeline mused.

Miriam giggled. "She has Graham. I'm sure she's doing just fine."

"Oh yes, the Paladin was in Turnera, wasn't he...?" Yakumo looked a little unsettled. "I never imagined I would be meeting a living legend. I'm starting to feel nervous."

"That old man isn't scary or anything..."

"No, he's *super* scary, my granduncle is."

"That's because you're his grandniece. I've never thought he was scary before. He was

always surrounded by children,” Anessa said.

Ishmael seemed intrigued. “So the Paladin is good with kids? I always pictured him as somebody who towered above the clouds.”

“Yes, we adventurers only tend to see his majestic might—but children take to him, and he seemed pleasantly surprised by that,” Duncan explained, recalling his time in Turnera with a smile. “Living that kind of life, you could almost forget you were an adventurer.”

For most of his life, he had traveled from place to place as a wandering warrior. To him, his life in Turnera must have been a long-awaited taste of something warm and grounded. Most adventurers grew bored of that very comfort and would leave their homelands in pursuit of something more exciting. He wondered why he had felt such a longing for that life. Now that he thought about it, it was quite strange.

“So even the Paladin, the pinnacle of adventurers, winds up with a quiet life in the country,” Yakumo said, stuffing her pipe. “It’s a curious thing. Well, I understand age catches up to all, and the body isn’t as nimble as it was before.”

“You just get tired of it—plain and simple,” Percival said with a yawn.

“Did you grow tired, Percy...?” Angeline asked, her head quirked to the side inquisitively.

“In my case, it doesn’t matter—whether I grow tired or come to hate it, I can’t do anything else. Ever since I reunited with Bell, it’s like I can feel the resolve draining from me, though.”

“I don’t think it’s a bad thing, personally,” said Kasim.

“Nor do I,” Percival admitted. “But I can’t let it all go just yet. We need to find Satie first.”

“It’s nice to have a clear goal. For wanderers like us, there are times when we don’t know why we’re doing it at all.”

“Isn’t it for excitement? To see things you’ve never seen before?” Marguerite suggested.

Yakumo thought over her answer as she watched the smoke rise from her pipe. "When I was young, perhaps. But I've grown used to it all, and I've gotten sick of new things. And yet, I haven't stopped wandering. My heart is searching for something, but I don't know what it is."

"I started to wonder so too," said Duncan. "I've lived over thirty years and spent more than half of that time as an adventurer, but it was like I was just going from place to place searching for what wasn't there... And in the end, I never found out what it was."

"Weren't you looking for a beautiful wife? You found love." Without anyone noticing, Lucille had taken out her six-stringed instrument and had begun to strum a tune.

Percival laughed aloud. "Aren't you headed to Turnera because you found your 'something'? Don't go disappointing your wife."

"Hmm..." Duncan said bashfully, seeming to shrink into himself.

Kasim stretched out and adjusted his hat. "Now then... It's about time to head to the guild, Ange."

"Right..."

They needed to meet with the guild master, Oliver, to fulfill his request. Even though they had a lead in Salazar, Angeline thought she'd ask for information on Satie anyways. The haziness in her heart could be diverted by concentrating on what was happening before her eyes. Despite everything, she was still happy whenever she talked to Belgrieve, and there was amusement and entertainment found in mingling with Percival and Kasim. She sincerely had fun when everyone got together to talk.

Why did I become an adventurer again? Angeline wondered. In her case, she had simply looked up to Belgrieve and desired his praise. That aspiration had been so near and dear to her, but it suddenly felt as though it had gone far away. On the surface, she was delighted that she could help her father reunite with his old friends, but she was more conflicted inside. Kasim had come, and then Percival; gradually the connections to Belgrieve's past were growing clearer and clearer. And it was a lonely feeling to know that she herself had no place in those memories.

She knew it was pointless to draw comparisons, but she was beginning to have strange thoughts, like wondering whether Belgrieve held his memories with his old comrades more dearly than his life with her. Then, when she reassured herself she would win

that contest, she felt like she was paying insult to Belgrieve's past.

She was anxious, and for that reason—though there was no logical connection—she was making Belgrieve dote on her even more than usual. She would cling to him and plead for him to carry her on his back, and each time, just as he had always done, Belgrieve would kindly acquiesce with a wry smile on his face.

The sight of the same old father she had always known was a relief to Angeline, but behind her veneer of forced cheer, there was a voice that would insistently whisper, "This isn't it; this isn't *right*." Perhaps this was why she would become strangely cold immediately after his doting lately. Even she could tell how unstable she had become. *Am I just putting off the issue?* she wondered. *But what else am I supposed to do?*

"Ange, let's go," Kasim called out to her—evidently, she had been spacing out, and his words brought her back to reality. She got up, slapped her face to rouse herself, and rolled her head to work out the kinks.

"Look after dad for me, Mr. Percy."

"He's not sick or anything... Well, I'll just feed him something to pep him up. Still, that Bell... Why's he the only one acting like an old man? We're the same age, you know."

"How old are you, mister?" Lucille asked, blinking curiously.

"Huh? Oh, I'm... forty... I had forgotten."

"Oh no. Already old enough to become forgetful?" Miriam giggled.

Percival frowned, holding his fingers up to count. "I... must be over forty, but... Was it four or five? Well, whatever. I'm going to the market."

"Shopping? I'm going too! I'm going too!" Marguerite chanted, kicking her feet in the air.

"Fine, fine, calm down," Percival said, as though he were dealing with a rowdy niece.

Istafar's guild was booming. Many rare materials had been brought in after the big wave, and the merchants with this insider information had stormed in, causing quite

a mess. Although the Earth Navel was not public knowledge, much of Istafar's economy depended on it.

With that said, most of the adventurers didn't just sell their loot at the nearest city. They would bring it all the way back to their home bases, where they could command an even better price for it. The amount of materials circulating through the city was quite low when compared to the number of adventurers that had been farming the abyss, and so there was a bidding war being waged over the scarce materials. With a passing glance at this riotous activity, Angeline followed Kasim up to the guild master's room.

Oliver was sitting at his desk, looking through some documents. Once they were let in, he looked up from his work, seeming pleasantly surprised.

"Why, if it isn't... It's good to see you back in one piece."

"Nice to see you again, Mr. Oliver... Thank you for this." Angeline walked over to his desk and set down the magic crystal they had borrowed from him.

He gingerly picked it up. "I'm glad you found some use for it. So, about the materials?"

"We left them with your assistant. They're being appraised right now. It should be everything you asked for."

"Thanks a bunch for that. Now we can make more crystal balls... I'll pay you as soon as their worth is determined."

"Okay... Um, there's something I wanted to ask. Can I?"

"Hmm? Sure, what is it?"

"I'm looking for someone."

Oliver narrowed his eyes before ushering his two visitors to sit down. "Looking for someone? Can you give me a description?"

"She's an elf—a woman named Satie."

"Elf..." Oliver frowned, folding his arms. "I did see an elf woman... a short while back. She was in a party with a boy."

"Oh, not her." That had to be Touya and Maureen. Angeline explained they'd run into one another at the Earth Navel and were coming back together.

Oliver shrugged. "I see; you already know her, then..."

"Anything else?"

Oliver's gaze wandered as he ruminated over the description, but ultimately, he closed his eyes and shook his head. "I'm sorry I can't be of any assistance."

"No, thank you... You've done enough already." Angeline bowed her head gratefully.

"Hmm..." Kasim observed her, looking mildly impressed.

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Belgrieve took in a deep breath, then exhaled. He was sitting on his bed meditating in this fashion when he was interrupted by a knock at the door. He opened his eyes.

"Are you awake, Mr. Bell?"

"Anne? I'm awake."

The door opened to admit Anessa. "How are you feeling?"

"I got some good rest, so I'm fine. Thank you."

"I see... That's good..." She looked relieved as she sat in a nearby chair. "Everyone went to the market—except Ange and Mr. Kasim; they headed off for the guild."

"Hmm? You didn't want to go?"

"Oh, I thought it would be a right bother if you got worse, so I stayed behind," Anessa said with a mischievous smile.

Belgrieve scratched his head. "Sorry to make you worry."

"Don't be... Ah, let me get you some tea." She poured a cup of tea from a wooden bottle. "It looks like we're probably going to the capital."

“Indeed. Another long journey ahead...”

“Aha ha! You’re pretty sturdy, but I guess travel gets to you in different ways than battle.”

“Perhaps... It’s certainly unsettling even to sleep in a different bed.”

Anessa chuckled as she handed the cup to him. “Mr. Percy wasn’t happy about it. He said you’re the same age, but you’re the only one showing it.”

“I won’t get anywhere by holding myself to his standard. Good grief, everyone seems to put me up on a pedestal...” Belgrieve gave a troubled laugh before taking a sip. The coolness of the liquid permeated his chest.

They both drank tea in silence for a while, until eventually, Belgrieve looked up. “Ange’s acting strange.”

Anessa’s expression stiffened, evidently startled. “Strange? How so?”

“She’s oddly cold—like she’s trying to make some distance from me, or so it seems... But then she’s suddenly all over me... It’s like she’s unstable.”

“Hmm. Well...” Anessa fidgeted, rubbing the tips of her toes together as she pressed the cup to her lips.

“I could understand it if we were going our separate ways again. But if it’s something else, if she’s brooding hard over something, I was just wondering what I could do for her. This happened once before. I think she’s at it again... Do you know anything, Anne?”

“You saw right through it,” Anessa grumbled. She scratched her cheek. “But I’m not sure if you should hear it from me. She’s thinking over things in her own way...”

“Well... I guess you’re right. I’m sure she has something in mind... I shouldn’t be overprotective.”

“Heh heh... But Ange still loves you. That hasn’t changed. It’s more like she’s confused by everything else changing around her.”

“Both me and her, we lived in a very small world. Honestly, I can’t believe I got to see

Kasim and Percy again. In only two years, our world has expanded a great deal."

"It's very strange, isn't it? Those bonds that bring people together... But Ange's at a loss because of them... Ah, no, I'm sorry. It's nothing." Her tongue had nearly slipped, and she hurried to change the topic. But Belgrieve had picked up on it anyways. That side of him—not as Angeline's father, but as a friend to Kasim and Percival—certainly would be a foreign face to Angeline.

"It's scary when what you know and love starts to change."

"Ah... um..." Anessa mumbled, cringing. Evidently, she realized she had let it slip.

Belgrieve reached out to pat her on the shoulder. "There's far less a parent can do for a child than you might imagine. When she's troubled and hurting, she needs support from her friends... Well, nothing wrong with her having a boyfriend either."

"Aha ha... Good one."

"Anne. I think Ange's world grew thanks to you and Merry. Please continue to be her friend."

"Of course I will." Anessa smiled with a blush on her cheeks.

Belgrieve's thoughts turned to the past. He had lost his parents at a young age, and the village adults had raised him in their stead. They were kind to him, but it had been Kerry and his other friends who had replaced his loneliness with their warmth towards him.

He had set off for Orphen to become an adventurer, where he was passed from party to party until he finally met Percival. At a time when he couldn't recognize his own value, it had always been his friends who accepted him.

Little by little, Angeline was leaving. She was surrounded by adults she could respect and friends she could rely on, and as a father, he was thankful to see her surrounded by so much support. But, when a child was preparing to leave her father, what could he do for her? He gave it some thought but came up empty-handed. No matter what he might do, it would be too much.

Belgrieve sat there with a furrowed brow. It was like Angeline's worries were contagious. When all was said and done, he thought it was a cause for celebration that

Ange was working through her own thoughts and emotions rather than relying on her father's teachings. He had no intention of interfering with that. But still, a part of him felt a bit lonely.

It really is troublesome, being a parent. Belgrieve smiled wryly as he twisted his beard.

CHAPTER 102

THE BREEZE OFF THE NYNDIA MOUNTAINS

The breeze off the Nyndia Mountains caused clouds of dust to bloom on their way through Istafar. As the season gradually shifted to fall, what had already been a dry region began to feel all the more parched, and the dust particles in the air brought Percival to a coughing fit. He pressed his sachet against his face.

“You okay, Percy?”

“*Cough...* I can’t stand this air.”

“Can’t really help it when it’s this dry. It’s at its worst in the fall. Heh heh... I see even the Exalted Blade has a weakness.”

“Do you want a candy to suck on, mister?”

“No need. You keep them.” Percival reached out and patted Lucille on the shoulder.

“Looks like that puppy’s taken a liking to you.” Kasim cackled.

“Truly! Will you be lonely, mister?”

“Yeah, I sure will. I’m gonna cry here. How about you? Hmm?” Percival grinned as he pinched her drooping dog ears and flapped them about.

Lucille’s cheeks flushed red. She blinked and said, “I’m lonely... Let’s shake it up again sometime.”

“Wait for me in Turnera. Don’t catch a cold,” Percival said, patting her roughly on the head.

Yakumo looked on with an odd smile plastered on her face. “This looks illegal to me.”

“Percy, do you have a thing for younger girls?” Kasim teased, beaming at him.

Percival heaved a tired sigh. "There you go again..."

Everyone shared a cheery laugh.

There were several stagecoaches in the square; some were preparing to depart, while others had only just arrived. They were all packed full of passengers and cargo, adding even more chaos to the already crowded streets. Just across the square, an overloaded wagon's busted axles were squealing as several people pushed it from behind, but they weren't getting anywhere. The irritated owner was yelling about something or another.

"We'll make sure the package makes it in one piece, Bell. This is where we part ways for now," Duncan said, shifting the bags on his back.

"I'm sorry for the trouble, Duncan, and thank you. Take care along the way."

"Ha ha ha! I have Yakumo and Lucille with me; no need to worry. I will pray for your reunion with Dame Satie."

"We'll do our best. Give our regards to Graham."

"That I will. You've helped me a good deal, Ishmael. If you ever find the chance, you should stop by Turnera."

"That is a... bit far... But I would like to visit someday," Ishmael said, smiling as he and Duncan gripped one another by the hand.

"Now then..." Yakumo said, taking out her pipe and sticking the stem between her lips. "Even if we do arrive before the snow, we'll be leaving in spring at the earliest. We make it big in the south and take our vacation in the frigid north? Sounds backwards to me, but I for one will be taking it easy."

"There's no entertainment in Turnera..." Angeline reminded her.

Yakumo frowned. "Hmm... It was on the outskirts, yes? Then there isn't much I can do. I'll buy a few things along the way."

"The baked sweets from Bordeaux are good," Angeline suggested. "So is the ale."

"We'll also be stopping by a town called Rodina that's famous for its pork," said

Duncan.

"Not bad, not bad. But it'll be cold by the time we get there. I need something stronger than that to drink."

They would need to make haste if they wanted to reach Turnera before the roads were sealed off by snow. However, they were adept travelers and skilled adventurers as well. *I can rest at ease leaving it to them*, Belgrieve reasoned.

The stagecoach housing the three voyagers soon left, despite their reluctance to part, and it wasn't long before the rest would be on their way as well.

Belgrieve took a deep breath as he looked around. It was still as lively as ever with carriages coming to and fro. That large wagon that had been causing all that commotion moments before had disappeared to who knew where. He noticed a somewhat lonely look on Angeline's face. She had been acting strangely as of late, and Belgrieve was already quite concerned about her. He put an arm around her shoulders to embrace her, and ruffled up her hair with his free hand.

Angeline wriggled ticklishly. "Agh!"

"Don't make that face, Ange. You're worrying your old man here."

"Hee hee..." Angeline happily nuzzled her face into his chest but suddenly pulled away.
"When are we departing?"

"Well, we have to wait for Touya and Maureen..."

"What are they doing? Never mind, I'm starving over here. Let's get something to eat."

"We should start by returning to the inn. It's too dusty here. *Hack*," Percival said with a grimace as he began to cough once more.

Kasim nodded. "We do need to pack our bags, after all. I'm sure young Touya will return to the inn when he's ready."

And so, they retired to their lodgings, splitting off to their respective rooms to inspect their bags.

Unlike the mountain road from Mansa or the treacherous route to the Earth Navel,

they would not need to prepare for any significant amount of camping. They would be traveling down spacious highways, presumably meeting plenty of merchants along the way. In the worst case, it would only take a bit of money to procure food and water.

With that said, Belgrieve still had the large bag and cookware he had brought as well as the canteen hanging from his waist. He packed portable food and medicine, bandages, cloth, and various small tools, placing them in the bag based on their weight, their fragility, and how often he expected to use them.

All the while, Kasim observed him amusedly from where he sat on his bed. "Ah, this takes me back. I remember we used to watch you pack like this."

"Right," said Percival, who had long since finished stuffing his small sack. "We tried to help, but Bell did a better job, so we'd just end up watching."

"Was that how it happened? Didn't you all have your own equipment to look after?" Belgrieve wondered.

"The bare minimum, yeah." Percival hoisted up his bag. "But you were always the one with the biggest bag."

"And you'd always come out with just what we needed when we needed it."

"It's all about having the right person in the right place. If any one of you carried the large bag, you wouldn't be able to fight when it came to it. Having me carry it was most efficient for the party. That's all there is to it."

"Yeah, I guess so. In pure combat prowess, you were certainly the weakest," Percival said in all earnestness.

Kasim burst into laughter. "Heh heh heh! Not going to sugarcoat it, huh? But how about now? Do you think you'd lose to Bell?"

"Nah. My apologies to you, Bell, but I don't feel like I'd lose."

"Me neither. It's just how it is," Kasim added.

"Tell me something I don't know..." Belgrieve scratched his head. They were being as frank with him as could be, but it was oddly comforting to him. This was far easier for him to take than having everyone else put him on a pedestal for no apparent reason.

Gradually, Percival was growing less awkward and seemed more at ease with himself.

"But I was also the most relieved when Bell carried the supplies. I could see the rest of us getting so immersed in battle we'd break things without even noticing."

"Hmm, I can see it. Once battle started, you and Satie would forget about everything else—troublesome as it was."

"Like you were any better. Quit acting like you had any common sense. Right, Bell?"

"Ha ha, right! You also got pretty carried away, Kasim."

The three laughed merrily. Then, Kasim heaved a sigh and put on his cap. "How do you think Satie's doing?"

"That's what we're going to find out. When we meet, I'll start by apologizing... Then, we'll fight and settle the score once and for all," Percival said with a chuckle.

Belgrieve smiled. *Come to think of it, Percival and Satie's spars were always a series of draws...* He had witnessed Percival's strength at the Earth Navel, but it was still unclear who was stronger. Perhaps it would be like old times again, where both would be writhing on the ground, holding their heads, having struck one another at the very same moment.

Kasim folded his hands behind his head. "Do you think she polished her sword skills? Or perhaps she turned to magic instead?"

"Well, she had a talent for both, she did... You never know. Maybe she used both to come up with her own unique skills."

"I can see it... Well, I just hope she's doing good for herself."

"She's not the sort who'll keel over that easily. I'm sure she's fit as a fiddle."

Though they were cracking jokes, there was something off with how Kasim and Percival spoke. It was like they were putting up a strong front of overblown cheer to cover up their anxieties. After all, not a single one of them could have the slightest clue of how she was actually doing now. Naturally, Belgrieve had entertained the worst-case scenario himself. He didn't want to jinx things, so he refused to say it aloud.

The more he reminisced about old memories, the more it felt like a dream to be with those same old comrades in arms. He had more wrinkles on his face now, and so did Kasim and Percival. They had all grown beards and their hair was longer. But when they told stories, he found himself sparkling with childlike glee once more. That was why he had to find Satie no matter what. Only then would he, and Percival and Kasim, finally make amends with a past they had all left behind.

Suddenly, Angeline crossed his mind. Right now, she was in the transitional period between childhood and adulthood. He wondered if she too would be reminiscing with Anessa, Miriam, and Marguerite like this when she was all grown up one day. Luckily, the girl was blessed with good friends.

When Ange turns forty, I'll be halfway through my sixties. I don't even know if I'll still be alive. But that's still a long way off. By then, surely she won't be asking me to dote on her all the time anymore. When that happens, what adjustments will I have to make too? It's difficult to picture...

Though it excited him to think about what the future might hold, it left him feeling a bit empty as well. It seemed there was some difference between what he understood logically and what he felt on an emotional level. *I've lived forty years, and it's still nothing but worries...* He closed his eyes.

Belgrieve was sitting there stock-still with a vial of medicine in his hands as he mulled things over when the shrill whinny of a horse outside the window brought him back to the present.

Percival was looking at him inquisitively. "What's wrong? Your hands have stopped."

"Hmm? Oh... Just doing a bit of thinking..."

"About Ange, I'm sure."

Belgrieve flinched and stopped moving again.

"Bull's-eye, bull's-eye!" Kasim crowed, cackling.

"Something happen? Did you get in a fight?"

"I've been thinking... It's almost time for her to go independent. Leave the nest."

“Hmm?”

“You think so? I haven’t known her for long... But from the way she acts, do you think she’s acting like someone prepared to leave her father? Not that I’d know anything about that.” Percival, with his head cocked to the side inquisitively, recalled the sight of Angeline fawning all over Belgrieve.

Belgrieve rubbed his head, a wry smile on his face. “Well, how to put it...? She has a lot going on.”

“Isn’t Ange making it big in Orphen already? She left the nest ages ago. Going independent doesn’t mean she can never come and visit, right? It certainly doesn’t mean she has to grow to *hate* you.”

“Back when I was Ange’s age, I couldn’t stand my parents.”

“I wasn’t talking to you, Percy. I don’t even know what my parents look like.”

“That’s just as irrelevant, fool. In the first place, can you think of any reason Ange would hate Bell?”

“Yeah, no.”

“If by ‘leave the nest,’ you mean for her to go live on her own, she already went and did that. So what’s this independence you’re talking about? For her to stop wanting you to pamper her?”

“Uh, hmm, well, right...” Belgrieve twisted his beard, struggling to find the right words. It wasn’t like he wanted to stop pampering her either. He couldn’t put his point into any definitive words, but it was undoubtedly a kind of parental instinct.

At that moment, the door opened, and Angeline popped her head in. “Maggie’s hungry, so we’re going to the market... Want anything, dad?”

“If they have any biscuits that will last a while, could you buy two bags?”

“Got it! I’ll be back.”

“Yeah, come back soon. Take care.”

The door clicked shut behind her. Percival and Kasim grinned at Belgrieve's heavy sigh.

"Yeah, that's *totally* the girl who's gonna go independent. So what were you saying again?"

"Now, now. Ange loves Bell; we already knew that."

"Oh for crying out... Did you want anything from the market?"

"No."

"Not really."

"Good grief."

Belgrieve let out a tired sigh as he turned back to his bag.

The two could barely stifle their laughter.

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The dust in the air had begun to settle as the winds died down, but a kind of haze lingered over the crowded street as fine grains of sand were kicked up by the plodding feet of pedestrian traffic. This kind of atmosphere occurred in Orphen occasionally, but Istafar was in an arid zone, so its sand clouds were a different beast.

"Ick! You don't have to be Percy to be done in by this stuff. Is it just me or is it especially dry today?"

"My throat's prickly... I wanna get out of this, and fast."

"Do you think those three will get there safely?"

"It should be fine. Duncan's been all over, and Yakumo and Lucille are wandering adventurers. They're a lot better at traveling than we are."

"Let's stop standing around and talking. Can't we find somewhere to sit? My throat's parched."

The girls frowned in the face of the unfamiliar desert air. Nevertheless, they endeavored on and scoured the food stalls for something to eat. Though a cloud of dust lingered in the air, it did little to mask the fine scents coming from all over. Be it the smoke that rose as meat juices hit charcoal or the fragrant steam that escaped from pots of soup when the lids were removed, it all commingled in the sandy wind.

Angeline restlessly looked around before buying some well-baked biscuits. They were tough to chew, but they lasted a long time and were priceless treasures for travel and long-term requests. Though the biscuits here were slightly different from the ones in Orphen, this was still a city that saw many wayfarers and stocked their own kind accordingly.

Once they'd finished buying what had been requested of them, they purchased meat skewers, chicken and bean soup, slices of thin bread, and mint water before finding a seat at a table behind one of the stalls. The area had been sectioned off with hanging fabrics which blocked the dust enough that Angeline could stop scrunching her face against the wind.

Marguerite, who was famished, immediately began stuffing her cheeks with meat from a skewer. She spooned some beans into her mouth, then dipped the bread in the soup before devouring it. Angeline watched her absentmindedly from across the table. "What... You're not gonna eat?" Marguerite asked her, evidently taking notice.

Angeline picked up her spoon, apparently only just remembering it was there.

"Still mulling it all over?" Anessa asked, her brow somewhat furrowed in concern.

"Not exactly... I was just wondering what sort of person Satie is," Angeline said before eating a spoonful of beans. The beans had been well stewed, and soft enough that she could mash the beans just by pressing them against the top of her mouth with her tongue.

"Well, she's an elf. I'm sure she's beautiful," Miriam reasoned, tearing off a piece of bread.

"Right, Maggie and Maureen are both pretty, after all."

Their gazes fell on Marguerite, who bashfully looked down at her plate. "What're you lookin' at me for?" She silently ate another spoonful. The tips of her ears were just a little flushed.

Miriam giggled. “Don’t be shy. Hey, Maggie, do elves still look young when they hit their forties?”

“Hmm? Well, yeah, something like that. Everyone starts looking older around fifty or sixty, but it varies from elf to elf. I can’t say anything for sure.”

Although the elves were said to be a race that aspired to a calm, quiet lifestyle, all of the elves they’d come across—Graham notwithstanding—had their idiosyncrasies. The elves who, unable to stand the customary lifestyle of their race, would set off for adventure tended to be a bit strange.

Angeline picked up the jug of mint water, her mind racing. In the stories she’d heard, Satie was lively, strong-minded, and Percival’s equal when it came to the sword. That had been when the elf was still young, so it was unknown how she had grown up to be. She was certain Satie must be a charming young lady, but if she really was as lively as she’d heard, perhaps she was similar to Marguerite. *If that’s true, it’ll be quite bothersome to have her as a mother.*

Suddenly, something dark and foreboding in the deep recesses of her heart began to rear up. She shook her head as though to drive it away.

She wanted a mother—that was how she sincerely felt. *And how wonderful it would be if that mother was someone Belgrieve truly loved. I should rejoice. What’s there to be jealous about? It doesn’t matter who becomes my mother; I’ll always be my dad’s daughter.*

A hand reached from across the table, pinching Angeline’s cheek.

“Grr...”

“You had a scary look on your face. Guess you really are worrying, stupid.”

“What do you mean, ‘stupid’...” Angeline reached across and squeezed Marguerite’s cheek in kind.

Anessa, looking tired of their antics, grabbed the two arms crossed over the table. “What do you think you’re doing? Seriously...”

“But Ange, you shouldn’t keep it to yourself. That’s no good,” Miriam chided her. “Bottle it up, and you’re going to go boom.”

"Hmm..." Angeline fell silent as her cheek was pulled in every which direction. She understood that, but she was at a loss for words. As her mouth worked over unspoken, incoherent words, Marguerite released her cheek before grabbing Angeline's wrist and pulling her own cheek out of its grasp.

"It really throws me off when you're like that. If you're thinking yourself in circles, how about some sparring? You need to let loose a little."

"Ugh... Now Maggie's trying to enlighten *me*. What humiliation..."

"The hell you say to me?"

"Settle down, you two! You're going to spill something!" Anessa frantically held down the rattling table; Miriam chuckled.

Messing around with Marguerite would clear her mind a bit. *Come to think of it, dad got along with Mr. Percy after having a big fight...* Not that she was on bad terms with Marguerite like those two had been, but it was good to have someone she could let loose with.

Angeline picked up her bowl of soup and gulped down its contents in one go.

"Ah, that's the spirit. Feeling better?"

"Yeah, a bit..."

Marguerite ran a hand through her hair to straighten it. "I wonder what sort of place the capital is. It's gotta be different from Orphen, I guess."

"It's the central city of Rhodesia. I'm sure it's bigger than Orphen. It might even be bigger than Estogal City."

"Hey, Ange, how was Estogal?" asked Miriam.

"Estogal City... There was a big river, and it was like there was a city built on each side of it. A lot of boats went through, and there were houses built atop floating platforms..."

"A river, huh? There weren't any big rivers in elven territory... Never even been on a boat before."

"The capital has a river too... And it's close to the sea," Anessa added as she spread out a map. The imperial capital—as the starting point of the Rhodesian Empire—bore the name Rhodesia as well. It was situated at the base of the mountains, overlooking a great, sprawling plain. The waterworks projects of the emperors of old resulted in its network of great canals connecting it to the nearby ocean and the maritime trade that brought. The land was fertile, and its location made it a trade hub. Rhodesia continued to develop from the passage of many people and goods.

It was, of course, exciting to go someplace they had never been before. Unfamiliar sights, people they'd never met before, and foods they'd never eaten—adventurers longed for these things twice as much as the average person.

"The capital, huh..." Angeline muttered. *Come to think of it, I met the crown prince last time I was summoned to Archduke Estogal's house. I don't really get aristocracy, but since he's the crown prince, does that mean he's going to be the next emperor? I don't plan on seeing him again. I can't say he made a good impression...* She propped up her head with one hand.

"What? Lost in thought again?" Miriam inquired.

"Hmm... When I went to the archduke's place, I met the crown prince..."

"Ah, thinking about the capital must have jogged your memory... The crown prince? I can't even imagine what he'd be like."

"If I remember right, you said he was really handsome or something. You even shared a dance... Hey, Ange, why don't you try marrying into money?" Miriam suggested with a teasing grin.

Angeline pouted. "He was a beanpole. Didn't feel reliable in the slightest... I had more fun dancing with dad in Turnera."

"Ah... Right. Ange's measure of an ideal man is based on Mr. Bell."

"Uh-huh, so that's how it is. Well, if Mr. Bell's your baseline, that's quite a high hurdle for any man."

"My dad *is* extraordinary..." Angeline puffed out her cheeks as she picked up the jug of mint water.

Marguerite sank back into her chair. "You're gonna be single for life," she said frankly.

"Shut it. I don't want to hear that from you, Maggie..."

"I'm fine. I like being on my own better."

"Girls who say stuff like that... often get tricked by strange men."

"Maggie's pretty simple, after all."

"Say what?! Who do you think I am?!" Marguerite seethed, earning chuckles from the other three girls.

Angeline happened to meet Anessa's eyes. Her friend smiled and winked at her; Angeline answered with a shrug and took a swig of mint water. The tension had drained from her shoulders, and she felt at ease. *It's good to have friends.*

CHAPTER 103

A LONG, DARK CORRIDOR

A long, dark corridor ended at a large iron door. At a glance, the hefty, solemnly ornamented portal looked as though it were the entrance to a prison ward. However, beyond this door was a small, secret garden within the palace. The short shrubs and bushes formed orderly rows, bursting in prismatic displays of beautiful flowers. However, the walls around it were high and narrow, cutting the sky above into a small, rectangular sliver. Though beautiful, it was cramped and suffocating as well.

At the back of the garden, a solitary man with handsome features and glistening golden hair sat in a small, weathered chair. It was none other than Prince Benjamin.

He sat perfectly still, staring at the small segment of the sky above, until he heard the door open with a weighty yet unpleasantly shrill sound to admit a man.

“Your Highness,” said the approaching man—Francois.

Benjamin nodded his head ever so slightly, but his eyes did not shift to Francois. “It looks like you failed,” he remarked in an amused tone.

“My sincerest apologies. The adventurer was no use.”

“So it was too much for Hector? Well, she’s someone who managed to give Schwartz the slip. It’s understandable.” Benjamin laughed aloud, finally looking at Francois. “But she has a covenant. She cannot stray far from the capital.”

“A covenant? Of what sort?”

“Do you want to know? Beneath this land sleeps the husk of an old god who fell in battle against Solomon. She entered into a covenant with it.”

“An old god...” Francois’s face paled. The words remained only in legend; before Solomon, there had been a pantheon of old gods who ruled over humankind. But, as he recalled the legends, he felt that something was off.

"It was felled by Solomon? According to legend, it should have been Great Vienna who defeated those gods."

Benjamin cackled. "Who's to say everything passed down is the truth? The Church of Vienna said as much to lend itself some credibility. Heh heh... Talking about history does tend to drag on, though. Let's have a nice long chat about it next time."

"Y-Yes sir." The topic had come as a bolt from the blue, and Francois seemed bewildered by it.

Benjamin crossed his legs and laced his fingers behind his head. "Well, it may be called an 'old god,' but it lost its strength long ago. All that remains of it are a few of its lingering regrets, and those only faintly."

"But is that enough to enter a covenant...?"

"Ha ha... I call it a covenant, but that doesn't mean the god has any clear will left in the world. Just the power—the system, rather—remains. And you can still abuse it if you go through the proper steps. When it comes to forming barriers and realms, she gained the powers that let her escape even Schwartz. In exchange, she cannot leave this land. It's one of those double-edged swords."

"I... I see..."

Benjamin smiled and clapped his hands together. From seemingly nowhere, a maid appeared bearing a tea tray. Her hollow expression showed no hint of emotion. "So what happened to Hector?"

"I had him return to the capital, temporarily."

"I see. Hmm... Let's have Hector set up a surveillance net in the capital. You take your soldiers to Findale again. Now that we've found her once, it's only a matter of time before we catch her again... Oh, right. Maitreya shall accompany you. You should have no trouble if you take her with you."

"Certainly... But Your Highness, I couldn't take your guard away..."

"Ha ha, don't worry about me. I have other capable guards."

As though coming to a sudden realization, Francois spun around. The maid was now

standing right behind him, her hollow eyes staring into his soul. He stiffly bowed to Benjamin before practically fleeing from the garden.

The heavy, iron door clapped shut, its echoes reverberating through the stillness.

Benjamin remained sitting, staring at the blue sky above, laced with wispy strands of clouds drifting across it.

From out of the darkness came the voice of a child: "What a farce."

Benjamin glanced over as a small shadow emerged. She wore black clothing, and her face was veiled. The child could not have been more than ten years old, but there was confidence in her step, and her voice was clear and articulate.

"Oh, Maitreya. You were here?"

"How long do you intend to play around?"

"Life's all about having a little fun."

"If you want to play, play seriously. It's not even a game if you hold back."

"Harsh. But the elf really *is* formidable. She's the first to challenge me and Schwartz in such a long time."

Maitreya shrugged. "That ends now."

"Heh heh heh, I'll be waiting for the good news."

Right before Benjamin's eyes, Maitreya's form disappeared into the shadows.

○

The road from Istafar to the imperial capital was quite diligently maintained. Although it wasn't paved, the dirt that comprised it was well leveled with only occasional bumps and dips. Even as countless wagons of all shapes and sizes passed over it, the wheels never caught on anything. It made sense, as trade with the east was one of the pillars supporting the economy of the Rhodesian Empire—and in foreign trade, ease of transport correlated directly to profit.

Angeline's party managed to cross into imperial territory with no issue whatsoever. They traveled in stagecoaches and took jobs guarding lone peddlers as well, stopping at several towns and villages along the way.

In addition to Tyldes, Rhodesia shared its southern border with the Dadan Empire and Lucrecia, the latter of which was the central hub of the Church of Vienna. Though the towns on this borderland were constructed with mostly imperial architecture, the style blended naturally with a varied international flair.

These foreign colors did fade the closer they got to the capital, but the towns they passed still felt fresh and novel. Everything was new to Marguerite, and even Angeline's party had no knowledge of the world beyond Estogal. The unfamiliar sights, the buildings that were subtly different from the ones in Orphen, and of course the food—it was all a joy to behold.

There was a clattering sound as they passed by a wagon loaded to the brim. Angeline shifted a bit in her seat to find a more comfortable position for her bum. With the road so flat, the jolt she felt whenever they ran over even the smallest stone felt that much greater.

She yawned and stretched, staring at the sights that passed by. The base of a mountain was encroaching on the right side of the wagon, while a vast plain sprawled out on the left with a forest beyond that. She saw what appeared to be young adventurers coming and going from the forest's edge, perhaps to gather materials. The weather was fine, and the sun was warm; it was a calm, clear autumn day. The winds that occasionally caressed her skin were a bit chilly, unlike the southern breeze she had grown used to. If it was like that in these parts, then the north would already have been visited by a bracing cold.

For a long while, Marguerite had been leaning out over the side of the coach, staring at the scenery. She never seemed to grow tired of it—or perhaps these sights inspired visions of the adventures she would go on someday. Feeling a bit mischievous, Angeline stealthily crept over behind the elf, reached out, and poked her under the armpit.

“Hwah! What do ya think you’re doing, idiot?!”

“Do you see anything...?” Angeline giggled as she clambered up beside her.

Sticking out her lips, Marguerite poked her flank in return. “It’s been nothing but forest for a while now, but it looks like that’ll end soon. How long until the next town?”

“Not long,” said Touya. “The closer you get to the capital, the less space there is between each town.”

Certainly, it seemed a more frequent event now that they’d been on the road for a little under half a day. *It must be because there are so many people around there*, thought Angeline.

“Findale, huh? It’s been a while,” Percival murmured.

Kasim nodded. “I never went out of my way to go to Findale, but I’ve passed through a fair few times.”

“What sort of town is it?” Miriam asked.

Percival held his chin and narrowed his eyes. “Well, it’s a town right up by the capital. If you’re headed to the capital, you’ll pass through it more often than not. That means it has a lot of visitors, and it’s a pretty big place...”

“When Rhodesia fought the great cavalry of Tyldes, it served as a stronghold, stopping the invasion just short of the capital,” Ishmael chimed in, taking over the explanation. “The walls and parade ground of the old fort still remain.”

Anessa, who had been nodding along, chimed in: “Orphen is also a trade center. Are you saying it’s even bigger than that?”

“I don’t know about Orphen, but Findale shares in the prosperity of the capital, the central city of the entire empire.”

As far as Angeline was concerned, Orphen was already “the big city.” A city larger than *that* was more than her imagination could handle. Admittedly, Estogal City had been large, but her immense reluctance to actually go there and the fact she hadn’t done any exploring meant it hardly left an impression on her.

“Ahh,” Miriam sighed, rubbing her hands against her cheeks. “Still, that bath was nice. My skin feels nice and smooth.”

“Yeah. It’s like all the fatigue was drained out of me,” Anessa agreed cheerfully.

The town they'd stayed at the night before had a natural hot spring, and the water there was of such high quality, many customers had traveled from afar just to bathe in it. Not ones to let such an opportunity slip by, the party went for a dip and washed away some of their traveling fatigue with the grime of the road. They were feeling quite refreshed when they boarded their next stagecoach.

"It was quite a nice bath. It reminded me of home."

"There was a hot spring in your hometown, Ms. Maureen?"

"There was. It was a cold place, you see—but the spring made it nice and cozy," Maureen exclaimed as she rummaged through her bag and produced a parcel wrapped in thin bark. It seemed to be a pastry of wheat dough steamed in the vapor of the hot spring.

Touya looked at it drowsily. "When'd you get the chance to buy that?"

"Just before we set off. Oh, I have enough for everyone."

Maureen held out more parcels of the steamed buns. Angeline and the other youths wryly accepted, while Belgrieve and his middle-aged comrades turned it down for the time being.

Angeline bit into the steamed bun. There were small, brown grains that had been hidden beneath the exterior—seemingly beans that had been boiled in sweet syrup. It was still faintly warm and fluffy, with a springy consistency.

When she finished the bun, she noticed that Belgrieve appeared to be deep in thought about something. Angeline nestled up beside him.

"What's wrong, dad?"

"Hmm? Oh, I was just thinking about how they must've already started preparing for winter in Turnera," Belgrieve answered. He continued, murmuring: "Do you think the onions are in the ground yet? Have they sown the wheat yet?"

Angeline felt strangely happy, and so she leaned against him. He looked at her curiously. "What's gotten into you?" he asked.

"It's... It's nothing..."

Even if he goes on a journey and meets his old friends, dad is still dad—that realization came to Angeline with a sense of relief. When she tried reasoning through things with her head, she would only confuse herself, but it was trivial things like this that could calm her heart.

“What use is worrying about the fields when you’re all the way out here?” Kasim teased.

“You have a point, but I can’t help wondering about it. I’m a farmer, deep down.”

“Good grief. When I look at you, I have no idea why *I’m* still calling myself an adventurer,” Percival said, leaning against the side of the coach.

Touya moved his bags onto his lap. “Yeah, what with Mr. Belgrieve being so strong when he hasn’t been one for years...”

“I know, right? Why don’t you just get reinstated, Bell?”

“How can I be an adventurer when I’m out here worrying about the harvest?” Belgrieve said with a chuckle.

Only a short while ago, Angeline would have been over the moon if Belgrieve had made a comeback as an adventurer. She would still be happy now, of course, but strangely enough, she didn’t find herself bursting with joy at the prospect anymore.

“Come to think of it, why did you all decide to become adventurers?” Touya asked, the question having just occurred to him. “I know you’re not one at the moment, Mr. Belgrieve, but you *did* want to be one long ago, right?”

Belgrieve twisted the hairs of his beard, a troubled look on his face. “At this point, I can’t remember clearly, but... I lost my parents early on. Yes... As I recall, I was just thinking, ‘I can’t stay here. I need to be somewhere else, doing something else.’ I was young... Back then, I had a bit of confidence in my skill. Once I reached the big city, I learned I was just a frog in a well.”

Angeline puffed out her cheeks and pressed her body against him. “That’s not true. Dad is incredibly strong. I became an adventurer because I admired him...”

“Well, that’s how it is for you,” Anessa said, shrugging and sighing. Everyone shared a merry laugh.

And yet, though Touya joined in, his heart didn't seem to be fully in it. "What I'd give... You really are strong, Mr. Belgrieve."

"I wouldn't say that... Now, how about you two? What spurred you on?" Belgrieve turned the conversation towards Percival and Kasim. The two exchanged a look, both tilting their heads in thought.

"In my case, I just couldn't think of anything else to do. How about you, Kasim?"

"I was an orphaned slum boy. I had to put food on the table somehow."

"Oh, now that you mention it—wait, weren't you dining and dashing the first time we met? Don't you remember, Bell?"

"Yeah, that's right. Percy said, 'A thief! We're bringing him in!' and so we ran after you. Then you blasted us away with magic."

"That one hurt like hell. It was love at first fight—I knew I just had to bring you into the party. And then I began chasing you for a different reason."

"Percy was running at me like his paycheck depended on it. I was sure he was gonna hand me straight to the soldiers, so I was flailing around even after he caught me. Well, after that, Bell got us to calm down and talk, and I joined the party after that."

"Hmm, so that's..." Anessa blinked. "Huh? You were an orphan too, Mr. Kasim?"

Kasim chuckled and rubbed his nose. "You got that right. Heh heh! That takes me back. They didn't have many jobs for a dirty brat like me. When I couldn't find work, I had to get up to no good to survive."

"Wait—then that means you were an orphan too, Anne?" said Touya.

Anessa nodded. "Yeah, me and Merry, we grew up in the same orphanage. We had to fend for ourselves somehow, so we decided on adventuring."

"Right, right. The sisters wanted us to do normal jobs, but we forced our way past them! It was so much trouble when we were first starting out," Miriam chortled.

"I see..." Touya folded his arms. "How about you, Mr. Ishmael?"

"Well, I didn't exactly want to become an adventurer... It's just, hiring people to gather the reagents I need takes time and money..."

"Ha ha! So you decided to do it yourself?"

"Precisely. However, now I'm spending more time on the road than in the lab... It feels like I've gotten my priorities backwards, somewhat," Ishmael said with a wry smile.

"*Nom...*" Maureen bit into her third steamed bun. "You've all got splendid reasons. In my case, I simply hated life in elven lands."

"Same here," Marguerite agreed. "But you know—going on adventures just to put bread on the table? It doesn't sit right with me. You gotta dream bigger—there's a whole world out there."

"That's just how a lot of work is, Maggie. It's the same for adventuring and any other job."

"Hmm... Well, I *like* being an adventurer. Don't you?"

The party all smiled and nodded. *Maggie sure is innocent*, Angeline mused, feeling a warmth in her heart along with a desire to pick on her. She leaned back against the edge of the wagon, enchanted by her friend, before turning to Touya. "What about you...?" she asked.

"Huh? Me? Oh, for me... It's like rebellion."

"Rebellion?"

"Yeah, well, against my parents. Although that might sound funny to you, Ms. Angeline."

"Ha ha! I get you. I really do. It was the same for me," Percival roared, patting Touya on the shoulder.

Angeline pouted. "You need to get along with family..."

"I guess so... Ha ha..." Touya gave a troubled laugh and scratched his cheek.

Over the course of the next hour, they passed by several horse-drawn wagons, some

dismounted riders drawing their horses along by the reins, and other travelers on foot. Overtaking all these people headed in the same direction, they gradually drew nearer to the city. Angeline leaned out the coach window to look ahead, holding herself up with one hand on the sill. Beyond a ridge of hills big and small, she saw a tall, slender structure.

"I think I can see a tower..."

"Huh? Where?" Marguerite asked, leaning out as well.

"That must be Findale's watchtower," Ishmael explained. "At night, they light a fire at the top to guide travelers."

"Hmm, so it's like a lighthouse. Interesting."

Eventually, they were close enough to hear the noisy jumble of neighing horses and shouts and laughter from the large open gateway in the fortress walls through which many people were exiting and entering.

"Wow!" Marguerite exclaimed the moment she passed through those doors. There were lines of stone buildings small and large, some of which were gorgeously decorated with colorful gems in the mortar. It seemed every building was at least two stories high, and most were three. And in the gaps between buildings, looming over the alleyways, the flags of the empire billowed as they dangled from ropes stretched across the alleys. The sky seemed far narrower than it had been in Orphen. The atmosphere here was incredibly energetic; the people were of all races, their faces bringing to mind the south, the west, and the east, and there were beastmen with all sorts of features among them.

If things are like this before we've even reached the capital, it must be even greater there, Angeline reasoned. Though she was looking forward to it, she was also a bit overwhelmed, and these conflicting emotions caused her to cling to Belgrieve's arm.

"Amazing... It's quite lively," she said.

"Yeah, I'm stunned... Orphen was big, but this is..." Even Belgrieve was taken aback. *I'm the same as dad*, she realized and felt some relief. By contrast, Percival and Kasim didn't seem particularly impressed, and they even yawned at times.

The coach came to a halt shortly after they had entered town in a large open square

that seemed to serve as a transportation hub. All the passengers they'd been riding with shuffled out before they too stepped down with bags in hand. There were stalls set up around the square's perimeter as well as peddlers unloading their carts.

"Whoa! Why are there so many people here, huh? Where did they all come from?" Marguerite loudly exclaimed, practically bouncing.

"Hell if I know," Percival bluntly replied. "Must've crawled outta somewhere."

Anessa and Miriam were also nervously getting their bearings. It was similar to Orphen in terms of appearance, but the mood was quite different. It was noisy with all of these different energies clashing with one another. Apparently, the capital was only a short distance away, though it would be a bit far to go on foot; preferably, they wanted to find another coach.

Angeline took stock of their surroundings and soon picked up on something strange in the air. The people passing by would send them strange looks and whisper furtively. She followed their gazes and realized they seemed to be focused on Marguerite and Maureen.

Is it because elves are rare? But those looks are a bit too unsettling for that... Angeline let her eyes wander idly as she adjusted the position of the sword on her hip.

All of a sudden, a scream pierced the air—it came from the man whose arm Marguerite was currently twisting, bringing him to his knees and eliciting cries of pain. The elf's sharp eyes bored right through him.

"What's the big deal, trying to grab someone like that?"

"A-Augh! Save me! It's the wanted girl! The elf!" the man screamed, instantly gathering all eyes on them. Most only watched from afar, but a few adventurer-looking folks picked up their weapons and made as if to intervene.

Marguerite reached for her sword in a rage. "Wanted? Me?! What, just because I'm an elf?!"

"Wait, Maggie—calm down!" Belgrieve called out as he and Percival tried to calm her fury. The approaching adventurers were struck breathless at Percival's intimidating air, like that of a ravenous lion.

"Wh-Who the hell are you...?"

"Could you explain what's going on here?" Belgrieve inquired. "Is being an elf enough to expect persecution in this city?"

The adventurers exchanged looks. "Not exactly... There's been a notice doing the rounds these past few days—says to catch any elf we see."

"There was an elf that lashed out at some imperial soldiers a while back," another chimed in.

"The bounty's pretty high too. It's only one specific elf they're looking for, but it's better to catch 'em all—they need as many leads as they can get."

"Those girls just arrived from Tyldes today. There is no reason they would be wanted in this town," Belgrieve explained.

"Hey, don't ask me. We're just doing our job here."

"Talk is cheap. You can say whatever you want, but where's the proof you're telling the truth?" another adventurer demanded.

"Then call the guards. Neither of them is the elf you're looking for. There's no need to apprehend them—a few questions should clear everything up."

"Hah! You're just gonna use that chance to run away." The adventurers were simply putting up a strong front. They were unable to move under the pressure of Percival's glare and remained transfixed and rooted to the spot. It wasn't long before there were no civilians left in their immediate vicinity. The onlookers had all retreated to a safe distance, watching over the confrontation with bated breath. More adventurers had since been drawn in by the commotion, and the party was now thoroughly encircled.

"Dammit... What's with all this? It was going so well until now... This is the worst. Do I have to hide my ears and face here too?" Marguerite murmured, quaking slightly. Her eyes brimmed with frustrated tears. Angeline placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

By contrast, Maureen seemed more curious than anything else. "How troublesome. It wasn't like this last time we were here." She didn't seem particularly alarmed by this development. Touya furrowed his brow but didn't seem to fully grasp what was going on either.

"It wasn't like this before?" Angeline whispered to him.

"No... But if an elf caused a problem, perhaps because someone tried to pick on them... Elves attract attention whether they like it or not."

That sounded plausible. After all, Marguerite would gladly get into a fight with imperial soldiers if the rest of the party weren't holding her back. *This is kinda miserable*, Angeline thought. *I'd hate it if I went to elf territory and they said all humans had to be caught because one human made a mess. But I guess most people can't make the distinction.*

Around the time both sides were growing tired of the standoff, a high-pitched voice resounded through the square.

"Ange? Is that you, Ange?!"

Angeline looked up and turned towards the voice. An extravagantly decorated carriage had come to a stop on the other side of the square, and from it, a girl had jumped out on her own and started running to her. Heedless of the fierce looks she was getting, she latched onto Angeline. "It really is you, Ange! I'm so happy to see you! Have you been well?"

"L-Lize...? What are you doing here?"

Liselotte, daughter of Archduke Estogal, happily nuzzled Angeline. Her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkling as she lifted her face. "Hee hee! A while back, my brother Francois was appointed as the captain of Prince Benjamin's elite guard! Father told me to go see how he was doing and to explore the capital while I was at it! I didn't think I'd see you here..."

"What a coincidence... Is the archduke here too, then?"

"No, father isn't doing so well. He can't go on long trips, so he entrusted everything to me."

Angeline found herself smiling. Fernand, the eldest son, had to handle government affairs as the archduke's heir, so it was a given that he couldn't leave his post. By sending Liselotte, though, that meant the second son Villard had been completely ignored.

"Yes, to run into you by pure coincidence—this must have been ordained by Almighty Vienna!" Liselotte excitedly prattled. "Hey, Ange—the day you left, Kasim disappeared too! Do you know anything?"

"Uh..." Angeline's gaze shifted to Kasim.

The magician grinned and raised a hand. "Hey, shorty. Fancy meeting you here."

"Wah! You too, Kasim?! It's like a dream! And are you by chance an elf? Are you Ange's friend? Amazing! I always wanted to meet an elf!"



"Who... who are you?" Marguerite stammered as Liselotte took her by the hand.

"I'm Liselotte! Nice to meet you, Ms. Elf!"

"O-Okay...? My name's Marguerite... Um, what?"

"Marguerite! Got it! Now, don't cry. You're so pretty, I'd love to see you happy."

"I-I'm not crying!"

This sudden interruption had completely dissipated the tension in the air. The adventurers that had accosted them exchanged looks, while Belgrieve and the others glanced back and forth between Liselotte and Angeline, not quite knowing what to make of it all either.

"Ange, you know this girl?"

"Um, well, she's Lize... Liselotte, Archduke Estogal's daughter."

"What? The archduke's daughter?" Percival narrowed his eyes. The crest on the carriage had only served to fuel the chattering of the onlooking rabble.

After looking around, Liselotte asked, "What's wrong? What happened?"

"Yes, well, um..." Angeline offered a short explanation.

Liselotte discontentedly crossed her arms. "That's completely unreasonable! You're being rude to these elves!" Puffing her chest out, Liselotte addressed the crowd. "The house of the archduke vouches for their identity! If you would raise a hand against them, know that you make an enemy of Archduke Estogal!" she proclaimed to all within the sound of her voice.

That left little room for discussion. The adventurers grudgingly sheathed their weapons and left in a huff. Though the crowd was still boisterous, it gradually dispersed until equilibrium had been restored to the square.

Angeline heaved a relieved sigh and took hold of Liselotte's hand. "Thank you, Lize. You were a huge help."

"Oh, don't worry about it—we're friends! Hey, come with me! These people are your

friends too, right? I'd love it if you could introduce me to them!"

Angeline looked to Belgrieve. "What should we do...?"

"If we stick around here, I'm sure someone else will zero in on us... How about we take her up on her offer?" Belgrieve said, respectfully bowing his head to the archduke's daughter. "I heard you were a great help to my daughter last time. Let me thank you for then, and again for today."

"Huh? Then you are Ange's dad?! Wow, it's an honor to meet you!"

"You speak of me too highly..." Belgrieve smiled wryly as Liselotte grabbed his hand.

Angeline giggled, putting a hand on her shoulder. "Your fiancé isn't with you...?"

"Ozzie's at the villa. Another noble's hosting a party there, but I got bored, so I came to Findale to play."

She's as bold as ever, Angeline mused.

Liselotte called to a tall woman standing beside the wagon. The woman's long, yellowish-green hair was braided. Perhaps she was a staff wielder, as she carried a metal rod longer than she was tall.

"Let's go, Sooty."

"Done already? You almost made my heart stop, there."

"Hee hee, but you didn't hold me back. That's why I like you."

"It's pointless to even try. So what now?"

"How about that restaurant we went to the other day? They should be able to accommodate all of us."

"Whether they can accommodate the whole group or not, no one would turn down a request from the archduke's daughter. The carriage, however, won't hold everyone."

"It's fine. We'll walk."

“Are you really a noble lady? Good grief.”

Sooty sighed before saying a few words to the carriage driver. Then, she began walking, taking the lead. Liselotte pulled Angeline by the hand.

“Let’s get going then. I want to hear about everything you’ve been up to.”

“Hmm, all right...”

The party proceeded down the main road. Showing no restraint whatsoever, Liselotte would frequently yet fluidly shift from one conversation to another, shuffling topics and conversational partners as she worked her way through the entire party. It wasn’t long before they had all warmed up to her. Her innocent, honest curiosity worked like a charm; even Marguerite seemed to forget her prior irritation and gleefully shared some of her tales.

Angeline observed everyone from the back of their procession. Belgrieve and Percival were whispering about something; though she couldn’t hear it, she could guess what it was about: an unknown elf—a wanted fugitive. She felt a bit uneasy in her heart, but for the time being, she chose to delight in her reunion with her cute friend. It wouldn’t be too late to ponder these matters after that.

The sun gradually sank to the west, its glow taking on a hint of red.

CHAPTER 104

DOWN THE BUSTLING ORPHEN STREETS

Down the bustling Orphen streets walked the flaxen-haired boy with long strides, exuding confidence with every step. Just behind him, a ginger-haired boy and a brown-haired boy walked beside each other.

“Hey... Are you two the only ones in this party?” the youngest boy asked.

“Yeah, pretty much,” said the boy beside him, scratching his cheek.

The dine-and-dashing thief they had chased blasted them away with magic, but rather than trying to apprehend him, the blond boy insisted that they should recruit him instead. It took a few days to track him down and bring him into the fold.

Though the fugitive had fought back on their first encounter, it was not like he was some kind of hardened criminal. If there had been legitimate work open to him, he would have jumped at the opportunity, so he had been overjoyed to join their party—though it turned out that the party itself turned out to be somewhat off from what he was expecting.

“I thought you’d have more people. I mean, you’ve got the spending money to invite a blockhead like me.”

“Yeah, about that...” The red-haired boy couldn’t argue with that. After all, he had also been expecting more people when he had first been invited. Once he joined, he found out he was the first new member. Apparently, the flaxen-haired boy had gotten into a fight, which prompted him to leave his previous party to form his own.

“How stupid...” their new recruit said with a fed-up sigh. “Can we really make any money like this? I’m sick and tired of gathering herbs.”

“Hmm, recklessness will be the end of us... But it might be time to take a hunting request.”

“You mean fiend slaying? Heh heh, I always wanted to give that one a try. There’s a new

kind of magic I want to test out too,” the brown-haired boy said, examining his hand front and back. He had no master, so any spell he knew was self-taught—but his technique was already astounding. Surely his skills would improve even faster if he ever had the chance to read a grimoire. This was precisely why their leader had been so adamant about chasing him down.

“Hey, what are you two doing? I’m gonna leave you behind!”

They looked ahead to see that the blond boy was quite a bit farther down the road. The two of them hurried to keep up.

When they reached the guild, it was jam-packed with a rowdy and cacophonous crowd, and with all the people coming and going, they would quickly bump into someone if they weren’t careful.

“What are we doing today?”

“Well, I think we have an accurate gauge of this guy’s abilities and personality now. It’s a good time to take a hunting request.”

“I... guess so. It’ll be our first hunt together, so we should put some thought into it...”

“Hey, the three of us will be just—” the golden-haired boy began to say before suddenly cutting himself off as he stared intently at some singular point in the crowd.

Curious, the red-haired boy followed his line of sight. “An... elf?”

“Wow. A real one.”

Long ears and silver hair—there was indeed a young elf among the crowd. In terms of age, she wasn’t so different from the boys. Although elves didn’t change much in appearance as they grew older, her expression and posture still exuded youthful naivete. The guild was abuzz with the entrance of a rare elf, and the girl was quickly surrounded by adventurers.

“I’ve never seen an elf before.”

“Guess they really do exist. I always thought they were only in faerie tales.”

“Sounds like they’re arguing about something. You think she’s all right?”

There was certainly a tense mood in the air. Whether she was strong or not, the simple fact that she was an elf meant there were plenty of parties who would want to recruit her. Those groups had begun to quarrel and attempt to intimidate one another.

To further exacerbate the tension, the elf girl showed absolutely no interest in any of their jockeying. She brushed away any hands touching her arms and swatted down attempts to grab her shoulder, answering their interest by rudely pulling down her eyelid and sticking out her tongue at them. Her incendiary attitude only added fuel to the rather precarious situation.

Somebody bumped into someone else's shoulder, the ensuing push was returned in kind, and finally, a full-on fight broke out between them. This only continued to escalate, as a flung fist hit someone it wasn't meant for, bringing a complete outsider into the brawl. The mess spiraled until it became a free-for-all.

This is no time to be looking for work, the red-haired boy thought as he backed away, shielding his new magician friend.

The brown-haired boy looked amused. "Heh heh, that's how it's got to be. Adventurers are a dangerous bunch."

"Well, violence is the main tool of our trade... Huh?"

Before he knew it, their leader was nowhere to be seen. The red-haired boy narrowed his eyes, scanning the area, only to see him weaving his way out of the crowd.

"Let's skedaddle! Meeting adjourned, adjourned!"

"R-Right... No, hold on! What are you doing with *her*?"

The blond boy was dragging the elven maiden by the arm. For her part, it didn't seem like she quite knew what was going on.

"It didn't feel right, leaving her in the middle of all that."

"Now look here... No, now's not the time to complain."

The girl had been the spark that had set off that conflagration. Although brawling occupied everybody's attention for now, once cooler heads prevailed, their interest would turn right back to her.

The brown-haired boy's curiosity got the better of him, and he began squeezing the girl's squishy cheeks. "Hmm, that's something. Her skin's as soft as silk."

"Hey, stop it, you. Who the heck are you people?"

"What does it matter? Let's just get out of here." And with that, the flaxen-haired boy left in a hurry. The elf girl allowed herself to be dragged along, offering only a slight bit of resistance.

The other two boys, left behind, exchanged looks before hurrying after them.

They managed to slip out of the guild somehow or another, reaching a generally vacant part of the street before finally catching their breath. They had been running for a good while by then, and all four of them were out of breath.

The ginger-haired boy rested his hands on his knees struggling to collect himself, and stared at the elf girl. She was panting heavily with a hand to her breast, all of her focus on taking deep breaths. "Are you all right?" he asked.

Her clear, emerald eyes turned towards him. Her gaze was piercing and seemed to see right through him. His heart skipped a beat.

The elf girl stared at each of the three boys in turn, her thick eyebrows furrowed. "What do you want?"

"I just saved you. You woulda come out pretty roughed up if you tried taking on all of them."

"Hmph. I didn't ask for anyone to save me." The elf girl turned away, not grateful in the slightest. In fact, she seemed somewhat irritated.

"Huh?" said the sandy-haired boy, a crease in his brow. "What's with your attitude?"

"I can see straight through you—don't even try to get me in your debt. You just approached me because I'm an elf, right? You're all so stupid. If you want to recruit me, at least do it after seeing how strong I am."

"Who the hell wants to recruit you? You barely got any muscle on those lanky arms of yours."

"Wh-What did you say?! That's some big talk when you all look so weak you'd be knocked over by a light breeze!"

"Me? Weak?! Now you've said it!"

"Want to try me? Very well, I'll wipe that haughty look off your face."

"Hey, wait, wait! Calm down, both of you!" the red-haired boy interjected, but neither of them listened to a word he said.

"Stand back. This stupid girl needs to be taught a lesson."

"That's my line. Your buddy here needs a bit of a beating, or he'll never learn."

The two of them drew their still-sheathed swords from their belts and struck at each other. The boy's sword smacked the elf in the hip, while her sword clocked him on the top of his head. In the end, they were both writhing on the ground in pain.

The brown-haired boy held his belly in laughter while the red-haired boy sighed.
"What were you even trying to accomplish?"

○

Belgrieve slipped out of the restaurant, citing a need for fresh air. He leaned against the back wall of the restaurant, arms folded in front of him. Another tall building stood not even three paces across the alley, confining the sky above to a long and narrow slice that cast gradually dimming light over him.

It hadn't taken too long for the meal to be thoroughly devoured, but Liselotte loved listening to stories and pressed them for one tale after another. The storytellers enjoyed themselves as well, of course—her overblown reaction to every little detail made her a rather amusing audience. With all the excitement, it didn't seem like story time would end anytime soon.

"Bell," a voice called out to him. He turned to find Percival had joined him. "She's a lively lass."

"Yeah. She seems completely uninhibited... And we were saved because of it."

"My thoughts exactly. I was sure all nobles were stuck-up pricks, but I guess there are

kids like her too."

Indeed, it was hard to imagine her as the daughter of an archduke. The way she paid no mind to differences in status whatsoever reminded Belgrieve of the three Bordeaux sisters. However, she was not a noble from the countryside. She was an elite among elites, and it was rare to find such openness where she came from.

With that said, Belgrieve wasn't too knowledgeable about the inner workings of nobility. When it came to the nobility of Estogal, Count Malta had left a strong impression as he brought ruin to Bordeaux, so Belgrieve didn't think very highly of them. Yet when he looked at Liselotte, he was reminded that they couldn't *all* be like that.

Percival walked over to him and leaned against the same wall. He coughed quietly, taking out his scented sachet.

"So... what do you think?"

"I'm still thinking. We don't have any proof, but there aren't too many elves around these parts. There's a high chance," Belgrieve said, scratching his head. "Although I've been meeting far too many elves these past few years—Graham, Maggie, Maureen... Honestly, a part of me won't be surprised if this elf has nothing to do with Satie too."

"Same here. But we have to unmask her anyways."

"We don't have enough info yet. Salazar might be able to tell us something, but..."

"I don't know if we can count on him or not."

Percival tucked his sachet away and stared up at the narrow sliver of sky. This elf of unknown origins, whom they had heard about the moment they arrived in Findale, was a largely unknown factor to them. They hadn't any idea how they would deal with her yet. Naturally, there was ample reason to believe she *could* be Satie—in which case, they would need to search Findale. That eliminated the need to venture to the capital to see Salazar at all.

"How about we split up?" suggested Percival.

Belgrieve tugged at his beard. "Not a bad plan. Then who are we assigning to each team...?"

"Touya and Maureen have business with Salazar. Ishmael wants to return to the capital. They're headed there regardless of our goals. How about we have one of them guide us?" Percival suggested.

"Makes sense... But we can't decide that at our own discretion. If we are going to split up, we'd better raise it with everyone else first."

"An unknown elf, huh...? This feels way too convenient..."

"But we can't just ignore it either," Belgrieve insisted.

Percival chuckled, only to scowl as he broke out into another coughing fit. He left the alley with long steps.

"Hey, where are you going?"

"These kinds of formal places are suffocating to me. I can barely breathe. I'm gonna go get a drink out there. Wanna come?"

"How am I supposed to do that? Good grief, we haven't decided on an inn yet... Come back soon."

"Got it, got it. I feel like a kid getting lectured." Percival left, laughing lightheartedly.

Belgrieve remained there a while longer, reclining against the brick wall. Gradually, the alley grew dimmer in spite of the dazzlingly bright late afternoon sky above, to the point that he struggled to make out the stains on the alley wall across from him.

He had begun to think, *I should go back in*, when someone else came out to join him instead.

"Huh? It's just you, Mr. Belgrieve?"

"Oh, Touya. Are you looking for Percy?"

Touya scratched his head with an awkward smile. "Mr. Percival left while Liselotte was still pressing him for stories... She said someone should go check on him, and that happened to fall to me."

"Ha ha ha! So that's how it is, huh—he was running away. He told me he was going to

grab a drink."

"What a free spirit," Touya said, his breath a faint white puff of fog. He took Percival's place beside Belgrieve. The boy's handsome side profile was vaguely androgynous. "This is the first time a noble ever invited me for a meal. The food's good, but I can't really settle down. How should I put it...?"

"I understand. It's been a few times for me... But I always feel like I don't belong. I still haven't gotten used to it."

"Oh? Where else did it happen?"

"There's a city to the north called Bordeaux. The youngest sister of the countess was saved by Ange. We've had friendly relations ever since."

"Hmm... Come to think of it, this occasion is also owed to Ange's connections. She's really something..." Touya folded his arms and nodded.

Now that you mention it... Liselotte had blended in so naturally he had nearly forgotten, but she had become his daughter's friend when Angeline had been summoned to the archduke's palace to receive a medal. Though the young girl had connections with Kasim as well, she seemed closer to Angeline—perhaps because they were both girls. It was a bit odd for a father to be the tagalong for his daughter, and a mite embarrassing as well, but it was also a joy to see firsthand all the bonds his daughter had built for herself.

Touya glanced at Belgrieve, seeming a bit nervous and fidgety. "Mr. Belgrieve, you... get along well with Ange, don't you? At least, well enough to travel together."

"We do. Although I think she could stand to become a bit more independent."

"As a parent... what exactly does a child mean to you? Um... I know you and Ange aren't related by blood, but she's precious to you, right?"

Belgrieve stroked his beard. "Yes, Ange was a foundling, but I treasure her. I fed her milk, I changed her diapers, I held her when she cried—be it in the dead of night or when I was in the middle of work... She was quite a handful. To her, it didn't matter how tired I was, after all."

"Did you ever hate having to do it?"

"Ha ha! That's just being a human. Sure, I felt frustrated a fair few times, but when I saw her sleeping without a care in the world... When she looked at me and laughed, or when she would slowly wriggle her small hands—just seeing her put my heart at ease. It was hard raising her as a single dad, but I will say unequivocally that I was happy doing it. To me, Ange is the greatest treasure in the world."

"I wish... I had a father like you," Touya admitted, hanging his head.

Belgrieve looked at him inquisitively. "You don't get along with your old man?"

"It goes beyond that. You could say I despise him."

Sounds rough... Belgrieve frowned.

Touya sighed and slumped against the wall. "My dad's an adventurer too. I haven't met him in forever... He beat the tricks of swordsmanship and magic into me and disparaged me all the while, telling me I had no talent... Ironic, isn't it, that I ended up becoming an adventurer like him?"

Before Belgrieve could find the words to respond to that, Touya went on self-deprecatingly. "It frustrates me that I have to rely on what he taught me to survive. But it's just in my nature. I can't think of anything else to do... Ange learned her skills from her father, but unlike me, she's proud of it. I'm envious... I'm sorry, I know there's no point telling you this..."

"I know I shouldn't say anything careless... But everything you've picked up as you fought as an adventurer is your own strength. You don't need to abase yourself for it." Belgrieve tried to choose his words with care. *It's like I'm dancing around the subject,* he thought. But he didn't have enough time to decide whether he should dig too deep or not.

Touya's words revealed two things—hatred for his father, and yet, grudging respect for him as well. This contradiction seemed to be causing him pain. For this reason, Belgrieve refrained from offering cheap platitudes.

"I'm sorry," Touya said, scratching his head. "Didn't mean to be a downer..."

Belgrieve smiled and patted the boy on the shoulder.



"If only I had some wise words for the moment... I'm sorry for being such an unreliable old man."

"That's not true. I'm happy you heard me out... It's quite cold out here. How about we go back inside?"

"All right, let's go."

Belgrieve followed him into the restaurant, down a hallway, up a flight of stairs, and back into a room kept at a steady temperature with magic. Yellow shinestones cast light down from the high ceiling, illuminating decorative vases and paintings as well as the carpet laid out over the floor. With only the clothes on his back, he felt completely out of place amidst such luxury. Percival wasn't the only one who was feeling suffocated by this ambience.

Their table was lively. Liselotte was a good listener and pestered continuously for new stories, so the conversation never seemed to end. There seemed to be an endless well of topics to draw upon out of their experiences, such as stories of their passage through Tyldes and of Marguerite and Maureen's time in elven territory. Belgrieve had lived in Turnera most of his life, and compared to the rest of his party, he didn't have many grand tales of adventure to share. He did talk a bit about how Angeline was as a child, but beyond that, he left the storytelling to the active adventurers. After all, the episodes concerning Mit and the aberration in the forest were not matters he could simply divulge to just anyone.

He sat down and reached across the table for the water jug, which Kasim obligingly passed to him. "Where's Percy?"

"He ran off, that troublesome guy."

"Tsk, so he made it out in one piece. I should have gone with him."

"What are you talking about? Good grief." Belgrieve was smiling wryly as he poured some water into his glass. *Kasim's acting completely shamelessly, and he's dressed like a beggar to boot*, Belgrieve mused as he recalled the surprise on the waitstaff's faces when they first saw him. Of course, as a guest of the archduke's daughter, he wasn't turned away.

While he was outside, the stars had dotted a sky that still had a hint of blue. Now the darkness had descended outside the window, and though the conversation raged on,

it was time to decide where they would stay the night.

Belgrieve leaned over the table. "Liselotte, you have my sincerest thanks for your generosity with this fine meal. But the sun has already set. We need to decide on an inn..."

"Oh, you're right. I'm so sorry; it was too much fun talking to all of you!" Liselotte apologized, awkwardly laughing and scratching her cheek. "Still, talking to adventurers is truly entralling. If I weren't a noble, I would surely be an adventurer!"

"You'd never make it," Kasim teased, chuckling.

Liselotte puffed out her cheeks. "Oh, Kasim! You're always too quick to pick on me!"

"Heh heh heh... You've got a nice, sheltered life. Just resign yourself to being a nice, sheltered noble lady. Hey, missy, don't glare at me like that. Just be glad shorty over here isn't seriously considering being an adventurer."

Sooty, who stood behind Liselotte, winced. "I wasn't thinking anything of the sort," she muttered.

"Don't be shy. You look pretty skilled and all—looks like you found yourself a fine retainer, shorty."

"You got that right! C'mon Sooty, you're very strong. Get a grip!"

"Flattery will get you nothing from me."

"Have I ever asked for anything from you?"

"Tsk... I should have seen that one coming." Sooty pouted.

Angeline seemed amused. "You do get along... Ms. Sooty, you weren't there when I visited last year. How long have you been serving Lize?"

"Since half a year ago, I believe. This troublesome tomboy snuck her way into the adventurer's guild, you see. The guild master was horrified and told me to escort her home."

"We talked about a few things on the way back, and I asked her if she wanted to work

for me. The other attendants would get angry when I did that sort of thing.”

“Of course they would. What are you talking about?”

“But Sooty just sighs and doesn’t stop me. I love her.”

“It would be too much trouble to try.”

“Then, Ms. Sooty—you used to be an adventurer?” Anessa asked.

Sooty nodded half-heartedly. “Technically, I still am—I still have my license after all. Although my current life’s a lot more stable. This girl’s fine even if you leave her to her own devices for a bit. She’s not causing trouble for me *all* day long.”

“You don’t have to praise me that much, Sooty.”

“That wasn’t a compliment.”

“But it must be nice, serving a noble. You must get to eat delicious food every day. I’m jealous, *nom nom*.”

“Show a bit of restraint, Maureen...” Touya scolded tiredly as he watched his partner produce one empty plate after another.

Liselotte magnanimously laughed. “It’s fine, don’t worry about it. Eat as much as you want. You too, Maggie.”

“I don’t eat as much as Maureen.”

“Oh, you don’t? I thought elves were huge eaters.”

“Hey, hey, can I order dessert?”

“Merry, you...”

“What’s the matter? It’s not every day that we come across an opportunity like this. Can I? Can I?”

“Go ahead! I want some too, and let’s have some tea along with it. Do you want anything in particular, Ange?”

"Hmm... I'm fine with anything."

It seemed the embers of conversation would fire up again, leaving Belgrieve out of the loop. "We really do... have to decide on an inn," he murmured.

○

Trees grew thickly on both sides of a certain narrow path, casting speckled patterns of filtered light against the ground below. But it wasn't sunlight that illuminated this path—the entire sky seemed to glisten in gold, pouring down its light evenly and coloring the entire world in faded sepia tones. At the end of this path lay a small house surrounded by a wooden fence keeping the deep forest just beyond at bay. Its triangular roof was thatched, and there was a well at the end of the yard. A small vegetable garden produced all manner of seasonal produce.

A woman sat on a chair under the eaves. She was an elf with silky, silver hair and ears like pointed blades of grass.

"Ow, ow, ouch... He really got me good."

The elf woman doffed her robe and pulled open her eastern garments to carefully wipe the wound that spanned from her shoulder down her arm with a wet towel. Although the bleeding had stopped, the hardened, sticky scabs left red streaks with each pass of the cloth. Once she finished cleaning the wound, she smeared a salve over it and dressed it in bandages.

"He seemed pretty serious about it... Ahh," the woman sighed before robing herself again.

The sonorous chirping of insects filled the air, though it was still too quiet for her liking—until a patterning of light footsteps sounded from the house. The door opened and two small children raced out the front. The first one held out a carved, wooden toy, while the other trailed behind him in pursuit of it.

"Hey! What are you two doing?" the elf said with a frown.

"I mean, he's hogging the toy," said one of the boys.

"No, *he's* trying to take it away," the other exclaimed. Both of them were insistent on their cause, neither conceding an inch.

The children were identical to one another; twins, perhaps. They both shared the same black hair and black eyes. The elf giggled and sprang to her feet. She scooped up the children, holding one under each arm as she spun in circles.

"Fighting is a no-no! Hryah! Take that!" The twins shrieked out in joy. "Ah, ow, ow! Crap, I forgot..." She scowled and set them down again.

The kids looked at her curiously.

"Are you okay?"

"Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine. I'm strong, you know. Now go play together, and no fighting."

The twins seemed a bit nervous, but they eventually bolted off somewhere. After they were gone, the elf took a deep breath and collapsed back into her chair. She stroked her left shoulder and checked to make sure there were no new bloodstains on her robe.

"Am I just... wasting my time?" She raised her eyes to stare at the golden sky beyond the eaves. Sometimes, it would flash here and there, while at other times, she would see a faint, hazy thing flow across.

For a while, the elf remained sitting motionlessly, but she eventually stood up once again. She gathered a few onions that had been hung out to dry and put them into the basket by her side before making her way to the vegetable garden.

"I'm not so bad at cooking anymore. If they ate my food now... I wonder if those three would finally say it tastes good," she quietly muttered. Then, she stooped down and pulled up some carrots and herbs, tossing them into her basket. A soft wind rustled the forest trees as faint green motes of light drifted through the air above her.

CHAPTER 105

JUST AFTER MIDNIGHT

Just after midnight, Angeline's eyes cracked open for reasons unbeknownst to her, and, with a rustling of sheets, she got out of bed. A diagonal beam of moonlight filtered through the gap in the curtains, casting the room in dim blue. She looked around to see the other girls soundly asleep.

Angeline pressed her hand against her eyes and took a deep breath. She'd be back on the move the next morning, so staying up late would do a number on her body. But she didn't feel like she'd be able to get any more sleep.

Last night, after they'd parted with Liselotte and settled in the inn, everyone had gotten together to talk. Belgrieve wanted to pin down the identity of the elf that had appeared in Findale. However, the prospect of gaining information from Salazar was also hard to ignore. Thus, he had proposed they split up into two teams—and Angeline had immediately said she would head to the capital. After all, she had Liselotte—a connection to get her into high-society circles. At least, that was her excuse, but she had a vague feeling it was better to keep some distance from Belgrieve for the time being.

She wanted to get her own feelings in order, whether or not that was the right thing to do. She'd been feeling rather gloomy and wanted to find some way to resolve things. *A change of environment—that might be just what I need.*

For what it was worth, Kasim had met Salazar, and he also knew Satie, so he was headed to the capital as well. Angeline would be joined by her party members, Anessa and Miriam. For their part, Touya, Maureen, and Ishmael were already headed to the capital, while Marguerite, unable to stomach that dispute that had broken out when they first entered Findale, wanted to be anywhere but there, so she insisted on joining the capital party. Only Belgrieve and Percival would stay behind to follow the trail of the mysterious elf.

Angeline lay back down supine on the bed, but after much tossing and turning, she ultimately gave up and left the warm confines of the covers once more. She could faintly hear the merry clamor of the pub through the walls and floorboards, in spite of

being on a lower floor, and in a separate building at that. With all else so quiet, her ears would inadvertently zero in on this noise.

I should get some water... And with that, she left the room.

The hallway was silent, but as she descended the stairs and passed through an outside alley, getting closer to the neighboring building, the noise of all the drunkards crammed into it became all the louder. This only further stirred her from sleepiness. She scratched her cheek awkwardly, hesitating whether to enter or not, but she was honest-to-goodness thirsty. Hovering around the bar counter, she was a bit surprised to see Percival sitting in the far corner. She walked over to him.

"What, can't sleep?" Percival said, glancing at her before she could get a word in.

"I woke up... You too, Mr. Percy?"

"Just haven't had enough to drink yet. This guy too."

Kasim weakly popped his head out from behind Percival. "We're all up late, huh? Heh heh heh."

"You too, Kasim...? What about dad?"

"Asleep. Out like a light," Kasim said and took a sip from the glass in his hand.

Angeline felt somewhat relieved as she plopped into a seat beside Percival. "You drinking?" he asked her.

Angeline shook her head. "Just water..."

"Don't be like that; have some fun. Hey, some brandy if you could. Cut it down with hot water."

Before Angeline could say anything, the bartender already poured steaming hot water into a cup, so she resignedly propped up her head. The diluted brandy was placed before her in short order.

Percival held up his own half-empty goblet. "Cheers."

"Hmm... Cheers."

She nearly choked on the piercing vapor of spirits wafting from the steam. The faintly sweet brandy trickled down her throat and through her body, and it instantly felt like a fire was lit in her belly.

"Still, Ange," Kasim started, tapping at his empty cup, "going to the capital is good and all, but you sure you don't want to be with Bell?"

"Yeah... I'm an adult," she boasted, proudly puffing out her chest while recognizing the bluff for what it was.

Percival gave a merry chuckle. "To think I'd see the day where I was drinking with Bell's daughter like this... It wasn't long ago that the possibility could never have occurred to me."

"Hey, you're sounding like an old man."

"Shut it," Percival growled, prodding at Kasim.

"Kasim, you said something like that too..." Angeline said with a giggle.

"Ah, that was supposed to be a secret."

"What's that? Hey, Kasim, after everything you said to me!" Percival lightly bopped his fist against Kasim's head.

"Hey, don't punch a magician," Kasim said, rubbing the impact site. "You're way too strong."

"When a magician gets in over his head, he gets what he deserves." Percival bopped him again, and Kasim stared back reproachfully.

"You're just as violent as ever, I see."

"And you're just as impudent. You're supposed to be the youngest one, remember?"

"It never felt like any of you were older than me—Bell aside."

"Enough. That's why I'm saying you're impudent."

Kasim leaned forward on his elbows to glare at Angeline. "See what you did? Percy got

cocky because you spilled the beans."

"Sorry," Angeline said, restraining her laughter as she continued to savor her drink.

Come to think of it, this might be the first time I'm drinking with them without dad. The timing never lined up like this before now, Angeline realized.

The old tales Belgrieve, Kasim, and Percival told were all fun and interesting, and that made her more envious than she'd like to admit. Belgrieve's party had only been together for a year—two years at most—and yet they'd gone through so much together. *His memories with them are just about as weighty as his memories with me...* Of course, she had fun listening to the stories, and yet they also filled her with envy. It had all happened before she was even born, but that did nothing to lessen the intensity of her feelings.

And yet, hearing these two speak like this when Belgrieve wasn't around did not arouse those vile emotions in her. Perhaps her jealousy simply came from watching Belgrieve so filled with joy over things she knew nothing about. For some reason, watching him like that made her feel as though Belgrieve was going somewhere far away. It depressed Angeline a bit as she realized how fussy she really was. She shook her head to clear it of such negative thoughts.

"Did you used to drink together... The four of you?"

"Hmm? Oh, right, we did. Back when we first started, though, there were lots of expenses and we didn't have the funds. We were water drinkers before we got our gear in order. Bell didn't let anyone waste money, see."

"Right, right. He felt reserved, in the back, but he was real stubborn when it came to safety. Well, once we built up some financial security, we went and we drank. That was a splendid time." Kasim's eyes narrowed as he warmly reminisced.

Percival cackled. "There are loads of adventurers who blast through all their money overnight. The moment they get paid, they'll drink it all down the drain. I thought that was normal until I met Bell."

"Same here. Not that I did it; I just thought that was how adventurers were. I was taken aback when I met someone as earnest as Bell. Honestly, he felt a bit boring for my tastes."

"I see... You're not wrong. After I recruited him, there'd be times I'd think I found someone truly preposterous—overly serious, reserved, and no fun to be around. And he was the guy who became an adventurer because he hated his old, boring life. But he was reliable enough on the job, and it's thanks to him that we survived. And one more thing—Bell's serious, but he's not inflexible."

"Yep. I picked up on that one pretty quickly. He was always acting with our best interests in mind. Once I realized that, I started feeling thankful for his stubbornness. It felt like I had a reliable older brother—a huge difference from Percy."

"Did you have to add that last part?"

Sounds like my dad, Angeline mused as her expression relaxed. She drank a mouthful of brandy as she tried to picture them all way back then, when Belgrave and Kasim were beardless and Percival was a fresh-faced youth without those angry-looking wrinkles on his face.

And Satie was... Angeline tried to imagine her but failed to grasp what their erstwhile comrade might have been like. Whenever that strong-willed elf came up in stories, Angeline would picture Marguerite. *No, it couldn't be her,* she'd think and would envision Maureen instead. Along with Graham, those were the only images of elves she had.

"What sort of person was Satie? She was pretty, right? Was she like Maggie?"

Percival's eyes wandered as he gathered his thoughts. "No... A different type of pretty."

"Then like Ms. Maureen?"

"Different still. Well, the feeling she gave off was closer to Maureen, but she was shorter. Her hair was a bit longer, and her eyebrows were thicker."

"But her skin was supple, and her hair was soft and silky."

"That goes for all elves, stupid. Even though her eyes had a gentle look to them, she could be stupidly pigheaded."

"Heh heh heh, you were always fighting with her."

"It was more like we were messing around, thinking back on it."

The expressions of the two men softened as they spoke of the past. Angeline took another sip of brandy. It had cooled a bit, and the alcohol vapor was no longer sharp in her nostrils. It seemed like the sweetness had deepened as well.

The Satie that Percival spoke of seemed slightly different from the one Belgrieve and Kasim would tell her about. The way he spoke of her made it seem like he was the one out of the three who got along with her best. The three men each remembered a different Satie. In the time they spent together, certain images would remain clear, while others would fade into obscurity. *Friendship, love, and aspiration, huh...*

Angeline ate a pickled berry before posing another question. “Did you ever consider marrying Satie?”

Percival barely managed to keep from spitting out his drink at this out-of-the-blue inquiry. Kasim, with a hand on his brow, roared in laughter.

“Where did that come from—cough...” Percival was teary-eyed as a bit of liquor dribbled from his nose. He grabbed his sachet and breathed into it to contain his coughing fit.

“I mean, she was beautiful, right...? You were with her for a long time...” Angeline pressed.

“Heh heh heh, you cheeky brat. Well, thinking back on it now, I may have loved her once upon a time. But now, I honestly don’t feel that way at all.”

“Really? Why not?”

“I mean, I have Sierra.”

“Oh.”

Oh, right... Angeline thought, scratching her head as the face of Mansa’s guild master crossed her mind.

Tucking away his sachet, Percival looked at Kasim curiously. “Who’s that? Why’ve I never heard about her before?”

“Now, now, we can take our time talking about that later... Anyways, Satie. Yeah, I’d sometimes feel my heart racing for no reason when she stared at me. How about you,

Percy?"

"Tsk, don't change the subject... Well, same. But I think it's perfectly normal to feel awkward when a beautiful woman is looking at you."

"Is that all?"

"Couldn't say. It's been so long, I can't really remember if it was awkwardness or affection."

It feels like he just dodged the question, Angeline thought discontentedly as she pressed her cheek into the hand propping up her head.

When she heard stories of Satie, she'd convinced herself that the elf would end up as her father's bride. However, the foundation of that assumption shook the more she heard Percival talk about her—and yet here she was, feeling relieved. She hated herself for it and downed the rest of her tepid, diluted brandy.

"I wonder how it was for dad, then..."

Of course, she'd heard Belgrieve say he'd loved Satie as well. But like the others, he would insist it was all in the past. Knowing Belgrieve, that was probably how he honestly felt, so Angeline wouldn't pursue the matter with him.

Percival looked at her amusedly. "Want another cup?"

"Hmm... If you insist."

"Someone's getting ahead of herself, heh heh."

Percival placed their order with the bartender before continuing. "Bell was undoubtedly in love with Satie. No mistaking that. Satie also liked Bell the most, I'm sure."

Angeline turned to him, startled and mouth agape; he gazed back at her with a smug grin. This tale had nothing to do with her, yet for some reason, her own cheeks were flushing. *It's just the brandy,* she told herself. She clapped her hands against her cheeks, feeling their warmth, before holding her head.

"Why are you blushing at that?"

"I mean... I mean, Mr. Percy. It sounded like you were close enough with her to get into petty lovers' tiffs..."

"I had a pretty good relationship with her, yeah. But it was more like we saw each other as worthy opponents. Satie would clearly feel at ease whenever Bell was around. If she wanted someone to be with forever, it'd have to be Bell over me."

"Huh? Really? I never noticed."

"You were still a brat then. Well, that's just me thinking back on it after all these years. At the time, I just ignored it. I was more like a battle buddy to her, and there was no conceivable way she would fall for Kasim. That just leaves Bell."

"Hey, why am I out of the running? Isn't that a bit rude?"

"Do you think Satie would ever fall for you?"

"Nope. Never."

"See? You get it."

After listening to that exchange in a daze, Angeline suddenly shook her head. "Well, um... Does dad know that?"

"You should ask him that."

"I mean, dad says it's all in the past..."

"Ha ha, that does sound like Bell. Well, that's his problem—not something for me to involve myself with. I'm over forty years old here; what business would I have butting into someone else's love and whatnot? Right, Kasim?"

"Hmm? Ah, well, I guess so," Kasim muttered awkwardly as he twisted his beard.

Angeline felt nervous as she pressed her lips to the cup set out in front of her. She was caught off guard by the sudden heat and set it back down in a panic.

"Ah! Mr. Percy, um, you don't love Satie anymore?"

"There was a time I was mad, real mad, and I took it out on her. When I think of her,

my feeling of guilt is stronger. I can't think about things like love."

"Oh..." *I feel like I've heard that before. It was about when the remaining three party members spent harsh, soul-crushing days searching for a way to heal Belgrieve's leg.*

Angeline had started feeling down at this recollection when Percival patted her on the back. "Don't make that face, Ange. I can't change the past, but I've finally managed to face the future. And word on the street is you're all about getting yourself a mother. Aren't you glad I'm not Bell's rival on this one?"

"Y-Yeah... But..."

Seeing her fidgeting, Kasim grinned. "Uh-huh, I get it. Ange, are you scared that Satie's going to take Bell away from you?"

"Huh?! N-No, that's not..." Her eyes wandered. It seemed as though Kasim had suddenly struck at the root of the matter.

Percival laughed heartily and ruffled up Angeline's hair. "What's this now? That's pretty cute of you! But don't worry. You'll always be number one to Bell."

"Yep. We might talk about all sorts of things. But rather than old stories we shared... Bell, he lights up as soon as he starts talking about raising you and about living in Turnera with you as father and daughter."

"You can't stop him when he gets like that. Lately, he's been having fun telling about how when you were three years old, you had a nightmare and wet the bed, so he had to swap all the straw under the bedsheets out in the middle of the night, and—"

"E-Enough about me!" Angeline flailed her hands against Percival, her cheeks bright crimson. *Dad! What do you think you're doing?!*

Percival laughed. He placed his hand on top of her head again, this time teasingly dragging her left and right. "Don't take it out on me. If you wanna get angry at someone, it should be Bell."

"Ugh..."

"He looks like he's having the time of his life when he talks about that sort of thing," Kasim said, placing his empty cup on the counter. "He won't say it out loud, but I'm

sure he's overjoyed that he gets to travel with you."

"Indeed. He tries his best not to brag, but he's got the tone of a doting father whenever he talks about you. I get embarrassed just listening to him. I can't wait to see how Satie reacts when she gets an earful of that."

Laughing, Percival and Kasim told Angeline all about the goofy smile on Bell's face when he told them about the first time Angeline had called him "dad" and the way he heatedly blathered on and on about when he noticed Angeline's talent for the sword during their practice. For some reason, it felt like the core of her body was filled with warmth. *Dad has always been dad. He met his old friends, but that hasn't changed at all.* The dark, throbbing pains in the corner of her mind felt like they were suddenly fading away.

"Hee... hee hee..." Her face was stuck in a smile she couldn't get rid of. She tried pinching her own round cheeks to force her smile to relax, but her cheeks only grew tender while her lips curled undauntedly. The dark mood that she had been stuck in for so long had given way to joy.

"Someone's happy," Kasim observed.

"Heh heh... heh heh heh heh..." Angeline chuckled as she laid her cheek against the wooden bar counter, which felt pleasantly cool against her skin. She continued rubbing her cheek against it, enjoying the sensation.

Percival and Kasim exchanged looks.

"She's practically melting."

"Her mood goes up and down at the drop of a hat. What an energetic girl she is."

But Angeline didn't seem the least bit bothered by their teasing. With her expression still slack, she polished off the tepid brandy in one gulp. Though she choked a bit as the spirits burned her throat, she raised a hand and ordered another.

Percival stared at her with wide eyes. "Hey, what do you think you're doing? You'll collapse if you drink like that."

"Heh heh... It's fine. I'm drinking. Heh heh..."

The steam off her cup billowed through the air, rising as though it had a life of its own.

○

The next morning, as Belgrieve was looking over his bags, Angeline pounced on him, latching on from behind, nearly toppling him over.

“Good morning, dad!”

“Y-Yeah, morning Ange.”

“Hee hee... Dad! Why did you tell Mr. Percy about me wetting the bed?!”

“Uh, well... I mean, it was when you were this small...”

“I’m a girl, you know! It may be in the past, but it’s still a secret!”

“Oh, s-sorry... Wait, why do you know that?”

Without offering any reply, Angeline rubbed her face against his back, shifting upward until her nose was buried in his hair and she could take a whiff of it. Her breath tickled.

Despite his confusion, Belgrieve reached out and patted her head.

This wasn’t the first time. Over the course of this journey, she’d suddenly come to him for pampering, but at those times her mood would seem unstable somehow or another. This time, it seemed she had returned to how she used to be—demanding his pampering with every fiber of her being. *Did something happen?* he wondered, tilting his head inquisitively.

Percival and Kasim were watching this display from the other side of a table in the room, grins on their faces.

“You’re in a good mood, Ange.”

“Yeah!” She broke away, circling around and taking a seat in front of Belgrieve. She was smiling from ear to ear.

“Let’s find Satie, okay!”

"That was my intention... What happened? What's got you so—?"

"I'm going to go get packed too!"

Before Belgrieve could finish asking his question, Angeline had nimbly bounded out of the room. It felt like a storm had just blown through, and Belgrieve had no idea what had just happened.

"What was that...?"

"It just goes to show Ange is your daughter."

"Yep."

"But... I don't feel like I've actually *done* anything."

"Right."

"Huh...?"

His two friends refused to elaborate, only adding to his confusion. For the time being, he got back to work checking his bags.

They would be splitting into their teams later in the day—though with that said, only Belgrieve and Percival would remain in Findale. Supplies would need to be divided as everyone would need access to their own share. He'd done a bit of preparation the previous evening, but he wanted to go over it properly now that the sun was up.

Ishmael, who had stepped out to wash his face, returned to the room. He saw Belgrieve sorting through the supplies and scratched his head, a forlorn look on his face. "Looks like our parting has come quite abruptly, Mr. Belgrieve."

"Yeah, it has. Ishmael, you've helped us a good deal... Please look after Ange in my absence."

"Oh no, Mr. Kasim and Touya will be with us as well. There's nothing for me to do. In fact, I'd say you helped me more. I'd love to stop by Turnera one of these days."

"I'd love to have you. Oh, but I might be intruding on your capital workshop first."

“Please, by all means.”

“Hey, why are we all saying our goodbyes already?” Percival sighed. “We haven’t even eaten breakfast yet.”

Belgrieve smiled wryly. “Right... Looks like the supplies are all sorted. Breakfast it is, then.”

“All right, I’m starving,” Kasim proclaimed as he stood.

It was morning, yet the pub was as rowdy as ever. The roads were spacious and well secured, so there were apparently travelers who took the risk of venturing out at night. They would arrive come morning and reward their fatigue with a lively drink. Every seat was filled, and it would take some time to find a place to accommodate them. It didn’t seem likely that everyone could sit at the same table.

They said their good mornings to the girls, who arrived a bit later, but they all had to eat on their own as soon as a seat became available. Once he was done, Belgrieve took his bags and left the inn with the other men. He watched the passing traffic as he waited for everyone to gather in front of the building. Marguerite—who finished a moment before him—prodded him in the side. She was wearing a hood to hide her ears and silver hair.

“Are you sure it’ll be fine, just the two of you? Can you find her like that?”

“Huh, are you worried?”

“Not really. Just wanted to ask.”

Percival gave a great yawn. “Well, I’m not getting my hopes up. It’s less than a day to the capital. We’ll meet up with you all if anything happens.”

“Hmm... Then shouldn’t we just all head to the capital to start with?”

“There’s no telling what might happen. It’d be really frustrating to find out we only just missed her, right? And there’s no need for all of us to meet Salazar”

“I guess you’re right,” Marguerite conceded. She leaned her back against a nearby wall.

Several gray horses paraded down the road. A young apprentice with a large parcel

struggled to keep up with his well-built master. From the opposite direction, a group of armed men and women—all of them adventurers—passed by.

Marguerite scoffed. “You better find that elf. Whoever it is, they got me wrapped up in this mess.”

“You have a point. But, Maggie, you did well holding it all in yesterday. Good job.”

“W-Well... I would have loved to send them flying, but...”

“Why’re you making it sound like you accomplished something? You woulda done just that if Bell and I hadn’t stepped in. Well, I do get how you feel. But if you had caused a commotion there, you really would have been the one on the wanted posters, heh heh heh.”

Marguerite pouted. “You guys would get angry too if you were in elf territory about to get arrested just because you’re human. It’s flat-out unreasonable. There’d have to be something wrong with you if you *didn’t* get angry.”

“I guess so...”

“It really is unreasonable if you think about it like that. There, there. Good girl, good girl. You did your best.”

“What are you petting me for, stupid?” Marguerite sullenly brushed aside Kasim’s hand.

Kasim waved that hand around with a smile. “Heh heh heh, I guess that’s Bell’s job then.”

“What’s Bell got to do with this?!” Marguerite angrily prodded at the magician.

Belgrieve chuckled. “We’ll have to resolve this fast. You’d like to take your time exploring Findale, right?”

“Yeah...”

Marguerite looked into the distance, where buildings towered as far as the eye could see. The scenery was even clearer in the crisp morning air than it had been the day before, making the place seem larger and more magnificent. It was truly a vast town.

A few days wouldn't be enough to see everything.

Eventually, Angeline and her party, along with Touya and Maureen, joined them. The elf yawned from under her hood. "Ahh... Sigh. Good morning."

"Didn't sleep enough?" Percival asked.

"No, not at all. I just woke up."

"Maureen always sleeps in," Touya said with resignation.

First it was her food, and now her sleep. She really marches to the beat of her own drum, Belgrieve mused. It had taken some time for everyone to be served and the sun was already high in the sky.

"Let's go..." Angeline said, taking Belgrieve by the hand.

"Right. Come to think of it, Liselotte said she'd help you out."

"Yes. We'll meet Lize once we're there."

After all their eager conversation and storytelling, Liselotte had returned to the capital once night fell. It seemed public order in the region was good enough to allow for that, given the many peddlers he knew to have likewise journeyed throughout the night. Before her departure, she had penned a referral using the archduke's name to ensure Marguerite and Maureen were not subject to undue suspicion. They could flash it if any other dispute broke out. The girl was still young and exuded a child's innocence, but she was judicious as well.

In any case, they headed back to the square packed with stagecoaches they had arrived at. There were many people there, but there were ample coaches as well, so they managed to find one bound for the capital with minimal effort.

"You haven't forgotten anything, have you, Ange?"

"I'm good." Angeline held Belgrieve in a tight embrace before climbing aboard. She nuzzled her face into his chest. "Okay... I'll be off."

"See you again soon. Take care."

"You take care too, dad... Hee hee." Angeline boarded with a broad smile on her face. Once inside, she found Anessa and Miriam waiting for her with curious expressions.

"She's been in a good mood all day, that Ange."

"It's like she's back in the swing of things."

Did something good happen? Belgrieve wondered again, as Percival and Kasim still refused to tell him.

Ishmael bade the two of them farewell again, as did Touya and Maureen. Although Maureen was the same as usual, Touya seemed a bit nervous.

"Um... Mr. Belgrieve, I'd like to meet you again before you return to Turnera."

"Sure, why not. Let's sit down for a nice drink once we've sorted everything else."

"You got it!" Touya smiled, gripping Belgrieve's hand.

Once everyone was seated, the coach quickly rolled into motion, not offering any time to linger on this farewell. Angeline stuck her head out the window and waved. Belgrieve watched until the coach disappeared beyond a bend in the road.

Standing beside him, Percival rolled his neck. "Now then... We should get to work."

"Right. For starters, we'll have to gather info."

"Either the guild or the soldier depot... Well, we're not in any rush." He grinned and patted Belgrieve's shoulder. "This takes me back—me and you, working together."

"Yeah, it does," Belgrieve smiled, tapping his wooden leg against the ground. "But first, we should find a somewhat smaller inn. It'll be hard to navigate the city with all these bags."

"Point taken. Good to have our priorities straight, ha ha ha!" Percival's cape flared out as he turned to leave. Belgrieve shifted his baggage and followed.

CHAPTER 106

WITH A CLOTH WRAPPED OVER HER BUNDLED SILVER HAIR

With a cloth wrapped over her bundled silver hair, the elf girl glared into the pot with a frustrated look on her face. Her eyes darted to a small box of seasonings off to the side. Her hand reached for one of the small vials, then another. But each time, she would pull back her hand without picking it up. When she finally did grab one, she peered through the glass, took in its scent, tilted her head, then put it back. She seemed lost on what to use.

A short distance behind her, the boy with red hair was watching over her suspensefully. After some time he finally asked, “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. You just sit there and watch.” The elf girl stared back at him with a furrowed brow before turning to the pot once more. Her hand reached for a vial, but she stopped again. With all this drama, one might believe she was concocting a magical potion of sorts, but she was simply cooking. The elf girl had been teased over her tasteless hodgepodge of a stew the last time she’d served it up, and so she had pleaded for the red-haired boy’s guidance. With that said, she wasn’t getting anywhere. The boy had barely begun to offer her any instruction before she started ignoring him to get into a staring match with the bubbling pot.

“You know... You don’t have to be *that* cautious.”

“It has to be perfect. I’ll make the most delicious thing they’ve ever tasted. Then they’ll see—you’ll *all* see!”

“Then can’t you listen to me...?”

“No. Then it will just be *your* cooking. I need to challenge them with my own originality.”

“You think so?” The boy didn’t quite get it, but the girl was serious as could be. He gave up and decided to watch in silence a little longer.

"The salt should be good... As for taste... Do I use herbs? Powder? I don't want it spicy... Hmm..." she muttered under her breath.

There was a fire blazing beneath the pot, and the liquid had been simmering for far longer than the red-haired boy would have liked. Though he felt frustrated, the boy decided not to say anything.

"All right... I choose you!"

She finally snatched up a vial and sprinkled some of its contents into the stew. Now that she'd done it once, she'd gained confidence. A far cry from her initial hesitation, she was grabbing vial after vial, seasoning with no hesitation whatsoever.

"Done!"

She gave a satisfied smile as she stirred with a wooden spoon. She scooped some up and brought it to her mouth.

The girl stayed silent, so the boy hesitantly called out to her. "How is it?"

She turned to him, a bitter expression on her face as the silence drew on.

"What's wrong?"

"It's... burnt."

○

There was a large training ground by the side of the highway amidst a sea of large and small tents, where imperial soldiers would split into two teams and wage mock battles. The air was filled with the sound of neighing warhorses and the metallic clangs of weapons and armor. *No bandit's going to make a move on us here*, Angeline mused.

The stagecoach wasn't the most comfortable of rides, but the road was well maintained and was easier to traverse than those in the north. The route from Istafar to Findale had also been tended to, but not to this extent. As the road to the imperial capital, it was frequented by royalty and nobility alike.

Marguerite stuck her head out the window, a beaming smile on her face. "Wow, the

road's amazing!"

"Isn't it?" replied Touya. "We were shocked the first time we came to the capital."

Anessa nodded. "A carriage could pick up a good bit of speed on this one."

"Yes, it's partly because Findale is so close to the capital, but the tidy roads help along the journey. It makes travel even faster than you'd expect," Ishmael explained.

Kasim shifted his cap. "It's much nicer than when I was here. Must be a recent development."

"Benjamin, the current crown prince, was the one who proposed it. That training ground over there was apparently his idea as well. Thanks to that, we don't see any bandits around these parts anymore, and fiends are few and far between. Trade's gotten even more active, and the empire's economy is really picking up."

"Benjamin, huh," Kasim murmured, frowning and twisting his beard.

Angeline blinked. "That's the guy I met at the archduke's estate, right...?"

"Yeah... Be careful around him."

"Huh? Why?" Miriam asked, her head tilted to the side quizzically. "I mean, isn't he an amazing person?" After all, he had cleaned up the roads and promoted public order with a large training ground running alongside them. The results were clear to see.

Kasim glanced around, keeping his voice down. "He's the one who sicced Francois on Ange. He might look outstanding, but there's no telling what's going on in that head of his."

"Francois... Oh, Lize's brother."

He had come up in conversation the day prior: an illegitimate son of the archduke who seemed to harbor some grudge against his own house. He'd tried to make use of Kasim's desperation to pit the archmage against Angeline. Ultimately, Francois was tossed into the river in the middle of winter, but he'd apparently come out all right, and now, he was part of Prince Benjamin's elite guard.

I have a bad feeling about this, Angeline thought with a frown. Now that she'd met

Liselotte, there was a high chance she'd run into Francois and Benjamin as well. It was a bit of a predicament.

Kasim sighed and leaned against the side of the stagecoach. "Well, you should be fine so long as you keep your guard up around him. Same goes for most of his ilk. But be careful, he's got the looks of a peerless pretty boy. You'd immediately fall for him if you didn't know any better."

"Oh, he's handsome? I kinda want to see him, then. Right, Maggie?"

"Why are you dragging me into this?"

"We've seen him before, haven't we, Touya? He really was handsome, *nom, nom*," Maureen said through a mouthful of bread smeared with jam. "He didn't look like he had a dark side to him either."

Touya's head drooped. "Where did you get that from? Well, I'll admit, he's got a good face. I thought he looked friendly and personable—the sort of guy who smiles a lot. I guess you can't judge a book by its cover."

Now that you mention it... Angeline considered their words. Putting aside how detestably buddy-buddy he acted, he had a charm to him that made her think, "Well, he's not *terrible*," even in spite of Angeline's unsociable tendencies. However, she also felt there was something uncanny about him, and she couldn't let down her guard around the man. Kasim's words corroborated her gut feeling—the prince wasn't all he seemed.

Just because they were entering the capital of Rhodesia did not necessarily mean they were bound to meet Benjamin. It was still rare for a mere adventurer to walk in the same circles as a prince, even an S-Rank like Angeline. However, that wouldn't matter if the prince himself took the initiative to cross paths with her, not to mention their existing connection through Liselotte. It wouldn't be strange for Benjamin to receive *some* information from the girl.

Benjamin's motives were inscrutable. It certainly was rare for a young adventurer to receive a medal of honor, but Angeline couldn't think of any reason he would be so focused on her. It wasn't as though his youth and good looks really hit home for her, but if he really was as handsome as everyone said, then he could have any woman he wanted. Perhaps he was just a weirdo who liked watching strong people fight.

Angeline thought over it a while, a strained look on her face, but eventually, she gave up with a sigh. There was nothing more difficult than imagining what someone she hardly knew was thinking. It felt like a waste of time and brain cells to keep pondering the matter. If something did end up happening, she could deal with it then.

As long as I don't let my guard down, I'm strong enough to calmly deal with whatever he throws at me, she concluded. Perhaps she would struggle a bit if she was pitted against someone of Kasim's level, but she wasn't going to lose—of that, she was quite sure.

She felt a sharp tap on her head. When she looked over, she found herself looking directly into Marguerite's pale-turquoise eyes. "You got that look again. What's our resident idiot thinking so hard about this time?"

"What's that supposed to mean? I'm not as stupid as you, Maggie."

"You say something, wench?"

"What are you fighting about now? Give it a rest," Anessa tiredly chided.

The angle of the beams of light through the carriage windows grew sharper and brighter as time passed. Plots of tilled land of all sizes began to populate the countryside stretching out on either side of the highway, and on the distant horizon, the shadow of a great city could just be made out.

Close to the fields, though a safe distance from the road, there appeared to be several small settlements amounting to buildings of wood and stone as well as tents. Perhaps these were the dwellings of farmers.

Angeline leaned out of the coach and looked down the road ahead of them, where she could see the capital city at the foot of the mountains, its buildings spreading along the rising slope. The walls, dotted with many watchtowers, stretched across the horizon, shutting off the bustling city from the plains before it. A vast, deep moat had been dug before the walls, filled with wavering green water. A great many tents were pitched along its length, almost like a free market in front of the city. Even now, it was an absurd cacophony of trundling wagons, loud voices, tunes strummed by street performers, whinnying horses, and chickens racing about.

The stopping point for the stagecoach was also outside the city, where they would disembark and enter one of the numerous gates on foot. Despite the fact they had yet to enter the capital, it was already crowded. The stalls and tents were lined with all

sorts of goods as spirited peddlers carried on a ruthless game.

"Amazing..." Anessa muttered, taken aback. "And we're not even in yet?"

"Surprised? There are loads of peddlers, so some of them set up shop outside," Touya said, pointing farther down the road. "It goes on for a long way. Have a look if you find the time. People gather here from all over the continent, so there are lots of interesting shops."

"I see... Will we ever get to them, though?"

Aside from these peddlers, the capital also had many conventional shops. *Even before we pass through the gates, it's so overwhelming...* Angeline shuddered. Orphen, Yobem, Istafar, Findale—she was familiar with a few large cities, but this seemed to be something else entirely.

Marguerite's eyes darted around eagerly. "Wow, have a look at that! I'm sure you'll have a real nice view on top of those walls. Do they let people up there? Well, Ishmael?"

"The ramparts are under army jurisdiction, so I doubt it..." Ishmael replied with a shrug.

"Well, that's no fun," Marguerite huffed, kicking a pebble.

"Now what are we to do?" Kasim asked, yawning. "Should we head to that shorty's place or have a meal?"

"Now that you mention it, I am hungry. I'm sure Lize's mansion is a good ways off, so how about dinner?"

"Why not...? It's almost night, after all," Anessa said. "How about we book an inn tonight and visit her tomorrow?"

Angeline was going to nod in agreement, but then something occurred to her. "Oh, but when are you planning on meeting Salazar?" she asked Touya.

"We can meet him whenever we want. The lab's at the foot of the mountain, so it will be an hour from here, but we do need to hand the materials over eventually... Oh, that's right. We have to go to the guild too."

"Who cares about Salazar and the guild and whatnot? Let's have some dinner, some food! I want some tasty fabada."

"Maureen... Weren't you eating on the coach already?"

"What's fabada?"

"A stew made from dried white beans. You throw in some sliced sausage and salted meat, boil it down, and it's delicious. Then, soak some hard bread in it... Oh right, some mornay with plenty of vegetables could be nice too... Oh, mornay is where meat and veggies are simmered in milk and cheese sauce. You stick them all in a tureen and broil them. I like it when they put fish in, though. Oh, but you can't forget Rhodesian pork roast... The skin is crisp and lightly charred, and the fat just melts in your mouth." Maureen's face was the picture of bliss as she imagined each dish. Angeline rubbed at her belly button, already anticipating her stomach's imminent growling.

With a tired look, Touya pressed a hand to his brow. "Same old, I guess... So what's the plan? If you want to start with food, I can show you a good place."

"Maureen just made me even hungrier. I vote for food. Right, Anne?"

"Hmm, certainly... Any objections?"

"I want to go! It's all stuff I've never eaten before."

"Yeah... Okay, let's. We've come all the way to the capital, after all... Is that good with you, Kasim?"

"Sure, go ahead. No use in rushing things. Let's start by filling our stomachs."

"That settles it. Then, for now..." Touya was about to take the lead when Ishmael raised his hand.

"Actually, I'd like to return to my workshop first."

"Oh... Sure. So you had a house in the capital, then...?"

"Yes. It doesn't feel right to go around with all my materials, so I'd like to get that in order."

"Huh? Then is this where we say goodbye? Let's have a parting meal, at least," Miriam pleaded, sounding downcast.

Ishmael smiled wryly. "I'd love to, but my workshop's around Second Street. It's a bit far..."

"Hmm, I see..."

"You're planning on staying at the archduke's villa, right? I'll drop by when I can. I might be able to help you out."

"Thank you."

"Oh no, I'm just thankful I got to accompany all of you... Well then, I'll be off." After adjusting the bag on his back for comfort, Ishmael disappeared into the crowd. The party saw him on his way before Touya led them into the city proper.

○

As he left the soldier's depot, Belgrieve folded his arms with a conflicted look on his face. Percival was idly fidgeting, twirling his hair around his fingertips.

"No significant leads. The ones who encountered her weren't the soldiers stationed here; they were a division from the capital. And the elf hasn't been spotted since."

"That about sums it up... How about we try asking around where the altercation took place?"

"Yeah, I doubt the guild will know much at this rate. That's probably for the best. It was a fishmonger, right?"

"Yeah."

From what they'd heard, an imperial soldier had suddenly cut down a woman shopping at the fishmonger. Then, the dead woman rose back up and transformed into an elf.

It was a peculiar spell indeed, unlike any other he'd heard about before. There was a possibility it was a forbidden or foreign art. Perhaps Kasim might know of it, but he was unfortunately operating elsewhere. With that said, the details of the magic were

largely irrelevant. He didn't want to get sidetracked with too much tangentially relevant information; it would just distract from their investigation.

Belgrieve unfurled a map of the city and checked it over. The soldiers at the depot had kindly marked down the key location—it appeared they were in for a bit of a walk to their next destination.

Percival coughed and pulled out his sachet. “Looks like we’re in for a bit of a march.”

“Yeah. It should take nearly an hour.” Belgrieve folded up the map, then tucked it away and took in their surroundings. *The others have probably reached the capital by now,* he mused.

Percival closed his eyes in fond reminiscence. “This takes me back. At first, it was just the two of us trotting down the streets.”

“I remember. It wasn’t long before we met Kasim along the way.”

“I remember Orphen was lively like this back then too.”

“Ha ha... It still is.”

They bought kebabs at a stall and filled up a bit before heading to the fishmonger in question. It was apparently downtown on a bustling street corner. There were many people passing by, and Belgrieve knew he’d inevitably run straight into someone if he let his attention lapse. He briefly detoured from the flow of the crowd, finding somewhere he could safely consult the map again.

“It should be around here.”

“There are too many shops. I haven’t been here long enough to tell them apart.”

It took a bit of loitering before they finally spotted the seemingly newly repaired stand displaying rows of fish. Belgrieve waited for the fishmonger to finish serving the customer that came before them before calling out to her. “Excuse me.”

“Come right in! What can I do for you?”

“I’d like to ask about the elf...”

The fishmonger, who was thoroughly sick and tired of talking about it by now, turned a look of undisguised disgust at him. “This again...? I sell fish here, not stories. If you’re not buying anything, try somewhere else.” Evidently, she’d been inundated with more than her share of pesky window-shoppers who came by just to hear about the incident. *I wouldn’t look happy either if they wasted my time without making a purchase.*

Percival grabbed a large fish from the stand and hoisted it up. “I’ll take this.”

“Huh? Oh, y-you’re buying?”

“I am, so tell us about the elf. If it’s not enough, I’ll buy more.”

“Hey, Percy—”

“We’ll cook it up at the inn. I’ll take that fillet too.”

The moment she realized they were actual customers, the fishmonger’s expression softened. She still looked somewhat wary, however, as she wrapped the fish in paper.

“I guess that’ll do... I don’t know the details, but the girl the elf turned into was a regular here. She’d always buy a considerable amount of fish—claimed she worked for the Green Grass Eatery on the edge of town.”

“Green Grass Eatery... Where is it?”

“According to the imperial soldier, the shop doesn’t exist. Strange, don’t you think? A bit creepy, even. To be honest, I don’t want anything to do with it all. I just want to forget.” She shuddered, perhaps in recollection of the sight of the soldier cutting down the girl in front of her. It seemed she knew nothing more than that; they were at a dead end once more.

Belgrieve was quizzically tugging at his beard when the sword on his back suddenly began to make a slight growling noise. His eyes scoured the area, wondering what could have set it off. All he saw was a small, shadowy figure standing under the eaves. The girlish-looking interloper seemed no taller than a child. Her veiled face stared at the ground as though her mind were working over some kind of problem.

His curious gaze was suddenly met by her veiled face turning to him. A chill raced down his spine as he could almost sense their eyes locking on each other. The sword

was now growling loudly.

"Hmm..." Belgrieve furrowed his brow. He sensed that the girl was mirthful behind her veil, but his musings were halted by the prickly aura of intimidation emanating from behind him. The girl twitched before taking off in a hurry, evidently shaken.

Belgrieve wondered what just happened before turning to see Percival glaring sternly in the direction the girl had just been standing. "Percy?"

"What a nuisance. I can't stand *them*." Percival clicked his tongue and pulled out his sachet.

"She was strange, I agree, but still—she *was* a child, right?"

"Only in appearance. Good grief, this region's got some strange ones hanging around."

Belgrieve was taken aback. "*Only in appearance,*" which means she wasn't actually a child under the surface. An artificial body? Or is she controlling her aging with magic like Maria?

It was also curious that Graham's sword had reacted to her. He took it as an ill omen of events to come.

For his part, Percival put his sachet away and picked up the bag of fish. "In any case, it looks like there's trouble headed for that elf. Be on your toes, Bell."

"Yeah..." Belgrieve took in their surroundings. Things seemed as lively as they had been before the encounter, but now he had a sense of something strange squirming beneath the surface of it all. They had unwittingly stepped into the storm. Belgrieve pursed his lips, his hand gripping the hilt of the sword at his hip.

○

The sun had already set, draping the cityscape in the dim of twilight. The streetlamps all around had already been lit, casting dark shadows from those passing under their light.

It was a pleasant trip, Ishmael thought as he walked down the street. He'd been graced with so many chance encounters and had even come to know the magician famed as the Aether Buster. His previous journeys as an adventurer had tended to be violent

and dreary, but for once he had found himself in good company. Compared to his usual outings to gather materials, this time he had come away from it with some peace of mind.

"Is there any way I can help them...?" Ishmael murmured. His impression of Belgrieve and his companions was rather favorable, and the longer he had come to know them, the more he felt inclined to assist them in any small way he could. It was even enough so that he considered putting off his own research. Nevertheless, he would need to start by tidying up and putting everything away. He'd been away from home for quite some time now, and he wasn't young enough to cast everything aside for a flight of fancy anymore.

To reach his workshop, he had to leave the main road and pass through a winding series of alleys. Unlike those bustling boulevards, it was quiet around here with hardly anyone passing through. The sound of his boots tapping against the stone pavement reverberated against the sides of buildings and echoed into the night sky.

The familiar wooden door was in sight, as were the boarded-up windows—a dark room was best for magical experimentation, after all. *If I ever invite them to see the workshop, they might find it too gloomy though...* Ishmael laughed softly as he turned the key and pushed the door open.

"Huh...? What is... this?"

There was nothing—nothing that should have been there. The dusty room now contained none of his experimental equipment, nor his shelves of grimoires, nor even the tables piled high with mountains of papers on spell sequences and other studies. Everything he remembered was gone, leaving only the cold stone floor and walls faintly illuminated by the lantern in his hand.

This is strange. Did I get the wrong house? No, that can't be. I'd never forget where I lived. Going off my memory, I... No, wait..."Memory"?

What kind of experiments was I doing anyways? What grimoires were there on the shelves? What studies did I do before I left? All those flasks and tubes and beakers in my head... What were they for?

Wait—why did I live here in the first place? Where was I before that? Where did I study magic? And before that?

There were images in his head. Yet it seemed as though none of them connected to anything specific. They were like the contents of a book, a story. Entries with no true substance were simply recorded within him as pure information.

Ishmael fell to his knees, holding his head. It felt like his skull was about to split open. “That can’t be... It can’t...” he muttered incoherently.

Who am I?

The door suddenly shut behind him with a loud *clack* and he realized he wasn’t alone. He lifted his head. “Who...?”

The figure of a tall man clad in black emerged from the darkness. There was an old blade scar on the right side of his face. Feeling a frisson of fear, Ishmael stood up on unsteady legs.

“Grr... Identify yourself...”

“Your role is over.” The man in black smoothly drew the blade at his hip—a long cutlass that was missing its pointed tip.

Ishmael, his breathing erratic, desperately held his hands out. A grimoire manifested in front of him, glowing with a faint light. The pages of the floating tome flipped on their own accord as mana amassed around it.

“Stay away—don’t come any closer!”

“What a farce. Why should I fear someone who never existed?”

“That’s ridiculous! I... I...”

The man silently approached and thrust out his sword as though the motion were completely effortless. Even though it lacked a tip, the sword easily pierced Ishmael’s chest before he could even attempt to defend himself. Before Ishmael knew what was happening, a sickly warm feeling rose up through his throat, and then blood began to gush from his mouth.

“Ugh... ahh...” He toppled forward with a thud. The lantern shattered against the floor, and the flame was extinguished. The grimoire dissipated into nothingness, gone just as abruptly as it had appeared. His large glasses skittered across the floor, followed

soon after by the pooling blood. The light was gone from Ishmael's eyes; the room was filled with the cold presence of death.

The man sheathed his sword and stared down at the corpse. Suddenly, Ishmael's body twitched and then rose like a marionette pulled up by its strings. The body's contours blurred like the mist, only to resolve into the form of a man in a white robe with the hood pulled down over his eyes. "A fine job, Hector," he said.

"Quit making me do your dirty work, Schwartz."

The man in white—Schwartz—scoffed. "That false persona was quite strong. He could have held his own against anyone except you."

"The occasional challenge is what makes the job worthwhile."

"What's the situation here?"

"The elf got away again. But we're ready for her. Maitreya went to Findale."

"I see; very well. But be careful. The Exalted Blade and Red Ogre are in Findale. If she acts too openly, they'll see right through us."

Schwartz's words brought a grin to Hector the Executioner. "The Exalted Blade? Heh heh, I thought he died ages ago... I should've gone there myself."

"I'll give you a different target. Don't let this one get away."

"Who do you think you're talking to? Anyways—the Red Ogre? I haven't heard that one before."

"Father of the Black-Haired Valkyrie. His strength is upper-middle class at best, but he wields the sword of the Paladin. His insight is also quite sharp."

"Hmm... The Paladin's sword." Hector rubbed his chin, an amused look on his face.

For a few moments, Schwartz opened and closed his hands, ensuring his body was working properly. "I was worried what might happen after we failed in Orphen, but as it turns out... that was just the starting point," he muttered.

"Oh?" Hector asked, looking at Schwartz inquisitively.

Schwartz ignored him, placing a hand on his chest. "Let's go."

The two figures flickered like mirages, and then they were gone, leaving only dust in their wake. The room was once again empty and dead.

CHAPTER 107

RHODESIA SPREAD OUT LIKE A FAN

Rhodesia spread out like a fan along the gentle slopes of the mountain. The city had loaned its name to the entirety of the empire, and so most people simply called it the imperial capital. The higher up the mountain, the more estates of nobility one might find. The imperial palace lay right at the heart of the mountain, a stately structure carved directly into the rock face. When night fell, its windows would light up, and it would be like the mountain itself was glowing.

Nestled close to this palace were the villas of prominent nobles from all across the empire, one of which was a mansion belonging to Archduke Estogal. The archduke was essentially allowed to govern the northern region as though it were its own independent nation, and though this mansion was not as big as the main estate, it was certainly sturdy and gorgeously decorated—a truly overwhelming sight to behold.

After spending a night in an inn, Angeline parted ways with Touya and Maureen. The duo had business to attend to at the guild, but Angeline's party did not. The capital's guild was the central pillar of the very system Orphen's guild was trying to break away from, and so it was a place Angeline intended to avoid at all costs. Thus, they went their separate ways with plans to meet up again later to see Salazar.

For the time being, they paid a visit to Liselotte at her mansion. They were led into a room for visitors, where they waited for her arrival.

"Phew... It's really pretty, don't you think?"

"I c-can't settle down."

Miriam looked around anxiously, while Anessa sat on the sofa and awkwardly fidgeted. Kasim sat—or rather, slouched—at ease, his eyes drowsily shut. The man held a fundamental hatred for lofty mansions and had seemed to be in a bad mood ever since they arrived.

Perhaps because Marguerite was a princess in her own right, she seemed undaunted by the gaudiness. Still, it was rare for her to see a place so thoroughly and shamelessly

decked out in imperial decor of the highest degree, and she was excitedly and incessantly pacing around the room. “Wow, it’s even glittering here! Whoa, that vase has got a strange shape!”

“No touching, Maggie... You’ll break it.”

“Huh?! Is it really that fragile? Then how’d they carry it in here to begin with...?” With confusion and intrigue all over her face, Marguerite began to closely examine the expensive-looking decorative vase. Angeline giggled softly as she watched her antics.

Without warning, the door burst open, and Liselotte raced in. “Ange! Everyone! You came!” She excitedly rushed over and embraced Angeline, who smiled and stroked the girl’s hair.

“We did indeed... Are you busy?”

“It’s fine! Talking to you is more fun than playing with other aristocrats.”

“Please make sure you don’t say that when said aristocrats are in earshot, okay?” a voice wearily called out behind her.

“Oh, Ms. Sooty.”

“A pleasure, all. It’s been, what, two days?” Sooty nodded before turning to leave the room again. “I’ll bring some tea.”

Liselotte plopped herself down on the sofa before staring around curiously. “Where are Touya and Maureen? And Ange’s dad and the Exalted Blade aren’t here either.”

“Touya and Maureen had something to take care of at the guild. Dad and Percy stayed behind in Findale.”

“I see, a shame... But I’m sure we’ll meet again. Are you asleep, Kasim?”

“You’re so noisy, you woke me up.” Kasim cracked open one eye to take in Liselotte before letting out a great yawn.

Giggling, Liselotte turned to Marguerite, who was still by the vase. “Oh, Maggie, do you like the vase? Try rubbing it! It has a wonderful texture!”

"Huh? I can really touch it? Won't it break...?"

"Oh, you silly girl! It's not going to break from that."

Marguerite blinked. She looked at Liselotte, then the vase, then Angeline. Angeline grinned. "You heard her."

"Ange, you lied to me again!"

At that moment, the maids entered with refreshments. The table was soon spread with sweets and teas, immediately lightening the mood in the room.

Miriam took her first sip, then reeled back in shock. "Whoa, the tea's delicious..."

"The scent is nice... I've never had it in Orphen."

"Hee hee, you like it? It's farmed on the peaks of Chitra Ridge. Apparently, you can get truly premium tea leaves at high altitudes."

"That *is* really high..."

"Heh heh, I'm already glad I came!" Miriam exclaimed, digging into the assorted sweets with glee. Even Marguerite, who had been angry about Angeline's prank with the vase, quickly got over it with the help of the treats.

"Come to think of it, where's your fiancé?"

"Ozzie's still at the tea party. He was really eager to make connections while he's here in the capital."

"The fool... Leaving his cute future wife behind..." Angeline sighed.

But the man hailed from a baron's house in the city of Estogal; it was understandable why he'd be so desperate to forge connections with high-ranking nobles here in the imperial capital. That was one way of looking at it, anyways. Angeline had little familiarity with noble society and had no intention of growing any more familiar with it. It was a world she couldn't understand.

They were indulging in tea and sweets as their conversation bloomed when the door suddenly opened once again to admit someone into the room. "Pardon me. How do

you do?"

Sooty froze at Liselotte's side. "Whoa, it's the prince..."

"Oh, Benjamin!" Liselotte briskly stood up. Angeline looked at him with a furrowed brow, but Anessa, Miriam, and Marguerite were staring in a daze at the beautiful crown prince who had so suddenly appeared.

Crown Prince Benjamin approached without a hint of hesitation, patting Liselotte on the head. "Sorry for barging in, little Liselotte!"

"Oh, Benjamin! There you go, treating me like a child!"

"My apologies. You're clearly a bona fide lady already, ha ha ha!"

"Hold on, where's my brother?"

"Oh, young Francois? I entrusted him with a mission. He is truly reliable. But my word, it's all lovely ladies in here. Even a fair elf maiden! Hello, Angeline—oh, and the Aether Buster too! It's been a while. I'm delighted to see you again. Have you been well?"

"I guess..." Angeline murmured.

"Heh heh heh, I didn't want to ever see you again." Kasim's outspokenness startled everyone, even Liselotte. But Benjamin laughed it off.

"Some things never change."

"It's just my nature. You have some nerve, showing your face in front of me again. I commend your courage if nothing else."

"Ha ha ha! How harsh you are! But isn't it because of our arrangement that you had your miraculous chance meeting? In fact, I think I'm deserving of some thanks here."

Liselotte looked between Benjamin and Kasim, utterly flustered. "Wh-What happened, Your Highness? Did Kasim do something...?"

"Oh no, it's just between us," Benjamin assured her as he strode to Kasim. His voice lowered to a whisper. "What now, Aether Buster? I don't mind if you reveal everything here."

Despite Benjamin's menacing tone, Kasim wasn't the least bit bothered. "Was that supposed to be a threat? You're just digging your own grave," he taunted with a smile on his face.

"Ha ha ha! Whatever could you mean by that?" Benjamin asked before glancing at Angeline. She shook her head—the fact that Benjamin had incited Francois was difficult to discuss when Liselotte was around. Francois was her brother, after all. Keeping Liselotte out of harm's way was far more important to Angeline than anything Benjamin and Francois had done. This seemed true for Kasim as well, and he glared at the prince with a smile that was only skin-deep.



Benjamin grinned back at him. "Now then—I know when I've worn out my welcome. I'll be taking my leave today. I'm glad I got to see your face again, Angeline. Until next time."

And with that, he executed a magnificent about-face and departed. *It's frustrating, but you could hang that poise of his up on a wall*, Angeline thought with a pout.

It was as though a storm had come and gone. Anessa, not fully understanding what had transpired, came back to her senses and sat up straight. "That was the crown prince? He was a bit more, well... He was more than I was expecting..."

"He was kinda... kinda amazing. Really sociable, or how should I put it... He was definitely handsome." Miriam took a sip of tea to calm herself.

Marguerite blankly cocked her head. "Was that a pretty boy? Really? Hey, Anne?"

"Huh? W-Well, going off general criteria... Wait, you didn't think so?"

"I thought he was handsome, but... Is it really *that* big of a deal? Everyone talked him up so much that I feel a bit let down now."

"Wow, elves are hard to please." Miriam giggled.

Kasim flopped back against the sofa in a foul mood. Angeline leaned in close to him to avoid being overheard. "Are you going to be okay after insulting him out in the open...?" she whispered.

"It'd be even worse if I pretended to be nice to him. There's no telling how much of a mess it'd be... That guy really makes my skin crawl, good grief."

"Did something happen between you two? Did you fight?" Liselotte asked anxiously.

Kasim cackled. "I... That is, whenever I see a handsome guy like that, I get jealous."

"Huh? Really?"

"You betcha. And he's *detestably* handsome, so I feel pathetic when we're together. That's why I can't stand him, heh heh."

"I thought you weren't bothered by that stuff at all, Kasim... It's a little surprising. So

you do have a cute side to you! But you have to be polite to His Highness, okay?" Liselotte giggled and patted Kasim on the shoulder.

Meanwhile, Angeline sipped her tea, relieved that Kasim had managed to trick her. Contrary to his flippant attitude, Kasim was quick-witted. He didn't want to drag her into it.

The unsettling moment had passed. Liselotte was soon pressing them for tales of adventure as she had before, and the conversations naturally returned to normal.

But Benjamin's face remained in the back of everyone's mind. It was confusing—the conniving image of him that Kasim had told them about was difficult to reconcile with that of the handsome, charming man they'd just seen, and they didn't know what to make of it. Anessa, Miriam, and Marguerite, who were meeting him for the first time, were the most affected.

Sooty, who had stepped out at some point, returned to their room after a while. "Touya has arrived. He's in the parlor."

"Oh, that's good. Bring him here," said Liselotte.

But Angeline stopped her and stood. "No, we should get going. We need to see Salazar."

"Huh? You're leaving? We should all take it easy together."

"We will, once we've done what we came here for..." Angeline assured her, smiling and stroking her hair. The girl looked a little discontented, but she reluctantly nodded and saw them off to the parlor, where Touya and Maureen stood and waited.

"Sorry for taking so long."

"No, it's fine. Let's go see him."

"Huh? Already? I was looking forward to the sweets," Maureen said, disappointed.

Touya's head drooped. "Is that all you think about...?"

Liselotte giggled. "Come again! I'll be waiting!"



A night had passed, and noon had come around, but Belgrieve and Percival were sitting across the eatery's table without any information to show for it. It was terribly crowded and noisy here.

Percival took a bite from his grilled, bone-in steak. "What do we do now...?"

"We've hit a dead end... I don't know where to start." Belgrieve frowned as he ate a steamed potato.

The elf they were looking for was the talk of the town. But because of this infamy, much of what they heard was exaggerated hearsay or drunken hogwash. They had begun to ask around as soon as they had seen the others off to the capital, but whatever truth was out there, it was buried in lies and fabrications, making it a trial to sort through the mess.

One thing they knew for certain was that the elf could transform into a human and, it seemed, use teleportation magic. She hadn't shown up since that incident. They would occasionally find someone who claimed to have seen her, but it all turned out to be nonsense, misunderstanding, or exaggeration, and they were getting nowhere.

The two silently continued their meal for a while until eventually, Percival opened his mouth. "This is just my gut talking here..."

"Yeah?"

"We saw that strange kid at the fishmonger's, right?"

"The one you said only looked like a child?" Belgrieve recalled the girl dressed in black with a veil over her face.

Percival nodded. "I get the feeling she's got something to do with this. Thinking back on it now, I don't think she was there just to gawk."

"Hmm..." Belgrieve stroked his beard. She was certainly a curious girl, and it was concerning that Graham's sword had reacted to her in the way it did. It seemed the girl was there at the location of the incident, looking for something—and perhaps she knew something they didn't.

"Right—there's a high chance she has a clue of sorts. Even if she doesn't, it's better than twiddling our thumbs and doing nothing. Let's try searching for her."

"Ha ha! Glad you agree. All right, that's settled," Percival exclaimed and polished off his drink.

They got up and left the eatery. By now, there were some gray clouds flowing in from the north. The wind was cold, and Belgrieve had to button up his collar.

"Looks like rain," Percival said, gazing up into the sky.

"Yeah," Belgrieve agreed.

They made haste towards the fishmonger's shop, the crowds around them likewise hurrying to escape the impending rain. The clouds seemed to grow thicker all the while, and though Belgrieve and Percy did try to get there as soon as they could, the first droplets were soon pattering against the rooftop of a nearby store. Not a moment later, the rain was coming down in full force.

The pair hid under the protruding eaves of the nearest building. They were joined there by others seeking shelter, who gazed out at the wet ground with troubled looks on their faces.

"Tsk, couldn't the rain have waited a bit longer..."

"Well, there's not much we can do. And I doubt that girl will be out in this downpour."

Though it hadn't yet turned to snow, it was nearly winter and the rain was cold—all the more so once it soaked through clothing. *We can still make our way if we pull our cloaks over our heads*, Belgrieve figured, but he noticed the rain was losing a bit of its momentum. Percival unhesitantly stepped out.

"Let's go. Now's our chance."

"Coming, coming."

A fine spray formed in the air as droplets clashed against one another, and they were running straight into it. They grimaced at the annoying dew that clung to their eyelashes as they made their way through the rain.

Judging by the clouds, this would not be a passing drizzle. *It's going to keep pouring until night...*

When they finally arrived, there were a few customers there—or at least, people sheltering from the rain. Traffic on the street was at an all-time low. They slipped under the eaves and shook their coats to fling off some of the moisture.

The fishmonger was in the middle of packing her wares away, apparently planning to close shop early, but she had a slightly surprised look on her face at the sight of them. “You were here yesterday...”

“Ha ha... We’re intruding again.”

“The fish was delicious, lady,” Percival said with a smile, glancing over all the goods that were still on display.

With an awkward smile, the fishmonger set down the one she was holding. “Oh, what a charmer. You must really like my fish if you’re coming in this rain.”

“You got that right, ma’am. So—have you seen a little girl with a veil over her head?”

The fishmonger cocked her head to the side inquisitively. “A veil? No, I’m sure I would remember that...” she said, trailing off as she seemed to stiffen, her expression frozen. She wasn’t looking at them—her gaze was directed over Belgrieve’s shoulder. At that instant, the sword on Belgrieve’s back began to quietly growl. With furrowed brow, he glanced back just in time to spot a platoon of soldiers crossing in front of the store in the rain. The insignia on their clothes and armor was slightly different from the one displayed by Findale’s soldiers.

The fishmonger shuddered and shrank back. “Vienna, have mercy...”

“Something wrong with them?” Percival asked.

The woman lowered her voice. “Those soldiers there, they came from the capital. They’re the ones that caused all this commotion. I don’t want to say it, but there’s something sinister about them...”

“So they’re the ones...” Percival looked like he was about to dash after them, but Belgrieve placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Wait, Percy. You don’t want to arouse suspicion right now.”

“But Bell...”

"Look." Belgrieve nudged his head in a certain direction. Percy squinted for a moment before his eyes widened. There she was, hiding in the shadows of the soldiers—the girl with the veil. That was presumably why the sword had reacted.

Percival clicked his tongue. "So she's with the empire... What now?"

"Let's try tailing them unnoticed. If they're searching for something, they should eventually split up. But if they're going to continue moving in that large group, there's a chance they've figured something out."

"I see. Got it. Still, it's hard to sneak around when I look like this." Percival chuckled.

Belgrieve smiled and turned to the fishmonger. "We'll be back to buy something later."

"Oh, y-yes, of course."

They both pulled the hoods of their cloaks over their heads and headed out into the rain, trailing behind the soldiers while keeping a fair bit of distance. Though there were few people on the streets, the mist brought on by the rain worked in their favor and helped to make the two large men relatively inconspicuous.

The soldiers turned the corner down a side street and proceeded down a meandering path that zigzagged all about the city.

"Strange..." Percival frowned.

"So it's not just me... Do you reckon they noticed us?"

They approached the next corner, peering around it warily.

Belgrieve was stunned. "Dangit... They gave us the slip."

There was not a single figure to be found in the alley beyond. Belgrieve thought they had been following closely, but it seemed they were dealing with masters of their craft.

Suddenly, the sword on his back began to growl again...

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It was drizzling lightly now, so finely that the droplets were hardly discernible, and

even the slightest breeze was enough to make the mist cling to the body.

A platoon of soldiers emerged from the darkness. Francois, who stood in the lead, looked around doubtfully. They were in a back alley, in the shadow of a building. "You used the shadows as a warp gate... What are you so afraid of?"

The girl before him shook her head, her veil swaying along with it. "Those two are not foes we can take on."

"Hmph, I thought you were supposed to be a top-tier magician," Francois mocked her. "Do you know how pathetic you sound?"

The girl frustratedly looked away. "If Schwartz told us to be wary, we must be wary. What's more, these barbaric battles are no task for Maitreya of the Black Tapestry. There are other jobs for me."

"Then get to them already. You've already got that mana trace you were looking for, right?"

Maitreya did not answer his question. Instead, she held out her hands with her palms facing downward and began to quietly chant. Though her voice was faint, her words had a peculiar quality to them that echoed across the surrounding buildings. The shadow at her feet seemed to shift and change as though it had a life of its own. All the while, the soldiers looked on with bated breath.

"Found it..." Maitreya's down-turned palms were pointed ahead of her when her shadow suddenly swelled from the ground, spiraling before them all. A tepid wind blew, lifting the puddled water from the stone pavement and kicking up an unpleasant spray. As mist and shadow continuously swirled, something hazy began to emerge at the epicenter. It was a peculiar, off-color landscape, appearing as though it were being reflected in a polished bronze mirror. A faint light poured out of it.

There were figures within. An elven woman sat in a chair beneath the eaves of a small house. She slouched back, closing her eyes as she took in the soft light streaming through the trees. It looked like she was at rest.

Francois smirked, silently signaling to the soldiers with his eyes. He too reached for his sword. But Maitreya lifted one hand to stop him and held out her other hand to receive something.

"What?"

"Crystal ball. Give it."

Francois frowned. But he took a small orb from his pocket and placed it in her hand.

"What are you going to do?"

"She managed to fend off Hector. It isn't wise to face her head-on." Maitreya began softly chanting again, and the beautiful, perfectly spherical crystal looked as though it were filling up with smoke. There were now gray clouds and flashes of lightning within it, and inside were countless humanoid figures writhing and lashing out. It looked as though they would smash through the orb and flood out at any moment.

She was about to toss that crystal ball into the sepia-toned world when suddenly the scenery shifted. The elf woman's eyes shot open, and she sprang to her feet.

"She noticed us...?" Maitreya muttered, beginning to lose her composure. "How?"

The scenery bent and stretched before melting back into swirling shadows and mist. Those swirls soon ebbed and faded in their turn.

"I knew it," a voice suddenly called out. Maitreya, Francois, and the soldiers turned, startled. Out in the light rain stood Percival, arms folded. "I knew you were up to something."

"The Exalted Blade! How did you get here?" Maitreya paused. Her eyes widened further when she spotted Belgrieve standing just behind Percival with his sword drawn. The blade faintly glowed and growled as if to intimidate them. "That sword... got in the way of my magic."

"The holy sword just couldn't stand your filthy mana. It happily led us right to you." Percival chuckled as he drew his own sword from its sheath.

The soldiers, caught off guard, readied their own weapons when Percival began to radiate an intimidating, leonine aura. These were well-trained soldiers of the empire, and yet they flinched and shuffled back. Several of them beat at their own chests as though they were choking and trying to forcefully draw a breath.

"Hey... Do you really think you can beat me? Stand down if you don't want to die. I've

only got business with that shorty.”

Francois advanced with a face full of rage. “Silence!” he demanded. “You’re cocky for a mere adventurer! Are you going to make an enemy of the empire?”

“Hmm? Who the hell are you...? Well, whatever. Get in my way, and I’ll cut you down.”

“Percy, enough with the threats. It’s childish,” Belgrieve said, moving to stand next to him. The radiance of his blade grew more intense.

Francois shrieked and took one step back, then another. “S-Stop! Get that sword away from me!”

Percival laughed aloud. “What’s this? After acting so high and mighty, *this* is where you draw the line?”

“Grr... Curse you!” The moment Francois raised his sword, an armed skeleton leaped out at Percival in ambush from behind.

Percival scowled and cut it down, scattering the bones to the ground. “Necromancy? Try another one.”

But when he turned back, Francois and his men were sinking into their own shimmering shadows like a pool of water.

Percival’s eyes widened. “Running again?”

But the moment before they were fully submerged, Belgrieve leaped forth, making full use of a step with his left foot to bound off the pavement and over over the soldiers who were already half gone. He landed right in front of Maitreya. The sword howled; he stabbed its tip into the ground. Everything around them quaked as though lightning had struck. Maitreya cried out with a strange voice as she was seemingly ejected from the shadows, landing face up on the ground.

“How can he move like that...? Isn’t that a fake leg...?”

Percival arrived a moment later, grabbing the girl by the scruff of her neck and hoisting her up in the air. He pressed his blade to her throat. “Good call, Bell. Looks like you’re still better at making split-second decisions than me.”

"That's not true. All of us always did what we had to."

Maitreya flailed around with her small limbs in the air. "S-Stop... Don't kill me..." she pleaded fearfully with a small, feeble voice.

"We won't. It looks like you know a few things, after all."

"No secrets. If you tell a lie..." Percival threatened her. Belgrieve's sword was growling as well.

"I-I'll tell you whatever you want. Just spare my life..." She was practically in tears already.

I'm not good with these rough matters, Belgrieve thought. I'm glad Percy's around...

Francois and his men were already gone, leaving only Maitreya behind. Percival took some rope from his bag and used it to bind Maitreya's arms and legs.

"Don't think you can run away. My sword will take your head faster than you can sink into a shadow."

"I-I won't run. I won't, so..."

Belgrieve heaved a sigh at the sight of her cowering under Percival's glare. "Look at her, Percy. Don't you feel bad for her?"

"What are you talking about, Bell? Nothing good comes from spoiling people like her. Dammit, I wouldn't have to be this cautious if I just had something to seal her mana..." Percival lightly prodded Maitreya with the tip of his boot, eliciting a pained yelp from her.

"All right, what next? We could try extracting information, or we could get her to open up that portal again."

"Right..." Belgrieve stroked his beard as he thought it over. "In any case, let's get out of the rain. No use in getting more soaked."

"You have a point. Back to the inn, then," Percival said as he hoisted Maitreya up under his arm.

"Do you think that figure in there was Satie?"

"I don't know. It was too far and too hazy..."

Belgrieve closed his eyes, chasing the form of the elf from his memories. Water dripped from the hem of his cloak. It didn't seem like the rain would let up anytime soon.

CHAPTER 108

THE ELVEN WOMAN COULDN'T CONCEAL HER SHOCK

The elven woman couldn't conceal her shock as space itself seemed to shift before her. It seemed unfathomable that someone could interfere with a barrier produced through the powers of an old god, but she knew it was bound to happen someday. She couldn't live in peace forever—the time to fight would inevitably come.

While she was sheltering the children here, her enemies were slowly growing in strength. Those doubts that had lingered in her mind ever since she'd been unmasked in Findale were finally becoming a reality.

"Did they follow the traces of mana from when I teleported?" She'd used spatial magic on the fly—it was hard to imagine she had been very careful with it. Even so, the traces should have been incredibly faint.

Schwartz would never be able to break through. The Blue Flame of Calamity was one of the top magicians in Rhodesia—no, the entire continent even. But the barrier was thoroughly prepared with measures specifically made to counter him. In which case, there had to be some other skilled magician involved.

Their forces are growing... she thought, sighing. "I can't fall too far behind."

She had no way of knowing why her foe had stopped with the interference before it was complete, but it was certainly a godsend to the elf. *I need to close up that hole and reinforce the barrier.*

In the middle of the yard, she spread out her hands and calmly invoked her mana. A faint chant, barely louder than a breath, created swirls of mana around her that gradually spread out. "That should do it for now..."

She caught her breath, a sense of fatigue creeping up her back. It weighed on her heavily, like a lifeless infant. Her shoulder wound still ached. The elven woman unsteadily made her way to the backyard where beings of light flitted about like

butterflies before coming to a rest around a small gravestone. In front of the stone was a wooden platform, atop which was placed some flowers in a cup of water.

The woman sat with a thud in front of the grave. “Do I really have to fight? Huh?” she wondered, as though speaking directly to it.

She could hear the voices of children romping in the distance. The elf woman closed her eyes and took a deep breath. *I'll protect them. The barrier is still safe.*

But their paltry garden would not provide enough food to support them all. With magic, she could not only change her appearance, but even her personality and memories. She'd ventured to town again and again, procuring supplies without anyone noticing her. Though there had always been the fear of discovery lingering in the back of her mind, she had still hoped these peaceful days would go on. Even if she knew it was a transient peace, she had prayed it would last forever.

But the situation was changing. Her enemies were not merely twiddling their thumbs in the dark. The net they had cast around her was closing in bit by bit. There was no way they would give up, nor would they be easily shaken from the trail they had already caught on to. Soon, she wouldn't be able to run any longer.

She could hear the pitter-patter of light feet approaching.

“That was crazy!”

“It shook!”

The twin girls raced up to her, and the elf embraced them. They happily hugged her back.

“Aha ha! It was surprising, wasn’t it...? But it’s all okay now.”

“That was the first time. Why did it shake?”

“Maybe something happened outside? What kind of place is it out there?”

“I want to see!”

“Me too!”

The twins looked at each other with innocent, gleeful expressions.

Though the elf had forced a smile, she was at her limit and couldn't contain herself any longer as tears began to pour from her eyes. She wiped them away with the back of her hand but couldn't stop from sobbing as she firmly embraced the twins.

"I'm sorry... So sorry for keeping you here all this time..."

The twins were startled, but they quickly began to rub her back and pat her on the head.

"Don't cry."

"We won't be selfish."

"No, it's fine... You're just fine." Wiping her tears, the elf woman placed a hand on each of their heads. "Now how about we choose the perfect flowers for your mother?"

"Yeah."

"They're drooping, after all."

The twins took the wilted flowers and ran off again. When they had gone, the elf slowly stood to her feet. She looked at the palms of her hands before clenching her fists and lifting her head. "I have to fight... before they attack this place again."

She quietly began to chant a spell.

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The rain had begun to fall again by the time they returned to the inn. There was hardly a soul on the streets—only the occasional shadow racing through the haze.

When they entered the room, Percival immediately took something out of his travel bag and stuck it onto Maitreya's back. It was a small piece of paper with a magic seal drawn on it. The moment it was placed, the paper caught fire and burned away, leaving only the red symbol on her clothes.

Maitreya stirred. "I feel numb!" she grumbled.

"Shut it. Just pipe down."

"Is that the one Kasim left behind?"

"Yeah, the paralysis charm. It's not very strong, but at the very least, she shouldn't be able to use anything as mana-intensive as teleportation."

And with that, Percival pulled a small crystal ball from Maitreya's pocket. He looked at the ominous, writhing figures within. "I'm taking this. Where'd you even get something this dangerous?" He then casually tossed Maitreya on the bed, eliciting a yelp.

"C-Curse you... Do you think you'll get away with doing this to Maitreya of the Black Tapestry...?"

"I've heard that moniker before. Never thought it'd belong to such a shrimp, though." Percival ripped off the veil covering Maitreya's face along with the headdress accompanying it. Although the face beneath belonged to a young girl, just as her build suggested, her complexion was pale and her eyes were bloodred. It didn't seem like she was an albino, however—two small horns protruded out from her ultramarine hair.

Percival laughed aloud like he'd figured it all out. "Aha! An imp. That explains that unpleasant aura of yours."

"Imp? You mean like a fiend?"

"Yeah, they're like vampires—fiends with high intelligence and mana. Some of them sneak in among humans. She must be one of them."

I see... Belgrieve nodded. Like goblins, imps did not grow particularly large. In that case, it made sense that she only appeared to be a child.

Fiends like vampires, devils, and ogres possessed human levels of intellect. In a sense, it would be accurate to label them as demihumans, and their intelligence made them incredibly dangerous. They were also quite rare to come across—as they similarly perceived humans as threats, they tended to keep their distance. However, there were some like Maitreya who disguised themselves as humans to survive in human society.

Still, she rose to be an adventurer with a moniker, Belgrieve thought, both surprised

and impressed.

"Imps must be incredible..."

But Maitreya indignantly protested, "Don't lump me in with the others. I am exceptionally talented."

"Can it."

"Oof!" A light smack from Percival had her holding herself and crying out in despair.



"Urgh... With no means to resist... Is this where it all ends...? What a poor girl I am."

"Don't make us out to be the bad guys here, you villain." This time, Percival poked her in the head.

Maitreya winced. "I'm not a villain, I'm just a professional. You do the job you're paid for."

"Hmm... Maitreya, was it? Who hired you?" Belgrieve asked.

Maitreya fumbled over her words for a bit, but after another prod, she reluctantly gave up a name: "Prince Benjamin."

As I thought. Belgrieve closed his eyes. Along their journey, when the old party members got together to talk, Kasim had brought up the prince several times. According to him, he was the one who had encouraged Francois—the third son of Archduke Estogal—to go after Angeline. He was a man with hidden intentions, and Kasim had warned Belgrieve to keep him in mind while they were in the capital.

For better or worse, Belgrieve hadn't gone to the capital himself. But if someone under the prince's influence was going around plotting something here, he had to worry about Angeline and the others who had gone to the prince's doorstep.

Yet, on second thought, the party that had gone to the capital was incredibly stacked. Every member was far stronger than Belgrieve, in his own estimation. *It might not be my place to worry about them*, he thought with a wry smile.

Maitreya scrutinized his smile curiously. "What's so funny...?"

"No, sorry. It's nothing." His expression became stony. "So... what exactly is the prince plotting?"

"I don't know. The prince is just my client. I do my job—that's it."

Percival frowned. "Just your client? How long have you been working for him?"

"Almost three years..."

"Three years? If you've been with him that long, he's not just a client anymore. I told you not to lie, didn't I?" Percival prodded her again with a fearsome look on his face.

Graham's holy sword growled audibly from where it was propped up against the wall.

Maitreya yelped. "It... It's not a lie... I'm just so talented that he doesn't want to let go of me. He trusts that I can do my job, but he doesn't trust me on a personal level. It's not like we're together every waking hour of the day. He doesn't consult me on his grand scheme either."

"Talented? You...?"

"Wh-What are you looking at me like that for...? It's true. I'm just about the only one who could interfere with that elf's barrier. Even Schwartz couldn't."

"What? Schwartz?" Belgrieve's eyes widened. The name of a big shot had popped up when he least expected it.

Indeed, he'd heard it had been Schwartz, the Blue Flame of Calamity, who had led the group that commanded Charlotte and Byaku. He'd appeared in Orphen a while back as well, fighting a battle against Maria the Ashen.

Schwartz was involved—and from Kasim's report, Benjamin was no saint either. Although he kept up the appearance of a promising, perfect statesman, there was no telling what he was scheming behind closed doors. *Then, just who is this elf that both Benjamin and Schwartz are after?*

Realizing she'd said something she shouldn't have, Maitreya turned away in silence.

Percival cackled, grabbing her collar and pulling her to face them again. "You might be good at magic, but you're lousy at keeping secrets. Every member of the devil tribe I've fought was pretty cunning, you know."

"Shut up..."

"What was that?"

"Eep!"

"Hey, Percy. Ease up on the threats." Belgrieve kneaded his beard, staring hard at Maitreya. "The prince and Schwartz are working together, I take it."

"They are..."

"Why are they after the elf? Does she have something?"

Maitreya fidgeted, trying her hardest to keep it in. But with a glare from Percival, she begrudgingly opened her mouth. "The elf has Solomon's Key... That's what they're after."

"Solomon? Then it's got to have something to do with the demons... What's the elf's name?"

"I-I don't know that... I really don't!" Maitreya frantically cried out as soon as she saw Percival's raised fist.

Belgrieve placed a hand on his shoulder. "Enough, Percy. Anyways, it looks like we're better off making contact with that elf as soon as we can. I don't know much about Schwartz, but he's pretty strong, right? If we dawdle, he'll get to her first."

"Yes, point taken... All right. You, open that portal again."

"I-I can, but... you'll have to remove this paralysis."

"Fine. But if you run, I'll slaughter you. You can't teleport faster than I can swing my sword."

"I-I know I can't get away from the Exalted Blade. So don't kill me..." She was trembling, her eyes pleading to Belgrieve for help. With a sigh, Belgrieve tried to pacify Percival.

"If she's too scared, it might affect her magic. Cut her some slack, Percy."

"You're lucky that Bell's so nice."

Though his sharp glare was unrelenting, Percival lifted Maitreya to her feet. He took a dispelling charm from his bag and stuck it on her.

Maitreya's expression softened in relief as she shifted closer to Belgrieve. By complete happenstance, they had managed to play out an entire good cop, bad cop routine to incredible effect.

"Stand back... I'll connect." Maitreya held out her hands. Just as had transpired outside, her shadow swelled up and began to swirl in the empty air. A sudden wind whipped at her hair, despite the windows and doors being shut tight. But after a few moments,

Maitreya lowered her hands, a baffled look on her face. The magic cut out, and the wind died down.

"I can't connect... Did she put up countermeasures? No, she did, but that's not it... She's not there."

"What's wrong? Open it already."

"I can't connect. To be more precise, the elf is not inside the barrier. My magic uses traces of mana to form a connecting portal. If the elf—the source of the mana—isn't there, I can't connect."

"Then can you bring us near the elf?" Belgrieve asked.

Maitreya shook her head. "I could access inside the barrier because it was close to this town. However, it looks like the elf has gone farther away. If she's too far, even I can't reach her. Not to mention I formulated this spell sequence specifically to reach an elf residing within a barrier. It's an extremely powerful spell, but it's incredibly restrictive as a trade-off. I'm just about the only one who could have put it together."

"It's all the same if you can't do it. In any case, we've figured out that you're useless," Percival said, stomping the floor in frustration. "Dammit, a step too late... What's really going on here?"

"All right, since it's come to this, let's get our information in order. Maitreya, how about you tell us a bit more?"

"Fine... I can't go back, now that I've leaked information. In exchange, protect me from Schwartz." Maitreya sat on the bed, a resigned look on her face.

○

The tunnels beneath the capital spread out like an ant's nest, and just as the buildings up top would add more and more floors, these underground structures would grow deeper, layer by layer. As the capital's population grew, these dim, gloomy spaces began to serve as the city's slums. Apparently, Salazar was to be found at the end of one of these mazelike paths.

Anessa anxiously looked down the long corridor. "Wow, the vibe's completely different from how it is up above," she muttered.

"Isn't it?" said Maureen. "It's a dangerous place, but it's good if you want to stay out of sight."

Angeline nervously took in their surroundings before glancing directly above herself. The connecting path they'd just entered had a roof above it, of sorts—though it was more of a pastiche of wood and stone, admitting faint rays of sunlight through the slight gaps in the ceiling. The walls stretched up some ways, reaching into an aboveground structure. Up there, there were glass windows and other signs that, perhaps, someone had lived there long ago, but no longer.

"He's doing his research in a place like this...? Who exactly is Salazar?"

"He's an imperial magician, for what it's worth. I don't know what he's doing, but I don't see any signs of anyone ever coming this way apart from us," Maureen explained.

"I see," Kasim murmured, stroking his beard. "So, he's funded by the empire now. He's moving up in the world."

"But ain't that a bad thing? I mean, he could be connected with that crown prince," Marguerite suggested. Much to her relief, she had finally been able to take off her hood.

Touya smiled wryly. "I don't think you have to worry about that. He barely listens to anything anyone ever says. Even if the crown prince is using Salazar's inventions, there's absolutely no way Salazar would be actively supporting him."

"Well, perhaps. I doubt he'll go out of his way to report us, in any case," Kasim said with a satisfied nod.

Angeline folded her arms and aired her thoughts: "But... won't that make it so much more difficult for us to get info on Satie?"

"I just hope we're not going to return empty-handed," Anessa added.

"Yeah..." Touya awkwardly scratched his head. "W-Well, we won't know until we talk to him. I'll be really sorry if this all ends up as a waste of time."

"I'll be happy just to meet the master of time-space magic," Miriam said, giggling.

Eventually, the patchwork ceiling gave way to ashen, gray stone. Those faint glimpses of the sky from before were now completely sealed away, as the tunnel was without

either windows or gaps in the masonry, but there were lanterns on the wall at regular intervals to light their way. The atmosphere was similar to a mining shaft.

They were talking less and less the farther they went, the air filled with only the tapping of feet. It seemed like the stone corridors would continue on forever until they had come to a stop in front of a small wooden door. The polished hardwood had a black luster, and it was densely covered with fine, arcane-looking symbols inscribed in glowing ink. These symbols spread beyond the door and covered the walls around it as well.

“Wow, wow, this is incredible!” Miriam excitedly said, peering at it up close. “It looks like he derived this sequence from the sixth postulate of the fourth theorem! But what is this, truly? I’ve never seen it before... An entirely new formula? No, but if you connect it like that, the heat index will...”

“Looks like it won’t work unless you draw it out in three dimensions. Well, I’m sure this is just something he jotted down when it came to mind.”

“Hmm, it does look a bit like scribbled notes... But still, amazing...”

The conversation between the two magicians was completely incomprehensible to Angeline. She cocked her head to the side before nodding. *I’m sure it’s amazing...*

Touya knocked on the door. There wasn’t a sound from within. Suspicious, he reached for the doorknob, turned it, and pushed the door open. “Salazar?”

Following Touya’s lead, the party crowded into the room. As soon as she entered, Angeline was taken aback. The first thing to strike her was a bizarre, nose-piercing scent that permeated the air. It seemed medicinal, as far as she could tell.

She looked around, grimacing. The room wasn’t lit in any way she was familiar with—there was no lamp hanging on the ceiling or any torches on the wall. Instead, the walls, floor, and even the ceiling were crammed tight with mysterious magic letters in the same faintly glowing ink that had been on the door.

The room itself was quite vast, but she saw none of the glass testing apparatuses or the shelves of grimoires she had grown used to seeing in the workshops of magicians. Deeper within, the room was lined with pillars at regular intervals, each of which was crowned with a refined crystal ball. The orbs gave off a peculiar ambience as they refracted the light of the glowing graffiti. Near the back of the room, a magic circle

covered the floor. It was the only spot that seemed to be deliberately planned and well organized, spared from the sprawling, erratic symbols covering every other surface.

Someone was sitting cross-legged at the very center of the circle—a young man, by the looks of it. He wore a long lab coat over conventional Rhodesian garb, and he had a monocle over his right eye.

“Salazar!” Touya raised his voice a bit as he walked up to the man. That was Salazar, evidently. But there was no response to Touya’s calls; instead, Salazar began to mutter something under his breath.

“No, that’s not it. If the event is part of a great spiraling flow, there must be something at the very center. And yet, should I find this center, the scale of the event shall—”

“Salazar!” Touya frustratedly grabbed Salazar’s shoulder and shook him.

The man jolted to his feet. Then suddenly, his form bent and swayed, and in the next instant, a tall woman was standing where he had been. The clothes she wore were the same as the man’s.

“What? Oh, if it isn’t Touya. It’s rude to interrupt someone when they’re thinking, my boy.”

“Oh, please, get a grip on yourself. I brought what you asked for,” Touya said, producing several differently colored magic crystals from his bag and lining them up on the floor.

Salazar’s eyes lit up—then, he blurred again, and standing there was a ten-year-old boy whose lab coat dragged on the ground. “Oh, what a joyous day! Indeed, indeed, now, I can make the tools I need to observe in detail. I’ll have to recalculate the sequences, then.”

“I get it, but can this wait? I brought some visitors.” Touya shook him again as he was about to get lost in his thoughts. Then, as if he’d only just realized they were there, Salazar turned to look at Angeline and the others.

“Oh, what a surprise to see so many guests in this room,” he said as he shape-shifted once more. Now, an elderly man with a crooked back hobbled towards them. “Welcome, one and all! An old experiment has caused my existence to become rather uncertain, so I do apologize for this unsightly form. I’d love to serve you a cup of tea, but I haven’t developed that spell yet! Oh, but wait. If I just use that crystal young Touya

brought me..."

"Okay, okay, we can worry about that later," Maureen said, prodding at Salazar with a calm look on her face, before turning to Angeline. "He's always like this. Leave him be for one second, and he's lost in his own thoughts."

"I get the idea," Angeline replied, shaking her head.

This is like a magician taken to the extreme, she thought. I have no idea what he's saying, he's suddenly young, then suddenly old, and then just as suddenly, he's even a woman. It's an interesting spectacle, but holding a conversation wouldn't be fun.

Even Miriam, who had been so excited to meet the master of time-space magic, stared at the man with her mouth agape, unmoving.

Halfway resigned to the situation, Angeline leaned against the wall, feeling the cold of the stone surface through her clothes. She took another good look around the room. Although the only illumination was coming from those symbols on the walls, it was fairly bright—enough so that she could see everyone's face quite clearly. If she kept her eyes fixed on the letters for too long though, she felt they'd start moving all on their own.

Kasim sighed and bopped Salazar over the head. "Your shifting's gotten even worse than before. You need to get a grip on yourself, Snake-Eyes. Have you forgotten about me too?"

Salazar, now in the form of a young woman around the same age as Angeline and her party, peered closely into Kasim's face, seemingly scrutinizing him. Suddenly, Salazar burst into a delighted cheer and embraced Kasim. "This mana! Oh, Aether Buster, my friend!"

"Friend? I wouldn't say we were that close. Are you going senile already?"

"A delightful reunion! Well, hear me out. I've done a lot of thinking. Your parallel processing sequence was a huge source of inspiration for me. So I used it as a basis, you know."

"Yeah, yeah, got it. We can talk about that later." Kasim pushed Salazar away, looking rather annoyed.

Salazar patted Kasim on the shoulder, now in the form of a middle-aged man. "No one ever came to visit me since I was shut away in this cramped laboratory. Well, none who weren't up to no good—and not a single person I could exchange knowledge with on equal terms."

"I get it, but can't this wait?"

The conversation wasn't getting anywhere at all. Angeline impatiently walked back into the conversation. "Um, we're looking for an elf named Satie. Do you know anything, sir? Madame?" she asked loudly.

For a moment, Salazar froze. Then, he approached Angeline as though he were sliding across the ground, peering deep into her face.

"What...?" She was naturally surprised.

"Yes, yes, yes! I see! Very interesting indeed!"

Once he was close, she could see that the eye behind his monocle did, indeed, have a snakelike vertical pupil. As he shifted once more into the appearance of a twelve-year-old girl, Salazar seemed to reach enlightenment all on his own. He nodded before walking away from her in a very good mood indeed. "So I myself can become a part of this great current! How spectacular!"

"Seriously, what? What are you talking about?"

"Oh, you don't know?! But there are times those in the midst of the flow don't feel it themselves. Have you hopped aboard the flow, or is it created by your very steps?" In his excitement, he twisted and warped into a tall, handsome man.

Angeline looked at Kasim, dumbfounded. For his part, Kasim scratched his head, looking somewhat apologetic.

"A current, you say? Are you crazy? Even seventh-order fixed-point observation magecraft wasn't able to measure the mana flow of worldly phenomena. Wasn't that your conclusion?"

"Why, it isn't mana I'm observing, young Aether Buster! It would be rather troublesome for a magician of your caliber to hit a mental block there! Mana is a force, the direction of which is determined by human will! Then, what is will? Is there any

greater force that encompasses it? Don't you know the unfathomable wonder of collective consciousness? A consciousness unified by shared enthusiasm is being carried by a certain flow—the flow of events! Its direction is as one, and as streams of different directions collide, that is where we get chaos, and where massive energy is generated!"

"Shut it. If you're trying to get people to understand, speak slower," Kasim chided, hanging his head in exhaustion.

After hearing Salazar's impassioned speech, Miriam folded her arms and groaned. "Hmm, I think there's a saying that goes, 'Heroes are only born on the battlefield'..."

"You understand what he's saying, Merry?" asked Anessa.

"About half of it. There are some time-space researchers who claim that human action and consciousness all run along a certain great flow... Oh, but there are several branches and tributaries; the entire stream is made of a complicated mix of them. When streams clash and swirl, a lot of energy is generated... So during massive wars, you'll see phenomena that can't be explained by any conventional knowledge."

"I see... I don't get it," Marguerite conceded, having apparently completely given up on understanding at all. She walked around the room, staring deep into each crystal ball.

Maureen had taken a seat by the wall, opening a parcel to eat something or another. She too was off in her own world.

Yeah, we're really not getting anywhere. This is going to be troublesome. I feel bad for Kasim, but let's send him to keep Salazar company until he's finally satisfied. Then, we can get down to business, thought Angeline.

"I'm going to take a walk until he's done," she whispered into Touya's ear. "It's hard to breathe here with this smell."

"That so? You sure? You won't get lost, will you...?"

"Want to come with me?"

Touya glanced around, then nodded. "Sure. In any case, I'm guessing Mr. Kasim's the only one who can keep up with anything he's saying."

Thus, the two of them walked out of the room. Once the door shut behind them, they were met by much-appreciated silence.

Angeline took in a deep breath, feeling relieved. Sure, the air here was a bit cold and mildewy, but it was far better than that strange, medicinal scent in the room.

Touya's shoulders relaxed a bit. He adjusted his bundled hair as he leaned against the wall. "I'm kinda sorry. Looks like I just made things more confusing..."

"No, it's fine. It seems like he knows something. It's probably not going to be a waste of time..."

She was a little curious about how Salazar had looked at her with such interest. But if she wanted to ask why, she would need to wait until after he'd had his fill of discussing abstract theories and whatnot.

Touya looked down the corridor, then at Angeline. "How about we go somewhere we can see the sun?" he offered.

"Yeah."

The tapping of their feet as they walked was the only sound to be heard. After a bit, she looked over her shoulder and saw the magic writing flashing faintly in the distance.

"I wonder how dad's doing..."

"Findale's a big place, but I get the feeling Mr. Belgrieve and Mr. Percival can manage. They really are amazing."

"Aren't they? Heh heh, dad *is* amazing, and so are his friends. They're strong and smart—and that's the sort of adventurer I want to be."

"I think you're already there, Angeline."

"Not at all. Compared to dad, I have a long way to..." Angeline paused, her eyes sharpening as she felt a peculiar presence. Her hand reached for the sword at her hip. It seemed Touya had noticed as well, as he narrowed his eyes and braced himself.

Suddenly, space itself seemed to bend and twist before her. A short distance away, the air seemed to ripple, and then a white figure popped out.

"Grah?! The coordinates were thrown off... Curse you, Schwartz..." the figure rasped through labored, painful breaths before falling to her knees.

"Huh? Y-You..." Angeline's eyes widened in shock, her mouth working silently.

The figure before them was an elven woman with disheveled silver hair and wearing a robe stained in blood. Angeline saw herself reflected in the elf's emerald eyes.

CHAPTER 109

THE SPAN OF A FEW BLINKS

The span of a few blinks felt like such a terribly long time. Both sides simply stared at each other with bated breath, but Angeline's mind was racing like lightning during that time. "Satie?"

Before the sound of Angeline's voice had reached her ears, the elf woman stood in a panic. But her feet were unsteady, and she nearly tumbled over before she caught herself.

"Who are you...? What are you doing here...? You need to hurry... Run away..."

"Oh, you're terribly injured! Don't push yourself!" Touya hurried over to the elf. The blood seemed to be coming from her side and her right shoulder, and a cut traced down her beautiful, porcelain cheek.

Angeline reached for her waist pouch. "Wait... Medicine..."

"You can't! Don't worry about me, just hurry!" In the midst of her exhortation, the elf frantically turned around. She stood on guard, a grim look on her face. "Grr... He caught up..."

Space once again rippled like a stone cast into a still pond, and this time a middle-aged man in a black coat appeared. His wavy brown hair, speckled with white, was tied back, and he had a scar from an old wound that ran across his right eye.

The man in the black coat held out a long cutlass that was missing its tip. "You've got some guts, going after Benjamin directly. But you were naive. Did you think you could pull that off alone?"

"Ha ha, how persistent... I don't have any quarrel with you."

"Nor I with you."

"Then how about you let me go?"

“As long as I’m being paid, capturing you is my job.”

“Hmm... Even when that’s not the real Benjamin?”

“A trivial detail. Oh...?” The man narrowed his eyes dubiously at the sight of Angeline, who had come forth to protect the elf woman. “You’re...”

“I don’t know who you are, but it’s not cool to attack someone who can’t move,” she declared, drawing her sword.

The man grinned. “I see. So it’s *you*. Interesting...”

“Touya, look after her... Touya...?”

There was no reply. *Strange*, she thought and glanced back to see Touya had fallen to one knee on the floor, his eyes wide in shock. He gripped at his chest with one hand, and he had broken out into a cold sweat. “Why...? How are you...?”

“What’s wrong...?” Angeline asked, confused. She put a hand on his shoulder—he was breathing so heavily his entire body heaved every time he inhaled. He wasn’t maintaining a steady rhythm either.

For a moment, the man in the black coat seemed to ponder something. “Why are you here? Weren’t you supposed to be dead?”

“That’s right... Because you killed me.”

“Hmm...? Oh, I see. You’re the other one. The failure.”

Touya’s face contorted in rage. He bounded off the ground, drawing his sword to cut the man down. His technique was so great that even Angeline had to admire it, but the man casually intercepted the strike and pushed back.

His cold eyes pierced through Touya. “Too shallow. You haven’t progressed in the slightest. What are you trying to accomplish by simply imitating the appearance? Doing this won’t bring him back.”

“Shut up! Just how... How do you think mom felt?! ”

An unexpected battle had begun, but Touya’s control over his technique had become

a bit shaky from the blood rushing to his head. *I have to help him...* But she knew she couldn't join the fray while the elf's wounds were so serious. As she slowly worked out how best to treat the woman, she suddenly felt another presence behind her. She turned, and there stood a man in a white robe. His hood was pulled down over his eyes, making it hard to read his expression, but he was clearly not in a friendly mood.

Angeline shielded the elf woman, glaring at the man in the robe.

"Schwartz..." the elf muttered.

"What... Him?"

That was the magician who had deceived Charlotte and conducted all sorts of foul experiments—even bringing demons into the mix. It was no exaggeration to call him the mastermind behind all of that. His appearance here of all places was the last thing Angeline could have expected.

Before her was Schwartz, and behind her, Touya fought the man in the black coat. There was nowhere to run. *Maybe the others will notice the noise and come here...* That was the faint hope she held as she strengthened her grip on her sword.

"Can you buy some time?" the elf whispered. "Just a little..."

"Give me too long, and I might just beat him. Are you okay with that?"

"Heh heh! Even better!" The elf laughed. She had a beautiful smile.

Angeline's attention turned back to Schwartz. The man had done nothing and simply stood there with his arms folded. It looked like he was observing them. Though he seemed completely unguarded at a glance, he was strong enough to go toe to toe with Maria. He was not someone to be underestimated.

Just as she was about to face him, she sensed a current of mana behind her. She heard Touya yell in rage, "From shadows of beasts! From the dark demise! Lord of thy husks! Enshrined in a mound of flies!"

"Huh?!" Angeline gasped, coming to a halt. *Grand magic in a narrow corridor like this?*

With a great surge of mana, something with gargantuan physical mass appeared, along with the detestable stench of rotten flesh filling the air.

"Oh my..." the elf woman muttered. "Black magic?"

Schools of magic that strayed from accepted conventions were known as black magic. Though often quite powerful, these forms of magic usually ate away at the body or soul. *Who is Touya, if he can use something like that?* Angeline didn't take her eyes from Schwartz for one second, but her thoughts were in turmoil.

But Schwartz made no move and didn't even seem to be preparing any spells. He simply stood and observed.

It's kinda irritating—that he hasn't made a move in this situation just makes him seem even more dangerous, thought Angeline. She had been unable to find the right time to attack him in the time since Touya's interruption.

"You're half-baked—boring," she heard from behind. The mana receded before dissipating into a strong breeze that ruffled Angeline's braid. She wondered if whatever Touya summoned had been blown away, before she heard a faint, pained voice—Touya. *Was he done in?* Angeline wondered with a surge of unease.

At that moment, she felt a tug on her sleeve. "Come here!" The elf woman pulled her close, and everything around her suddenly blurred like she was looking through a warped pane of glass. Schwartz's white robe seemed to melt away before Angeline's eyes.

With his target gone, Hector the Executioner sheathed his blade.

"The grand magic must have thrown off my obstruction spell. By the looks of things, Maitreya failed," Schwartz reasoned.

"That's why I told you not to trust her. In the end, she's just a fiend," said Hector. He sent a doubtful look as Schwartz walked towards him. "What was that all about, Schwartz? You just let them get away. Is this a game to you?"

"It's still too early."

"What?"

"That young man named Touya... What is he to you?" Schwartz answered the question with one of his own, completely skirting around the issue.

Hector scowled. "A failure."

"Your failure?"

"It happened when I was hunting sinners in the east. My elder brother was quite capable, but he died from his own naivete."

"A capable elder brother and an incompetent younger one, then."

"He was not my younger brother," Hector said, then shut his mouth.

Schwartz wordlessly waved his hand, and then, the two of them were gone.

○

Maitreya carefully blew on the steaming sweet tea before ecstatically taking a sip.

"You really changed sides? Just like that?" Percival tiredly said, leaning against the wall.
"What a calculating girl. No one's gonna trust you if you're like that."

"I don't need anyone's trust. My life comes first."

"Hmph, that certainly sounds like what a fiend would say."

Maitreya pouted and set down the cup. "So what did you want to know?"

"How long have they been targeting the elf? What kicked it off?"

"The elf was already a target before I was hired. In fact, I was hired specifically to deal with the barrier."

"It took you three years?"

"It did—not because I'm incompetent, mind you. No, it's because we could never find a trace of her. My specialty is to create a portal using the target's mana, so first, I need to find—" she began, winding up to a lengthy lecture, before Percival put a stop to it with another poke.

"Solomon's Key, huh..." Belgrieve mused, twisting his beard. "Why would the elf have something like that?"

"Benjamin and Schwartz... They were one step away from obtaining it. But the elf snatched it away at the last second. The elf has always been getting in their way."

According to Maitreya—though she wasn't clear on the exact details—Prince Benjamin and Schwartz had been conducting research on Solomon and his demons for a very long time. One facet of this was something Belgrieve had already heard from Byaku: an experiment to make a demon into a human. As the experiment involved having the demon be born from a surrogate mother, many women of all sorts of races became test subjects.

Maitreya didn't know what set her off, but the elf had boldly and brazenly attacked several secret testing sites around the capital, rescuing the test subjects and experiments while destroying the facilities. Thanks to her, these experiments were no longer being conducted. "My theory is that the elf was one of those test subjects," Maitreya explained, taking a sip of tea.

Percival put a hand to his mouth, a strained look on his face. "Nasty stuff. But it makes sense."

"So because she was one of the subjects, she understood the severity of the prince's schemes and is working to put a stop to them?"

That's rather miserable to think about... Belgrieve closed his eyes. *What a hopeless battle that had to be.*

"Hey, Bell. If that elf turns out to be Satie..."

"Yeah. We might have to cross blades with the crown prince."

"Not just 'might.' You *will*. Do you have the resolve to do so? Making an enemy of the prince means making an enemy of Rhodesia. It doesn't matter how strong you are. You're not going to win against the might of the entire empire."

Belgrieve stroked his beard, eyes narrowed in thought. "Does the emperor share the prince's ideals?"

"I don't know about that," Maitreya said. "At the very least, the prince has not gone public with the experiments or with Schwartz."

"Naturally. There'd be riots if he publicized human experimentation involving

demons.”

“Is there... any way we can use that? If we can frame it as a personal battle against Benjamin rather than a fight with the empire, we’ll at least stand a chance. I’m sure the people involved are self-aware enough to know the work they’re doing isn’t commendable. If we play things right, we might be able to prevent them from getting the empire’s backing.”

“Hmm...” Percival put his arms together and groaned. “That may be true, but... How? Now *that* is the question.”

“I don’t know either. We don’t have enough information. We don’t even know if the elf is Satie yet.”

Maitreya sat on the bed with a perplexed expression, holding her knees. “Do you want to meet her that badly? The elf named Satie, I mean.”

“Yeah. That’s why we came here.”

“Humans are strange.”

“Well, if you want to live among humans, you’ve got to understand that much,” Percival said, prodding at Maitreya and eliciting a quiet groan.

“What’s our next move? Her magic doesn’t work, and we don’t have any leads.”

“And if those imperial soldiers return, they’ll be on the lookout for us. We can place our hopes on Ange finding something worthwhile, or...” Belgrieve trailed off, turning to Maitreya.

The imp cocked her head curiously. “What?”

“If there are no leads in Findale... we could have her transfer us to the capital.”

From what Maitreya said, the elf’s base of operations had originally been the capital. He didn’t want to waste any more time in Findale.

“How about it? Maitreya, can your magic take us there?”

“Of course. But it will take some time...” Maitreya got to her feet, apparently up to the

task.

But Percival scratched his head. “Hey, are you sane? If you let her use teleportation, she’s obviously just going to teleport herself away from us. There’s no guaranteeing she’ll send us somewhere safe either.”

“You think so? Do you still want to be the prince’s ally?”

Maitreya frantically shook her head. “I don’t.”

“Words are cheap. She’s just nodding because I glared at her.”

“Th-That’s not all. It’s as I said, isn’t it? After leaking this much info, I can’t possibly return...”

“Oh, I’m not so sure. I don’t know what you are to them, exactly. But if you give them info on us, they’ll take you back.”

“That’s not true... Schwartz does not forgive betrayal. He wouldn’t thank me even if I brought him information on you or your party. I’d just be digging my own grave.”

“Anyways, Bell. I don’t trust her yet. I’m not going, even if it is your idea.”

“You’re the leader. I trust you.”

It was clear that Percival wasn’t just being cruel to the girl. Every word echoed with his will not to expose Belgrieve to danger. Whether it was from his past trauma or his sense of responsibility as the party’s leader, he’d become much more cautious than he once was, and Belgrieve couldn’t contain his smile at the realization.

“What?” Percival pouted.

“Just thinking how much you’ve grown up.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? Forget it—let’s just wait for everyone to return.” And with that, Percival plopped down into a chair.

Maitreya sat back down on the bed with her legs dangling over the side, a bit despondent. After staring at them in boredom for some time, she began to flutter kick them in the air.

Belgrieve smiled wryly at her. “Do you want another cup of tea?”

“I’ll take it...”

○

Before she realized what was happening, she found herself in a strange world filled with light, but everything seemed to be cast in a muted sepia tone. There was a small house, around which faint lights fluttered about like insects before fading away. The house seemed to be in the midst of a forest.

Angeline was stunned for a moment, but upon realizing she’d just been teleported, she hurriedly looked back. The elf woman who had used the spell now lay collapsed on the ground breathlessly, while Touya knelt beside her in pain.

After looking around, the elf’s expression relaxed. “I’m back, somehow,” she muttered. “*Sigh...* Even after mustering my resolve, I still ended up like this. Pathetic, really... But going against Hector and Schwartz at the same time was a bit much...”

Then she looked at Angeline and smiled. “I owe you one. It’s thanks to you I’m not dead yet. Ouch...”

“Don’t talk. You need to be treated... Are you okay, Touya?”

“I’m fine...”

Touya did not look at her, but the sound of rustling cloth indicated he was tending to his own wounds. Angeline heaved a deep sigh before producing bandages and a vial of medicine from her waist pouch. While she was so occupied, she could hear the pitter-patter of light footsteps approaching and then coming to a stop nearby. When she looked up at their source, she saw two identical kids with black hair looking quite surprised.

“It’s a stranger.”

“A stranger?”

“Satie’s friend?”

“Maybe?”

Satie—that's what they said. Angeline felt her heart pounding in her chest as her eyes turned to the elven woman. She looked very young, as most elves did, but she had a somewhat mature air to her. Her features were beautiful, and her silky, silver hair billowed in the breeze; and yet, her eyebrows were bushy and untamed. She had heard about these very features before.

"You really are... Satie, aren't you?" Angeline asked in a timid but unfaltering voice.

"And you are...?"

Angeline took a deep breath. "I am Angeline—daughter of Belgrieve."

The elf's eyes lit up in surprise. "Belgrieve... Does he have red hair?"

"He does. And he has an artificial right leg," Angeline said, nodding.

The elf—Satie—looked deeply shaken, but she returned Angeline's gaze unflinchingly. "Bell... So he is alive. He even has a daughter..."

"Kasim and Percy are here too. Everyone came to see you, Satie."

"What...?" Satie's wide eyes were brimming with tears. She quickly wiped them away, covering her face with her hand. "But... But why...?"

"Satie." Angeline knelt down to place a hand on Satie's back. Though messy, her long hair was soft and glossy. Even though she was roughed up and covered in blood, and though Angeline knew now wasn't the time for such things at all, she couldn't help observing how beautiful she was.

Angeline figured she'd wait for Satie to calm down, but she was startled when the elf suddenly collapsed facedown on the ground. But it didn't take long for her to realize the obvious reason—the elf's wounds hadn't been treated yet.

"Satie!"

"What's wrong?"

The black-haired twins rushed over but stopped just short, a bit fearful of Angeline. They stared at her with wary eyes.

Angeline quickly unrolled the bandages without taking her eyes off them. "She's injured... I'll treat her," she explained, somewhat stiltedly.

"Do you live here? Are you friends of hers?" Touya asked. Before Angeline had realized it, he had finished administering first aid to himself and was carefully lifting Satie up.

The twins nodded, clearly anxious.

"Touya, your wounds..." Angeline anxiously pressed him.

"I'm fine. Even if I wanted to treat all my wounds, this is hardly the right place. I'm sure there's a bed in the house, so let's borrow it."

"Y-Yeah."

Touya entered the house without a shred of hesitation. The twins followed after him after exchanging looks, and Angeline eventually trailed after the group.

The house was dimly lit, but it was very tidy, which kept it from having a gloomy atmosphere. In fact, it was quite a calm and reassuring place. Touya laid Satie on the bed and immediately began to strip her clothes like he'd done it countless times before.

Angeline froze for a moment before rushing in to stop him. "I'll do it..."

"Hmm? Oh, sure. Sorry about that. I'll go draw some water," Touya said, beating a hasty retreat.

Even if it's an emergency, he's quite a guy to undress a woman without a hint of hesitation, Angeline thought, not knowing whether to be impressed or aghast. In any case, she'd taken over the job, and it was on her now to administer treatment.

It was a simple matter to peel away the eastern-style robe, which was fastened at the front. She hadn't been able to tell because of the loose clothing, but her chest was far more abundant than it had previously seemed. Even as a woman, Angeline blushed, but she knew that now wasn't the time for that.

Her clothes are all bloody. I'll need to find something for her to change into, she thought. But then, she heard Touya in the background already asking the twins where the clothes were.

She must have lost a lot of blood. Her complexion is poor. As Angeline wiped away the dried blood from around the wound with a damp cloth, Satie groaned and cracked open her eyes.

“Urgh... Ow, ow...”

“Don’t get up. I’ll dress your wounds.”

Satie had almost sat up but lay back down again.

While Angeline washed the wounds and smeared them in ointment, she stole an occasional glance at Satie’s face. For her part, the elf stared up at the ceiling and groaned.

“Angeline, was it? It’s strange, really. I never thought I’d be saved by Bell’s daughter.”

“Dad wanted to see you.”

“Aha ha, so that’s it... And Percy and Kasim are with him?”

“Yeah... I’ll wrap the bandages... Lift your arms.”

“Heh heh, thank you.”

She slowly helped Satie up, then bound her abdomen with a roll of bandages. All the while, Satie watched her with gentle eyes.

“You don’t look much like him. Who’s your mother?”

“I’m adopted. Dad found me in the forest...”

“Hmm... I see.”

“I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“Aha ha... Nothing decent, I’m sure. They must have told you I was a violent, crude woman who couldn’t cook. Especially Percy and Kasim—they always used to get so carried away. It was always nothing but insults the moment they opened their mouths.”

“Th-That’s not true...” Angeline stumbled over her words as she handed over a vial

she'd gotten from Maureen.

"An elixir?" Satie looked pleasantly surprised. "Smells like an elf made it... It can't be one of mine."

"I have elf friends. Three of them. There's old Graham and Maggie—dad made friends with them before I did."

"Old Graham... You don't mean the Paladin, do you? That's incredible. Oh, Bell... You raised a daughter, made friends with the paladin... Looks like you got up to all sorts of things the moment I took my eyes off of you. Good grief." Satie laughed before throwing back the whole elixir. She wiped her mouth as she stared off into the distance.

"We all parted on pretty bad terms. Bell was terribly injured, and then he just disappeared. I was always quarreling with Percy, and Kasim was all shaken up, not knowing what to do... Heh heh, looks like those three finally made amends."

"Yeah, I heard about that. Percy said he was really mean to you..."

"Oh, you don't know the half of it. That idiot... He was brooding so hard, and he's not that kind of guy at all." Satie cackled as she lay back down. "But the biggest idiot was Bell. Taking it all onto himself, seriously... How stupid." A tear spilled from one of her closed eyes, and then, she was asleep. It seemed the elixir was already taking effect.

Angeline felt the strength drain from her shoulders in relief as she pulled the blanket over Satie. So much had happened, it was like a hurricane had blown through her head. She had talked about nothing but what Belgrieve had wanted to say; she hadn't asked about why Satie was here or what she was doing. There were so many things she wanted to ask, and far more she wanted to hear, that she wouldn't have been able to process it anytime soon.

"Is she asleep?" asked Touya, who had been watching over them from a safe distance. The black-haired twins rushed over and clung to the bed.

"Is Satie okay?"

"Asleep?"

Angeline nodded, patting their heads. They reminded her of Mit, somehow. The twins looked up at her with their wide, round eyes.

“Who are you, miss?”

“Satie’s friend?”

“Hmm, not exactly... My name is Angeline. How about you?”

After looking at each other, they turned back to her.

“I’m Mal.”

“I’m Hal.”

“Mal and Hal... Nice to meet you,” Angeline said, offering her hand to the twins.

They awkwardly smiled at her and enveloped her hand with their small, soft, and smooth palms.

“That’s good...” Touya let out a relieved breath. “Sorry, Ange. I lost control...”

“Don’t be. We were saved because of it... But what happened? Are you acquainted with the guy in black?”

“Something like that. It’s hard to explain. Anyways, that’s the elf you’ve been looking for, right? I’m glad you found her.” Touya smiled and shrugged, seemingly hinting to her not to press the topic. His clothes had been slashed at the shoulder, and beneath it, she could see a bandage that was lightly stained with blood. It didn’t look too serious, but she could tell the blade had been swung with lethal intent.

A bit serious for plain old acquaintances... But I guess he doesn’t want to talk about it, she concluded and left it at that. She hadn’t even sorted through her own confusion; there was no telling if she’d be able to deal with someone else’s complicated circumstances.

The twins, seemingly put at ease by Satie’s gentle breathing, tugged at Angeline’s hand.

“So, you know, we want to talk. Is the yard okay?”

“You came from outside, right?”

"Outside? Well, outside here... I guess so."

Angeline looked at Touya, who smiled and nodded. "I'll keep watch. How about you play with them? Looks like this is no ordinary place, at any rate."

Sure enough, the world outside the house was filled with a peculiar light, yet for all the brightness, it seemed to be lacking in color. They couldn't wake up Satie for the time being, so it was probably best to get some info out of the twins. She wouldn't be able to ask the difficult questions, but it wouldn't be a complete waste.

Thus, Angeline let the twins drag her out into the yard.

CHAPTER 110

LEAVES AS GOLD AS WHEAT RIPE FOR HARVEST

Leaves as gold as wheat ripe for harvest swayed in every tree, but when she observed them very closely, there was some green beyond the gold. It was like the light of this place itself carried the color, tinting everything it touched.

The forest was vast, but there were no birds or beasts to be seen. And despite the encroaching winter, the dense vegetation made it seem like early spring. This was quite perplexing to Angeline, who had been raised in the mountains. It was as if everything was just slightly off.

Hal and Mal had told her to wait for a bit before running off. Once they returned, they had Angeline sit down so they could place a crown of woven flowers on her head.

“For you.”

“Mal made it.”

“Thank you... It’s very pretty.” The white clover flowers were gold in the sepia light, like everything else. The twins sat on both sides, staring up at Angeline with wide eyes.

“Why did you come here, Angeline?”

“Did you come to see Satie?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow.”

“A guest from outside.”

The twins looked at each other and erupted in laughter.

"Are you... Satie's children?" Angeline asked.

They both shook their heads. "Satie is mom's friend."

"I see. Where's your mom?"

"Over here."

Hal got up and took Angeline's hand. She let the small child lead her to the back of the house—to a small gravestone adorned with fresh flowers. Angeline swallowed her breath.

The twins raced around the stone.

"Mom is sleeping here."

"She's been sleeping forever. When do you think she'll get up?"

They giggled, but Angeline's heart throbbed, and she clasped a hand over her chest. When the twins returned to her, they each grabbed one of her hands and led her to where she could sit down.

"Satie, you know. She saved mom from all the mean bullies."

"We were with her."

"It was dark."

"It was scary."

"Where are we...? Satie's house?" Angeline asked.

The twins nodded.

"Satie made it with magic."

"We're not supposed to leave. There are bad guys out there."

"But outside is amazing. I hear there are lots of people."

“I want to see living fish. I hear they swim in the water. Is it true?”

“It’s true... There are birds too; they use their wings to fly through the sky.”

It was just as she suspected—there were no other life-forms here. The twins knew about birds, fish, and beasts, as Satie would bring them from the outside as food, but they didn’t know what they were like when they were alive. Their eyes sparkled as they hung on Angeline’s words.

“Outside is amazing. I want to go with mom and Satie.”

“Do you have a mom too, Angeline?”

“I don’t have a mom. But I have a dad.”

“Dad?”

“What’s a dad?”

“Well, hmm...? He’s a male parent. The female parent is the mom. The male parent is the dad.”

The twins stared at her blankly. They didn’t seem to understand what she was saying.

“My dad is named Belgrieve. He is very strong, and cool, and kind...”

“Strong?”

“Kind?”

“That’s right. When he carries you on his back, his shoulders seem so wide... Also, unlike women, he has a beard and hair growing on his face. Right here, around the chin.” Angeline reached out to touch Mal’s chin. She shrieked and laughed, feeling ticklish, while Hal was left to rub her own chin with a smile. “It feels all coarse and nice when you nuzzle his cheek.”

“Coarse...”

“I want to try!”

The twins excitedly flailed their arms and legs back and forth. Angeline was watching them softly when she heard a chortling laugh behind her. She turned to see Satie, borrowing a shoulder from Touya to stand.

“You’re all good friends now... Isn’t that nice, Hal, Mal?”

“Ah, Satie!”

“You’re awake?”

The twins jumped up and ran to her side, and she ruffled up their hair.

“I told you, didn’t I? I’m strong. How about you make a bigger crown for Angeline? And Touya says he wants one too.”

“Got it!”

“I’ll pick the flowers.”

The twins raced off. Once they were gone, Satie slowly sat down. Her wounds were far from healed, and she was clearly in pain. Angeline felt on edge as she placed a hand on the woman’s shoulder. “Don’t push yourself, Satie...”

“Aha ha... I’m fine, perfectly fine. I’m not going to die... Let me thank you again, Angeline, Touya. Honestly, I thought I was done for.” She bowed her head slightly as she offered her thanks.

“Um, uh...” Angeline mumbled. “Have you been fighting all this time?”

“Did you hear that from those two?”

“Yeah... They said you saved them and their mom.”

Satie closed her eyes and sighed. “Schwartz, you see... He and his cronies have been researching Solomon’s legacy—his homunculi—for a long time now.”

“You mean, to turn demons into humans...?”

“Oh, you knew about that?” Satie said, looking a bit surprised.

So Angeline told her about Byaku, who had been born from the experiments, and Charlotte, who'd been used to spread the doctrine. It wasn't just Satie—Touya also listened with deep intrigue.

"And now they're all living in Turnera."

"I see. Aha ha, that's Bell for you."

"Demons, huh... I can't even picture that. But what's turning a demon into a human going to accomplish? I don't really get the point," Touya wondered, folding his arms.

Satie sighed. She looked a bit sad. "I don't know the details. There are a number of organizations researching Solomon's homunculi, but Schwartz's group is just about the only one trying to turn them into humans. Oh, but it looks like making them human is not the final objective. There's something beyond that, and I'm sure they'll need Solomon's Key to do it."

"Solomon's Key...?"

"What's that?"

"Something Solomon left behind. Legend has it that Solomon once used it to control the homunculi, but... I snatched it before they could get it. Then, I destroyed it. That should stop them from succeeding," Satie said, clenching her fist. "I couldn't forgive them for what they'd done. So I fought, and I destroyed their equipment to get in their way. I bided my time for my chance to save the women and their children. But they all died. Their bodies couldn't endure what the experiments had put them through."

Angeline's head turned towards the gravestone nearby.

"Yes." Satie smiled and nodded. "Their mother stayed here for a while. But she gradually grew weaker and weaker." What had first seemed to be a fond reminiscence turned to evident bitterness on her face. "She was a brave soul who worried about me to the end. I regret that I couldn't save her. You'll find the other graves a bit farther on from here. I watched over their final moments. Luckily, those kids grew up healthy. That might be the one saving grace..."

Angeline was speechless, struggling to come up with something to say.

"Then those two are surviving experiments...?" Touya managed.

“You could say that. But now, they’re like daughters to me.”

“Were you the elf in Findale too?”

“Yeah, there’s not much food here. I’d generate a false persona to go shopping, but I never thought they’d use it to track me...” Satie said, chuckling. “I’ve had a bad feeling these past few years... Ever since the crown prince was swapped out with a fake.”

“Huh... A fake?”

“Is that true? Our current great statesman?”

Angeline and Touya stared at the elf, stunned.

Satie nodded. “You’ve heard the rumors, right? Our prince was originally a complete moron. Everyone was shocked when he changed, but he became such a prodigy that no one complained about it. What’s more, the influence he holds is incredible. No matter how unnatural he seems, no one can go after him for being a fraud.”

“So you mean to say... It’s not that Rhodesia is researching demons. Rather, Schwartz’s group is using the empire to achieve its goals.”

“That’s one way of looking at it. Because of that, it’s gotten much harder for me to move... My opposition regained its footing and assembled all its pieces. This place won’t be so safe anymore. I’ve earned a fair bit of resentment, so I doubt they’ll let me get away,” Satie said, smiling sadly.



Unable to bear it any longer, Angeline threw her arms around the elf's shoulders. "Satie... You don't need to bear it all alone. Dad, Percy, and Kasim are here. I'll help out too. We can do something about it."

"Same. I might not amount to much, but I've got a score to settle with one of their ilk."

Satie smiled. "Thank you."

"Satie..."

"But... I've lost too much already. I'm terrified of losing anything more."

Suddenly, Satie stood up and quickly put some distance between herself and the two of them. The world shimmered bewilderingly before Angeline's eyes in the same manner as before. Satie's figure grew hazy—this was teleportation magic.

"Satie!" Angeline cried.

"Go tell Bell that I don't want to meet him, and he shouldn't try to see me. Tell him not to throw away the happiness he spent so long to obtain."

"Wait! I can't..."

Satie smiled. "I'm glad I got to meet you... But you should forget about me."

Before Angeline could reach out for her, the sepia light rapidly faded. And Touya and Angeline were once again sitting in the dark corridor.

"Why...?" Angeline muttered in a daze. Her outstretched hand slumped limply to her side.

○

Having run out of things to talk about, Belgrieve and Percival sat in pensive silence. Maitreya, bored out of her mind, lay down on the bed, occasionally turning over on her back or stomach. She eventually spoke up, looking thoroughly annoyed. "So what's the plan?"

"I'm thinking about it..."

"We've just gotta wait for our comrades. When you really get down to it, shorty, you've got way too little info. How are we supposed to get anywhere like this?"

"That is *not* my fault! Blame the prince and his cohorts for being so cautious."

"You could have at least asked for her name. Dammit, if we just knew who the elf was... If she's someone else, we won't have to be at odds with the prince."

"Yeah..." Belgrieve said, nodding. But a part of him was certain that wasn't the case. He didn't have anything concrete to go on, but he was convinced. He heaved a deep sigh and leaned back into his chair, his artificial leg tapping at the floor as he shifted. The sound of the rain was growing stronger.

All of a sudden, the sword leaning against the wall suddenly roared. There was a blurry distortion in the air before them which resolved into a hazy projection. Percival immediately readied his sword to strike before squinting curiously at the sight. "This is... communication magic?"

The initially murky projection, not unlike seeing through a fogged-up window, gradually became clearer and revealed several figures.

"Dad!"

"Ange...?" Belgrieve jolted up in surprise. He could see Angeline and Kasim, as well as most of the other members who had gone to the capital, pushing and shoving to get to the forefront of this projection. They seemed to be in a room dimly illuminated in faint blue.

"Wow, it really is projecting! Is this special magic? Amazing!"

"Hey! Don't push, Merry!"

"Don't shove her at me; how am I supposed to see anything?!"

"Salazar! Raise the volume a bit!"

"You're not the ones with the message! Stand back, why don't you!"

"Hey, it's pretty noisy over there," Percival said with a chuckle. "Don't all talk at once. By the look of things, you managed to meet Salazar just fine. Any results?"

Angeline's face became an extreme close-up.

"Well, the thing is... We met Satie."

"Uh... What?"

"You did?! Is she over there?!" Percival demanded, storming up to the image.

Angeline closed her eyes and shook her head. "Satie... She said she didn't want to meet you guys."

"Huh... What is she thinking?" Belgrieve briefly glanced at Maitreya before turning back to Angeline. "Ange, can you tell us what happened from start to finish?"

Angeline nodded and dutifully went into the tale. Satie had suddenly appeared in the corridor; then, Schwartz appeared, and they had to teleport away into a mysterious house inside of a barrier. The elf in Findale was Satie; she had fought a long battle to undermine the plotting of Schwartz and Benjamin. And in the end, Satie had rejected the idea of working with them or even reuniting at all.

Percival folded his arms and groaned. "The prince is an imposter? Sounds serious... Satie's picked a fight with someone like that?"

"I don't know what she wants..." Angeline said as she rubbed her eyes. "If she wants to duke it out with Schwartz, then I could have..."

Kasim stamped at the ground in frustration. "I was an idiot. Satie's been near the capital forever, just like me—and I never noticed... I even worked with groups like Schwartz's before and was told to search for Solomon's Key! If I had just done it, I would have found her."

"Don't be daft, Kasim," Percival said as he began pacing, on edge himself. "Then, you wouldn't have met Ange. If you and Ange never met, I wouldn't have met up with Bell either. That would have been the end of all of this. Enough with the pointless regrets."

"I guess. Let's just be happy she's still alive."

Belgrieve silently mulled things over for a long while before speaking up: "Maitreya?"

Maitreya snapped out of a daze and hurriedly corrected her posture. "What?"

"Can you try connecting to that space again?"

"Oh right... If Satie's back, can you do it?"

"I'll try." Maitreya held her hands out. The shadows swelled up and began to blend with spirals of mana, but before they could reach an adequate union, they burst and disappeared. Maitreya's eyes widened. "She's set up perfect countermeasures. How frustrating."

"You really are useless!" Percival smacked the imp upside the head.

Maitreya swiftly raised her hands to guard. "Eep! Please stop!"

"Who's that shorty?" asked Marguerite.

Belgrieve twisted his beard. "Things have happened on our end of the investigation too. In any case, it doesn't look like we'll gain much by waiting around Findale. Percy, how about we join them in the capital?"

"Sounds about right."

Angeline looked anxious. "Dad... Is it... okay to meet her? Will she be angry?"

"Couldn't say. But she's not an idiot. She probably doesn't want us to get wrapped up in her struggles—at least, that's what I believe."

"Hmph. She's as cocky as ever if she thinks she can handle everything on her own. We'll barge in whether she likes it or not," Percival concluded, punctuating his words by pounding a fist into the palm of his other hand.

"Hee hee..." Angeline giggled in relief. "That's good. She looked like she was in pain. We've got to help her."

"Yeah, definitely."

"You sure about that...? From what Ange said, Satie's sheltering some of Schwartz's test subjects," Anessa anxiously chimed in. "And the crown prince is his comrade. If you want to help Satie, won't we be making an enemy of the entire empire?"

Percival cackled. "Don't you worry. They can throw a million imperial soldiers at me,

and I'll cut down the lot of them."

"Oh, c'mon, Percy. Taking out the hordes is my job," Kasim said with a laugh.

"Are imperial soldiers strong? Sounds interesting." Marguerite had a beaming smile on her face.

"Are you crazy..." Anessa went pale at the ominous words coming from her comrades' lips.

"It'll be fine, Anne." Belgrieve chuckled. "They're not serious, I tell you."

"I-I know that..."

"But... There's really no telling what might happen. Honestly, I'm anxious too. One wrong step, and we might be deemed traitors to Rhodesia. And then, we really will have the entire empire against us. We'll need to make sure it doesn't come to that."

"You look like you have something in mind, Mr. Bell."

Belgrieve shrugged. "For now, it's still just a wild fantasy of mine. I'll need everyone's cooperation. However, I'd feel bad for asking you all to follow these old men into danger... I won't force you or anyone else to help if you're nervous about that."

"Dad!" Angeline angrily exclaimed. "What are you talking about?! That's what everyone came here for! What do you think saying that now is supposed to accomplish?!"

"Hmm..."

"She's right, Bell. No keeping me out of the loop. In the first place, what're three old men gonna do about it? You ain't getting anywhere without me!"

"Maggie, I don't think one more person will make that much difference."

"What's that, Merry? You tryna say something?"

"Hee hee, that's why I'm joining too. I can't just lounge around in my room after coming all the way to the capital. If Ange's going, then it's our duty as party members to go with her anyways. Right, Anne?"

"Yeah." Anessa nodded. She looked at Belgrieve, a tad miffed. "Mr. Bell, I hope you haven't forgotten, but we are active adventurers. Of course we'll be as cautious as can be, but rushing into danger is our job. We're not going to get cold feet at this point."

"It's a grand adventure! I am an S-Rank adventurer, you know, dad!" Angeline said, sticking out her chest.

Belgrieve placed a hand on his brow. *I'll have to throw in the towel...* He heaved a deep sigh. "I just can't beat the young'uns."

"Ha ha ha ha! What reliable girls you've got there! Hey, Kasim! You make sure those kids don't do anything reckless!"

"Whoa, you just asked me to do what I'm worst at. Hurry and get over here, Bell."

"Ha ha! Got it. I'll try to get there as soon as possible."

"Is there anything you want us to do right now, dad?"

Belgrieve stroked his beard before turning to quietly discuss something with Percival. "Can you arrange for us to meet Liselotte?" he finally asked.

"Lize?"

"Yeah. I want to get a bit of info on the inner workings of the empire."

"Then we can help with that," said Touya. "We've lived here a good long while, and the guild knows who we are."

Belgrieve seemed taken aback. "Touya... But I can't drag you into this."

"No, please let me assist you. There's someone I have a personal grudge with on the enemy side."

"I see... Got it. Let's discuss the specifics once we get there."

"Thank you."

Belgrieve grew a bit anxious as he saw the brooding look on Touya's face, but for the time being, heading to the capital took priority. He could talk it over with Touya after

they met up again.

Suddenly, the image grew grainy. He heard someone complaining.

"You're dragging this out, my good ladies and gentlemen! It's over, finished! I am about to keel over!"

"Ah, Salazar! Wait!"

"Dad, Percy, take care!"

There seemed to be a panic on the other side. Maureen, who had stayed completely out of the conversation, popped her head in and waved her hand. "We'll be waiting. I can introduce you to a few good eateries."

And with that, the transmission vanished.

"She never changes, does she?" Percival mused before beginning to gather his bags. Without hesitating, he reached out and plucked Maitreya up by the back of her collar.

Maitreya dangled there, blinking in stunned silence, before she began to flail about with her arms and legs. "What? What's going on?"

"What do you plan on doing, shorty?"

"You're... going to the capital, right?"

"Yeah. And personally, it would be a huge bother if you returned to Schwartz... If you promise you won't, we'll just let you go now."

"Will you really trust my word on it?"

"It's enough to know you can't access the barrier anymore. I doubt you're going to be offering us up to Schwartz, and you already told us about the Executioner and the other guards. With all you've revealed, they're not going to trust you now," Belgrieve explained with a smile.

Maitreya dropped back down onto the bed and frowned with mild annoyance. "You haven't considered that all my cowardice could have been an act? Do you honestly think everything I told you was the unvarnished truth? Aren't you underestimating me

a bit too much?"

"Ha ha! Then you're quite the actor. Who can blame me for being fooled by someone of your caliber?"

"You're treating me like a child..." With a sullen face, Maitreya's eyes wandered in thought. Finally, she said, "Why do I have to be on the receiving end of all this? I am Maitreya of the Black Tapestry—a magician you should fear and respect!"

"You haven't done anything useful yet, and that's the truth. Don't act cocky."

"What a farce. Such naivete. I know the elf's identity, I know your aim, and I know you're headed to the capital to achieve it. On top of this, I know your comrades have connections to the archduke's house. The capital is practically Benjamin's own backyard. Simply telling him that you are on the elf's side will be invaluable information. They can easily put together countermeasures to deal with you."

"I see... What countermeasures do you have in mind, specifically?"

Maitreya arrogantly puffed out her chest. "You'd be unable to make a single move. It would be simple to have you all arrested as criminals with just one word from Benjamin. Better yet, he'd leave you to get in contact with the elf—and round you all up at once. If the prince cast his net with that intention from the get-go, it would be a simple task to take you fools by surprise. As I told you before, Hector the Executioner is a master of the blade, and he can use advanced darkness magic as well. What's more, Benjamin has other powerful guards. And though Schwartz has been gone for a while, it looks like he's returned—neither his might nor his intellect are to be scoffed at. As I've told you, even though I only know a fraction of the big picture, you're still at a major disadvantage. Just give up."

"Wow, you're pretty kind, if you're that worried about us," Percival said with a grin.

Maitreya's eyes widened. Her cheeks flushed, and her lips tapered. "You tricked me..."

"I'm sorry he's so mean. But didn't you think it was unnatural that we let you listen in on our entire conversation with the capital party?"

"Why...?"

"If you still planned on teaming up with our foes, that would certainly be valuable

information to them. I thought I'd see how you decided to conduct yourself with it. At the moment, your standing was still a bit ambiguous. Personally, we thought it best to clear it up."

"In short, if you looked like you were about to bring that info to them..." Percival stuck up his thumb, using it to draw a line against his neck.

"You were testing me...?" Maitreya mustered, her face pale.

"No, we wouldn't go as far as killing you. I just thought I'd leave you restrained." Belgrieve shrugged with a wry smile. "But that didn't seem to be the case. You went as far as pointing out our naivete. You could have feigned ignorance and returned, or joined us to manipulate our movements in the capital. If you were a bit bolder, you could have played a double agent to lure us into a trap—though we'd have naturally been prepared if you showed any signs of duplicity."

Maitreya averted her eyes, her face making clear she hadn't considered any of that.

Percival merrily laughed and poked at her. "I knew it; you're a terrible actor. Your pride's so overweening, you easily fall for everything."

"Ugh..."

"So, Maitreya, I'd like to ask for your cooperation," Belgrieve said, bowing his head to her.

Maitreya blinked, stunned. "Are you serious?"

"Yes, I'm serious. Honestly, your magic is quite proficient. I would like to avoid having you as an enemy, and it would be a huge help to have you on our side. After all, you don't seem particularly devoted to their cause."

"Or rather, I don't think you have a choice. We've bared our hearts to you. You're not getting away at this point."

"I don't trust them either. Hardly. They are simply my clients. Loyalty is out of the question."

"Then?"

Maitreya let out a resigned breath and nodded. “I’ll tag along with you. But just to let you know, it is not because you threatened me. I am allying with you of my own volition. Don’t get that wrong.”

“What are you putting on airs for?”

“I am an imp, and we happen to love interesting things. It seemed intriguing, whatever Benjamin and Schwartz were plotting, but... Enough of that. I’m more interested now in how you plan on turning the tables against such a mighty foe.”

“Fine, we’ll leave it at that. Enjoy your front-row seat to the spectacle.”

“But *my* life is my top priority—if I don’t see any chance of you winning, I’ll run away. Are you all right with that?” Maitreya asked, looking a bit anxious.

Belgrieve smiled at her reassuringly. “Yeah, that’s fine. I wouldn’t blame you for that.”

“Too naive... I’ve never met a human like you before. Are you really an adventurer?”

“No, I’m not an adventurer.”

“Huh... But I mean... You’re fighting shoulder to shoulder with the Exalted Blade. Oh, a retired S-Rank, then? A mercenary, perhaps?”

“I’m retired, but I was only an E-Rank back then. I’m not a mercenary either... If I had to describe myself, I’m a farmer.”

“Seriously? What are you, really...?” Maitreya asked, eyes wide open in shock at his confusing answer.

Percival chuckled. “Just goes to show there are S-Rank farmers in the world.”

“Argh, whatever. So what’s the plan?”

“I’ll explain it once we’ve met up with the others. It’ll just be confusing to tell it in bits and pieces. I haven’t put it together well enough to give a full, proper explanation.”

Maitreya scoffed. “My services aren’t cheap. If you succeed, I will be charging my usual fees.”

"Yeah, hold me to it." Belgrieve propped the greatsword against his shoulder and gathered his luggage.

He'd brought Maitreya into the fold whether she liked it or not by letting her overhear the important details. This was what Helvetica had once done to him in Bordeaux—presumably unintentionally, back then, but Belgrieve had been more deliberate. *Would Helvetica be angry if I phrased it like that?* he wondered.

The journey was taking an unexpected turn. He'd set off to reunite with an old friend, only to find himself exposing the darkness of the empire. *How does fate work, exactly, and where does it plan on taking us?* He closed his eyes as he pondered this.

The three of them—Kasim, Percival, and Satie—had fought their own battles, be it for survival or for their ideals. *Now, it's my turn.*

He didn't know how much he could accomplish after spending a peaceful lifetime in the countryside, but the daughter he had gained there had paved the way for this opportunity. As a father, he couldn't disappoint her.

When they finally left the inn, the looming darkness of the stormy sky had been replaced with the light blue of a sunny day, the heavy clouds having gone on their way. The western sky was a burning red, dyeing the thin clouds above it in purples and blacks. The puddles below reflected it all like a mirror.

A damp, cold wind brushed against Belgrieve's cheek as he shifted the growling sword on his back. He took a deep breath, cold air filling his lungs.

His adventure was about to begin.



EXTRA

THUS SPAKE DAD

With dinner out of the way, and after exhausting all conversational topics over drinks, everybody returned to their room with the sense that the day was at its end. But it wasn't as though they would immediately fall asleep as soon as they hit the sack. The girls merrily chatted late into the night, while the old men sat a while, drinking a few more cups of liquor.

"We're just following the highway, so it ain't a hard journey. But it sure is a boring one," Percival said, pouring some distilled spirits from the bottle.

"What, are you thirsting for blood already? Should we take a job hunting in a town along the way? Heh heh heh..."

"Don't treat me like I'm a fiend or something."

As Percival poked at him, Kasim chuckled and sipped from his glass. "You too, Bell. Drink some more."

"Nah, I'm fine. I'm not as strong as you two," Bell answered, hurriedly cupping a hand over the lip of his own glass as the bottle was brought towards it.

"Live a little. How are we supposed to sleep before this bottle is empty?"

"He's right. It'll take far too long for the two of us."

"What are you talking about? Look how much you've had already..."

The liquid sloshing around inside it was more than halfway depleted. *Even after they drank so much at dinner...* Belgrieve mused with a plastered-on smile. It was an amount that would have certainly brought him down with a hangover the next day had he tried to imitate them. The fact these two could come out perfectly fine spoke to how well they held their drink. *I can't beat them here either...* His thoughts took a strange turn.

Percival munched on a potato he'd bought from the pub. "You were never much of a drinker. But you sure you haven't gotten stronger over the years?"

"We didn't have any strong spirits in Turnera. Hard cider was the strongest stuff we had."

"Oh, now that you mention it, the apple cider was pretty good," Kasim said, pouring himself another cup. "You weren't buying it from somewhere, right? You made it yourself?"

"Yeah, the entire village gets together to make it every fall. It should be around that time now... You drank it at the spring festival, right? That one was barreled the previous fall. We make plenty of it, and the brew rests all winter to drink in the spring. Then, when the fall festival comes around, we polish off whatever's left from that batch."

"Hmm, I see. I do remember seeing apple trees here and there. Makes sense."

"Yeah. When Ange was still around, I'd have her climb up the trees every year to get them down. She's nimble and a really good climber, you know. It was never my strong suit, so she was a huge help."

"She's pretty light on her feet, yeah. Well, I guess that's how it is with kids."

"When the season comes around, you start plucking them from the ones that show a bit of red. You get 'em all by the end of it, but it's a really busy time by then. From sunrise to sunset, there are loads of things you have to do to prepare for winter."

"You really are a farmer. You've come a long way from home," Percival said with a laugh.

Well, he's not wrong, Belgrieve silently conceded. From time to time, he would wonder if all of this was a dream he was having from his bed in Turnera. But he knew this was undoubtedly his reality, and that delighted him to no end.

"It's all thanks to Ange. She's the one who pulled me back into the outside world."

"Right. I don't know what would have become of me if I'd never met Ange in Estogal City."

"And I never woulda met you two if that never happened. You never know where life's

gonna bring you."

For all the cumulative years these three men had lived, the mood became rather solemn when these topics came around. The conversation took a brief pause as each sipped and mulled over their own thoughts.

Strangely enough, the serious air caused Belgrieve to remember something funny. He snorted, and Percival and Kasim looked at him curiously.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing... I was just thinking about Ange, you know. She was always demanding to be pampered; she was such a crybaby when she was younger... And now, she's an S-Rank adventurer of all things. She's really grown up."

"As far as I can tell, she's still demanding your pampering, but... Well, I guess that's how it looks from her father's perspective."

"Well, she's my cute, precious daughter whom I value more than anything, but she was a real handful, if you can believe it... It was when she was two, I think. She learned to walk on her own two legs, and the moment I took my eyes off of her, she was trying to pick up my sword. I was so surprised I scolded her a bit louder than I should have, and she started bawling her eyes out... I had to stop working to hold her."

"So she was already showing talent back then? That does sound like her." Percival laughed and downed his glass.

Kasim grabbed the bottle to give Percival a refill. "Heh heh heh... So the two of you have come to where you are today through a lot of trouble. Must be hard, being a parent."

"Well, in my case, Ange came to me before I was prepared for it. Normally, I think you would gradually develop a fatherly awareness as your wife's belly grows, but... Yeah, it was a mess. She'd cry at night, and I couldn't take my eyes off her once she learned to walk, and I never even imagined I'd need so many diapers. I was washing them every day. My friends in the neighborhood with kids were a lifesaver... It was around the time she was three, I believe. She wanted to sleep in the same bed as me, but then, she wet it when she had a nightmare. You remember how the bed at my place is a sheet over straw, right? Well, the sheet was soaked, and it'd seeped into the straw too. I had to change all of it out, and I was going back and forth from the shed in the middle of

the night.”

Perhaps the alcohol in his system was bolstering his enthusiasm, but Belgrieve was being strangely talkative, and Percival and Kasim were soon laughing along with his stories.

“Heh heh heh, what a merry family you have...”

“Heh heh heh... You must have other stories, right? No need to hide it. Go on.”

“Hmm, well...”

There was no end to his memories. There were plenty of things he remembered even if Angeline had forgotten. His glass was refilled yet again. It seemed that none of them would be going to sleep just yet.

AFTERWORD

You thought there'd be an extended short story at the end of the book but instead, it's me! The author! Bringing you more nonsense!

I'm sure nothing could have disappointed the readers more, but this volume was intentionally kept without the original addition. To be honest, I didn't want to write an afterword either, but if I did that, I thought I'd completely lose motivation to add anything new to the published edition. It was unavoidable. This is what you get, even if no one asked for it. If you'll forgive me, I'm trying to keep it as short as possible.

Generally speaking, this story tries to have an arc from beginning to end in each volume, but this volume has drawn it out to the next volume. It's been split up like this ever since this work was serialized on the web. Back then, I thought it would be a bit too long to fit into a single volume, and it would feel lacking if I tried to. If, like the other volumes, the story had wrapped up at the end of the volume, I could have included an extended short story as per usual. But if it's dragging out like this, I felt it would be an unnecessary detour right at the heart of the tale. As an author, that's something I would very much like to avoid.

I'm sure there are at least a few readers who aren't satisfied with that, but please just see it as the author's unnecessary fixation. For what it's worth, I thought I ended this book with a fine transition into the next one, and if I had all sorts of unnecessary factors pop up between now and then, it just wouldn't be a very beautiful book.

Now let's leave the excuses at that. In any case, we've reached volume eight, and I am forever grateful that the book managed to get this far. There are so many people all over the place that this author owes some gratitude, that I've come to live my life with my head bowed at a perpetual downward tilt.

Some people might think that having a serialized story means that the books just come out on their own, but is that really the case? It will be kinda funny—in a twisted way—if the series gets axed here, but if possible, I'd like to bring the readers to a satisfying conclusion. So if you do find it interesting, I would be incredibly thankful if you could recommend it to your friends and acquaintances.

The world has been especially noisy these days. If this story can serve as a slight breather for whoever reads it, that's all I can ask for. Everyone, please stay healthy. Take care, and look forward to Volume 9.

MOJIKAKIYA, April 2020

Do your best, gang!
You're almost there!

Toi8
2020

BONUS SHORT STORY

THOSE TWO, BACK THEN

She ran, her long, chestnut hair billowing behind her.

“Adventurers are all about stamina.” Ever since her seniors in the business had told her that, thirteen-year-old Anessa would race around the streets of Orphen whenever she had the time. She would purposely choose the roads that were hardest to traverse, training herself to clear them without ever dropping her pace.

After experiencing a life-or-death situation in the dungeon, she had devoted herself to her training all the more. She’d transitioned from a pure focus on the bow to learning how to handle a dagger as well. The fact she could do nothing against the mutated variant she’d encountered in close quarters left a strong impression on her.

When Anessa decided to live as an adventurer, she’d chosen the bow as her weapon. The reason was simple—the party already had two swordsmen. She didn’t have any particular interest in marksmanship, but such was life. But Anessa was diligent by nature, and perhaps she had some talent as well. She improved a good deal faster than the average adventurer. Perhaps this was to be expected in hindsight, as she would one day serve as the rearguard of the Black-Haired Valkyrie, but that was a long way down the line. She was still at a point where she couldn’t even fathom growing overly proud of her skills.

Her first party had been composed of others from the same orphanage. They’d gotten used to the work and challenged a dungeon to advance to the next level, only to have the misfortune of running into a mutated-variant of a fiend far beyond the dungeon’s rank. This was enough for most of them to give up on adventuring entirely.

So now, Anessa worked even harder than before. There were only two people in the party now, but they were doing small jobs to make ends meet, and building up experience by occasionally joining other parties on missions.

Miriam—the girl she got along best with—had become an apprentice of the Archmage Maria the Ashen. At first, Miriam had been unable to bear the harsh training, but she

gradually grew accustomed to it. Her voice across the dinner table had regained some cheer and she was making visible progress in her magic. This was enough to spur on Anessa's own efforts.

They were convinced they had no other path in life. When their childhood friends had given up, they'd powered through on pure stubbornness... And just like that, two years had gone by.

After running through the city, Anessa came to a stop in front of a small store. She climbed the stairway outside it and entered the room on the second floor. Inside, Miriam was holding an intense staring contest with a hefty grimoire.

"Home."

"Ah, welcome back, Anne."

The two of them were roommates. There weren't many landlords willing to rent a place to two young girls—one twelve, the other thirteen—but they had managed to snag the shop's second floor, somehow.

Of course, they had to leave the orphanage, even if it took so much trouble to do so. The sisters there had insistently told them, "Give up on being adventurers." Though they knew the words came from a place of concern, it certainly didn't feel good to hear that day in and day out.

Anessa wiped away her sweat and reached out to grab a cup of juice that had been left on the table.

"Hey, that's miiine..."

"What's it matter? We've got plenty left, don't we?"

After she had polished off the juice, Anessa tied back her chestnut hair and sat across from Miriam.

Miriam's ears swayed in discontentment. She took the empty cup back, then thrust it at Anessa again.

"Refill!"

"Yeah, yeah." Anessa had already grown accustomed to this exchange.

They maintained their silence for a while. Miriam continued staring at the grimoire, while Anessa spread her daggers and arrowheads across the table, and began to hone them on a whetstone.

These two were no longer novices, though they weren't yet at the intermediate level. There was much to learn with each passing day. Now and then, they'd hear tales of adventurers—ones they'd known long enough to call their peers—losing their lives on what had seemed like minor requests. Anessa never failed to maintain her equipment and whenever she had money to spare, she would spend it upgrading, or paying a fee to the guild for training. Miriam would practice magic whenever she had free time.

After she finished sharpening her third dagger, Anessa ruffled up her hair in irritation.
"Maybe I should cut it..."

"Huh? Your hair?"

"Yeah. It's gotten annoying, lately."

"It'd be a waste after you've grown it that long."

"Well, I wasn't trying to grow it out. I just didn't have the time to cut it."

Miriam looked up at her and shut the book. "We've been pretty busy lately."

"Right. But we can't grow complacent yet." After tucking away the sharpened daggers, Anessa tightly fastened the arrowheads to the shafts. She pulled out her bow and plucked at it with her fingertips, producing a melodious twang. "It's about time we joined a proper party."

"Hmm, one with a good vanguard, hopefully..." Miriam was hiding the fact she was a beastman and wasn't too enthusiastic about joining a party. Adventuring was a tough trade, and the fact they were two young girls was already enough for others to be dismissive of them. It was entirely conceivable that they'd be scouted by somebody with ill-intent. Anessa understood this too, but there was a limit to what an archer and magician could do alone.

Miriam slumped down, resting her chin on the table. "Ahh, if only there was a strong

and interesting swordsman our age. A girl too."

"There's no way we'll find someone that conveniently." Anessa smirked as she placed the bow aside and got up to brew some tea.

At that exact moment, in the northern village of Turnera, a black-haired girl sneezed.



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My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer: Volume 8
by MOJIKAKIYA

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