

Author

MOJIKAKIYA

Illustrator

toi8



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

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

- VOLUME 11 -

-AUTHOR-
Mojikakiya

-ILLUSTRATOR-
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[J-NOVEL CLUB]

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CHARACTERS



◆ Belgrieve ◆

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



◆ Angeline ◆

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



◆ Anessa ◆

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



◆ Miriam ◆

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



◆ Kasim ◆

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



◆ Percival ◆

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



◆ Satie ◆

A former comrade of Belgrieve's, and the only woman in the party. She was Angeline's real mother, and after the truth came out, Satie and Belgrieve finally married.



WORLD MAP

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

Elf Territory



Ancient Forest

Rodina

Hazel

Sid

Bordeaux

Elvgren

Garuda

Orphen

Estogal City

Turnera

Haril Checkpoint

Northern Trade Route

Erin

Eastern Trade Route

Tyldes

Yobem Checkpoint

Benares

Asterinos



STORY

At the end of the father and daughter team's first adventure together, Belgrieve reunited with his final lost comrade, Satie. Soon after, the party returned to Turnera together, and they spent many peaceful days reclaiming the time they had lost with each other. Thus the story of Belgrieve's journey to confront his past came to a close.

Amazingly, it turned out that Angeline was Satie's biological daughter. This discovery led Belgrieve and Satie to instantly fall into their roles as a married couple.

Despite being newlyweds, they were as composed as any long-term couple, to the frustration of Percival, Kasim, and Angeline, who decided to surprise them with a wedding ceremony during the spring festival.

The newlyweds were suddenly dragged to the front and center of the festivities, where everyone offered their blessings. Despite their initial diffidence, with a little bit of helpful incitement from Helvetica, they reaffirmed their love as husband and wife.

“Satie, I love you. No... I’ve probably loved you for a long time.”

“I...love you too... Bell... I want to be with you...”

Angeline set off for the big city once more, and Belgrieve—alongside his wife and friends—awaited the day she would return, and for the chance to tell her once more, “Welcome home.”

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



CHAPTER 137

THE BRILLIANT MOONLIGHT POURED DOWN UPON THE DEWY GRASS

The brilliant moonlight poured down upon the dewy grass which soaked the cuffs of the six-year-old girl's trousers as she walked through it, holding hands with her father. Angeline and Belgrieve had gone for an after-dinner walk to enjoy the clear summer night, which was chilly in spite of the daytime heat. The wind's gentle caress filled her with an indescribable comfort she could only feel at this time of day.

Angeline's eyes were glued on the sky all the while, entranced by the brightness of the moon's glow. She would occasionally stumble over the uneven terrain or the small stones strewn across the ground, but so long as she didn't let go of her father's hand, that was enough to steady herself and keep from toppling over. This was a delightful realization for the girl, so she began to purposely let herself dangle from Belgrieve's hand for no reason at all. It had already happened numerous times just that night.

"What's this? You're stumbling a lot tonight, Ange," Belgrieve observed.

"Hee hee..."

Angeline loved her father's hands—they were rough but warm, and it always put her at ease whenever he held her hand or patted her head. They were so big that they would fully envelop her hand and cup her head.

"The big moon is pretty."

"Yeah, I guess it is. All the dew is glistening beneath it too." The vista before them appeared as though it had been splashed with beads of liquid silver.

Belgrieve smiled mischievously. "Here," he said, holding his arm out in front of Angeline. She grabbed on to it, beaming, and he hoisted her up until her feet dangled above the ground. Angeline was ecstatic and squealed gleefully as she kicked her legs about in the air.

Eventually, Belgrieve pulled her to his chest, and Angeline wrapped her arms around his neck with a yawn.

"Let's go home."

"Yeah..." She suddenly felt sleepy. A comforting warmth radiated from the depths of her body, and Angeline closed her heavy eyelids.

Shifting Angeline in his arms, Belgrieve turned and began down the short path back to his house. The sound of the wind seemed to accompany his every step along the moonlit path.

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Clouds loomed overhead, and the air was damp and dense. It was like spring was gradually being chased away by the summer heat, and when Angeline was active in this weather, she would oftentimes feel so hot she would have to remove her outerwear.

The flowers had stopped blooming in the fields on the outskirts of Orphen, being replaced by fresh green leaves that rustled in the breeze. There was no longer any need to worry about the late spring frost—the nights would only dampen the ground with evening dew. The days when she would have to don a coat when she went out were becoming scarce.

Angeline sheathed her sword and pulled at her damp clothing, which clung fast to her skin. "It's so hot out... My clothes won't stop sticking to me."

"Looks like we're getting a southern wind today. If it's like this here, it's going to be even worse in Estogal and the imperial capital," Anessa observed. She was usually quite fastidious about such things, but since nobody else was around besides her companions, even she opened up her collar and flapped it around to catch some of the cool breeze.

Marguerite had it comparatively easy—all she had to do was remove her fur cardigan to cool down, given that her remaining clothing consisted of a cloth wrapped around her chest and her shorts. On the other hand, Miriam seemed to be practically melting as she slumped against her staff.

"So hot..." she moaned.

"It's because you're wearing such a heavy robe..." Marguerite pointed out.

Miriam had at least taken off the cloak she customarily wore over it, but her hair and tail were already quite fluffy on their own, and she wore a robe so thick it did not reveal even the contours of her body—it was only natural that she was suffering in this heat. But Miriam hated being leered at and did not want to show off any of her body, so as long as it didn't become completely unbearable, she would obstinately refuse to dress any lighter.

"It's not like we're in the middle of town. What's wrong with stripping?" Marguerite asked, wiping away some sweat.

"I'm only wearing underwear underneath my robe! Of course I'd be embarrassed going outside like that!" Miriam cried, puffing out her cheeks.

Angeline chuckled. "So you *do* have some shame, Merry..."

"What's that supposed to mean? Aw, if I'd known it was going to be this hot, I would have worn a summer robe," she grumbled. Her summer robe was tailored in the exact same design, but it was made of a more breathable material. She had assumed it would still be a bit cooler outside.

Today, they were out on an investigation request. Some bizarre fiends had reportedly been sighted near Orphen, so Angeline's party had been sent out to find it. It hadn't been long before they found the mutated variants, which turned out to be not very strong. Even so, they would have likely been a threat to civilians or lower-ranking adventurers.

Angeline looked down at the corpse at her feet. It was a large rat, about the size of a dog. However, its tail was shockingly long and tipped with an enormous, scorpion-like, and (presumably) venomous barb. The twenty-strong rat pack had dug out a network of tunnels for their nest. Angeline's party had smoked out the den and split up to take down the fleeing rodents wherever they emerged.

Anessa cut off one of the rat's tails, handling the sting with care. "I think it's a mutation of an armored rat... We should take at least one of them back with us."

"Yeah—for the report, and for further investigation..."

"It wasn't much of a job. Let's hurry back and get some drinks," Marguerite said,

folding her hands behind her head.

"I'm all for that! Somewhere nice and cool!" Miriam exclaimed, pumping her fist enthusiastically.

Thus, the four of them returned to the city. It was midday, but it was overcast and the city appeared gloomy. They circled around to the guild's back entrance and handed the fiend's corpse off to a guild staffer. The staffer quickly wrote up a few forms and handed them over to be taken to the reception desk, at which point their job would be considered completed.

The guild was a ghost town when they went around to the main entrance. All the hustle and bustle from earlier in the morning was nowhere to be seen, replaced with a listless weariness from the unanticipated heat. Everybody seemed to be afflicted with the sluggish mood.

Angeline left her party members to wait in the lobby as she headed to the desk, where Yuri greeted her with a smile.

"Welcome back, Ange. You finished up quickly."

"Not quickly enough..." Angeline murmured, then placed the documents on the counter.

Yuri quickly glanced over them. "Yes... That should do it. Please sign here."

Angeline wrote her name on the line at the very bottom of the form, and that was that. "It's so hot today..." she groaned, stretching her limbs.

"I know, right? It would be fine if it were just a bit drier, but when it's this muggy out it really gets to be unbearable."

"Hey, compared to the capital, this is nothing." Angeline looked past Yuri to see Edgar in the back. He had chimed in from back there, where he seemed to be doing desk work.

"Mr. Ed, are you on desk duty today...?"

"Pretty much. The more our operation expands, the more paperwork there is to do—go figure." Edgar took a sip of herbal tea that had long since gone cold.

The Orphen guild had recently partnered directly with a large merchant company, which had had the effect of breathing new life into their organization. The simple fact that there was no limit to the amount of materials the guild was willing to purchase did wonders to motivate their resident adventurers. Since then, there had also been an increase in the number of new, young recruits, some of whom were very promising, if not as uniquely exceptional as Angeline when she had first joined.

Yuri sighed. "But that also means an increase in kids who rush in and die or incur heavy injury... Desire is a powerful motivator, but it's tragic if there's nothing to contain it."

"Is that how it works...?" Angeline asked, taken aback. She hardly had any interaction with the lower ranks, so she didn't know about that side of things.

Yuri nodded. "There's been an influx of people ever since they learned there was money to be made. It's when the kids with talent but no discernment start to pick up the ropes that the accidents start to happen. It's a real downer for us to see those with promising futures disappear like that—just downright disheartening."

"It's pretty hard to stop the young ones from being reckless," Edgar added. "I mean, that's how we were too."

Yuri awkwardly scratched at her cheek. "But once you get to our age, you just can't help but be concerned for them. Even more so, since we know what it was like... Maybe it would be better if we could teach them a thing or two, but frustratingly enough, we don't have the manpower for that."

"I see where you're coming from, but I'm not sure if they'll even listen to us... Right, you'll need someone like Mr. Bell for those young'uns to have even a hope of listening. That's what worked for Ange, after all."

Angeline blushed as the two adults turned to her. Since the first time Angeline ever told her father she wanted to become an adventurer, Belgrieve had hammered in one specific lesson: never act without thinking. Since it wouldn't have even occurred to the girl to take her father's words lightly, she had dutifully memorized every word of his lessons.

Angeline had a sharp intuition when it came to things like sensing danger or picking up on otherwise minuscule hints. Before something bad happened, she would almost

always feel it in her gut first. This natural talent coupled with adherence to her father's teachings had helped her to evade danger countless times, even when she hadn't actually known what was coming her way.

Yuri fretfully planted an elbow on the counter and propped up her head. "Yeah... Perhaps we wouldn't have to worry about the neophytes if we had an instructor like Bell. It would be fantastic if there were somebody with that kind of unimpeachable character, somebody the kiddos would actually listen to. Even better if he were the guild master."

"Right, Mr. Bell's becoming a guild master, huh... Honestly, I'm a bit envious. I get the feeling he'll be a hundred times more reliable than Leo."

"The Turnera guild accepts everyone, you know..."

Edgar slouched over in his chair. "Don't tempt us. Leo's already grumbling about wanting to retire to Turnera himself. We're already walking on eggshells over here... Good grief."

Yuri giggled. "He's only half-serious, probably; saying such things helps distract him."

"Well, yeah, I get that..." Edgar made to sip from his cup again but grimaced at the realization that it was empty.

The paperwork was eventually handled, and Angeline returned to the lobby to rejoin her three friends to discuss what they would do next. It wasn't long before they decided to get drinks and a late lunch while they were at it—preferably somewhere with cooling magic.

"But before that, I want to take a bath..."

"Oh, that sounds nice. Let's get to it, then," Merry said.

Whether it was from the sweat and grime of their day's work or just the humid air, the way their clothes stuck to them was very uncomfortable. A quick hot bath would be incredibly refreshing.

So they went their separate ways for the time being and agreed to meet again after freshening up and a change of clothes. Marguerite had originally only meant to stay at Anessa and Miriam's house temporarily, but after she had become a full-fledged

member of the party, she no longer felt motivated to find anywhere else to live. Angeline alone had to split off to her own place. Her heart was filled with a sense of nostalgia as she stared at the gray sky above, probably from having just talked about Belgrieve.

“I wonder what dad is doing right now...”

Just like Orphen, Turnera would be experiencing the start of summer now. She wondered if the wheat harvest had begun yet. *Surely, they must have started shearing the sheep by now. The more impulsive kids are probably jumping into the river already and returning home shivering with blue lips. In summer, the mountains are covered in beautiful green, but there's so much work to do, so much going on. Are mom and dad keeping busy every day with their life as newlyweds?*

Anytime Angeline began thinking of such things, she felt a longing for home. Her plan was to return in the fall, but the thoughts were already simmering in her heart. She contented herself with the thought that the greater her frustration at not being able to see him, the greater her joy would be when they finally reunited.

Angeline laughed. “I’m already running short on dadium...” There were times when such emotions caused her to become restless, but now she just felt strangely happy. It probably had something to do with the fact that she wasn’t feeling nearly as stressed. Compared to before, there were far more fun things to look forward to back home.

It wasn’t just Belgrieve. There was Satie, and Graham, and she even had cute brothers and sisters to see. For now, Percival and Kasim were also still in Turnera. She couldn’t wait to sit in front of the fireplace with everyone and swap stories.

Angeline nodded. *So I’ll do my best for now...* The harder she worked, the greater the rewards—the more fun she would have when she finally returned. Angeline suddenly stopped and turned back the way she had come, laughing. She’d walked right past the alley that led to her residence.

○

Fresh blades of grass rustled in the breeze as the village sheep grazed upon them. After they had all been gathered up for shearing, they were unleashed onto the fields again, now relieved of their heavy coats. No matter how much of the summer grass the sheep ate, there never seemed to be any less of it. The shepherds would joke about it growing

back with every bite.

Kerry owned the most sheep, and every year he would enlist the help of many of his neighbors to assist with the shearing. Wool was an important product for the village and one of their few resources for external trade. Turnera was known for the quality of its wool, which came from very well-fed sheep, and traveling peddlers were always happy to buy some. The old hands laughed at the fumbling, inexperienced youngsters whenever a sheep escaped. Meanwhile, wives and mothers were in their homes preparing meals, while the small children were minded by the village elders. The mood was festive all around.

Percival watched over the shearing from a distance, pouting with his arms folded. Kasim joined him, an amused look on his face.

“What are you doing all the way out here?”

Percival sulked. “They told me I can’t be around because I scare the sheep. Char was pretty pointed about it.”

Charlotte had really taken to looking after the sheep, so she had been very strict with Percival ever since the time he had scared them off with his intimidating aura.

Kasim chuckled. “Well, you are pretty dangerous. I guess it’s instinct.”

“Shut up... Well, I’m not cut out for that kind of work anyways, so it doesn’t matter. I’m just bored.” Percival yawned and gazed at the sky. “It’s nice and peaceful around these parts. It’s not a bad thing that guys like us have nothing to do.”

“At this rate, you’re gonna end up as a freeloading deadbeat.”

“Yeah, so are you. Don’t act like you’re any better. But it’s fine—our work is going to start soon.”

They were making steady progress with the dungeon. Seren spent her days going back and forth between Turnera and Bordeaux endlessly as she prepared to take on a leadership role in the village, and her house was nearing completion. They’d decided on a spot for the guild and were in the midst of laying the foundations. Some time ago, the guild master of Bordeaux, Elmore, had come along with Seren to teach Belgrieve about guild management, with detailed explanations of how things ran in his branch.

Maintenance of the roads was also picking up, and what had once been an expanse of uneven dirt had been paved over with a pretty white road extending out from the village's front gate. Some of the village youths had taken jobs working on the construction, and the rhythm of daily life in the village was gradually changing in entirely novel ways.

Kasim folded his hands behind his head. "Looks like everyone's giving it their all. To think that we'll be the ones keeping them in check..."

"Only to start. These kids have been learning the basics from Bell since they were little. They'll get used to it all soon enough."

"And then we'll have nothing to do."

"What's wrong with that? We'll be able to start on our own journeys without regret."

Kasim put on his cap. "Are you planning on searching for that fiend again?"

"Yeah."

"Honestly... I don't think you ought to be so fixated on it still."

"Yeah, I know you're right. But I haven't settled the score with my past—not in the truest sense," Percival said, his attention momentarily drawn over to the sheepshearing by a sudden outburst of shouting and cheers. "It's a nice place—beautiful, even. I could picture myself staying here forever—until the memory of that day comes back to me suddenly. Even if I tried to put it behind me, I couldn't get it out of my head."

"So that's why... I guess that's why you fought there for so long, after all." Kasim took a deep breath and placed a hand on his brow. "I don't know how to tell you this, but... Well, you'll scare the kids if you go around scowling like that."

"Ha ha! I guess so. I've got to do something about the wrinkles I'm getting on my brow," Percival joked, his fingers brushing over the deep-set lines carved into his flesh by a lifetime of rage.

Their conversation was interrupted by the appearance of Hal and Mal, who raced over to them.

"It's Percy. What are you doing?"

"Kasim too. Let's play."

"Whoa! You're not supposed to latch on to me like that! I'm not like Percy or Bell!"

Kasim braced his legs to stay up as Mal pounced on his back.

Percival laughed heartily. "What's an archmage doing, losing to a child? Hey, shrimps, come over here! Dangling off that beanpole can't be any fun."

"Yay!"

The twins were now dangling from Percival's arms. Percival did his best to entertain the children, spinning and jumping about.

Kasim shrugged, sighing, before he noticed Belgrieve coming their way. It seemed he had finished his share of the day's work.

"What's this? Seems like you're having a good time over here."

"Hey, Bell. What about the shearing?"

"I'm not supposed to help out too much. If I don't leave enough of the work to the young'uns, the adults start scolding me," Belgrieve explained.

The middle-aged adults of the village had long since mastered the various seasonal tasks, and if they took charge of it, the work would certainly get done much faster. But if they did so, they'd be depriving the next generation of opportunities to gain experience with these jobs, and perhaps future generations would eventually lose the knowledge of these essential functions. At Belgrieve's age, it was important to know when to step back.

Kasim chuckled and sat himself down on the ground. "Time to pass the torch, huh? Sounds rough."

"It can be. But Turnera has to keep going somehow."

The work done in the village was the same every single year. In the early spring they would sow most of their crops, and just before summer, they would bury the potatoes.

A few weeks later, it would be time to harvest the winter wheat and shear the sheep. Then fall would come around and they would be harvesting the spring-sown wheat and sowing it with the next season's wheat—and all along the way, their various other crops would be harvested in their season. Then there were other important parts of sustaining the village, like brewing cider and spinning yarn.

“Even just focusing on wheat, how everything is done can differ depending on the cultivar, from sowing, to reaping, to threshing...”

“Huh. There’s surprisingly a lot to it.”

“And that’s how it is for everything the village does. It might look simple, but it takes a lot of knowledge to keep it all going.”

“Hmm... I guess so.” Kasim nodded, clasping his hands behind his head again. “Nothing’s as easy as it looks, then. And now you’ll need to start thinking about the guild too.”

Belgrieve smiled wryly. “Yeah... I’m really uneasy about it. I’ve got no experience whatsoever.” He had retired at E-Rank and then spent the rest of his life farming in the countryside, only to suddenly be appointed guild master. It was only natural that he felt out of his depth.

Kasim laughed. “You’ll be fine, trust me.”

“You all keep saying that, but... I just don’t see it myself.”

“You don’t have to see it. Despite everything that goes on around you, you always get by. That’s just how you are,” Percival chimed in, still carrying a twin on each arm.

Belgrieve scratched his head. “I’m anxious of doing it all on my own. With all of you here...”

“But we won’t be able to help at all with *management*, heh heh heh...”

“But hey, you’ve got Lady Bordeaux’s little sister to help you, so you should be fine. Those sisters are pretty impressive even at their age,” Percival said, punctuating his reasoning by raising and lowering his arms, eliciting cheers from the twins in turn.

“Dad, Percy’s amazing!”

"He's so strong!"

"Ha ha... Yeah, he is. I'm glad you're having fun."

Belgrieve smiled at the twins before turning back to watch the other villagers shearing. By now even Mit could be seen with a set of scissors in hand, working alongside Charlotte. Barnes had taken on the job of holding the sheep down, and little by little, the work was being passed down to the next generation. Belgrieve thought back to when Angeline had still been young and she had sheared the sheep like the children were doing now.

The twins clambered from Percival's arms to his shoulders and down to a new perch hanging off his legs. Percival walked away with them once more, undeterred.

"Ahh..." Kasim yawned. "Look at him, Percy's really losing his edge. Maybe he should just stay here."

"Was he talking about his journey again?"

"Yeah. Off to find *that* dark fiend. I don't think he ought to keep obsessing over it... But I can't say I don't get where he's coming from."

"That's a hard one... Speaking for myself, I don't lose much sleep over it anymore."

"I'm sure. And Percy knows that too, but for him, it's probably not about *you* anymore. We were able to come together again, but *he* went through a lot of suffering until then."

I guess that's true, Belgrieve thought. Even with a radiant future ahead, Percival couldn't erase the past. But if he remained mired in that time, he wouldn't even be able to reach out and pick the buds of his future. That was what Belgrieve was concerned about.

"I think he'll be all right..."

"Hmm?"

"Percy. He's no longer blinded by vengeance. He's got his wits about him."

"Yeah, that's what I want to believe too. Percy wants to settle the score—more with himself than anything."

"Yeah... Our leader is pretty tough."

"Heh heh heh! No doubt about that!" Kasim held his knees close as he rocked with laughter.

A nice, cool breeze was now coming through, but with the sun at its zenith, it was still nearly hot enough to draw sweat even when they were at rest. Summer was knocking at the door. The season wouldn't last long in Turnera, so the villagers knew to make full use of it. There would be much to do, but they could find some thrills in the free time that they did have. Swimming in the river was only possible in this season, and it was far more refreshing than wiping down with a damp cloth.

The sound of a hammer striking wood echoed from somewhere off in the village, punctuating the noise of the bleating sheep and goats. Belgrieve was on his way back to watch the shearing in Kerry's yard when Satie emerged from the house in an apron, the activity drawing her attention. "Wow, it looks like this is never going to end. They've been at it since yesterday and there's still more to be done." She sounded sincerely amazed.

"It's because we've got so many of them to take care of. But when we all get together to do it, it kind of feels like a festival, doesn't it?"

Satie giggled. "Heh heh... I guess so. Especially with Graham looking like that."

Graham—who had been charged with looking after the small children—currently had his hair tied in a bun and covered with a handkerchief. He resembled nothing so much as a housekeeper, and the sight of a living legend to elves and mankind alike dressed in that manner and surrounded by children was far too amusing for Satie. "Oh, it'll be lunchtime soon. Could you let them know?"

"Okay, got it... I'm really getting used to seeing you dressed like that," Belgrieve observed.

Satie giggled, delicately lifting up the hem of her apron. "I'm a mom, after all. But everyone else is really skilled. I really feel like I've got a long way to go to do more than look the part."

Satie had been mingling with the other village ladies and helping out in various ways. She certainly had developed household skills, but the village matrons were even more adroit than she was. Satie marveled at how their hands never stopped for a second

even as they indulged in ceaseless conversation that flitted from one topic to the next so quickly that Satie could barely keep up.

“Come to think of it, where are Hal and Mal? Is Graham looking after them?”

“No, they’re playing with Percy.”

Satie had to stifle her laughter at that. “Those two really like Percy, don’t they? They all have a bit of a naughty streak, so I guess they’re on the same wavelength.”

“Maybe. He’s got a lot of raw strength to show off too. I saw them riding on his shoulders a moment ago.”

“Hee hee... Is that a note of fatherly jealousy I hear?”

“Not really. They play with me just as much as him. I just can’t swing them around like Percy does.”

“You’re really kind, after all.”

Belgrieve smiled self-deprecatingly. “What does that have to do with it?”

Satie laughed mischievously and poked him in the cheek before returning to the kitchen, from where he could hear the sounds of clattering tableware. It was almost time for lunch.

CHAPTER 138

IT RAGED, DRIVEN BY UNENDING HUNGER AND THIRST

It raged, driven by unending hunger and thirst. No matter how many it killed, it could never be satisfied. It was driven by instincts that whispered incessantly for it to kill and to consume. It didn't know how long it had spent stalking the darkness. It had no memory of when it had first come there nor even any idea why it was there at all.

Just moving was terribly wearisome to the being, so it spent much of its time curled into a ball to rest. But then its nose would perk up whenever it sensed the presence of approaching prey. Then it would wait for the perfect opportunity to catch its mark off guard—and then, it would devour every last bit, not leaving a scrap of flesh or a drop of blood.

Hunting was not its forte. It did not possess the technique to aim for its victims' vitals and kill in one strike. This was of little concern when none could muster an attack that might harm the being's sturdy body, and even a clumsy ambush would end in feasting. At times, prey that survived the being's first strike would cry in pain, but it would mercilessly eat them regardless. It felt no strong emotions in its heart.

It had no idea how many times the pattern had repeated, nor how much flesh it had eaten, nor how much blood it had lapped up. Its hunger could never be sated, its thirst unquenchable—its chest void of all but loneliness.

The place was dark and the air here was still and stale. There was nothing here but the cold, heavy darkness of a stagnant pool.

The being didn't know how long it had been since the last time it had killed, but it suddenly sensed a presence—the sound of thick boots striking the ground and the sounds of spirited chatter.

It hunkered down, all four legs coiled to strike. From this posture, it could pounce at its target like a loosed arrow.

It could see them now—young prey, a party of four. The boy in front eagerly gabbed about something—he gave no sign of noticing the being in the dark. All of the bipedal ones that had wandered into its domain had been weak, pathetic.

It was ready. The being gauged the distance before leaping forth as always. *That's the first one down*, it thought. But another boy had jumped out from behind and pushed the first boy out of the way.

Its mouth was filled with the taste of blood.

○

Angeline's yawn proved to be contagious and quickly spread to Marguerite beside her. Anessa burst out laughing. "It looks like you're trying to compete with how wide you can open your mouths!"



"Hmm..." Angeline mumbled before taking in a mouthful of mint water.

"You look sleepy," said Miriam. "Were you up late?"

Angeline nodded. "I was writing a letter to dad... But I'm terrible at writing. I'd write one draft, then throw it away, then give it some more thought..."

"So you never ended up writing it, then," said Marguerite.

"I'm still in the middle of it."

"What's up with that?"

"You're pretty fussy about letters."

All of her friends looked at her wearily where she sat leaning against the side of the coach. Angeline was always wanting to write letters, but whenever she actually sat down to do it, she struggled to find the right words. This was why her letters to Belgrieve were always simple and short. She had to go through several dozen drafts to eventually produce just a few sentences.

The coach rattled and shook as it rolled over the bumpy road. The canopy above flapped in time with the motion of the carriage.

So many wheels had rolled down this simple paved road that there were tracks carved into it, causing uneven bumps here and there. Each time any one of the wagon's four wheels rolled over a rough patch of road, the impact would reverberate through the entire chassis, making it impossible to sit peacefully for long.

Angeline leaned out of the coach and watched the passing ground. "Can't they fix this up...?"

"I'm not sure. Apart from Maria, everyone else who lives here is just a simple farmer."

"But quite a few magicians do stop by for business with that hag or whatnot," Miriam said. Angeline took a good look at the other passengers riding their stagecoach. Apparently, quite a few of them were magicians.

Finally, the village came into sight. It was a small, rural farming town consisting of rows of small buildings with bark and thatch roofs. In the midst of them all was one

white structure that stood out from the rest. Maria's retreat was a little way on from there.

Angeline and her party members disembarked from the stagecoach, and she took a nonchalant look around. Most of the buildings were houses of wood and stone, but a few brand-new shops had been set up around the coach station. Though the village's main source of income was selling produce to Orphen, it was big enough now to keep these shops in business.

The four girls headed off for Maria's house. There were quite a few people loitering around the premises when they arrived—some of them magicians, and others, adventurers. Their hopes were written on their faces—they all wanted to gain something by meeting the renowned Ashen Archmage, Maria. But she had refused to see any of them.

Angeline and her party weaved their way through the crowd and approached the house. "Granny!" Angeline called out when they had reached the door.

"What?" came the disgruntled reply from the other side.

"It's Angeline... Can I come in?"

There was no answer. Taking that as approval, Angeline opened the door. Dusty air flooded out from the interior, leaving Marguerite's eyes spinning.

"Whoa!"

"Oh, come on! How many times do I have to tell you to clean, you old hag?!" Miriam cried out exasperatedly before racing into the house. She grabbed Maria, who was dressed in her usual voluminous robes, and dragged her out the door. Maria broke into a coughing fit as soon as she was cast into the outside air.

"Cough, gag! What do you think you're doing?! Quit stomping around, you stupid cat! You're just kicking up the dust!"

"I'm surprised you managed to get it piled so high," said Marguerite, who actually seemed somewhat impressed as she peered into the small hut. It was dusty, but the smell of herbs and scented oils overpowered it.

The thick layer of dust that caked the experimental apparatuses and thick books was

visible even in the dim light admitted by the drawn curtains and the red of the lit fireplace. It was clear which books she had been reading most recently, as those were the only ones that had been dusted recently. Miriam pulled back the curtains and threw open all the windows, allowing the light to pour in all at once and the wind to blow through and carry out some of the dust. The light of the sun made each particle all the more distinct. All the adventurers and magicians who had been watching from the outside looked on in shock, wondering what had happened.

Miriam took a broom and went on a sweeping frenzy through the house as the other three girls helped Maria into the shade of a tree. The sun was relentless right now, but the light that filtered through the leaves was soft and gentle as it cast a shifting, speckled pattern on their faces every time the breeze came through. It was well and truly summer now.

It was a summer like this when dad taught me how to weave straw hats, Angeline remembered.

Maria curled up, and after weathering yet another coughing fit, she irritably clicked her tongue. “Dammit, just when I was meditating... Each and every one of them...”

“Sorry, granny. But it seems kinda busy around here,” Angeline said as she looked around. Those same folks who had been pacing around the house were now watching them from a distance, but they quickly scampered off when Maria leveled a sharp glare in their direction.

“With business booming in Orphen, there are more idiots flocking over here too. It was already annoying enough when this thing was put up right next to my house...” Maria said as she glared at the building with white walls.

Of their own volition, some journeyman magicians who deeply admired Maria had come together to erect the structure. It served as a small school of sorts to traveling magicians from all across the land. Because of Orphen’s ongoing economic boom, Maria’s peaceful abode was seeing more visitors than ever.

“I’m considering moving away at this point,” Maria muttered.

Anessa rubbed her back with a wry smile. “You came here because you wanted a quiet life. It’s quite ironic.”

“Cough... That it is.” Maria covered her mouth and looked at Angeline. “So, what are

you here for? Did you just come to play?"

"You could say that... But I was wondering how your demon research was going."

"Nothing's changed since the last time you asked. I've got no material to work with. I'm still analyzing that demon that melted, but..."

"I'm a demon too, you know."

"Again with that nonsense."

"No, it might not be complete nonsense," Marguerite butted in.

Maria frowned. "You're all working together to pull a fast one on me, huh?"

"No, this actually has to do with Schwartz," said Anessa.

The look in Maria's eyes changed. "Is that true?"

"Yes. We fought against his gang when we were in the capital."

"Hey... Why didn't you mention something that important last time, Ange?"

"I forgot," Angeline answered matter-of-factly.

Maria wearily face-palmed. Marguerite busted up laughing at her reaction.

"Well, that changes things quite a lot," said Maria. "Tell me in detail—no, it would be best to wait until the house is cleaned."

The house was still filled with stomping and thumping noises from Miriam's cleaning. The occasional gust of dusty air that was blasted out through the windows and doors was evidence that she had resorted to using wind magic.

"Oh right, Muscle General recovered after that..."

"Tsk, so he really got better... *Cough...* I should have replaced his medicine with poison."

"Would poison even be enough to kill the general?" Marguerite wondered.

"Well... I doubt it."

They continued idly chatting as they waited for Miriam to finish until she finally popped her head out of the doorway.

"Done! How do you even live in that filth? How did you ignore it until it got this bad?!"

Maria stood up wearily and dusted herself off. "Silence, stupid disciple. Why don't you brew some tea while you're at it?"

"Hmph!" Miriam quickly pulled herself back into the house.

Anessa chuckled. "Despite everything, she still does what you tell her."

"Hmph. She was a lot more lovable when she was still a brat... *Cough, cough!*"

"Granny, are you not going to take any new disciples...?"

"Too old. They're a pain at this point. Even if I don't take any, they just keep coming on their own." Maria glared again at the white building before angrily getting up and stomping back to the house.

Although it was still quite cluttered inside, all the piles of books had been returned to the shelf, the beakers and flasks had been gathered in one spot, every surface had been dusted, and it seemed somewhat brighter. Miriam was rummaging around in front of the fireplace to prepare the tea.

Maria sat down in an armchair and breathed deeply. "So... Did you finally manage to kill that robed bastard?"

"I'm not sure... Mr. Kasim was the one who took him on, so I don't know what happened exactly. But I didn't see a corpse," Angeline said.

Maria sighed. "Then I doubt it. Once upon a time, I joined the team they put together to hunt him down... *Cough.* I thought I'd killed him back then."

"But he came back? Is he immortal?" inquired Marguerite.

Maria's eyes narrowed. "I couldn't tell you. But that does sound like something he could have done... Just tell me everything in order. My thoughts are too out of sorts

right now."

Anessa took the lead in retelling their story while her friends added in some details along the way. She related their journey to the capital in search of Belgrieve's old teammate, where they had encountered the impostor prince conspiring with Schwartz, and Satie's long battle against them, and how she had once participated in experiments that culminated in her giving birth to Angeline.

Maria leaned back into her chair, arms folded thoughtfully.

"If you want to hide a tree, the best place is in the forest, huh? I didn't think he'd still be in the capital," she muttered before looking at Angeline. "Ange, did you hear anything from your mother? What sort of experiments they were, and what method was used to give birth to you?"

"I didn't. I wasn't that interested..."

Maria's head slumped down wearily. "This is your origin we're talking about, and you're... I feel like an idiot for asking."

"Well... When she talked about it, mom always looked a little sad."

"I see..."

"What was his goal, in the end...? World domination?"

"Don't question it. It's pointless. There's only one thing that's ever driven him, and that's his thirst for knowledge," Maria sullenly explained. "Cough... Ultimately, everything that happened in the capital involving the false prince was all just for the sake of his experiments. Not a single thing's changed. Disgusting... Cough cough!"

Anessa rubbed her on the back. "What was he originally researching?"

"At first, I believe it was necromancy. Back when he was with the national laboratory, he'd often lead around the corpses of bandits saying he was testing out his spell sequences. The last straw that got him a price on his head was an incident where he converted the population of an entire town into vile undead. He tried to cast the same spell on the capital too."

"Necromancy..." Angeline crossed her arms. The fake Prince Benjamin had been a

skilled necromancer. The power he'd bestowed upon Charlotte was also the power to manipulate the dead. At the time, she had just thought it was the sort of thing that villains got up to.

Miriam refilled her mentor's teacup. "But it wasn't just that Schwartz was trying to reach the pinnacle of necromancy, right?"

"No. I'm sure necromancy is merely another means of achieving his true goal."

"But what is that?"

"Cough, wheeze..." How should I know? I think it has something to do with Solomon, though."

"Solomon, huh..."

The name seemed to have come up quite a lot, and Angeline's feelings on the topic were now rather complicated. The demons were said to be homunculi created by Solomon. According to Satie and Byaku, Angeline was a demon too—and therefore, she could trace her origin to Solomon. He had apparently been a mortal man, so strictly speaking, Solomon could be considered her father. The thought was simply anathema to her—it was impossible for her to think of anyone other than Belgrieve as her father. It hadn't been so long ago that she had mulled over the identities of her real parents, but at this point, it didn't matter to her in the slightest.

"Solomon... Come to think of it, I did hear a strange story..." Angeline murmured.

"Do go on."

"Well, according to the false prince..."

Angeline explained what Benjamin's impostor had told her back when she'd confronted him. A long time ago, Solomon had worked together with Vienna for the sake of mankind, fighting off the old gods. But then he'd fallen into despair when he realized the nature of humanity, and he'd turned to conquest.

"Then was Solomon a good guy?" Marguerite wondered.

Anessa shook her head. "No, I wouldn't go that far. He did end up ruling this continent with an iron fist, after all."

"But is that even true?" asked Miriam. "I mean, from what Satie said, the old gods apparently did exist, but..."

"It's getting complicated... There's no doubt that Schwartz is trying to do something with regards to Solomon. But I just don't see any connection between that and the experiments he's conducting. I can't imagine how any of this is related to seizing power. The way he's going about it is just too roundabout." Maria sipped her tea before going on. "But this is strange. I was aware of experiments to give birth to demons, but... Ange, why are you *human*? You're sure your mother is an elf, right?"

"Yes... I don't really have an answer to that either."

"Tsk... Looks like I'll have to go to Turnera..." Maria muttered.

Angeline's eyes instantly lit up. "You're going to Turnera?" she asked eagerly, leaning closer to the woman. "Sure, okay, let's go together, Granny! I'll be heading there in the fall, so how about you come with me?"

"I was kidding, fool! Do you actually think I'd go on a long and annoying voyage at my age?!"

"It'll be fine. I'll look after you."

"Silence! Dammit, I shouldn't have thoughtlessly let that slip..." Maria wearily pushed Angeline away as the girl tried to take hold of her shoulders. The other three girls giggled.

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The plan was to build the deputy official's home facing the square. The stone foundation was already set, and the wooden frame was looking more complete by the day. From dawn till dusk, the village was alive with the sounds of axes and saws working at the lumber mill.

The guild, on the other hand, was being planned for construction near the village entrance. Some of the villagers were leery of having ruffians congregating in the heart of the village, and their opinions had carried the day. It wasn't a bad idea, given that the dungeon would be outside the village as well. As with the other project, the foundation work had already been laid and wood was piled high near it. A refreshing scent wafted off the freshly cut lumber.

Anything new that happened in Turnera was a cause for some excitement—among the younger villagers, naturally enough, but even the elders also seemed a little giddy. The talk of the town seemed to always revolve around the dungeon and the guild before moving on to the inns and restaurants that a developing town would inevitably need. The mood around town seemed to be hopeful and anxious in equal measure.

Regardless of the enthusiasm over the new construction, the village's everyday work went on. The sheepshearing had finished up, and the harvested wheat had mostly been processed already. The grass would continue to grow higher and higher in the fields even as their farming work went on, so weeding became an everyday task. The summer dining table was decorated in abundance with a colorful array of summer vegetables, but such blessings required careful and constant care during each crop cycle.

While the rest of his household worked outside, Belgrieve sat at a table in his new house staring at documents.

Back when Bordeaux's guild master, Elmore, had stopped by, he had come with various documents that he had thought might serve as good references. There were request application and acceptance forms, registers filled with the names of old adventurers, and even accounting books, albeit from a very long time ago. Though Belgrieve was thankful that so many people were helping him out, he also had the unsettling feeling of a burden on his shoulders gradually growing heavier and heavier. After poring over everything, he began to ponder the actual logistics of the guild management side. He decided to take a break to get some exercise—a familiar walk was just the thing to gather himself after so much studying.

The early summer sun beat down relentlessly through clear skies, illuminating the deep green of the trees and grass. The scent of the grass was carried on the breeze as it billowed through laundry hung on drying lines. Belgrieve kicked the ground a few times to check the fit of his peg leg before heading to the field out back. A new fence had been erected at the start of spring, and it was already covered in soft vines dotted with what looked like flower buds. He recalled that Charlotte had bought the seeds from a peddler who had passed through town this past spring, and she had planted them along the fence. They seemed to be growing steadily.

Charlotte and Mit, who had been laying straw around the bases of the seedlings, looked up from their work and waved at him.

"Hi, dad," Mit said simply.

"Are you done reading?" Charlotte asked.

"Yeah, I thought I'd get a bit of exercise... But since you two are working so hard, it looks like there isn't anything for me to do," Belgrieve teased. The children looked at each other and broke out laughing.

"Where's Sa—your mom?"

"She went to pick bilberries with Byaku, Hal, and Mal. Apparently, she's going to make jam in the afternoon!"

Wild bilberries could be found on low-growing shrubs. The small berries were a delicious melding of sweet and sour flavors. The village didn't cultivate the shrubs since they grew in such abundance in the wild as is. Unlike cowberries, they could be foraged right near the village, so the villagers were all well acquainted with their flavor.

Belgrieve helped Charlotte and Mit place down straw and removed any bugs clinging to the leaves of the saplings, then pulled any conspicuous weeds nearby. High noon was soon upon them, and it became all the hotter outside.

Belgrieve wiped away the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand as he surveyed the whole field. "It's gotten a lot tidier. How about we rest for a bit?"

"Yeah."

"It's quite hot today," Charlotte observed as she pulled her straw hat down over her head and turned to Belgrieve. "You'll teach me how to weave a hat, won't you?"

"Yes, as soon as we have straw to spare."

Straw hats were one of several things that could be fashioned from straw. Skilled straw workers would make wreaths of wild plants to serve as decorative hatbands after the basic product was complete. Some of these hats were nice enough to wear in larger towns too, so the peddlers would happily purchase them. But most of the villagers were content to make them simply and crudely for their own use.

Belgrieve felt a sense of nostalgia as he recalled teaching Angeline how to weave when

she had been just a little girl. Her first attempt had been ungainly and misshapen, but she had worn it around Turnera with pride nevertheless. It was still a vivid memory for Belgrieve.

Belgrieve walked across the garden where he could hear the sound of splashing water. He saw that Satie and the others had already returned, and they were in the middle of washing their freshly picked bilberries next to the well. Charlotte and Mit raced over to them with fire in their eyes.

“Welcome back!”

“Wow, that’s a lot...”

Satie turned to them, smiling. “We may have picked a bit too much. Here, you can have some.”

There was a heap of bilberries in the basket. When washed and damp, they glistened like gemstones as they reflected the light of the sun. The twins already had purple stains around their mouths, and Charlotte and Mit were soon to join them.

“I’m surprised you found so many of them.”

“Byaku found them for us. Right?” Satie said, glancing over at the boy.

Byaku sullenly turned away.

“Not bad,” Belgrieve said, stroking his beard. “When did you pick up a skill like that?”

“Hell if I know,” said Byaku. His eyes still averted, he tossed a load of bilberries into a washbasin and began to agitate them in the water. It was clear that he was embarrassed by the praise. Belgrieve burst into laughter at the display of modesty.

The children insisted they could take care of cleaning the bilberries, so Belgrieve left it to them and entered the house. He needed to make preparations for lunch.

After tending to the flames in the fireplace, Belgrieve put some dry mincemeat and oats in a pot of hot water. Once it started to simmer, he threw in some diced potatoes and other root vegetables and seasoned them with salt and herbs. He put the lid on the pot and stifled the flames a bit, then took a moment to catch his breath and wipe away his sweat. It was rather hot out for cooking. Belgrieve glanced over to see that

Satie had finished kneading the bread dough. Her gaze seemed to be distant.

“What’s wrong? Getting tired?”

“Hmm? Oh, no, that’s not it.” Satie shook her head and slapped her hands against her cheeks, then turned to him with a soft smile. “It’s fun, you know. I’ve been really happy ever since I came here.”

“I’m glad to hear it.”

Satie smiled at him before allowing her gaze and thoughts to wander once more. It seemed that she would often get a distant expression on her face like this. Even when Belgrieve asked if anything was wrong, she would deflect his questions. He trusted her enough to know there was nothing malicious on her mind, but he was a bit concerned nonetheless.

“Don’t shoulder everything on your own, okay? Not that I’m one to talk...”

“Heh heh... I guess you’re right. Thanks.” Satie took a deep breath before enthusiastically leaping to her feet. “All right, let’s make some fried rolls too. Could you pass the skillet?”

“Will this one do?”

“Um, the larger one, please.”

It was then that Percival returned. “Is that lunch? Oh, Bell, I need you for a moment. The folks who went to Bordeaux are back. They said they want to talk about the construction.”

“I see. Could I leave this to you then, Satie?”

“Of course. Come back soon.”

A week ago, Kerry, Barnes, and a handful of Turnera’s carpenters had departed for Bordeaux immediately after the shearing was finished. They had wanted to get a look at a proper guild building with their own eyes, not to mention some shopping they could get done while there. It seemed there was much for them to learn about the construction, and they’d returned with much to say.

Belgrieve struck up a conversation with Percival as they walked to the site of the guild construction. "Hey, Percy..."

"Hmm?"

"If Satie comes to you asking for help... will you lend her a hand?"

Percival laughed loudly. "Of course. You say that like we're not friends."

"Ha ha! You're right... Well, it seems like Satie's still keeping quiet about something."

"About the demons, I'd imagine."

Belgrieve nodded. In order to truly resolve the matter of the twins, Byaku, and Mit—all of whom contained a demon—it would be necessary to track down Schwartz. Satie was the person most involved with his organization and would be most able to help with that. However, the battle with Schwartz in the capital had been a very traumatic experience for her. Even if he had a general idea of her involvement, Belgrieve was not keen on trying to draw the finer details out of her.

Percival stroked his chin thoughtfully. "She still hasn't gotten her thoughts in order, I'll bet. It would be better to wait until she's ready than to try pressuring her to talk about it. Kasim thinks so too."

It seemed his former party members had also noticed there was something off with Satie's behavior recently. Belgrieve smiled and patted Percival on the back.

"That's our leader for you."

"You got that right."

There was already a crowd gathered at the construction site when they got there. As they walked up, Kerry waved. "The guild master's here!" he proclaimed.

"It's a bit soon for that..."

"What are you talking about? But, my word, Bordeaux really was a big place! I learned a bunch!"

Kerry was in high spirits. His household was among the most affluent in Turnera, and

his family had always had many irons in the fire—so he was gleeful at the prospect of taking on this new project.

Barnes took out a paper that depicted a rough sketch. “We asked around a bit. This is the design we thought—”

But he was interrupted by somebody else. “What do we do about an inn? The guild’s supposed to direct adventurers towards inns, right?”

“Are we gonna set up a store? It’d be a lot easier if it were a pub too—a twofer.”

“No! I’m telling you, it’s too early. We haven’t even started yet!”

“Let’s start with the guild building, anyways. We’re not even gonna get any visitors without that.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying! Can everyone please pipe down for one second?!” cried Barnes, who was still annoyed at being interrupted.

“What was that, jerk?” somebody else interjected angrily, causing yet another useless argument. It seemed everybody had their own thoughts on the matter, and their own fixations too.

Belgrieve smiled wryly. *Doesn’t look like this will end before lunchtime...*

CHAPTER 139

THE COLDNESS OF THE SOFT SNOW

The coldness of the soft snow could be felt even through Belgrieve's clothing and had the property of restricting his movements—the more he exerted himself, the worse it was.

Fear and panic robbed him of his composure. With each lungful of dreadfully frosty air, his body refused to obey his will. He broke into a coughing fit. His breathing was so shallow he feared that his lungs had frozen over. He managed to get a grip on his sword, but his hand was completely numb, and he found himself unable to draw it from its sheath. Snowflakes danced through the pearly white sky above, and his eyelashes were weighed down by ice. Even the act of blinking produced a slight, throbbing pain.

"Agh... Raaaaah!" he shouted to rouse himself up. He forcefully raised his trunk and, with his left foot braced against the ground, managed to lift his right knee.

"Dad!" his seven-year-old daughter cried out, struggling to wade through the snow to reach his side. Snow children frolicked in the flurry surrounding them, giggling at her endeavor.

"Ange, stay back!" Belgrieve commanded, but his voice sounded strangled. His body shivered as though trying to cast off the snow and ice. He exhaled deeply, looking at the being before his eyes. She stared down at him with cold, transparent eyes like ice. Belgrieve finally drew his sword and struck an en garde stance, but his body was stiff, and the tip of his blade wavered slightly.

"Wait! Wait!" Angeline desperately stumbled her way towards him, sliding in front of Belgrieve.

"Ange!"

"Stop! Don't be mean to dad!" she said as she spread her arms out.

Belgrieve reached out and hugged her.

"Ange, it's no use... Hurry, get back..." His lips were numb, and he struggled to enunciate his words.

The being's eyes narrowed appraisingly as she looked over Angeline.

"HMMM..." Her voice was crystal clear like sparkling shards of ice. Her expression never changed, nor did her lips move, but the words had certainly come from her. She turned her attention from Angeline to Belgrieve.

"TRANSIENT ONE... IF YOU HAVE LEARNED YOUR LESSON, PLEASE REFRAIN FROM REPEATING THIS FOOLISHNESS."

With that, she turned her back on him and walked away. The piercing cold gradually eased up, as did the pain that racked his body. With snow children still laughing at him, Belgrieve watched her leave dumbfoundedly. "W-Wait... Are you not... a fiend?"

Her face turned back to him ever so slightly. "THE TRANSIENT ONES... CALL ME LADY WINTER."

"Lady Winter..."

The roaring wind scattered snow into the air. Belgrieve shut his eyes against the sudden cold, and he locked Angeline in his embrace to shield her from the brunt of it. By the time the blizzard relented and he opened his eyes again, the woman was already nowhere to be seen. Only the echoing voices of the snow children faintly lingered in the cold winter air.

Angeline started wide-eyed for a moment before dissolving into sniffling tears and rubbing her face into Belgrieve's chest.

Belgrieve gently patted her on the back and wondered if it had all been a dream.

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Percival had been walking ahead of him and listening attentively, but he stopped and turned at this point in the tale.

"So what happened after that?"

"Well, we went home. Once the tension of the moment had faded away, I was left

chilled to the core, and Ange ended up catching a cold.”

“Sounds like a disaster.”

Belgrieve chuckled. “No—we were lucky we made it out alive. I have Ange to thank for that.” *If Angeline hadn’t been there, I would have probably been frozen solid—I wouldn’t be here today, alive and well.*

Percival cackled. “Looks like Ange’s always saving you.”

“It’s true. That girl’s too good for me.”

“What are you talking about? She’s like that because you were her father,” Kasim interjected. He had tagged along with them.

Percival stretched out his arms above his head. “I wonder what those girls are doing now... I guess they’re probably hard at work taking on guild requests.”

“Probably. She was quite excited about coming back in the fall, so she’s probably working hard now to earn it.”

“Heh heh heh... It’s good to be energetic while you’re still young,” Kasim mused, fiddling with his cap. “But Lady Winter, huh? Back when I lived on the streets, I heard a faerie story from one of the other orphans, but I never believed she actually existed.”

Belgrieve laughed. “Exactly. That’s why I and anybody else would mistake her for a fiend and attack. I’ve heard of some adventurers who were frozen solid for their trouble.”

“There’s no one alive who could take on the season itself—not even an S-Rank. She’s leagues above any ice queen.”

“Speaking of—what about ice queens, Percy?”

“I fought one when I was wandering around north Keatai. She was a beauty to behold but brutal as can be. I had a bit of trouble.” Given that he had won even in spite of that, his “Exalted Blade” moniker was not just for show.

They resumed their walk again. “The path’s starting to slope upward. Are we getting close to the mountain?” Kasim asked, yawning heavily.

"Yes, we're already in the foothills of the mountain." Belgrieve pulled out an unseasonable muffler and wrapped it around his neck. The trees around here were as vibrant and green as the ones nearer to home, and yet the air was bracingly cold. The grass that was growing tall elsewhere had shrunken and withered here, the tips wilting.

It was already early summer, but they had been through a string of oddly cold days lately, and it seemed like a cold breeze was coming down from the mountain. Before anyone knew it, the formerly verdant mountainside was now snowed over, and the clear blue sky was marred by heavy clouds looming over the summit, casting their darkness over that small patch of earth. Even so, the cold had spread as far as Turnera, and the villagers had been forced to take their winter clothing out of the closets. It wasn't yet cold enough for frost to settle in, but it was chilly enough to make the villagers shudder in their short-sleeved summer clothes, and to halt the growth of the summer crops. The blooming tomato flowers had fallen from the vine before any of them could bear fruit.

If this was just a natural phenomenon, there was nothing they could do. But there was no fun to be had in sitting tight and waiting for the cold to pass, so Percival had said he would go investigate, and with nothing better to do, Kasim went along with him. Belgrieve served as their guide since he knew everything there was to know about Turnera's neighboring forest and mountain.

"If Satie came along, it would be just like the party was back together," Kasim mused as he stepped over a fallen tree.

"She doesn't seem too interested in that sort of thing anymore. She's more worried about looking after the kids than running off for a quick jaunt in the wild."

Belgrieve nodded. "Yeah." They weren't young anymore; they couldn't just go prancing off on a whim like they used to. Even so, it did make him quite happy to journey into the wilderness with his old teammates once more. Perhaps boys remained dreamers no matter how old they got.

Kasim folded his hands behind his head. "Satie went on and became an adult. It feels a bit lonely."

"I get you. But we can't just cling to the past forever... Not that I'm one to talk."

"Heh heh heh... You're self-aware, if nothing else."

"That one was uncalled for."

The three men pressed on and made light work of their trek with idle banter. Percival and Kasim were both accustomed to adventuring, and they kept up with Belgrieve's pace like it was no sweat—like this remote, unforgiving place was their own backyard.

Lately, Belgrieve had been spending all his time researching the dungeon, or rather guild management. He wasn't bad with desk work; he simply wasn't accustomed to it. After spending so long staring at those small letters, the urge to go outside had become irresistible, so this walk up the mountain put him at ease.

Seren was scheduled to drop in again sometime soon. Her new house already had a roof, and the walls were being slathered with ample amounts of plaster. It was too early for her to move in, but she would soon start bringing her belongings a little at a time. Kerry had an empty storehouse, so that was where her things would go for the time being until the manor was completed and could be moved into.

On top of taking over the chief's duties, Seren would also begin setting up various facilities around the village, and though she had seemed quite bewildered at first, the girl was gradually getting into the swing of things. She always had been a smart cookie, so once she was on board, she had made rapid progress with her work.

In any case, the days were passing by at a dizzying rate. But as far as Belgrieve was concerned, days spent hiking around the mountain felt far more natural to him. Even with all of his new responsibilities, he was still a country boy at heart.

The elevation gradually increased. The atmosphere was frigid, and the budding leaves on the trees looked wilted and spiritless. Even the fauna seemed to be lurking with bated breath—they couldn't hear any animal sounds whatsoever now. Their breath came out in puffs of frosted air amidst this eerie silence, in stark contrast to the warm sunlight above.

Percival stopped and looked around. "The temperature's dropped considerably. Are we close to our destination?"

"Yeah."

"If it's a fiend, it will be trouble... But if it's Lady Winter, do you think we can

negotiate?"

"Hard to say. She's nature itself, so... Well, I'll try talking to her."

"Having a little chat with a spirit of the highest degree? Heh heh heh! You don't know how jealous the archmages would be if they heard about this."

"You're an archmage too though."

"Not because I wanted to be."

"Anyways, let's keep going a bit. It will probably start snowing once we get nearer."

After another hour of climbing, they came upon a light flurry. The snowflakes gradually increased in size, and the three were in the midst of a snowstorm before they ever saw it coming. The sky was gray, and large snowflakes fell incessantly. The wind wasn't strong, but this just meant the snowflakes were falling in greater density. Their heads and shoulders were quickly coated in snow, and they had to shake themselves vigorously to slough it off.

"This is rough. It's like winter's been concentrated on this one small patch."

"Percy, do you know any fiends that can change the environment to this degree? Like the ice queen, perhaps?"

"They exist; the ice queen could definitely do this much... But then, it would be strange that it stopped at the mountain. From this close to Turnera, an ice queen would have definitely come down the mountain and attacked by now."

"Then the possibility of Lady Winter is higher. Thankfully, she's someone we can talk to."

"Yeah, I guess so." But Belgrieve's frown remained. He would have felt much more relieved if this incident were caused by a fiend. It was far too unnatural for the manifestation of winter itself to appear here in this season. If it was all the work of a fiend, then they would simply have to defeat it—and with Percival and Kasim by his side, that would certainly be a viable option. *However, if our opponent is a great spirit surpassing human understanding, and furthermore, if there is some unnatural cause for her to act up now...*

Belgrieve shook his head. “It’s pointless to overthink it...” In any case, they wouldn’t know until they met her. Perhaps it really was just an abnormal weather condition after all. There was no use in assuming the worst and making himself unnecessarily anxious.

As they trudged through snow that now rose up almost above their ankles, they could hear a clear singing voice, and from beyond the falling snow, they could see several small figures gallivanting about as though dancing.

Kasim squinted his eyes. “Oh wow. Snow children?”

“Yep—snow children.” That almost guaranteed the presence of Lady Winter. Belgrieve felt a bit gloomy as he pressed on.

Taking care that the tip of his peg leg did not come down on any uneven terrain beneath the snow, he drew closer. The figures of the snow children, which had previously been mere shadows, slowly distinguished themselves. They appeared to be children of about seven or eight years old wearing matching fluffy white clothes and fur hats. They danced happily, floating above the ground without ever touching it, never deigning to glance in the direction of the three interlopers.

“It would be a nice sight if it weren’t early summer,” Percival muttered.

Kasim smiled resignedly. “Well, nothing we can do about it... Is that her?”

A little ways onward, they could see a noticeably larger figure. She was tall and slender, and wore white clothes and a fur hat just like the snow children, but the aura emanating from her wasn’t as gentle even as she played with her long, silvery hair. Lady Winter stood there silently, her face inclined upward ever so slightly as she stared into the falling snow.

The trio remained as silent as her. The Lady standing before them was so beautiful to behold that they found themselves staring with bated breath. It wasn’t that they were captivated so much as at a loss for words.

Thus, the silence persisted. Only the crystal clear singing voices of the children breached the falling snow to reach their ears. Suddenly, Percival let out a loud sneeze, and Kasim burst into laughter.

Lady Winter looked at them with a hint of surprise. “WE MEET AGAIN, TRANSIENT

ONE."

Her voice wasn't any more severe than usual. Belgrieve relaxed a bit and smiled.

"You haven't changed one bit, Lady Winter. I'm somewhat surprised to see you here in this season... But was it just a whim?" Belgrieve asked.

Lady Winter stared back at him blankly. "WE SIMPLY CAME HERE RIDING THE COLD BREEZE."

"Huh...? Meaning it's just abnormal weather?" Percival reasoned.

Lady Winter did not acknowledge him. She turned her gaze skyward once more as if to say their conversation was over—that they had found their answer.

Belgrieve felt completely drained and reproached himself for having fretted so much over it. "It looks like I'm just a worrywart after all."

"What's wrong, Bell?" Kasim asked, looking at Belgrieve confusedly and nudging his shoulder.

"No, it's nothing... Fair Lady, am I right to assume you only came here by chance?"

"WE HAVE NO WILL OF OUR OWN. WE SIMPLY ENTRUST OURSELVES TO THE FLOW," Lady Winter said, her eyes turning to Belgrieve once more. "WITH THAT SAID, YOU MUST TRULY ENJOY WALKING IN THE COLD."

"Not exactly..." Belgrieve scratched his head awkwardly. *I'm starting to feel a bit embarrassed...*

Kasim twisted his beard, laughing. "Well, that's one less thing to worry about. So, Lady, how long do you plan on staying here?"

"THAT IS NOT FOR ME TO DECIDE," Lady Winter bluntly answered him.

It was becoming rather less clear to Belgrieve whether the Lady simply accompanied the season or if she was indeed the personification of winter itself.

Winter, huh... Belgrieve mused. He suddenly recalled the last time he'd met her. "My lady, you warned me once before about 'those who tried to control even the winter.'

Who did you mean by that?"

Lady Winter glanced at him. "YES, THAT IS TRUE. I DO NOT KNOW THEIR NAMES, BUT THERE WERE SOME WHO ATTEMPTED SUCH A THING LONG AGO."

"Don't you think she's talking about Solomon?" Kasim nonchalantly said. "It's not public knowledge, but some ancient texts say that Solomon tried to develop spells to control the weather and climate. Couldn't that be what she meant?"

"Hmm? Then Solomon's waking up?" Percival asked, his disbelief disturbing his breathing and requiring him to breathe through his sachet.

It certainly sounded like a preposterous story—but Belgrieve was perturbed to hear it coming not from a human but from the spirit of winter herself.

"But didn't she warn Bell quite a while ago? We went and crushed those guys who tried to revive Solomon, so wasn't that problem solved?"

Come to think of it, Charlotte's cult and the false prince's ambitions have been thwarted, and Angeline destroyed the demon in Orphen. If these were the events of which Lady Winter had forewarned me, then the trouble has surely already passed. "Does that mean the warning was useful?"

Belgrieve saw that Lady Winter was cocking her head. "I DO NOT KNOW WHAT YOU ARE THINKING ABOUT, BUT THE FLOW OF EVENTS HAS NOT CHANGED, TRANSIENT ONE."

"So... Something's still bound to happen?"

Before Lady Winter could answer, she suddenly looked up—a strong wind had started blowing from the east, to the apparent delight of the snow children. Lady Winter floated up into the air, her hair billowing in the wind.

"IT IS TIME FOR US TO GO. FAREWELL." Snow danced and whirled around her, painting everything they could see in pristine white.

"Hey, can't you be a bit clearer? What's going to happen?" Percival shouted after her. But his voice was drowned out by the howling wind. The laughter of the playful snow children gradually faded, and when the blizzard subsided, the figures of Lady Winter and her children were nowhere to be seen. The snowfall from the leaden sky grew

weaker, and it seemed it would let up before long.

Percival roughly scratched his head and knocked away the snow caking his scalp. “Damn, she just went on about cryptic nonsense and left. That’s why I hate dealing with spirits...”

“Well, it can be a lot more uncanny when her kind deigns to explain things unambiguously. But what’s in store for us...?” Kasim wondered, folding his arms.

Belgrieve twisted at his beard. “Do you think it’s about Solomon’s revival?”

“Most likely... Do you reckon that they’re making progress we have no knowledge of?”

Percival clicked his tongue in disgust. “Whatever the case may be, I find it irritating to twiddle my thumbs and wait for the crisis to come to me.”

Belgrieve thought the matter over for a moment longer but soon turned to his friends. “For now, let’s head back. This out-of-season snow should melt soon enough now that the sun can get to it. We might have an avalanche.”

“That sounds bad. All right, let’s get going.” Percival’s cape flared behind him as he turned.

“Once we get back... we’ll need to get everybody together to discuss this,” said Kasim.

“Yeah, Graham might know something... Though I’m hoping we’re just overthinking this.”

“If we are, we can just have a laugh about it later.”

“You’re right.” Belgrieve nodded. “The pressing issue is getting back to Turnera before we’re swallowed by an avalanche.”

Kasim chuckled. “Got it. Don’t trip, Bell.”

Percival led the way once more, coughing. The journey back down the mountain was a solemn affair, each of them mulling over what they had seen.



"Achoo!" The young girl sneezed loudly, sniffling. Angeline's gaze was unfocused and she was running a fever. Belgrieve wrung out the towel that had been on her head and poured a cup of herbal tea.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah... And you, dad?"

"Daddy is okay. Here, this is medicine."

Angeline obediently sat up in bed and drank down the medicine with a grimace. Almost immediately after, she lay back down and pulled the covers all the way up to her mouth. She closed her eyes and was fast asleep.

Belgrieve caught his breath before drinking what remained of the medicine himself.

"Good grief..."

He felt a bit feverish, but he couldn't go to sleep when his daughter was dealing with a cold. The frigid cold that emanated from Lady Winter was fearsome indeed. The fireplace was roaring and it should have been warm in the house, but he was still feeling chills. After that chance encounter that had nearly left him dead, he had gone directly home. It wasn't long after that Angeline had come down with a fever and retreated to bed.

The entity he'd mistaken for a fiend had proved to be something far beyond that. Putting a hand to his chest, he could feel that his heart was still racing. His instincts told him the truth—no matter how he might have struggled, he would never have been a match for the Lady. And yet, he had desperately and recklessly rushed at her to protect his daughter.

But in the end, it was his daughter who had saved him.

"Was she Lady Winter from the faerie tales...?" he muttered.

He could faintly remember stories from long ago, nearly forgotten to him now. *I'll have to go ask the village elder about it next time I get the chance.*

He shuddered. He stubbornly clung to consciousness with Angeline in such a state, but he knew he'd collapse right alongside her if he dropped his guard for even a second.

Belgrieve added wood to the fire and held his hands close to the flames. A spark flew with a loud snapping noise, the only sound to be heard as the snow fell outside his window. He dribbled a bit of distilled liquor into the hot herbal tea and took slow sips of the toddy. His body warmed up, even if only slightly.

Suddenly, he heard Angeline turning over in bed. Belgrieve stood and draped the displaced covers back over her. She mumbled something under her breath as she happily nuzzled into the pillow. The sight made Belgrieve crack a smile.

“I should make some soup.” He poured water into an empty pot and suspended it over the flames before tossing in some finely diced potatoes and dried meat. The blowing wind rattled the windows—it didn’t seem like winter was about to end anytime soon.

CHAPTER 140

THE ELMER LIBRARY WAS A LARGE, HISTORIC BUILDING

The Elmer Library was a large, historic building a short distance out from Orphen. It had been constructed by Archmage Elmer, and it now boasted a collection of various books from all times and places. Aside from volumes of conventional literature and poetry, it also contained quite a wide array of grimoires, as befitting the collection of an archmage.

Most of the collection was made available to the public, but some of the tomes were too rare, others contained too much power, and still others were forbidden for other reasons for the laymen to peruse. These books could only be accessed by those granted special permission, and earning that was an incredibly difficult feat. Moreover, Archmage Elmer had engraved a special spell sequence onto the building to manage his collection, and it was impossible to steal from it. Much like Maria's retreat, the library had become a gathering ground for magicians, and many of them had constructed hermitages, laboratories, and test chambers around it.

Angeline and her party were visiting this very library. Despite the vast number of people packed into the large building, it was utterly silent—everybody was either reading a book or writing a paper with a serious face. There was no sound of idle chatter to be heard, and the quiet was rather nerve-racking. The room for general reading was like a grand hall with a high ceiling, and sound would travel very well. Angeline imagined that even just clearing her throat here would be a grating nuisance to everybody else.

Angeline was an avid reader, so she pulled a book from the shelf and began to flip through its pages. It was a collection of old folk tales that had originated from the Orphen region. Among the many stories were a few that she remembered her father telling her as bedtime stories when she had been a child.

Anessa and Miriam had also picked out books to read. But Marguerite, unaccustomed to such places, seemed far too restless to do any reading. She sat in her seat and fidgeted incessantly, her hands either rubbing against one another or her knees. "So

damn unsettling. What's up with this place?" she whispered softly to Angeline.

Angeline shrugged. "We have something we need to look into. Bear with it a little longer..."

"I mean... Tsk, if I'd known it was gonna be like this, I woulda stayed behind."

"Then do you want to head back first? I can give you the key," Anessa offered, reaching into her pocket.

Marguerite pouted. "Don't leave me out of the loop!" Her words were a little too loud, and her outburst immediately attracted attention. She pursed her lips and clenched her hands atop her knees. "Urgh, I don't belong here... How long is old Maria gonna take?"

"Just take a deep breath... Your lack of composure is your biggest weakness, Maggie..." Angeline chided. Yawning, she turned back to her book. Angeline was generally calm and quiet, at least until the topic of her father came up.

The four of them sat like that for a while until they heard a great cough that cut through the silence and echoed all through the hall. All of the researchers who had been engrossed in their books flinched and looked around to see what was happening.

Maria entered the hall, paying no mind to the loud echoes accompanying every step. In fact, she seemed to deliberately stomp in a manner that could only be described as forceful.

"Cough, hack... By Vienna, it's as dusty as ever. I feel horrible... Hey, girls, what are you spacing out for? Let's get going already."

"You're the late one, stupid hag..."

"Silence, cat. Move your feet, not your mouth. Tsk... I hate coming here..."

Paying no mind to the critical looks from the other visitors, Maria sauntered right into the depths of the library, her footsteps resounding loudly through the entire building. Angeline and her party shelved their books and followed behind her, stifling their giggles.

Past the general reading room, there was an area resembling an office. Librarians who

appeared to also be magicians quietly sat at desks and sorted through catalogs. When Maria barged in, all of them looked at her wide-eyed.

“A-Ashen Maria...?”

“I’ve got business in the banned section. Get me access. *Cough...*”

The librarians mutely stared at Maria and the girls she’d brought with her, apparently caught off guard.

“Um...”

“Access for five. They’re with me.”

“But...”

“What, do you think you’re too important to attend to me?” Aside from being a renowned archmage, Maria cut an imposing figure and had a sharp, nasty look in her eyes. All of the librarians cowered under her scornful gaze.

“That’s n-not...”

Angeline walked up to the librarians and flashed her S-Rank adventurer plate. “Here, does this help?”

“Oh, are you... Angeline, the Black-Haired Valkyrie?”

“Yes... That should prove my identity. These three are my party members.”

“My apologies then. I’ll process the paperwork for you alongside Maria’s.”

“It’s been a while since anyone visited the banned section.”

“Can someone go and undo the locking spell?”

“I’ll go take a look.”

“Um, if you could sign right here... Wow, I’ve never seen an elf before...”

The librarians had burst into a flurry of activity at once, throwing the silent office into

chaos. Before they were done there, each member of the party had to sign six different forms.

"Amazing. They all look pretty frail, but now that they're moving, I can tell they're pretty strong," Marguerite muttered as she watched the librarians at work.

"Hmm, so you noticed? You can't work here if you don't comprehend all those convoluted spells Elmer put together. And there are a bunch of folks out to steal those rare grimoires. *Cough, gag...* You can't be a librarian here if you're not skilled enough to fight off all intruders."

A number of the library's books were also quite valuable just for the information they contained, and after Elmer had passed away, all the magicians who were close to him had gotten together and pooled their funds to preserve his great collection. The institution was actually quite a significant employer of highly skilled magicians.

"Why don't you try working here, Merry?" Angeline asked.

Miriam immediately shook her head. "This stodgy, egghead stuff isn't for me."

"Is that really okay for a magician to say...?" Anessa lamented, sighing.

Once all the paperwork was finally finished, they were led through a door at the back of the room which in turn opened into a rather small chamber with no distinguishing features. Without skipping a beat, a number of librarians began tracing magic sigils over the walls while quietly chanting. The chamber rumbled as a descending stairway manifested before them.

"This way, please," a female librarian said, ushering them down the stairs.

As they climbed down, Angeline was filled with a peculiar sensation of wrongness. Her eyes probed every inch of the stairway unconsciously, taking note of shinstone lights dotting the perfectly ordinary stone walls at regular intervals. There didn't seem to be anything out of the ordinary, but she couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching her.

"Granny... Is this some sort of magic?"

"*Cough...* Of course it is. Elmer personally applied countless layers of antitheft magic on the off chance somebody could get past all the librarians. Even I would have a hard

time breaching them all."

"Hmm..." Angeline mumbled. They weren't there to steal anything. She shrugged and stopped thinking about it.

After descending for quite some time, they finally came across a wooden door. The librarian who was leading them pressed the papers they had signed against the door. The door rattled with a terrible creaking sound—and then, a childlike voice suddenly filled the void.

"Hmm? Maria? It's been a while."

Maria scowled. "Don't make me go through those troublesome procedures ever again, Elmer," she said, snorting.

"Sorry about that. Well, I think following proper procedures is important in most everything. Now, come in."

The door opened on its own. The librarian stepped off to one side and gestured for them to enter. "When you want to return, please just retrace your steps."

Angeline cocked her head. "You're not going in?"

"Yes, well... Not if I can help it," the librarian girl said, a pained smile on her face.

Angeline and her party members didn't quite get what she meant, but Maria seemed to know all too well. She shook her head wearily, and swallowing her reticence, she entered with her party. As soon as they were past the door, they were taken aback at what they saw.

The first thing that caught their eyes was the rows upon rows of orderly shelves, each of them towering as tall as any great tree. Every inch of shelf space was tightly packed with heavy-looking tomes. In the spaces between the shelves, they could see three-dimensional magic circles floating in the air; occasionally disappearing and reappearing as they pleased. The room was bright enough to read without difficulty, but there didn't seem to be any light source anywhere. It was as though this space simply maintained the effect—that is, the state of brightness—with no apparent cause.

That's strange... Angeline looked up and saw there was no ceiling at all. At some point,

the walls were obscured by a haze that faded away into a glistening starry sky above. Nearby, miniature models of the celestial bodies were clumped together to form an entire galaxy, spinning at a steady speed.

“Whoa? Whoa! What’s this?!” Marguerite excitedly raced forward.

“*Cough, cough...* Half of this place is made of mana. Well, it’s almost like a man-made dungeon, albeit pretty small in scale.”

“This is the limit to what can be made with a human’s mana.”

Again, they heard the same voice. A boy who looked to be all of ten years old peeked his head out from behind one of the bookshelves. He had pale-brown hair tied into a ponytail behind his head and wore a pair of glasses with thick lenses. The ends of his oversized robe dragged on the ground.

The child looked over Angeline and her friends and nodded. “What lovely guests these are this time. I’m glad to have you.”

“Who are you?” Angeline asked.

The boy chuckled—and suddenly, he appeared right before Angeline. He lightly poked her in the hip, causing Angeline to take a bewildered step back. “Huh...?”

“I am the owner of this library—Elmer, as they call me. It is a pleasure, my ladies.”

“Huh? By Elmer, you mean...” Angeline was sure they had heard that the owner of the library had passed away.

As they puzzled over this seeming contradiction, Maria spoke up. “To be more precise, the residual thoughts of Elmer. The real one is long since dead and buried. *Cough, cough...* But *he* was given the same personality as the original. So, I guess it’s not entirely wrong to say he’s Elmer...”

“Granny Maria, did you know the real Elmer...?”

“Is it finally time to reveal how old you really are?”

“Silence, disciple. I’m still a spritely seventy. I’ve only ever known Elmer in this residual form.”

"How old are you, Elmer?" Anessa asked.

"I think I've enjoyed 150 happy returns, but it's a pain to keep track. I'm not allowed to leave this place, so I've become quite estranged from the flow of time."

"Anyways, he's an old man inside. I have no idea why he chose to take on the form of a brat..."

"What about you? You continue to maintain a young form despite your age. Just how many young men have you fooled with that surprisingly nice body of yours? Even at seventy... You really are a shameless old hag." Elmer teleported yet again and smacked Maria on her rump. Maria yelped and swung at him, but before her fist could strike him, Elmer had returned to his original location.

Maria glared at him. "You pervy old man, at least be kind to the infirm... Hey, girlies, don't let his appearance fool you. He was known as a shameless womanizer back when he was alive. *Cough, gag!*"

"You're making me out to be some kind of cad. I'd rather describe myself as a... resourceful gentleman."

"You're close enough... that he knows about your body?" Marguerite stammered, arms held out before her in alarm and blushing faintly.

"What are you imagining, you blockhead? You saw what he just did—poking and smacking."

"Well, Maria often stopped by when she was a little younger. I've got a good *feel* for her. In fact, ask me what I *don't* know about her," Elmer said, flashing a rather charming smile.

Maria simply palmed her forehead and sighed, resigned to his antics. After all the time she'd spent here, it was just too much of a pain to do anything about him.

Angeline pursed her lips as she rubbed her hip where Elmer had prodded her. *So this is why that librarian girl didn't want to enter the room*, she realized. She began to suspect Elmer had taken on the form of a child just to make it easier for him to engage in his mischief.

Miriam and Anessa nervously drew closer to one another.

"I guess there really are no decent archmages, huh?" Marguerite whispered to Angeline.

"Right..."

There weren't too many archmages in the first place, and thinking back on all the ones they'd met thus far, there certainly didn't seem to be a single upstanding person among them. *Are they just a bunch of reprobates or something?* Angeline wondered.

Maria turned a suspicious glare on Angeline. "Ange... You just thought something incredibly rude, didn't you?"

"No... Of course not."

"Now, now, ladies. This way, if you please. How do you like your tea?" Elmer cheerfully ushered them towards a table, and though the girls were wary as could be, they all sat down. A three-dimensional magic circle floated down to the table, shimmering, before a full tea set appeared.

"Now, go on and drink up. No need to worry—this was transferred in from the office above, freshly brewed. You don't need to worry about stale leaves or anything 'funny' being mixed in."

"Fine... In that case..." Angeline took a sip of the herbal tea and found it to be sweet, refreshing, and somewhat calming. Anessa and Miriam, observing her, seemed relieved.

Unlike the general collection above, there was no need to respect the silence in this place. Marguerite, at least, seemed to be more at home.

"So, what brings you here today?" Elmer asked. "The books in these stacks are all the greatest of my collection. Feel free to ask me anything you want about them. I am always kind to girls."

But Angeline and her friends were at a loss for where to begin. They turned to each other wordlessly, fidgeting and wondering what to say.

Maria, who was slouched forward in her chair, took a deep breath and planted an elbow on the table. "It's about Solomon. We want to know about his demons, in particular."

Hearing that, Elmer's frivolous expression immediately changed to a more serious one.

"Now, Maria—are you really going there? I've known far too many magicians who delved too deeply into Solomon's domain only to unearth their own destruction. I wouldn't recommend it."

"I don't need you telling me that. I've avoided intentionally pursuing anything related to Solomon all my life. But *Schwartz* is involved—I can't pretend I don't know what he's up to."

"Oh, *him*... Yes, he's never up to anything good... What do you want to know?"

Miriam had a curious look on her face. "Are you knowledgeable about Solomon, Mr. Elmer?" she asked.

"I am not particularly knowledgeable myself. But this room doesn't only contain grimoires. It also has books that were condemned by the Church of Vienna—namely, the ones that contain inconvenient truths they wanted to bury."

According to Elmer, the church considered Solomon to be pure evil. The church's founding dated back to when the demons created by Solomon had been defeated by a hero who had been blessed with the grace of Almighty Vienna.

Even though Solomon himself was gone, if the many documents he had left behind detailing his massive achievements in the field of magic were to be reevaluated, then faith in Vienna would falter. The villain needed to forever be the villain in every way imaginable. It would be inconvenient for the church if his very existence were not rebuked.

Angeline recalled what the false prince had told her in the capital. It was a story of how Solomon had once worked alongside the goddess to defeat the elder gods who had once ruled the land with an iron fist.

Elmer seemed pleasantly surprised when he heard this. "That story's generally seen as taboo. Though I guess it goes to show there's no such thing as an absolute secret."

"So it's true? I supposed the story to be nonsense," Anessa said.

Without warning, Elmer disappeared, but before they could react, he reappeared with

a book in hand. It was quite old, and its binding was tattered from the cruel passage of time. Perhaps it had been restored with care though, as it didn't seem like it was going to crumble away anytime soon.

"This is a historical record from quite a long time ago. It barely escaped the church's book burnings."

"Huh? Then the truth is in there...?"

"I cannot tell you what's true and what's not. We can only see the past through the eyes of other people. Even accounts of the same event told by different writers can seem like completely different stories."

"Then it *is* nonsense?" asked Marguerite.

Elmer appeared next to Marguerite and ran a finger down the back of her neck. She sprung up from her chair.

"Yipes! What are you doing?!"

"Young elf, it is up to the reader to distinguish between truth and 'nonsense.' You elves *really* have the loveliest skin texture. It's so silky... Could I touch your stomach, by chance? The thighs would do too."

"Of course not, you pervy brat!"

"He's an old man inside. Don't be fooled," Maria wearily said.

Angeline took the book from Elmer and tried flipping through the pages. It was filled with ancient-looking letters and hard to read but not completely incomprehensible. *Was this considered good handwriting back in the day? If this is good, then why does everyone criticize my penmanship?* she wondered.

Elmer floated through the air, posed as though he were sitting in a chair. "Demons, huh? Those are the greatest taboos among everything Solomon left behind. Although I doubt Schwartz cares an iota about any of them."

"That's just how he is. *Wheeze...* Elmer, have you heard anything about experiments to give demons human form? I'd be fine with grimoires pertaining to the subject too—doesn't make a difference to me either way."

"What? Is that what Schwartz is experimenting with?"

Maria nodded, and Elmer placed a hand to his glasses with an amused look on his face.

"So he's gone beyond necromancy and has started to stick his hand in that stuff too? What could he be plotting this time?"

"Granny, you can talk about it. I don't mind," Angeline said.

Maria mulled over it a bit but eventually turned to Elmer. "Hmm... Can you keep a secret?"

"Ha ha ha! Do I look like the sort of guy to go blabbing? I can't even leave this room."

"You're a pervert... But I can trust you that far. Well, I'm still half in doubt myself, but... it seems that Ange here has a demon's soul inside her even though she's human. Also, the one who gave birth to her was an elf. Something isn't adding up."

Once Maria had finished, Elmer looked quite surprised. But it didn't seem like he was making light of the situation.

"That sounds absurd. But interesting. Could you tell me more?"

And so, Angeline explained it to Elmer. Not that she had all the details either. It was a bit of an incoherent explanation missing some very crucial points, but Elmer heard her out with interest.

"And so, I'm my mother's girl. But I don't know why I'm human..."

"I see. That would explain your beauty—you must take that from your elven mother. Even stood right next to that elven lady over yonder, I don't think the comparison would disfavor you at all, Ms. Angeline."

Elmer smoothly dropped such cringeworthy lines without skipping a beat. Angeline really couldn't let her guard down around him. She fidgeted a bit before standing up straight.

"So I thought you might know the answer. I asked Granny to bring me here..."

"I see, I see. However, my collection does not contain any of the data from those

experiments. It is quite clearly heretical magic, and I'm sure they won't let their files leave their sight. Especially if it's Schwartz pulling the strings."

Apparently, the goal of Schwartz's experiments had been to turn a demon into a human—that was how Byaku had put it. The trials that succeeded would be completely human, the presence of the demon having vanished entirely. This made Angeline a success. There had apparently been a large number of failures, though, like Byaku and the twins.

"What, so this was a wasted trip?" Marguerite folded her hands behind her head and leaned back so hard that the backrest began to creak. One of the three-dimensional magic circles crossed right in front of her.

"There has to be some sort of magic he learned of that set him off on this venture," Anessa said as though she were trying to soften the blow of Marguerite's words. "Maybe you have a book on that, Mr. Elmer?"

Elmer appeared by her side and placed a hand on her shoulder. He leaned in close to her ear. "Heh heh, I do like people who know how to show a bit of consideration. *Good girl*," he whispered.

"Well, thanks," Anessa answered stiffly with a pasted-on smile.

He left her with a grin and sat in a random seat. "From *Nicaillu Chishma* by Ginaemily, Chapter 4. 'And thus, Vienna's beloved children set off for the northern lands. For the deep forests colored in snow and ice were a sign of purity.'"

"Vienna's beloved children set off north... Are you talking about the elves?" Miriam said.

Marguerite blinked, confused. "Huh? Really?"

"I mean, that's what it feels like. They always say that an elf's mana is very pure, and the Vienna church looks up to elves as a noble race."

"No way. I mean, I don't revere her at all."

"That's, well, because it's Maggie..."

"It's Maggie, after all..."

“What’s your problem?!”

For some reason, Elmer seemed satisfied by Marguerite’s annoyance and nodded. “What a splendid look! Now then, let’s continue. From the same *Nicaillu Chishma*, Chapter 5: ‘Their powers derived from the light and darkness of their souls. Their powers were contrary. And thus, they attracted one another. Yet they could never be joined.’”

“They...?” Angeline asked.

Elmer grinned. “Solomon and Vienna, apparently. The *Nicaillu Chishma* is a long epic poem written by Ginaemily and is currently banned. Well, I do think the author took some creative liberties. It was written back before the church was such an imposing entity, so it might have a bit of credibility, though.”

“Light and darkness...”

“I can’t make heads or tails of it. What’s it mean? And what’s it got to do with us?”

Something seemed to come to Maria. She lightly cleared her throat before saying, “Ange, you were born from an elf. Are you certain of that?”

“Um, yes. I didn’t ask how, though...”

“I investigated what remained of that demon that melted in Orphen. It looks like demons are highly condensed agglomerations of mana. And since they were made by Solomon, the nature of the mana is the polar opposite of what the elves have.”

“Meaning... what, exactly?” Angeline cocked her head slightly, not following. But Maria buried her face in her muffler and fell into quiet contemplation. The surrounding noises weren’t entering her ears anymore. *This side of her is really very magician-like.*

Elmer shrugged and hit his hands together. “It looks like she’s onto something,” he said. “But what will knowing even do for you? Oh, well I guess you’re curious about your own origin, Ms. Angeline.”

“No, I actually don’t care that much...”

“Hmm? Really? I mean, you’re a demon, right? Doesn’t that make you anxious?”

"No, even if I am a demon, I'm not going to do bad things. I'm my father's daughter, after all."

"Hmm, you take after your father, then?"

"No, I was adopted. I take after mom more."

"A beautiful mother and daughter. I'd love to see you two together."

"But Ange doesn't really resemble Satie very much."

"Yeah, not really."

"Neither in looks nor in personality."

Angeline puffed out her cheeks and smacked the table. "You three need to respect your leader some more."

"Hey, Elmer. Find me some books about Solomon and Vienna. Also, fork over some data comparing the mana of elves and humans." Maria seemed to have suddenly emerged from her reverie.

Elmer snorted, then pulled his disappearing trick again. This time, he manifested behind Maria, plunging both his hands into her armpits.

"Grah?!" Maria cried as she jumped up. It seemed something had irritated her throat as she suddenly doubled over in a coughing fit. "*Cough, cough, cough, cough, gag...*"

"That's not the right attitude when you're asking someone for a favor, Maria. Yes, if you would only be a bit sweeter. A slight blush couldn't hurt. 'Master, please—'"

"*Wheeze...* It sounds like you're asking to die again!" Maria shot up, enraged, her face that of a fiery devil. Her mana swirled around her, causing her hair and clothes to billow in its wake.

Angeline hurried to her feet. "We'll be leaving now. Goodbye, Mr. Elmer."

"Yes, until next time—if I survive!" Elmer said lightheartedly before facing off against Maria with a pose resembling some martial art. He was clearly in extreme danger, and yet, he seemed to be enjoying himself.

The four girls beat a hasty retreat from the room and climbed back up the same staircase they'd descended to get there.

"I feel kinda... tired," Anessa said. Her friends all nodded.

"Seriously, those archmages are all hopeless," Marguerite sighed. "Why do people even respect them?"

"Well, they develop a lot of useful spells and artifacts... But did it seem like the hag realized something? We might be able to make some progress after all."

"Right... Let's leave this one to Granny Maria."

Apart from Miriam, none of them were experts in magic. Maria was certainly the right person for the job, and she'd likely make a lot of headway now that she had a lead to go off of. With that said, asking Satie herself would be the quickest solution. But doing so felt like gouging at one of her old wounds, and Angeline was loath to do that. She wasn't all that interested in where she had come from in the first place. Belgrieve was her father, Satie was her mother, Turnera was her homeland—and the rest was trivial.

Anessa folded her arms. "But what is Schwartz trying to do by making demons into humans?"

"Yeah, that's the thing. I doubt he's doing it for the good of humanity... But it doesn't feel like he's using them as weapons."

"What is it, then...? Well, not that I'm interested in the goals of a guy like him."

Their ruminations continued as they went on their way, but it wasn't long until all of them began to feel hungry.

Angeline rubbed her belly. "There was a restaurant on the way here, right?"

"Yeah, there was. Shall we?"

"Let's. Libraries just ain't right for me. I'm gonna need some grub to pep me up," Marguerite said with a yawn.

It proved to be another infectious yawn, soon spreading to Angeline. *They're doing it again*, Anessa and Miriam both thought at the same time, giggling.

CHAPTER 141

TURNERA SAW VERY LITTLE RAIN

Turnera saw very little rain—not to say that it never rained at all, but it was still a rare sight. In winter, snow was practically an everyday occurrence, but when spring and summer came around and the rain started to fall, the children would see this oddity as cause for celebration and delightedly dance in it (never mind the adults, who tended to be peeved that it would get in the way of their outdoor work).

Today's rain was a light drizzle; the falling rain was so fine it could scarcely be called drops at all, but going outside would still result in clinging, sticky clothes, and the water pooling on the eaves of buildings did come down heavily.

"Water is falling..."

"That's strange."

Hal and Mal were walking around the yard. Their black hair was sopping wet, and their bangs were glued to their foreheads. It was quite an interesting experience for both of them, and they would stroke their damp hair while gazing up into the drizzling sky. They never seemed to get tired of it.

Belgrieve watched over their antics from a chair under the eaves of his house. He recalled how Angeline used to walk through the rain like this. She hadn't seemed to care about getting wet, and consequently, he would end up having to light the fireplace in the middle of summer to help her clothes dry.

The distant scenery was a misty white, only visible as a collection of faint silhouettes. The sound of the water dripping from the roof to the ground or into the wooden bucket that had been left out made a clear, distinctive drumming sound. The rhythmic beating of the rain was broken by the echoing of axes striking trees off in the distance.

"Hey, you'll catch a cold if you get too wet," Belgrieve warned.

The twins giggled, his warning only making them feel more inclined to mischievously race through the rain. They did seem to enjoy troubling their elders, an urge common

to all children. And since he knew this, Belgrieve left them to it despite the bitter smile on his face. He would have been a bit more concerned if it were an early spring rain, but it was summer now. As long as they dried off and warmed up, they probably would be fine.

Some time had passed since he had met Lady Winter with Percival and Kasim. They had discussed their encounter with Graham after that, but since their enemy was not clear, no one wanted to draw any hasty conclusions. It wasn't as though they were treating the great spirit's words as complete nonsense—the way that entities such as Lady Winter perceived time was completely different from humans. Perhaps the events she spoke of would transpire immediately, but they could just as well happen one hundred years in the future. Whatever the case may be, it was no use worrying about it. They had determined that there was far too little information to go off of, and in Turnera, it was impossible to get any more information than what they had. In which case, it was pointless to keep mulling over it now, and frustrating as that was, Belgrieve had ultimately returned to his daily routine.

Today, it was his turn to keep an eye on the household. He had read some documents pertaining to guilds and given some thought to day-to-day operations. After spending some time on that, he had gone outside to watch the twins play.

Graham, Percival, and Kasim had gone out fully armed to pinpoint the right spot for the dungeon. They made for a rather excessive scouting party for searching the area around Turnera, and Belgrieve couldn't help but laugh about it. Satie had gone to Kerry's house to help clean up after the shearing that had finished up the other day. The gathered wool would need to be boiled in a large pot and washed several times to clean it up before it could be carded and spun on a spindle to make yarn. By the time the process was finished, Belgrieve suspected that the scent of winter would be on the breeze.

Charlotte and Mit had gone with Satie. Although Belgrieve had offered to go along, Charlotte had insisted she would be just fine. It wasn't long ago that they had relied on Belgrieve for everything, but now they'd reached the point where they wanted him to see that they could do things on their own.

Charlotte had become quite invested in taking care of the sheep, and she was enthusiastic about the prospect of owning her own flock someday. It was a bit strange to think that the daughter of a Lucreian cardinal, after all of her travels, would ultimately end up a shepherdess in the furthest reaches of the north.

"They're all... growing up," Belgrieve muttered. That was how it had been for Angeline, and now Charlotte and Mit were growing up too. The twins playing before his eyes would also grow up someday and go off to find their own paths in life.

Hearing the sounds of boots sloshing in the mud, Belgrieve turned to see Byaku coming his way. He had evidently been out in the field, as he was wearing a hood and had splotches of mud on his sleeves. The basket he was carrying contained vegetable trimmings, small root vegetables, and large pea pods.

"You could've waited for the rain to stop."

"That's none of your business," Byaku coldly replied as he sheltered under the eaves and brushed the water from his clothes.

Belgrieve chuckled. "You'll need to wash those. Do you want me to draw some water?"

"Hmm..."

So Belgrieve headed to the well. As he was pulling up the wooden bucket, the twins ran up to him, splashing muddy water around with every step.

"Dad, what are you doing?"

"Drinking water?"

"Oh, no. This is to wash the vegetables. Do you want to help?"

"Yeah."

"Okay."

They put the vegetables in the water bucket and carefully cleaned the grime off of each one. Aside from the dirt, some of them were also crawling with insects, and these were more reliably removed by soaking them in water.

As Byaku and the twins took care of the washing under the eaves, Belgrieve went inside to fetch some towels and came back to dry the twins' heads. They didn't stop washing the vegetables even as they squirmed and chittered.

"Nooo."

“Don’t get in the way, dad.”

“You’ll catch a cold... Hey, stay still.”

“Don’t wanna.”

“Bucky, save us.”

The twins eventually abandoned the bucket to cling to Byaku, who had been sitting across from them.

“Hey, idiots, don’t cling to me when you’re still wet. Just listen to him.”

Though the rampaging twins could be rather overwhelming, he managed to contain them, one under each arm.

Belgrieve cracked a smile. “Must be rough, being a big brother.”

“The hell are you on about? In the first place, you’re the... No thrashing! Just get in the house already!”

Still holding up the twins, Byaku stormed into the house. Byaku, like all the rest, had grown quite accustomed to life in Turnera and was a good deal stronger than before. The twins, for their part, seemed to be thoroughly entertained by the ride, their merry voices audible to Belgrieve outside.

The rain continued dribbling down from the edge of the roof. The misty drizzle rode the wind and blew straight at him, so even with the roof to protect him, Belgrieve’s hair and beard were getting damp. He hastily washed the vegetables and, returning them to the basket, hoisted them up to take inside.

Thanks to the weather, it was quite dim in the house, but it wasn’t so dark that he would need to light a candle. Byaku had added some wood to the smoldering embers in the fireplace, which was now blazing red again. The twins were huddled up under a blanket in front of the hearth, their clothes hanging by the fire.

Belgrieve chuckled as he set the basket down beside a pot. “You’re feeling cold, right? What did I tell you?”

“Not cold.”

"Bucky said we had to stay like this."

"We won't catch a cold."

"Right?"

So they said as they snuggled up together by the fire. Clearly, they intended to be stubborn on this one—such was the adorable rebelliousness of small children.

Still, Byaku, huh? Belgrieve stroked his beard. The boy was abrasive and sharp-tongued, but he was good at looking after people. He was facing all the troubles that came with his age, but for all that he had seen in his short life, he had taken lessons from them and grown. Or perhaps this was just what his true nature was all along.

Byaku was fishing through a dresser on the raised floor, searching for a change of clothes for the twins, when he met Belgrieve's gaze.

"What?"

"Nothing—I'm just glad to have you around."

"Tsk..." Byaku turned away and brought the clothes to the twins. "Hey, put these on."

"Clothes?"

"Then can we play?"

"What's the point if you get wet again? Just stay put."

"Aw."

"Not wearing them, then."

Hal and Mal pouted and went back to snuggling up. Once they turned defiant, it wasn't easy to persuade them.

Byaku frowned. "Fine, have it your way... Not my problem." And so he turned away, still holding their clothes. The twins immediately looked anxious, staring at his back and stealing glances at Belgrieve. They could be obstinate, but without anyone to play off of, they didn't know what to do. Belgrieve found it all rather heartwarming to watch.

"All right, how about we get lunch started? You need to properly dress, both of you. Then you can help out your big brother, okay?"

"Yeah..."

"Help out..."

They stood up, fidgeting. Byaku looked just as sour as usual, but he dutifully dropped the clothes into their tiny hands. Hal and Mal quickly got dressed before racing to catch up with him.

"Bucky!"

"We'll help."

"Good grief..."

Byaku sighed wearily, then took the snow pea pods from the basket and set to work removing their stringy spines, the twins following his example. Byaku made sure they could see his hands and worked slowly and deliberately.

Seeing scenes like this filled Belgrieve with inexplicable happiness and delight at these signs of the children's growth. He'd already experienced this once with Angeline, but that didn't lessen the feeling one bit. Thinking back on it now, Angeline had also stubbornly insisted she could do things she couldn't when she was little, failing time and again. More often than not she wouldn't even admit that she *had* failed. When she had tried to clean the soot off the pot, she'd ended up black all over even while she insisted she had done it deliberately. And when she'd cooked obviously inedible dishes, she would put on a sour face and insist it was fine as she ate it herself. It was cute when kids were a little stubborn.

Belgrieve often found himself recalling old memories whenever the kids did something. He was living in the present, but he was always brought back to memories of Angeline. *I guess I really am a doting father*, he thought, scratching his head.

"Hey, old man. The others don't need lunch, right?" Byaku asked, dumping the peas into a strainer.

"That's right. It's just the four of us today."

Graham, Kasim, and Percival had taken a packed lunch, while Satie, Charlotte, and Mit were at Kerry's house and would surely eat there. In that case, it was just Belgrieve, Byaku, and the twins today—a somewhat rare lineup.

The root vegetables and trimmings were tossed in an oiled pan with dried meat, while the peas were boiled with salt and apple cider vinegar. The leftover porridge from the morning was then heated with some minced greens, and that was lunch taken care of.

There was still some time to go before the summer vegetables could be fully harvested, but the plants were already in flower, and a few already had fruits about the size of his thumb. Their spread might have been a bit bland for now, but it would soon become vibrant with all the colors of the harvest.

It was usually Percival, Kasim, or Charlotte who would get the conversation going, and without any of them around, the four who were left finished their meal with few words. By the time the plates were cleaned up, the replete twins were getting sleepy. They laid their heads on the floor cushions and dozed off on the spot.

The rain and its rhythmic drumming had ceased, and through the window, Belgrieve could see the sun emerge through the clouds. The dampened trees and grass glistened under the sunlight through the faint veil of vapor. *It might get a bit muggy*, Belgrieve thought as he draped a thick blanket over the twins, then began to brew lent-leaf tea.

Byaku sat across from him, reclining into the backrest of his chair, and exhaled deeply.

"Are you tired?" Belgrieve asked as he pushed a cup of tea towards the boy.

Byaku yawned and wiped a tear from his eyes. "I'm just full is all."

"I see."

The twins were sound asleep now, and the wood in the fireplace made loud snapping sounds. Byaku took the cup in hand, but he seemed to be daydreaming.

Come to think of it, it's been a while since it was just me and him. Whenever everybody else is being vivacious, Byaku always takes a step back and stays silent. And when he's looking after the kids, we don't have time for a nice long chat either.

"Byaku, how is life in Turnera for you?"

"It is what it is... Whether I like it or not."

He was as aloof as ever. Belgrieve smiled wryly and took a sip of tea. "Yeah, you're busy every day... I guess it's not so fun for you."

"I didn't say that. Well... The food's good, at least." Byaku's eyes grew a bit distant. He slightly shook his head in frustration. He seemed to be trying to forget a sudden memory.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"I won't force you to talk about it, but... don't shoulder everything on your own, okay?"

Byaku frowned, then sighed. "Back then... food didn't taste like anything. No matter what I ate, it was bitter and disgusting. I didn't even know why I was alive... But now, it's not so bad."

"I see... Yeah, I see."

Belgrieve reached out and gently patted Byaku on the head.

Byaku scowled and brushed the hand away. "Quit it, stupid."

"Oh, sorry..." Belgrieve pulled away. He'd unintentionally gone and treated the boy like a child. The smaller kids liked it when he patted their heads, but Byaku made it quite clear that he hated it. Aside from his prickly personality, there was his age to consider. *I can't be insensitive about that sort of thing...* Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his head.

They were silent for a while after that. As the twins began to snore, some of the lingering rainwater pattered down from the roof, and in the distance, Belgrieve could still hear the echoing sound of an axe striking a tree.

Byaku was staring out the window when he began to speak again. "Schwartz ain't a decent guy, I'll tell you that. Although I rarely ever saw him in person... I'll bet Satie had a rough time."

Belgrieve was a bit surprised to hear that. Byaku tended to avoid Satie, but perhaps he was looking out for her in his own way.

"Probably. I haven't asked her about it. It feels like I'd be tearing open an old wound."

"Maybe I've met her before. She's been fighting Schwartz for a long time, right?"

"Yeah... I see. You were working under him."

Byaku propped up his cheek and closed his eyes. "I fought the folks who opposed him a few times before. There were other organizations researching Solomon too, and then, there was Lucrecia's Inquisition. I killed my fair share and lost all sorts of things. There was always a bitter taste in my mouth. I don't think I ever tasted food back then..."

"That... must have been hard."

"Thinking back on it now, you know... Back then, I had given up. I thought to myself, 'This is just how things are.' My life right now... ain't bad. In that regard, I guess I... should be thanking stupid Ange."

Belgrieve smiled. "I think she would be delighted if you said so to her face."

"Don't screw with me." Byaku ruffled up his hair, clearly regretting what he'd said. Belgrieve laughed and refilled his own empty cup. He heard the twins turn over in their sleep. *I'll need to head out to the field in the afternoon*, he thought.

○

The sky was clear, and the sun poured down relentlessly onto the dusty road below. The brick of the tall buildings and the white city walls seemed to practically glow in the light of the early summer sun. That was where Angeline and her party were, currently aboard a wagon bound for the guild.

Marguerite waved a hand in front of her face to clear away some of the dust. "Ick, it's way too hot and dusty."

"Yeah, it's a dry day. But it's better than Istafar, right?" Anessa said without taking her eyes off the road. She was the one holding the reins in the driver's seat.

Certainly, southern Istafar was so dry that the dust would have been caked on them so much that running a finger over their skin would produce a clear line. It was incomparable to Orphen. But even if it was a bit better here, Marguerite was still

scowling nonetheless.

"I'm used to it... But it's still new to you, right, Maggie?" Angeline asked.

Marguerite nodded. "I mean, you never get dust clouds in the forest, and there was plenty of grass in Turnera... This is just a bit much. It's better in winter when there's at least a bit of snow on the ground."

"This area's not paved, after all..."

"But it sure is dry, right? I'm sweating up a storm too; let's hurry and deliver the goods so we can have a nice bath," Miriam said, stretching her limbs.

Two days ago, they had set off for a nearby dungeon to collect the materials that had been requested. It was a high-ranking dungeon, but now that Marguerite, a first-rate frontline fighter, had been added to the team, they were even stronger than before. They had managed to collect everything without trouble, and it hadn't been long before they were aboard this wagon back to Orphen.

It was already well into summer, long after the point where the occasional cool days would alternate with the hot ones. Now it was just hot every day.

As for the matter of Solomon, Maria seemed to have found a lead, so they'd left it to her for the time being and devoted their attention to work once again. As the day of her fall return to Turnera grew near, Angeline had taken on her work with greater fervor. She was doing more to make up for their upcoming absence, though the workload was starting to get to her a little.

The plan was to return to Turnera for the autumn festival and, from there, to set off on a journey to the east. But she got the feeling she might just end up lounging around the house all winter. *Would dad sigh if he heard me say that?* Angeline wondered.

In any case, they returned to the guild and handed over their materials, received a confirmation form, and circled around to the desk in the lobby. It was the same old routine. However, the desk was strangely crowded today. Apparently, a number of parties had been out on the same guard request, and there was a discrepancy with their contracts. They were now squabbling over it.

Yuri looked quite troubled but still handled the crowd with a smile. Behind her, Gilmenja was coming and going, lining up various documents on the counter.

"This looks like it will take a while."

"Right. Well, we're not in any hurry. Should we put it off?"

"Then it's bath time. To the bath!"

"I'm hungry too. A bath, then the usual place. How does that sound?"

And with that, they put off the paperwork to complete the request. Angeline parted from the other three and returned to her own apartment, grabbing a change of clothing before setting off for the public bathhouse.

When Angeline got there, the other three had yet to arrive. The steam made the midday sunlight streaming in through the high window look like a solid beam, and she could hear the water sizzling as it passed over a large flimestone. There were quite a few other customers, but owing to the heat, most just washed up—few had it in them to actually get in the bath.

Angeline tied back her hair and washed herself off before submersing herself in the large bath. She took a deep breath. It felt like she was finally rid of all the sweat she'd shed in her two-day dungeon dive and all the dust she'd picked up on the way back.

"Phew... Ahh... If only there were one of these in Turnera..." she mumbled, stretching her legs out in the water. To Angeline, Orphen fell short of Turnera in almost every regard, but it did have one small advantage when it came to bathing. She covertly massaged her chest for a bit until the others arrived.

"It's pretty empty," said Anessa.

"Looks like we can take it easy," Miriam added.

Marguerite sat beside Angeline in the bath. "Aaagh! That hits the spot..."

"You're like an old man, Maggie."

"Say what?" Marguerite pouted and poked Angeline in the shoulder. Anessa and Miriam giggled as they got in the water and relaxed to their hearts' content.

They were warmed up and riden of the day's grime, and they left feeling quite refreshed. As soon as they were out, the four girls were once again enveloped by the

dusty air, but it didn't bother them nearly as much now, especially given that they weren't already caked in the filth of the dungeon as they had been before.

They walked through the crowd and headed for the usual pub. As they got closer, they could hear a strangely boisterous singing voice.

"Everybody have a good time!"

"This voice is..."

"Yeah." They already had a pretty good idea before entering, and as expected, there was Lucille standing atop one of the tables, strumming at her stringed instrument and singing.

The inebriates, already well into their cups since noon, were infected by the cheerful tunes of the south and joined their voices in cacophonous disharmony. There was enough heat in the air to make one break a sweat; it was quite rare to find this kind of atmosphere in this particular pub.

They spotted Yakumo sitting in the corner with a peevish look on her face and joined her. She was somewhat surprised to see them but a bit relieved too. "It has been a while."

"It has. Have you been well, Ms. Yakumo...?"

"As you can see. And you can see how the pup is doing too. I prefer to drink in peace and quiet, but... Well, how about a get-together?" Yakumo said, holding up a bottle.

Yakumo and Lucille were planning to earn some money in Orphen for the time being. This meant that they were staying in the same city as Ange and the others, but it wasn't like they were part of the same party, nor did they work in the same places. They hadn't seen one another in over a month. It wasn't an incredibly long time, but it was a bit pleasant to see them after a while.

They ordered wine and food and gave a little toast. Having downed her first glass in the blink of an eye, Marguerite licked her lips.

"Ahh," she sighed. "The first drink after a job well done is something else... But what are we gonna do about that form?"

"I'll stop by later..." Angeline offered. "We just have to hand it over, after all."

"Well, it's not like we all have to be there. You sure you're okay with that?" Anessa asked as she passed around bowls for the stew.

Angeline nodded. "Yeah. A walk after a little drink is just what I need."

"Then you'll have to leave before you drink too much," Miriam cackled.

"What's this? You're still working?"

"The desk was crowded. We haven't turned in our completion form yet."

"Oh, so that's it... Well, if the job itself is done, there's no need to hurry."

"What about you guys? You got enough money?" Marguerite asked.

Yakumo's eyes wandered in thought. "Well, we weren't really pressed for money to begin with... It's more like we missed our chance to take off."

"Are you two going on another journey?"

"Something like that. We were never good at staying in one place."

A new wine bottle was brought to their table. Lucille was still singing along with the lunches.

Angeline poured herself another glass. "Ms. Yakumo, you're from Buryou, right...?"

"I am. What of it?"

"Well, you see... When fall comes around, we're going to return to Turnera and then light out east from there. Do you want to come with us? I'd be happy to have someone who knows the place..."

"Hmm, that sounds interesting. I won't be bored with you girls. Well, I'll give it some thought." Yakumo chuckled before finishing off her glass.

The modest party continued for a little longer, but Angeline got up when she noticed the red tinge in the sunlight streaming through the window.

"I'll go stop by the guild..."

"Oh, right. Forgot about that."

"S'rry, Ange. Could you take care-a that?" Miriam mumbled, slurring her words as she gestured with her glass. She was already a bit out of it.

Angeline left the pub. The westering sun now lit the streets from a new angle, casting the scene in a slightly different atmosphere. As always, it was crowded and dusty, but with a bit of wine in her, Ange didn't feel it to be unpleasant. This was the same town she had lived a quarter of her life in, after all.

She slipped through the crowd and entered the guild building. There were fewer people at this hour, yet business was booming and it was still far from quiet.

When she headed over to the counter reserved for high-ranking adventurers, she saw that the quarrel had ended, and Yuri was filling out some papers behind the desk. The woman took notice of Angeline and smiled as she put the paperwork on hold.

"Welcome back, Ange."

"Glad to be back, Ms. Yuri. We dropped by a bit earlier, but..."

"Yes, I did catch a glimpse of you... Sorry for the trouble."

"No, don't worry about it. We weren't in any hurry... Here you are." Angeline took out the paper that she'd folded twice and handed it over.

Looking through it, Yuri nodded. "You're all good. If you could just sign here."

Angeline signed at the very bottom. "It's starting to get pretty hot..."

"Isn't it? We're well within the heart of summer... Oh, come to think of it, I hear they're starting to sell cold sweets at a shop near the square. How about we go together sometime?"

"Sounds nice. I'm all for it."

As their conversation became animated, Gilmenja appeared from a door behind the counter.

“My, how lively you are...”

“Ah, Ms. Gil. You looked quite busy last I saw you.”

“That was hardly any trouble. They were just arguing over who ate the last cookie.”

“Huh?”

“Kidding. Well, it was about divvying up the spoils—same old, same old. Heh heh heh...” Gilmenja prodded Angeline on the shoulder. “Oh right, someone was asking around for you. I think he’s still in the lobby.”

“Huh? Really? Thanks for telling me.”

Angeline returned to the lobby. There were so many people about that she feared it would be hard to tell who was looking for her. But as she looked around, a familiar-looking man seemed to take notice of her and waved his hand. He had scruffy brown hair and thick glasses.

Angeline’s face lit up. “Oh, Mr. Ishmael!”

CHAPTER 142

THE SUN WAS SETTING

The sun was setting, and torches were beginning to be lit at the corners of each building as Angeline walked with Ishmael. She'd first encountered him when he was traveling with Duncan in Istafar. They'd all journeyed together to the Earth Navel and then all the way back to the imperial capital. It hadn't quite been a year since she'd last seen the magician, but still, it was an unexpected reunion.

Ishmael awkwardly scratched his head as he apologized for not being able to assist them in their adventures in the capital. "I'm really sorry about that. I was held up by my fellow researchers as I was putting all those materials away..."

"You don't have to worry about it... It ended up being pretty dangerous."

"I heard about it from Touya, actually. It must have been quite the adventure."

"That's right. The crown prince was an impostor, you see. And he had been fighting against my mom for a long time."

Angeline boasted about her time in the capital city. Ishmael nodded along, never appearing to be the least bit bored or tired as he listened to it all. The tale was far too long in the telling for the short walk between the guild and the pub, and they arrived before she was even halfway through.

When they entered, they were immediately surrounded by tumultuous noise. The place was even busier now that evening had come. The inebriates were still singing with voices like geese being strangled to death. Perhaps Lucille had grown tired, as she had stopped singing and playing her instrument and had sat down to drink with the others.

The table had apparently gotten rowdy while she was away, as there were two extra empty bottles lying around.

"Hey, everybody!" Angeline said cheerfully as she reclaimed her seat.

"Whoa!" exclaimed Anessa when her shoulder was jostled. "What? You're gonna spill the wine."

"It's Mr. Ishmael. I found him."

"Hmm? Oh, you're right."

"My, how curious..." Yakumo seemed amused as she breathed out a streaming puff of smoke.

Marguerite abruptly got up to talk to Ishmael and jovially patted him on the shoulder. "Didn't expect to see you around these parts. Have you been well? In the end, we never got to meet up in the capital!"

Ishmael smiled wryly and straightened his glasses, which had been knocked crooked by her strength.

"I'm sorry about that... I know it must seem like I ran away."

Miriam giggled. "No one sss-ees it thataway..." she said, slurring under the drink's influence.

In any case, Ishmael was somewhat indelicately shoved into a chair, and now there were seven people crammed around the small table. They tidied up their mess a bit before they placed an order for more food and drink. Even though there was an endless stream of rowdy people coming and going through the doors of the pub, the barkeep was as stoic as ever. He deftly maneuvered about behind the counter, neither mixing up any orders nor imperfectly cooking a single dish. By contrast, the younger waitstaff navigating the drinking hall looked exhausted.

They raised their glasses for another toast before getting back to their discussion.

"Were Touya and Maureen well?" Anessa asked.

Ishmael nodded. "Yes, but I only met them shortly after everything that happened in the capital. They said they were headed to Keatai, so I think they may already be there by now."

"I see. They did say that they used to work out of Keatai..."

"We're going there too, you know. After we head to Turnera for the fall festival, we're thinking of heading east. Right, Ange?" Marguerite asked.

"Yeah."

"Oh, do you have a goal there?"

"There's something there known as steelwood..."

The slightest cues would continue the conversation. Quickly, it went from their journey east, to the dungeon in Turnera, to Belgrieve and Satie's marriage. There seemed to be no shortage of tales to go along with their drinks. Whenever their throats grew parched from talking, they would go through a few more bottles.

Marguerite, the strongest drinker of the bunch, was still perfectly fine, but Miriam was practically melting into the table, and Anessa was consciously fighting to keep her eyelids from drooping and frequently shaking her head to keep awake. Lucille had begun singing and playing along with her guitar once again while Yakumo smoked her pipe and did her best to abstain from imbibing any more alcohol.

Angeline was feeling a bit inebriated. She was always happy to see an old friend again, and she unconsciously drank more to keep up the mood. Ishmael rolled his shoulders and cracked his neck to loosen up after sitting there drinking for so long. He had chugged down most everything that was put before him and was now well into his cups.

"My word... The more we talk, the more I just seem to drink..."

"How long are you going to be here, Mr. Ishmael?"

"I don't have a definitive plan. My materials and research are well in order, so I have time to spare... Perhaps I should stop by Turnera while I'm free."

"You're welcome to. Let's go together then," Angeline said, smiling radiantly and refilling Ishmael's wineglass.

Ishmael seemed taken aback. "Hey, Ms. Angeline, I'm trying to slow down here..."

"Not holding up too good, eh? Hey, barkeep—get this man some water!" Marguerite called out, waving her hand.

Ishmael smiled awkwardly. “Sorry, and thank you... But it would feel wrong for me to drop in on your family uninvited.”

“Don’t worry about that. Anyways, I’m sure some progress has been made by now...” The roads were probably a bit nicer now, and the manor Seren was set to move into was most likely shaping up as well. The guild building might have been done too, and if so, her father would be busily managing everything from the guild master’s office. Her mother would be running the front desk; the sight of an elven receptionist would startle and amaze any adventurer passing by. Angeline felt herself begin to smile as she imagined the scene.

Yakumo puffed out a smoke ring. “You look like you’re having fun.”

“It will be a lot of fun, yeah... Hey, you’re both coming too, right? Yakumo, Lucille?”

“Oh, what to do... I’m fine with accompanying you to the east, but going all the way north to Turnera would be a bit of a pain... What do you say, Lucille?”

“The spring festival was fun. The fall festival should be too.” Even Lucille had come over to the table after playing along with the musical carousers, now carefully holding a wineglass with two hands. She sat down at the table and gazed at Ishmael serenely.

Yakumo sighed before knocking the ash out of her pipe. “I don’t doubt that, but... my fear is that Ange will ultimately settle down and have us spending another winter there. Doesn’t that sound likely?”

Angeline had to chew over her words at that one.

“Yeah, I can see it,” Marguerite cackled. “If that happens, how about we leave her behind and head east without her?”

“What? Hey, Maggie. I’m the leader here...”

“If you’re too spineless, I’ll gladly take over. Right, Anne?” Marguerite said, smacking Anessa on the shoulder.

“Huh? Um, uh, I was asleep...” Anessa mumbled, blinking owlishly as she took her bearings.

“Ha ha, it might be best that we all call it a day. Let’s discuss our Turnera plans some

other time," Ishmael said, sipping his water.

"Hmm..."

For how festive the mood still was, Angeline felt she hadn't drunk quite enough yet, but Anessa was already dazed and Miriam was completely down for the count. Though Angeline wasn't as buzzed as she wanted to be, she knew she'd had a decent amount too. Marguerite, who'd drunk just as much if not more, was perfectly composed, but there was no point in using her as a reference. *I guess it would be bad if I got carried away and ended up too hungover to work tomorrow...* She nodded.

"Yes, let's call it a night. Anne and Merry look like they're at their limit..."

"Aw, I'm still good, but... Well, not much we can do about it."

Yakumo nodded. "You're a monster, Marguerite..."

In any case, that marked the end of the party, and they all headed out. The stone buildings still radiated heat, but the blistering inferno of the summer day was long gone. A chilly breeze passed down the street, and quite a few of the stores lining it had already turned off their lights. But it was still only just nightfall, and much of the booming metropolis refused to go to sleep. Rowdy merrymaking continued in the pubs dotting the road.

Angeline stretched out her arms and took a deep breath of refreshing air. The evening dew had taken away the dustiness from the atmosphere, and it was now much more comfortable to breathe.

Anessa rubbed her eyes and looked up at the sky. "Looks like we're in for clear skies tomorrow."

"What does it matter? After drinking so much, we won't be working tomorrow," said Yakumo as she packed her pipe.

Miriam was teetering on her feet even in spite of holding herself up on Marguerite's shoulder.

"Merry, walk properly. Haven't you gotten heavier again?"

"Nooo..."

"We'll be taking our leave here. Until next time," Yakumo said.

"Good night, both of you... We'll talk about going to Turnera some other time."

"Heh heh... So we will. Now then..." Yakumo's gaze wandered, and she seemed to become lost in thought for a moment. "Hey, Lucille, we're going. Hey!"

Lucille was by Ishmael's side, taking a few good whiffs of the man. *Come to think of it, she was staring at him the entire time at the pub,* Angeline thought.

Ishmael smiled nervously. "What's wrong?"

"Mr. Ishmael... Your scent changed, baby."

"Did it...? I can't tell myself. Do I stink?" Ishmael sniffed his armpits before cocking his head perplexedly.

"What are you doing? Let's go. I'm sleepy." Yakumo was yawning even as she turned to walk away.

"I'm going home. Good night, Ange. Good night, everybody," Lucille called out before wobbling along behind Yakumo.

"She's as interesting as ever. So, Ange. What are we doing tomorrow?"

"Hmm... We'll go to the guild for what it's worth. Then, we'll see what happens from there," Angeline said, shrugging. Miriam was hanging rather limply from Marguerite's shoulder. Luckily, they didn't have any urgent jobs to attend to—if Miriam was badly hungover, they could just take the day off. After all, they'd been working nonstop for a while now, and a slight reprieve would surely be permitted.

With their plans in place, she parted from the three of them. Ishmael had said his inn was in the same direction, so he would accompany her partway to her place. They headed down the main road together.

"It must've taken a while to get here from the capital."

"Yes, well, that's just how journeys are."

"Between research and travel, which one do you prefer...?"

"Well, they both have their own appeal. In my case, I'm almost always traveling for the sake of research," Ishmael explained with a crooked smile.

To each their own, I guess—the journey itself is the main appeal for someone like me, Angeline thought. When Ishmael had gone to the Earth Navel, it had also been to gather materials for his research. *A magician's inquisitive spirit is bottomless, I guess.*

"Come to think of it... Mr. Ishmael, do you know anything about Solomon?"

"Solomon?" Ishmael asked, staring at her dubiously. "I have some knowledge, for what it's worth... Are you interested?"

"Yeah. The person we fought in the capital was doing research on Solomon, so I got a bit curious."

"Oh, as I recall, it was the Blue Flame of Calamity, right...?" Ishmael said with a pensive expression. "I assume you want to know about demons then."

"That's right... Do you know anything?"

"Of all the things Solomon left behind, they attract the most attention from magicians. However, due to the influence of the church, research on demons is strictly prohibited. Any research that is being done is taking place behind closed doors. That said, I'd wager there aren't any research magicians who *aren't* interested in demons."

"Hmm... Wait, but Granny Maria didn't seem too interested..."

This seemed to catch Ishmael off guard. "Pardon?"

"Oh, Maria is an archmage. What was it again...? I think she was called the Ashen."

"Ashen Maria? She's a tried-and-true genius. Even without turning to Solomon's relics, she's innovative enough to develop new sequences purely by her own merit. I guess Mr. Kasim is the same, come to think of it... In any case, those who aren't so talented get swallowed up by the abyss of Solomon's research. That's simply how great and mighty Solomon's demons are."

Elmer had also mentioned knowing many magicians who'd trodden too far into the territory of demons and had ruined themselves as a result. Perhaps it was precisely this danger that made them so irresistible to research. This desire for danger also

motivated the kinds of magicians who became adventurers.

“Did you ever do any research into them...?”

“Well, not beyond the point of personal danger. There’s no way I wouldn’t be curious about the magic of the archmage who stood at the top of the land—whoa, pardon me.” Ishmael had stumbled over a stone in the road.

“We can talk about the complicated stuff later...”

“Ha ha... I’m truly sorry... I think I’ve had a little too much to drink.”

The winds whirled about the gentle, downward-sloping street. The cool breeze felt nice on her booze-reddened face. Ishmael was still walking a little unsteadily. Perhaps he had also gone overboard with the drinking, even if it didn’t show on his face. He’d joined a table with far too many people who liked their alcohol a little too much and gotten swept up in their pace.

“Speaking of... You’re a strong drinker, Angeline.”

“Not exactly. I do enjoy drinking with everyone though.”

“That sort of thing sounds nice.”

“You don’t go out for drinks with your fellow researchers?”

“I don’t. Well, I’m not a very sociable person to begin with.”

“Oh, I see. Then back there...”

Ishmael laughed. “Oh, no. It depends on the time and place. It’s a bit of a chore to get together with other magicians, but I don’t hate the carefree air of adventurers. Around you folks, I feel like I can get away with being a little less uptight.”

Angeline giggled too. “You’re tougher than I thought, Mr. Ishmael...”

“Ha ha ha! Well, I’ve been an adventurer for a fair amount of time... Speaking of, I’m actually quite surprised that someone as gentle as Mr. Belgrieve wanted to become an adventurer.”

"Heh heh... But he turned out to be a great one anyway."

"That's right. That's why so many people look up to him, I'm sure."

Angeline felt a sense of pride and delight to hear that. The alcohol had loosened her up emotionally, and she was in such a good mood she prodded at him playfully.

But then, it turned out her own footing wasn't nearly as stable as she thought, and she lurched forward farther than she had anticipated.

"Oh!"

"Ah!"

Angeline instantly reached out her arms, but she didn't make it in time to catch him. And so Ishmael staggered about for a few unbalanced steps before crashing into the wall of a house by the side of the road. All sorts of bits and bobs scattered from the satchel he had hanging from his shoulder.

"Sorry, Mr. Ishmael... Are you okay?"

"No, I should be the one apologizing..." Ishmael caught his breath as he bent at the knees to collect his scattered belongings. "I drank too much... This has been a learning experience."

Angeline awkwardly scratched her head before crouching down to assist him. She helped him pick up a notebook, a pen, a magnifying glass, an ornament with a chain, and a drawstring purse. Mixed in among all these small items was a twig from an apple tree. It was split in two at one end, and the longer of these two branches still had a leaf clinging to it. Angeline had seen twigs like this in Turnera. They were hardly a rarity, but it did seem a bit odd for anyone to carry one around.

"Hmm...? An apple branch?"

Angeline cocked her head curiously as she reached out to pick it up. But the moment her fingertips brushed against it, she felt a powerful shock run up her arm, almost like static electricity. Her entire arm all the way to her shoulder felt numb. Angeline jumped up in shock.

Ishmael's eyes widened. "Wh-What's wrong?"

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

Angeline stared down at her hand. She opened and closed it. Everything seemed fine. *What was that?* She timidly reached out to retrieve the twig again. This time, nothing happened. She inspected it and found it to be as full of life as if it had just been plucked right off the tree, and it was shockingly heavy.

Though she felt some doubts, she handed it over to Ishmael. "Here you go, Mr. Ishmael."

"Thank you. I do hate how clumsy I can be... Well then, I'll be going this way."

"Yes. Good night." She parted with Ishmael at a three-way intersection and headed home. For some reason, she felt strangely sobered up. She felt that the numbness still lingered in her fingertips, but when she probed them again, there didn't seem to be anything amiss.

Angeline thought this was strange, but she returned to her room and life as usual. She changed her clothes, brushed her teeth, and went to bed. *Surely, a splendid dream awaits me...*

○

The creature was starving. It remained completely immobile outside of its hunting hours. Curled up in the darkness, it waited an eternity for prey to approach. Up until recently, that had always been enough. But ever since the last prey had gotten away with most of its limbs, food had simply stopped appearing. The creature could not die from starvation, but the emptiness that came from its hunger grew, and it felt far more alone than ever before.

Beyond its swirling haze of memories, it felt there was something it had once sought after. This thought brought with it a terrible feeling of loneliness. But the thing did not know what to do. It hadn't the motivation to head out in pursuit of anything, and it was filled with the certain resignation that whatever it did would be pointless.

Suddenly, it sensed something in the distance—its first meal in a long time. It prepared to pounce and focused intently in the darkness. But unlike past meals that had always stumbled upon it unwarily, this being stopped just out of range of its leap. The creature could hear whispering.

“This is supposed to be the place. There’s something lurking in the shadows.”

“Yeah, this presence would be a bit much for those low-rankers to deal with.”

“Well, whatever. It may be a mutated species, but this is still just an E-Rank dungeon. Let’s take care of it nice and quick.”

“Don’t let your guard down. You always get ahead of yourself.”

It sensed three and heard one draw a sword. *They intend to attack?* It readied itself.

It heard the sound of boots bounding over the ground—two of them were closing in. There was no time for hesitation. It braced its feet and leaped from the dark.

“Here it comes!”

The two foes came to a sudden stop and jumped back. *You’re not getting away!* But in that moment, it became clear the two foes had given cover to a blast of magic. The being had forgotten how to defend itself. It took the attack head-on and was blasted to the ground.

“It’s all over now.”

“Die!”

In the time that the beast lay there writhing in pain, the two fighters who had retreated before suddenly closed the distance with their blades poised to strike. It could tell their sharp blades were striking its body, but they failed to cut through. The dull pain it experienced was not enough to render it immobile, however. It contorted and then leaped at one of the swordsmen.

“What?!”

Its fangs were vicious. No mere animal teeth, these were actually formed of highly condensed mana, and they easily pierced and shredded the swordsman’s armor before tearing into his side. Blood and screaming danced through the air. Without wasting a moment, the creature stood up on its hind limbs and tore through the swordsman with its front claws.

“Gah!”

“No way!”

The magician on the back line called out the name of her now-expired swordsman compatriot, her voice filled with despair.

It was not a conscious thought process that led the beast to fall upon the magician and devour her next, just an instinctive reaction to her voice. Its fangs punctured her delicate flesh and stole her breath away in no time at all.

“Huh? What the h-hell...”

The last remaining swordsman stood there in a daze before his face contorted with rage. He raised his blade and swung. “You bastard! How dare you!”

Once again, the beast was struck by the weapon’s sharp slash. Had this adventurer been up against any other foe, that would have been the end of it. But the sword rebounded off the creature’s flesh in vain. The beast launched at the swordsman with its maw agape.

“Agh...”

What was left of the adventurer’s body fell to the ground with a thud. The beast was now surrounded by three corpses exuding the coldness of death. They had been somewhat formidable, but the outcome was unchanged. The creature devoured their meat and drank their blood, thoroughly occupied with its first meal in seemingly ages. But it wasn’t long before it sensed yet another approaching presence.

“To think I’d find you here...”

It was a man in a white robe. This one was different from all the other life-forms that existed only to be eaten. The man had a peculiar air about him. The creature felt confused. For the first time, it felt something like fear—its source, of all things, a human, something the creature had only ever regarded as food.

“I see... So even the high-ranking ones end up like this.”

The man let out a long-suffering sigh as he glanced at the corpses before he boldly walked up to the beast without a hint of fear.

The creature was bewildered by the man’s unprecedented boldness. It quickly tensed

its legs to strike. All it would take was a single bound and it would all be over—as it always had been before. But before it could do anything, it was suddenly immobilized. From the man's outstretched hand, a pale-blue light coldly shone through the darkness.

"This dog needs to be taught to heel." The man began to chant in a low voice that caused the creature to feel curiously drowsy. It could feel its consciousness slowly slipping away.

CHAPTER 143

THE WIND BLOWING UP THE HILL

The wind blowing up the hill rustled the dull green wild grass with a silky susurrus. A boy with red hair stood there, his hair tossed by the breeze. He felt for the sword on his belt. When he had resolved himself to living as an adventurer at all costs, he had worked with desperate fervor as a farmhand to save the money to buy the blade from a passing trader. It was cheap, but unlike the machetes he would use for his ventures up the mountain, this was a proper weapon. It had a different weight to it than the bushcraft implements he was used to. It had all the weight of a tool used to wound and kill. That weight overwhelmed the boy with both elation and desolation. The thought that he could finally leave on his journey was the flip side of the realization that he was really leaving this place. He could no longer make any excuses to delay—he had to go to the big city.

From the hilltop, he could see early-morning smoke rising from chimneys all around the village. The plumes gradually dispersed at a certain point and faded into nothingness before long. He could still see signs of the autumn festival that had happened just the day before. He was anxious and wistful about leaving behind life as he'd known it until now. Greater than either feeling was the sense of purpose burning in his heart. He knew this was what he had to do. His father had long since died, soon followed by his mother. The boy had been alone in an empty house that felt so terribly strange without them. The thought of running away from this empty home had overcome him, and he felt an inexplicable conviction that he would need to leave the village altogether to get away from it. His heart yearned for distant lands.

He took in a big puff of air and slowly breathed it out. The sky above was tinged with the hues of fall, as were the yellow and red trees surrounding the village. The boy loved the view from here. He could see the whole village and everything around it. This was where he had lived from the moment he was born, and these were familiar sights to him. He could still vividly recall racing around here with his friends.

Once he set off, he would never see these nostalgic sights again. Many of his elders had attempted to dissuade him from leaving, and he would be pushing past them in a sense to go. He was stubborn after his own fashion. He had sworn that he wouldn't return

until he was at least renowned as a triumphant hero. He couldn't even fathom how long that would take—the rest of his life, perhaps. Even so, this conviction was all he had. He adjusted the scabbard on his belt once more and took in another deep breath.

The wind was now at his back, almost like it was giving him a push. He chuckled softly before slowly making his way down the hill. From down in the village, he could hear the horses of the merchant caravan neighing even from here.

○

The twins crowded Mit as they slept—Hal's face was pressed into Mit's cheek, while Mal, mumbling softly to herself in her sleep, had her arms wrapped around his belly and her legs locked around one of his. Mit, murmuring, tried to turn in his sleep, but he had no way of moving in his predicament. He contorted into a somewhat strange posture, causing the blanket to slide off of the three of them.

It was already summer, but Turnera was the northernmost point of the dukedom, and it wasn't warm enough to sleep without covers at night. Belgrieve draped the blanket back over them, wary of any of them catching a cold.

“It’s easy to get sick in this season...”

Because of the day's heat, many children were prone to sleeping in light clothing and would end up catching ill as a result. When Angeline had been young, she would unconsciously kick the covers off when she was asleep, leaving her body exposed and resulting in a sniffly nose in the morning. Even so, she would try to go out and play without any regard to her health. Belgrieve recalled enticing her to stay in and rest by sitting at her bedside to either read her a book or regale her with tales of his adventuring days. It wouldn't take long before the little girl was soundly asleep.

“They’re sleeping like logs,” Satie observed as she tended the fire.

Belgrieve lowered himself down in front of the hearth. “Yeah... They played a lot today.”

“So you get the feeling that Schwartz is using quite a bit of that old god’s powers?” Kasim asked as he filled a teapot.

“That’s right. Though there’s still things we haven’t heard until now, so I don’t see the full picture yet...”

Satie, frowning, heaved a deep sigh. Turnera had enjoyed a long spell of peaceful days, but it seemed Satie had gathered her courage and finally decided to be forthcoming about what she knew of Schwartz and his experiments. Aside from Belgrieve, Percival, Kasim, and Satie herself, they had been joined by Graham. Charlotte and Byaku, both of whom had once served Schwartz, had stayed up to participate as well.

Satie picked up a cup of tea, eyes hooded. "But they used to be enemies, right? It seems that Solomon's brand of magic doesn't mix well with the old gods. At the very least, I wasn't able to make use of anything aside from teleportation, space construction, and fake persona conjuration magics."

"Teleportation magic... As I recall, couldn't you do that, Byaku?" Belgrieve asked.

Byaku, reclining in a chair with his arms folded, let his gaze wander as he mulled over the question. "This is the first I'm hearing about old gods. That spell was just something I *borrowed* from Schwartz."

"Borrowing magic... You don't hear about that too often," Kasim mused.

"Additionally, the old god's power wanes if you leave the spot where the fragments of its consciousness remain... The teleportation magic was probably Schwartz's own power."

"What is false persona magic, anyways? I haven't heard of that one," Percival said.

Satie closed her eyes. "As the name implies, you can create an entirely new persona. The spell constructs both memories and personality, and you can set a trigger to return to normal. By doing so, you can become a completely new person cut off from the memories of the original."

Kasim twirled his hat on his fingertip as he processed her words. "Oh, I get it. That lets you avoid all suspicion, and the personality is programmed to be none the wiser, so it wouldn't feel unnatural to the constructed persona either. Sounds like a convenient spell, that... You could work as much mischief as you wanted."

Percival sat up straight in his chair, frowning. "But... we destroyed his base and his backing in the empire. What's he gonna do now? Whatever he's planning, won't it take time?"

Satie took another deep breath and shut her eyes. "I don't know. He wasn't the type to

just share his mind with the rest of the world."

"Is it safe to assume that his current objective is to turn demons into humans?" Graham asked.

Satie nodded after a moment. "Yes. There were other things he was working on, but I think it all led towards that. Of course, I'm not sure if that was his ultimate objective or just another step in a grander plan..."

Satie's shoulders quivered like she was having trouble breathing, and she shed a tear from one of her tightly clenched eyes. Belgrieve softly wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

"Sorry," said Graham apologetically. "I made you recall something painful."

"No, it's okay..." She wiped away her tears with the back of her hand and took a deep breath. "But to be honest... there were a lot of painful parts I can still vividly remember."

"Don't push yourself. We don't need to dredge up the details of those experiments. Things might be different if knowing those things could help us pin down Schwartz's objective, but... even then, I wouldn't force you," Percival said, struggling to find the right words.

Satie smiled a bit. "Heh heh... I didn't think you had it in you to be tactful."

"Shut it." Percival turned away, a sour expression on his face.

The mood had softened a bit, and refills were poured from the whistling teapot. Satie took a sip before continuing. "In any event, Schwartz wanted to perfect the transformation of demons into humans... I have no doubt that Ange was a successful trial. We're lucky that Schwartz doesn't know that..."

They'd only figured out that Angeline was Satie's daughter after the battle at the capital. That was a conclusion derived from knowledge only Satie and Belgrieve could possess, so there was no way Schwartz could know.

"But... Ange grew up to be a good girl, as you all know. Doesn't that mean that his plan is a failure? And even if he wanted to do something with her now, she's pretty strong. She's not gonna lose so easily," Percival reasoned.

Almost everybody nodded, but Byaku still seemed dubious. “Should we be so optimistic? From the moment I met her, the demon Caim inside me recognized her as kindred to us. It wouldn’t be strange if Schwartz came to that conclusion on his own.”

Come to think of it, Byaku’s been pointing it out from the very start... The implications of his words had been so inconceivable back then that none of them had paid him much heed, but now he seemed very credible indeed.

Kasim scratched his head. “But you don’t know any more about *it*, right? If you connect to that demon’s mind for too long, it eats into you.”

“That’s true. I don’t know what the logic is behind her becoming a complete human. One thing I *am* certain of is that my demon feels envious of her.”

“Does that mean that Solomon’s demons... have a desire to become human?” Belgrieve wondered.

Byaku frowned. “I don’t know. Caim’s mind has descended into complete madness. Whenever I try to talk to him now, he ignores what I say and just tries to devour me and take over my body—that’s about it. I can’t get anything useful out of him anymore.”

Even with Graham and Kasim helping him out, that part still hadn’t improved. Indeed, even the backing of two living legends was not enough to appeal to a being created by the twisted archmage who had once ruled over the land.

Charlotte clenched her hands. “Samigina’s ring... It tried to consume me too.”

“Ultimately, the demons act only out of yearning for Solomon. They’ve got deep memories of the battle to conquer the land, so they think they need to defeat all enemies for him. That’s what I think,” Byaku said, taking a sip of tea.

Belgrieve twisted his beard. “What do you think, Graham?”

“That sounds plausible. I’ve faced a number of their kind before, and to me, it felt that fighting was an extension of their loyalty to their master. Hence why everything withered around them and fiends were drawn to their aid. I know little of the age of Solomon’s reign, but I imagine it must have been an ironclad rule, brooking not even the slightest resistance.”

“I think you’re right,” Satie said. “Before they were experimented on, the demons took

on the forms of vague shadowy silhouettes, and I could feel an immense murderous intent from them. But rather than hostility, it was more like... a sense of duty."

"So by making a demon into a human, he was able to contain that hankering for homicide?" Kasim asked.

"That was probably part of it..."

"But what then? His purpose is still unknown," Percival said, crossing his arms.

That was the part that eluded them no matter how long they pondered the matter. The lantern's flame flickered. Satie finished the rest of her tea and sighed. "The demons—or rather, Solomon's homunculi—can take on all sorts of forms. You all know that, right?"

"Yeah. I've fought shape-shifting demons a number of times before," Belgrieve said. Percival and Graham indicated they had done so as well.

Satie rubbed the tip of her nose. "They often take on humanoid or bestial forms, but... For instance, the one Char mentioned—I've known some to look like gemstones, or others, liquids, like that sword of that rabbit-eared templar at the capital."

"What happens to the consciousness of the demon itself once it's in a solid form like a ring?"

"I couldn't tell you. They instinctively want to return to Solomon, so... maybe the ones in other forms are just asleep, their consciousness remaining deep within. But for the successful human trials, maybe even those deeper thoughts all go away... That might be why the presence of the demon completely vanishes."

"So they're completely reborn as humans then?" Percival asked.

Satie nodded. "Yes, I think so. As for how they're conceived... there are various ways, apparently. But demons are magic-based life-forms, so they can be controlled to a certain degree through spell sequences. Meaning, once the demon is within the test subject's body, you can overwrite it with a sequence to have it dwell within as a baby. I didn't even notice when it happened to me. Maybe they mixed a liquid demon into something I ate..."

"Which means Schwartz and his cohorts discovered some way to control demons with

magic, to an extent."

"Correct. That's how they could keep a number of demons around in dormant crystal forms. I presume the other organizations trying to use the demons knew about those methods too. Kasim, you were part of one of them, right?"

"Yeah, I was. But it was like Schwartz was always a step ahead," said Kasim.

Belgrieve's eyes wandered as he stroked his beard. "So... does this mean that his experiments were a success?"

"Ange's existence seems to be proof of that. I don't feel the slightest bit of demonic presence from her."

"Does that have anything to do with the fact that... you're an elf?"

"I'm not sure... But of all the experiments I've seen, Ange is the only one I would consider a complete success, so it is quite likely. It might be related to how an elf's mana differs from a human's..." Satie reasoned, glancing towards Graham.

The old elf seemed to be deep in thought, and it was some time before he answered her. "The mana of elves is of a slightly different nature from that of humans. It should have a *terrible* affinity with the mana of demons."

"As I recall, gramps, your holy sword absolutely despises demons and anything of the sort," Percival said, glancing over to the wall where said blade remained completely silent. They had heard that it was overflowing with the pure mana of elves. Since it detested demons, it stood to reason that an elf should have poor compatibility with a demon.

Belgrieve furrowed his brow. "On the contrary... Maybe elven mana could work to neutralize some of the evil parts of the demon."

"All we have is supposition. But if the only one to become a human child was born of an elf, then we can derive some meaning from that."

It seemed even Graham could only offer conjecture.

Satie sighed and wrapped her arms around her knees. "But if some power held by elves is able to contain the power of demons... maybe I'll be able to protect these

children. That's... encouraging." She buried her face in her knees, her shoulders quivering once more. "It was a terrible sight... They were all tattered and bloody... A homunculus grows in the womb far more quickly than a normal child. They'd visibly grow within a single month, and there were girls whose bodies simply couldn't keep up with it, and they died."

Belgrieve gently patted Satie on the shoulders.

"If only I was a bit stronger, you know... And then, I'd... have saved a lot more of them," she said, sniffling.

"You shouldn't blame yourself for it. You did all you could, on your own."

"Sorry... I thought I'd already processed these emotions. It's all coming back to me now."

Kasim roughly scratched his head. "Hmm... One thing isn't clicking... If the real goal was to have demons he could freely control, there's no way he'd have let Satie get away, and when she did, I think he would have tried a lot harder to find her... Schwartz doesn't seem like the kind of guy who would slip up there, does he?"

"I don't know his disposition myself, but... Well, that was quite the fumble for an archmage who left his name in the history books."

"He'd be much less of a threat if he were prone to half measures."

"We can't entertain such a notion. This is the man who managed to seize the heart of the Rhodesian Empire, even if only temporarily."

"That's precisely my point. There's just something wrong about how he handled the demon research—the part he should have been paying the most attention to. For all the ghastly things he was up to, he was strangely haphazard at the worst times. It is weird."

"I mean, I get that..."

They were just spinning their wheels and getting nowhere now. It seemed Charlotte and Byaku knew nothing beyond the fact that the experiments were being conducted, and though Satie knew more about the experiments themselves, she had not been keyed in on whatever objective lay beyond them. No matter how much they discussed

the matter, they could not escape the realm of pure conjecture. It was starting to feel a little pointless to them all.

Suddenly, Kasim seemed to recall something. "Come to think of it, Satie... didn't you say you destroyed Solomon's Key or something?"

"Hmm, that's true... Oh, didn't you say you were searching for it too, once upon a time?"

"Yeah, I was. Well, I wasn't all that motivated, so I can't say I was searching diligently." Kasim explained how he had been searching for an enchanted item known as Solomon's Key while working with another group of demon researchers but that his efforts had borne no fruit.

Percival furrowed his brow and cocked his head. "What is it, exactly?"

"It appeared as a small branch from an apple tree. But it was actually a powerful mana construct, and I had to layer my magic several times over and exert all my strength to finally break it."

"What did you do with its broken remains?"

"I buried them in my constructed space. And without me around, that space will have collapsed in on itself."

"I see. Then we don't have to worry about that. I just thought that might be what Schwartz would start with."

"That was a possibility, but only if the Key was still around."

As Satie put it, Solomon's Key was an item that anyone researching the demons would want to possess. There were old documents that stated it was what Solomon had once used to command his demons.

Satie, who had been paying close attention to Schwartz's every move and heedless of the probability of failure and death, had intervened the moment before he obtained Solomon's Key and snatched it away. As a result, it had never reached his vile hands.

Given that, it didn't seem like there was anything Schwartz could do. His goal was unknown, but whatever that happened to be, Solomon's Key was bound to be a major factor. Now that it had disappeared from this world and he was deprived of his base

in the capital, it didn't seem like he could make any drastic moves.

With a loud snapping noise, one of the newly added bits of wood had split in the fireplace. "In short, there doesn't seem to be anything we have to worry too much about," Percival concluded as he rearranged the wood with a poker.

"But, he's... unfathomable. You can't underestimate him!" Byaku said.

Kasim sighed. "He's the worst sort of person to deal with. Agh, I should have taken him out when I had the chance."

"I do not think he's after world conquest." Graham's soft-spoken words drew all eyes to him. "If that were the case, then the Rhodesian Empire would have been the most important tool he could have asked for. He would not have relinquished his hold on it so easily. I personally believe the twisted curiosity and drive of a magician are what govern his actions. For people like him, you cannot surmise their actions by simply weighing what they have to lose or gain."

"Just how many people... were sacrificed for that...?" Satie was sobbing quietly into her knees, her body quaking. It seemed it had finally grown too painful for her to go on. The more they talked, the more she would remember.

Belgrieve gently drew Satie close. Like the others, Satie did want to see this issue resolved. But the days she had spent engaged in battle with Schwartz and his conspirators, and the ghoulish, bloodstained sights that ensued had traumatized her. She couldn't look at it directly for long.

"Let's end it here today," Percival said as he picked up a piece of firewood. "It's getting late."

"Right, very well. We're in no hurry," said Kasim as he folded his hands behind his head.

Belgrieve rubbed Satie's back. "Satie, how about a walk to get your mind off of all this?"

"Okay..."

The spouses left the house together. The heat of the day had long since given way to night's refreshing chill. The grass was laden with glistening dewdrops reflecting the light of the half-moon, which was bright enough that they had no need of a lantern to guide their way.

Satie let out a deep breath as she looked up at the moon. Her silken, silver hair practically glowed in its pale light. Belgrieve was entranced by the sight of her when their eyes suddenly met.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"Nothing... Well, I was just thinking... Ange must have gotten her hair from you."

Satie chuckled. "Maybe she did... It's a different color, but she does have some lovely locks, that girl."

"That she does. Even when she has a terrible case of bedhead, she only has to run her fingers through it to straighten it out."

When Angeline had started to braid it, Belgrieve had wondered if perhaps her black hair would start to grow curly. But then she would untie the braids and it would naturally go perfectly straight, and it was as soft as elven hair.

The two of them had left the village by now and had walked all the way to the nearby plains. The summer grass was towering at this time in the season. There was a slight breeze, but not enough to rustle the grass noisily. The sky was clear but for a few wispy clouds that occasionally passed under the moon and cast shadows over the earth below.

Satie seemed to calm down with every breath of the pristine air.

"Sorry, Bell. Honestly... if I was stronger..."

"Don't say that. You did as much as you could."

"Did I really...?" Satie said as she stared into the distance. "What I have now is so precious to me. I wish it could continue forever. But, I know that if I ever looked away... something terrible would happen."

"Are you talking about the children?"

"Yes. I'm worried about Schwartz, but even more so about the kids. There's Hal and Mal of course, but Byaku's still fighting with the demon's consciousness too. I can't help but think of what might happen someday."

Aside from Mit, the twins and Byaku were also children born of the experiments. If they did not confront the secrets of their birth, then there was bound to be trouble someday, just like how Mit had once drawn the attention of the ancient forest. The will of the demon still persisted within Byaku, and there was no telling when Hal and Mal would lose their equilibrium. Of course the threat of Schwartz loomed, but for Belgrieve and Satie, the deeper fear was of the calamities that might befall their children and what they might suffer as a consequence.

Satie brought both her hands to her mouth and let out a sigh.

"It was pretty terrible, to be honest... Nothing but sad and painful memories. But if I don't confront them now, I won't be able to help those kids someday."

"Percy and Kasim are probably in the same boat as you... I'm starting to feel a bit guilty; I was the only one of us who got to enjoy any peace and quiet these many years," Belgrieve confessed.

Satie chuckled and patted her husband on the shoulder. "What are you talking about? It's thanks to you that Ange came and saved me. If you hadn't lived in Turnera... I'm sure we would never have met again like this."

"You're right..." Belgrieve gently wrapped his arm around her shoulders, smiling.

Satie looked up at him. "Bell, I think... no matter how they might come into the world, newly born lives bear no sins. Even if they were the results of all sorts of cruel experiments..."

"That's right. I think so too."

"So you know... for all the suffering that resulted from what I experienced, I'm glad that Ange came into the world. I mean, she brought us all together... I need to work a bit harder."

"Yeah..."

Even if it had been Satie's suffering that gave birth to Angeline, Angeline herself did not bear any of the sins. In fact, with all the good fortune the girl had brought, she deserved praise, if anything.

Belgrieve patted Satie's back. "But don't do anything crazy. What's the point if we lose

you in the process?"

Satie burst out laughing. "Pfft—ha ha! You're right... Oh, Bell. That's the same thing you used to say to me and Percy."

"Huh? I-It is?"

"Heh heh... Yes. You really haven't changed at all, you know that? In a good way, I mean." She patted his shoulder, giggling.

Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his head. "Well, I'll be..."

Still smiling, Satie stretched her arms overhead.

"All right... Let's head back. Seren should be here in a few days, right?"

"Yeah, it'll be a longer stay this time. The manor is pretty much done, save for a few minor details."

"Then it's going to get busy from here on... You'll have to do your best, guild master," Satie teased, a mischievous look on her face as she poked his cheek.

Belgrieve smiled wryly and patted her on the head. "I'm glad you're feeling a bit better."

"Hey, don't treat me like I'm Ange. I'm your wife, you know." Satie puffed out her cheeks, making an expression so amusing that Belgrieve couldn't hold back from laughing. The two of them reveled in the moment, trying to stifle their mirth as the wind picked up a bit and rustled the grass around them.

CHAPTER 144

THE WALLS OF THE GOVERNOR'S MANOR

The walls of the governor's manor were painted a beautiful shade of white that was almost blinding to look at in the summertime light of early afternoon. The head carpenter, who was putting the finishing touches on the manor's exterior, was clearly proud of what had been accomplished. With that said, the interior fell quite a bit short of what would be expected of a noble's manor. The carpenters, working off of what they had observed from architecture in Bordeaux, had applied all of their skills to the endeavor. Even so, they had only ever built houses in the countryside, and the finer details were a bit beyond them.

However, Seren hailed from House Bordeaux, which maintained a close relationship with the common folk, and she didn't seem the least bit bothered by it. If anybody, it was her maids and servants who complained of what was lacking hither or what would make it difficult to work thither. Seren had traveled back and forth between Turnera and Bordeaux several times by now, transporting documents and tools to the new manor with each trip. These trips had been fretful at first, but now she was taking it all in stride and steadily finishing up the preparations to settle in Turnera as the chief's aide. Although she was only his aide, the actual chief, Hoffman, seemed more than willing to retire and hand over his position.

Seren filed away a bundle of documents into her bookshelf, then turned to her guest.
“Phew... That should do it.”

“Is that the last one?” Belgrieve asked.

Seren smiled. “Yes, thankfully... It took a long time to pick and choose what I'd take with me.”

“This is quite a lot smaller than your mansion in Bordeaux, after all...”

“Oh no, I was actually sorting through all sorts of documents I thought might be useful for my work here... Luckily, the reference room was untouched in *that* incident.”

Is that so? Belgrieve stroked his chin. It seemed that Seren had been assessing the state

of things in Turnera, then going back to Bordeaux to look for any relevant documents—hence all the return trips. She explained how she'd gone through all of the old records from the oldest to latest, so it must have taken quite a bit of time. He had heard that Seren had a talent for bureaucratic affairs, perhaps owing to her earnest, hardworking nature.

A heavy woolen rug had been laid over the polished wooden floor of the office. The room was furnished with a shelf, an office desk, and a table with chairs to receive visitors. It wasn't fancy, but it was practical.

"I believe people are talking about me becoming the next chief," Seren said after sitting down.

"Yes, so I've heard."

"But there's no guarantee that I'll remain in Turnera for the foreseeable future, sorry as I am to say it."

Naturally... Belgrieve nodded. It would be unwise to keep someone of Seren's talents holed up in this remote village forever. Once the dungeon—and everything else—had taken shape, she would probably be sent off to a bigger town or married into the household of a prominent noble family.

Seren folded her hands over the table. "Furthermore, I think that the chief ought to be someone from the village. I may be the sister of the countess, but I am still an outsider—I have not committed Turnera's traditions and the seasonal work to memory, as Mr. Hoffman has."

"I see."

"So I think it will all go smoother if I remain a temporary governor dispatched from Bordeaux. Of course, I plan to do my share of work as the chief's aide as well."

"Certainly... That may be for the best. That would make it easier for you to operate. I assume you'll be traveling between Bordeaux and Turnera too often to do the chief's job."

"Yes. However, it seems like Mr. Hoffman is intent on passing his title to me..."

"Ha ha! He can be strangely earnest himself... I'll put in a word from my end. As long

as we give a good explanation, I think he'll understand."

"That's good to know..." Seren closed her eyes, relieved. She had talent to be sure, but she was still a girl who'd only ever worked under her elder sister's guidance. Unconsciously, she yearned for someone she could rely on.

Seren sampled the tea a maid had brought in and smiled. "Hee hee... I'm glad I decided to discuss this with you, Sir Belgrieve."

"I might not be the most knowledgeable, but feel free to consult with me anytime."

"Thank you. Back home, I often consult with Ashe, but I can't quite bring him out here..."

"Is Sir Ashcroft doing well?"

"Yes. Sash has lately been dragging him out with her to hunt fiends. He's growing stronger."

They chatted for a bit longer before Belgrieve took his leave. From time to time, Seren would consult with him on various matters. Helvetica apparently planned on stationing some soldiers in Turnera, so they would need to consider the construction of barracks as well. When they inevitably had an influx of travelers, they would naturally bring with them public safety issues. Some measure of deterrence would become necessary.

Belgrieve walked home, arms folded thoughtfully. So many things were happening, and he felt like he was being pushed along by the flow of events. It was interesting to see everything begin to take shape, but that brought with it a certain anxiety as well. Not that there was anything he could do about it at this point other than to keep thinking about it every step of the way—there was no stopping now.

When he reached the square, he found Kasim, who was teaching magic to a few of the younger villagers.

"Hey, don't be impatient. If you don't concentrate enough, your mana's going to disperse."

His students each attempted to concentrate in their own way, some of them keeping their eyes shut, while others stared fixedly at a single point. The ones with a knack for

it were surrounded by swirling mana that caused their clothing to billow as though caught in a strong breeze.

Kasim turned to face Belgrieve when he drew near. “Oh, are you done helping Seren?”

“Yeah. Looks like you’re making progress here.”

“Heh heh heh... They’re pretty enthusiastic about it. But it’s about time to wrap up. If I keep them too long, their folks aren’t gonna be happy.”

Belgrieve chuckled and nodded. The height of summer had passed, and fall was on the horizon; the leaves on the trees had gradually begun to change colors, and the village was busily preparing for winter. With the dungeon soon to come, there was nothing wrong with training to fight, but there was no point doing that if it came at the cost of preparing sufficient provisions for winter.

Kasim clapped his hands. “All right—class dismissed! I taught you the basics, so figure the rest out on your own. Once you’ve mastered working with your mana, I can teach you some harder spells.”

His young students cheered before enthusiastically returning home to work.

Belgrieve kneaded his beard. “Do you think they’re ready to fight?”

“Not all of them, no. But once they get a bit of experience, I can see a bunch of them reaching the higher ranks.” Kasim chuckled. “Perhaps that’s thanks to the Red Ogre’s teachings?”

Belgrieve smiled wryly. “I don’t remember ever teaching them magic... Well, I’m just glad they’ll be able to help out.”

“The fundamentals are important, but they need practical knowledge. Even if I taught them difficult magic, that knowledge would be useless if they panicked in the heat of battle... Well, the folks here have fought their share of fiends, so that might not be much of a problem.”

“Ha ha... Everything’s moving forward...” said Belgrieve.

Kasim nodded. “It is indeed. It’s like we’re building the future now. There’s no need to fuss so much about the past anymore.”

“You’ve... already moved on, right? But Percy...”

“Hmm... Well, pretty much. I’m not as obsessed as Percy, but I despise that dark fiend too. I’d want to kill it if I had the chance.”

“I see...” Belgrieve mumbled, awkwardly scratching his cheek.

Kasim grinned. “Don’t make that face. I’m not about to drop everything to go looking for it.”

“Hmm... I’d feel better if the same could be said for Percy.”

“That’s his problem, and he has to work it out on his own... Still, he’s mellowed out a bit while teaching the young’uns here,” Kasim mused as he limbered up. “Ain’t that nice? There was never anyone to teach us. We just learned by trial and error—mostly error, unless I’m misremembering.”

“You’re not wrong. But trial and error can be a good teacher too.”

“Maybe... But every now and again, I can’t help but wonder what could’ve been if there had been an adult like you around, back then. I know I got up to my share of mischief.”

“You’ve all had your share of hardships,” Belgrieve said apologetically. Kasim patted him on the back.

“You’re the one who had it hard. The rest of us were just too careless for our own good. I’m just wondering how things might have been different, that’s all. For better or worse, little brats usually have a one-track mind.”

“I’ll admit, I also think about that sometimes...”

“But ultimately, I think it’s fine how it all turned out. In a sense, if we hadn’t all gone our separate ways, then we wouldn’t have Ange, and there are loads of folks we wouldn’t have met without her.”

“I guess so...” Belgrieve closed his eyes.

“Don’t go making that face again... You’re as serious as ever, aren’t you?” Kasim asked, kneading his beard bemusedly.

“Oh, sorry. I know it’s bothersome to overthink these things.”

“Heh heh heh... Well, that’s also your strength, Bell.”

The wispy clouds were drawn across the sky in the wind. The sun was starting to set, and the western mountains cast their shadows over the village.

“It’s almost fall, huh...”

“Time flies. Around this time last year, we were in Tyldes, weren’t we?”

“I think so... So it’s already been a year.” Time seemed to be flying by. Angeline had been very insistent on eating fresh cowberries, so she would definitely come home this time. But it was safe to assume she was busy now, as she hadn’t sent any letters lately. Belgrieve had no idea whether she was going to spend the winter in Turnera again or leave for Orphen after the festival was over.

The two of them returned to the house together. It was time to begin preparing for the coming winter.

The sight of Byaku apprehending the twins, who had been playing with the vegetables drying in the yard, caused Belgrieve to crack a slight smile.

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Lately, Angeline had been having some rather peculiar dreams. They were terribly vivid and seemed almost real. Her fingertips would feel numb after she woke from such a dream, and sometimes, a faint scent would linger in the back of her nose.

But once she shook off her early-morning drowsiness, those sensations would fade, quite literally, like a dream. By the time she had changed her clothes and washed her face, she couldn’t even remember what the dreams had been about. All she knew was that they weren’t very pleasant and that she felt ill even without the clear recollection. As the days went on, she eventually found herself waking up several times in the dead of night. Her body would be covered in sweat and her throat would be dry. She knew she was having terrible nightmares, but she had no idea what they were about. Those times, she would find she couldn’t sleep for a while, even when she lay down again and closed her eyes—and even when she did, it was nothing but nightmares again. Then the sun would rise, and she wouldn’t feel like she had gotten a wink of sleep.

With one sleepless night after another, Angeline was feeling worn out. When she was sleep-deprived, it took more time than usual for her to wake up, and mornings were getting rough for her.

It wasn't as though she was physically exhausted—she was getting sleep, for what it was worth. Instead, it felt like the more she slept, the more fatigued she became. She felt out of sorts, and everything she did began to feel like a struggle to put any effort into.

Angeline's thrust was parried, knocking the blade out of her hand and the rest of her off-balance and overextended.

Marguerite, who had been squaring off with her, had a strange look on her face. "The hell are you doing? You've barely been putting up a fight lately."

"Yeah... I know." Angeline frowned and scratched her head. Since she couldn't give it her all, she had begun losing to Marguerite in their sparring matches. But Marguerite knew something was up and took no satisfaction from such hollow victories.

Marguerite sheathed her rapier and shrugged.

"You're gonna get taken out by a fiend at this rate."

"Ugh..." Angeline pouted as she retrieved her fallen sword. "Losing to the likes of Maggie... How humiliating."

Marguerite yawned. "Oh, look who's talking. Well, it's good that you're still well enough to be snarky."

Angeline snorted, but a part of her knew she was only putting on a strong front. She felt helpless; she knew she would become restless if she didn't do something to keep herself occupied, yet she felt too tired to do anything.

Summer was nearing its end. Every time she thought about the coming fall, she wished it would hurry up so she could go see her father. Ever since her party had returned to Orphen, their work had run them ragged. The number of fiends had decreased drastically compared to the time a demon had stirred things up. However, there were plenty of jobs that only S-Rank adventurers could pull off, and when they were brought before her, Angeline was hesitant to turn them down—thus, she was putting her sword to quite a bit of work.

As busy as she had been, she'd begun to contemplate leaving for vacation early. That urge was tempered by the fear that doing so would be like giving in to her own weakness, and she couldn't bring herself to go through with it. Thus was the downward spiral of Angeline's health. She hadn't taken any work for the past few days. They had gathered at the guild today, but Angeline was still in a terrible state, and they ultimately hadn't taken on any requests. She had sparred with Marguerite in the hopes that working up a sweat would raise her spirits, even if only a little. Unfortunately, there was nothing she could do about the slump she was in. All she had accomplished was to confirm that she was indeed stuck in a rut. With that established, they left the training grounds.

Summer's end was at hand, but the sun beat down all the more fiercely, and the harsh sunlight stung Angeline's eyes. It was just before noon, and Orphen was clouded in dust. As usual, uncountable multitudes came and went, and the sounds of their voices and foot traffic and everything else resulted in quite a deafening clamor. It was the same old scenery, yet Angeline found it strangely frustrating now.

Marguerite clasped her hands behind her head. "I thought we'd be taking on a few more jobs before we headed back to Turnera, to be honest."

"We can take them if you want..."

"There's no way we can put you on the front lines like this, stupid."

Angeline was irritated to hear common sense come out of Marguerite's mouth, but she didn't have the energy to retort. Angeline sighed, her shoulders drooping. Marguerite sullenly smacked her on the back, knocking Angeline off-balance again and causing her to stumble. "Oof!"

"Tsk... There's no point in competing with you when you're like this. C'mon. Let's get a drink or something."

"Ugh..." Angeline wasn't really in the mood for that, but she didn't feel like going home to sleep either. She had started to hate sleeping, and if that was what tired her out, she didn't see any point to it. Perhaps she could drink herself into such a stupor that she could enjoy one night of dreamless sleep. "Got it... Let's go."

"That's more like it. What about Anne and Merry?"

The other two were off on their own today—they had gone their separate ways at the

guild without saying what they were doing. They were most likely at the orphanage or off doing a simple job that they could do with just the two of them. In any case, Angeline and Marguerite hadn't been apprised beforehand, and it would be difficult to meet up with them now.

Thus, Angeline and Marguerite went to their usual pub. It wasn't even noon yet, so it wasn't too busy, and it probably wouldn't be until the lunchtime crowd arrived.

The two girls sat next to each other at the bar. The barkeep glanced at them, as stoic as ever. "Are you sure you don't want a table? Your friends will be joining you, won't they?"

"No, it's just us two today... Some wine, please."

"I'll have the stronger stuff—and some sausages and a steamed potato, and a cup of stew. How about you, Ange?"

"I'm good. I don't have an appetite."

"What are you talking about? You gotta eat when you can, or you won't have any energy when you need it. Speaking of—sautéed duck and pickles, please."

Whenever Angeline saw Marguerite so energetic, she felt like she had lost somehow. She tried to use this feeling to motivate herself, but it was like trying to blow air into a sack with a hole in it—her cheer would escape before she could inflate it. Still, she did calm down a bit after polishing off three glasses of wine. Marguerite was doing perfectly fine even after drinking the same amount of distilled liquor in the same time.

"So in the end, you still haven't been able to remember what those dreams were all about?"

"Yeah... And I can't shake the bad feeling from the dreams. That's what makes it so irritating."

"Huh... This smells like trouble," Marguerite said before taking a bite of her sausage and ordering another drink.

It was the very fact Angeline couldn't remember her dreams that put her in such a foul mood. If only she knew what they were about, she could at least complain about the *content* of the dreams; perhaps Marguerite would laugh it off and call it idiotic and

nonsensical, and Anessa and Miriam would console her with smiles on their faces. It would no doubt be a load off of her mind—but here she was, bereft of even that modicum of joy.

Angeline planted her elbow on the counter and propped up her head. “You ever gone through something like this before, Maggie...?”

“Like what?”

“Having a terrible dream that you just can’t remember.”

“Well, I wouldn’t remember if I did, would I? I would have just forgotten altogether.”

Angeline sighed. *I mean, yeah...* “I knew it. It was hopeless to ask you...”

“What’s that, dumbass? You’re the hopeless one right now.”

For want of anything to say in her defense, Angeline wearily nursed her wine.

Marguerite seemed a tad disappointed—she was clearly looking for a good fight, which Angeline was usually up for. “Good grief, do you have to be like that all the time? You’re feeling down because you keep worrying about it! How about you think of something else for a change?”

“For instance?”

“What’s the first thing you’re going to do when you get back to Turnera? You’re going to pick cowberries, right?”

“Yeah...” Angeline leaned back in her chair. She closed her eyes and recalled autumns back home.

The grass of the plains is beginning to fade in hue, but the forest at the foot of the mountain is painted in beautifully brilliant reds and yellows. There are clouds over the mountain’s summit, but the sky is clear everywhere else, and smoke from chimneys all around the village just disappears into its infinite expanse. In the forest, the air is filled with the fragrance of damp soil and dry leaves. A slowly inclining animal trail leads through the woods past gradually thinning tree cover until it opens up on a rocky outcropping where the sun hits just right. Amidst the small green leaves in this clearing, the ripe, bright red cowberries await...

Angeline heaved a sigh. “I want to go home...”

“You’re almost there. Just a little longer. So don’t you go giving in to those bad dreams,” Marguerite chided, smiling, before chugging down another glass. “Those cowberries were nice. They’re sweet but tart—I could eat them forever.”

“Huh... When did you have some?”

“You know. It was back when you went off to Estogal and we just missed you in Orphen. I was in Turnera right at the end of the autumn festival, so I went up the mountain with Bell and the village kids. You rarely find cowberries in elven territory, you know. I was pretty damn excited when I saw so many of them.”

Angeline slumped down over the table again. “I didn’t get to eat a single fresh cowberry last time.”

“Hmm, really? How long’s it been since you last ate one anyways?”

“I haven’t had any... since I was twelve years old.”

Angeline had eaten her fill of them at the feast that was held for her right before she’d set off to Orphen to become an adventurer—and that was it. Although she’d had preserved cowberries and jam since then, it was the flavor of freshly picked berries that was so vivid in her memories. But she hadn’t been back home whenever they were in season since then, so the opportunity had never come around again.

“Wow, that’s long. But won’t that make it even more emotionally fulfilling when you finally get to eat some this time?” Marguerite asked, her mouth full of roast duck.

“Hmph... I don’t want to hear that from someone who already ate them without me.”

“What, are you sulking? Heh heh! Lookie here, c’mom.” Marguerite prodded at Angeline’s cheek, grinning.

By way of reply, Angeline threw her arm around Marguerite’s shoulders, grabbed a cheek in each hand, and pulled. “You’re getting too cocky... And why is your skin so smooth?!”

“What are you doing?!” Marguerite tried to cry out, but the words came out garbled. She began pulling on Angeline’s cheeks too. The two of them were still grappling with

each other when the barkeep set a fresh bottle of wine down on the counter with a heavy thump.

“No horseplay at the bar.”

“Sorry...”

“My bad, my bad.”

They released one another, but not without sticking out their tongues at each other. The roughhousing had helped distract Angeline a bit. She sipped her wine feeling a little relieved, while Marguerite ordered more spirits.

Marguerite was quite satisfied to see that Angeline had returned to her usual self. “Heh heh... You gotta be like that, or it’s no fun.”

Angeline shoveled a piece of now-cold duck meat into her mouth. “Mmm... *Munch munch...*” She felt a bit embarrassed to have Marguerite look out for her like that, though she knew she would have tolerated it better had it been Anessa or Miriam.

The pub was getting more crowded, and the dining room was growing loud with clattering tableware and chattering voices. The wind that blew in through the door whenever it opened was not as hot as it had been at the height of summer. It wasn’t long ago that the heat would have been so bad Angeline would have broken into a sweat just by being in a crowded room, but that season had passed. She yawned—the wine was getting to her, but not in a bad way.

“Can I get some flatbread with shredded cheese over it, please?”

“Maggie, how do you still have room for food after drinking so much?”

“Huh? Alcohol doesn’t fill you up, right? How about you? Eat something, it’ll pep you up.” With that, Marguerite picked up a sliver of duck meat and shoved it into Angeline’s mouth.

“Agh!” Angeline chewed and swallowed with the help of some wine. She let out a deep sigh.

“Well, in the end, I guess you’re just tired out from all the work. It stands to reason you’ll be better once we return to Turnera then.”

“Yeah...”

It was as Marguerite said—it wouldn’t be long before Angeline would be on the road home. She would just have to do her best until then. Work (and Solomon) would still command her attention, but for the time being, she felt it would be fine to indulge in some nostalgic musings. Thoughts of Turnera and of Bell calmed her heart better than anything else.

However, she couldn’t shake the awful feeling that she’d be plagued by those strange dreams the moment she fell asleep. *I’m not demanding sunshine and rainbows when I sleep, but at the very least, is there some way I can sleep with no dreams at all?*

“I should ask Ishmael...”

Hopefully, there was some spell or medicine that would let her sleep peacefully. Miriam had learned magic to become an adventurer, so she wasn’t well-versed in noncombat spells. And for her part, Maria seemed to be occupied with looking into Solomon. Ishmael was likely her best bet.

Another gust of wind blew through the opening door. Several leaves were blown inside, rustling along the floor.

○

The sights before Angeline suddenly became distinct. She blinked her eyes and shook her head. *Am I dreaming, or is this reality?*

She was outside in some dark place—it seemed to be night. The street was lined with crumbling wood buildings and ramshackle wooden huts. It seemed like the slums.

But these were not familiar sights to her. Black mud was splattered all over everything she could see, and heavy dark clouds in the sky deposited a fine rain almost indistinguishable from mist. The heavy, depressing atmosphere weighed down upon her.

Angeline looked down at her hands. They were the same as always; her palms were callused from holding her sword, and her fingers, though slender, were hard and rugged as well.

The muddy ground was dotted with puddles of water. She could see the ground was

littered with broken tree branches and what appeared to be a dog's corpse that no one had bothered to dispose of. The tepid breeze assaulted her nose with the smell of decay.

Angeline thought she had dozed off in bed only moments before, and yet now she was standing somewhere completely unknown to her. It was quite a strange feeling.

The air was hazy from the misty rain, and that in addition to the darkness made for terrible visibility. Though the wind was tepid, for some reason, it sent a chill through her, and she hugged herself to contain her shivers.

I don't want to be here... Yet for some reason, Angeline's legs would not move. She was immobilized, as though her will could no longer be imposed upon her body. Suddenly, there was a loud noise—a building collapsing in a nearby alley, by the sound of it. The sound of falling rubble was distinctive to her even in this mist.

Angeline shuddered, suddenly filled with dread.

Angeline could hear the sound of somebody running through the mud, but just as she thought she saw a shadow begin to emerge through the mist, a flash of light burst forth from behind her.

"Urgh!" The figure fell to the muddy ground—he was a middle-aged man with sodden, white-speckled brown hair clinging to his bony face.

"Agh..." The man's face twisted in pain as he pressed his hand against his shoulder. Evidently, he had been pierced with magic from behind. His hemp robe was sullied with dirt and blood.

Yet another figure appeared from behind the man.

"Did you really think you were going to get away?" asked the bearded man in a wide-brimmed hat.

Angeline's eyes widened. Though he looked a little younger than the man she knew, it was unmistakably Kasim.

"W-Wait, please... I'm begging you, let me go! Pretend you didn't see me! I've got a wife and kid waiting for me to come home!" the man desperately pleaded.

Kasim chuckled. “Heh heh heh... Spare me the convenient excuses now. It’s a bit late for that. Not after all the nasty stuff you got up to.”

“But... But I already washed my hands of all that! I won’t cause any trouble for your group, believe me!”

“Now look here—did you ever spare anyone who pleaded for their life like that? Don’t you think it’s a little unfair that you’re the only one who should get special treatment?”

The man looked at Kasim with despair. Kasim laughed as he always did, but there was no mirth in his cold, sharp eyes—the same eyes he’d had when she’d met him at the archduke’s estate.

You can’t, Mr. Kasim! Angeline wanted to say, but no words came from her moving lips. She tried to run, but her legs would not move.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.”

A beam of light shot from Kasim’s fingertip the second the man had tried to move. It pierced the man’s leg, eliciting pained cries that echoed through the alley.

“Grahhh...”

“You’re no match for me. Now if you’ll be a good boy and come along, I won’t have to kill you.”



"Don't... Don't screw with me! You know what'll happen to me if I go back!"

Kasim shrugged. "Whatever happens to you is none of my business. Oh right, they probably already sent someone after that wife and kid of yours. Surely you knew *they* would never forgive anyone who betrayed them."

"Do you... even have a heart...?" The man looked to be in the depths of despair.

Kasim heaved a deep sigh and pressed down his cap. "Having a heart... is nothing but pain." Kasim slowly pointed his finger down at the man.

Don't! Angeline's voice wouldn't come out.

The beam of light toppled the man, churning up muddy water as he collapsed.

Angeline wanted to scream, but it was like someone was squeezing her throat. Her tears flowed unimpeded though, and as she collapsed to her knees, she could feel the sloshing mud.

CHAPTER 145

THE SOFT AROMA OF AN HERBAL CONCOCTION

The soft aroma of an herbal concoction wafted airily through Anessa and Miriam's kitchen from a steaming pot, tickling Angeline's nose. She was watching over the place in the absence of her two friends, and was seated lethargically at the dining table feeling rather unpleasantly like her head was made of lead. She remained immobile simply because it seemed too bothersome to do anything else. What's more, it was like a veil had been cast over her consciousness, and everything felt hazy and indistinct. She couldn't even say she felt sleepy, just torpid.

Angeline had felt at the time that messing around with Marguerite had restored a bit of her good mood, but once she lay down in bed at night she'd been greeted by one of those strange dreams again. When she'd awoken, she'd found her pillow was wet and cold from tears she had shed in her sleep, and she was gripped by profound sorrow. Her breathing had been labored, and her throat had felt inflamed. But even with these visceral reactions, she couldn't remember a single detail of what she'd seen. Only the smoldering emotions remained in her heart. Hence her sluggishness and why she hadn't bothered to go see Ishmael. Instead, she had dragged herself over to her friends' house and was now stewing in her fugue at their dining table.

The door opened with a clacking sound, admitting Miriam into the room with a shopping basket dangling from one arm. She frowned at the sight of Angeline still in that state and hurried over to gently pat her on the back. Angeline flopped down onto the table from even that little force.

"C'mon, Ange, get a hold of yourself..." Miriam said as she used her fingers to massage Angeline's back.

"Urrrgh," Angeline groaned and stirred. "That... actually feels pretty nice."

"Huh? Really? Hmm, you must be pretty fatigued."

Miriam furnished herbs, nuts, and berries from her basket. She seemed keen on making something to lull Angeline into a peaceful slumber. Angeline heaved a deep sigh and lifted herself up to talk with Miriam.

"Merry, do you know what you're doing? Have you ever made a potion before...?"

"I'm a magician, you know. The hag did show me the ropes."

"But in all the requests we've done together, I've never seen your handmade potions..."

"It... It will be fine. I have a recipe!" Miriam declared, pulling a heavy book from the shelf and opening it on the table. "See, right here. Compounding for a good night's rest. This will put your lights out."

"Will it really work? I was thinking about consulting Mr. Ishmael..."

"Hmm... I admit, I'm not as good at brewing potions as a research magician. But I do dream of entering the field someday. There's no reason I can't do it, you hear! Now please, trust in your friend." Miriam was pouting as she went into the kitchen for ingredients. Angeline giggled softly and laid her chin down on the table again. It was nice and cool and very comfortable to the touch.

They're just dreams...

Angeline had experienced numerous life-or-death struggles with powerful high-ranking fiends, and yet it was something like this that was getting to her. *How pathetic... Why am I like this?* she lamented. Without the energy to pull herself together, she was at a loss for what to do about it.

The smell wafting through the air changed into something rather peculiar. It was completely unfamiliar to her yet strangely calming. Whenever she had visited a magician's house before, it would generally have some sort of aroma in the air. Those who made medicine had homes that smelled of herbs and balms, while enchanter's homes would smell of ores and aromatic woods. This scent reminded her of some of those houses she'd visited before.

"How has Maria been lately?" Angeline murmured.

Angeline hadn't seen Maria ever since they'd met at Elmer's library. She seemed to have grasped on to a lead, but after she'd begun to fight with Elmer, the rest of the group had swiftly taken their leave.

Miriam returned from the kitchen with an earthen pot. "Okay, this should do it. Hot dish coming through!"

“Mm-hmm.” Angeline absentmindedly dodged out of the way as Miriam set it on the table. There was steam billowing out of the top, and she could tell just from the smell that it was made of all sorts of things.

“Drink this, and you should sleep soundly tonight,” Miriam said, and she poured some of the concoction into a cup. It was a brownish green color, but it wasn’t murky—it was clear enough that she could faintly make out the grain of the wooden cup.

Angeline tried a sip—bitter, but not as bad as cheap potions. The smell wasn’t too bad, but it didn’t help the flavor much. She was drinking it with a sour look on her face when Miriam seemed to recall something.

Rushing off to the kitchen again, she returned with a vial of honey. “If you add some of this...”

“You should have brought it out earlier...” Angeline wearily poured some honey into the cup. The sweetness offset the bitterness a little, enough that it went down easier now. Angeline blew on it and slowly sipped it down bit by bit. Drinks like these really did help put her at ease. She leaned back in her chair, which made a creaking noise.

Meanwhile, Miriam went back to the stove to heat up some milk and poured some into a cup with some honey. “Phew, nice and sweet!”

“Yours looks better than mine...”

“You can’t, Ange—don’t you want a good night’s sleep?”

“I think warm milk would help...”

“Are you saying my medicine *doesn’t* work? Hmm?” Miriam demanded, theatrically stamping her feet.

Angeline giggled. “Whatever I might drink... it’s still a little too early to sleep.”

“How about an afternoon nap? We have a spare bed.”

“Hmm...” Angeline mulled over that offer. It was just about the right time for a nap, and if she buried her head in a fluffy pillow now, she knew that sleep would take her in no time at all. She could hold her own against any S-Rank fiend, but she knew she stood no chance against a nap. “I’ll refrain. Otherwise, I might not be able to sleep tonight.”

"You think so? Well, your choice." Miriam emptied a paper bag of cookies onto a plate. "But, if you're like this, it looks like we're going to be spending the winter in Turnera again."

"Hmm..." Angeline was concerned about the possibility. Not that she minded the idea—it wouldn't be the first time she had dreamed of it herself—but she also got the feeling that staying so long and returning so frequently would cheapen the special feeling of her beloved home.

Maybe I'm just being selfish here... Angeline leaned back in her chair and stretched out.

No matter what, she was always looking forward to going home. The bed in Turnera was rougher and harder than the one she had in Orphen, but to Angeline, it gave her far more peace of mind. Surely there, she could sleep at peace without nightmares.

With that said... Angeline couldn't help but wonder why she had started having these nightmares all of a sudden. For the life of her, she couldn't think of anything special that could have triggered their onset. Angeline folded her arms and groaned as she retraced her memories, but she couldn't concentrate for long before getting lost in the fogginess that shrouded her waking recollection.

She had draped herself over the table again when Anessa came through the door. It seemed she had been out on her own errands.

"Ah, you're here, Ange?"

"Yeah... Welcome back."

"What about Maggie?"

"She said she was gonna go spar with Mr. Ed. She wants to keep her body moving since we're not taking on any requests."

Anessa set down her shopping basket. "Are you still out of it, Ange?"

"Sorry... I keep having these strange dreams, and I'm more and more fatigued..."

"Dreams, huh...? But you don't remember what they're about, right?"

"I don't... I get the feeling I dreamed of meeting Mr. Kasim this time though."

"Mr. Kasim? Why?" Miriam cocked her head.

Angeline sighed. "How should I know...? That's why it's so bothersome."

"Doesn't that mean you want to go see Mr. Kasim?" Anessa suggested.

Angeline pouted. "I don't really have any reason just to go see him. I want to see dad and mom too."

"There you go again."

"Yeah, in that case, it wouldn't be strange if Mr. Bell and Mrs. Satie showed up in your dreams too."

"That's right. My parents just don't show up in them... Because they're too busy fostering their love, perhaps... That's important too. It deserves attention. But it would be nice if they could spare some attention for their daughter too..."

"Aw, it's the usual Ange."

"But isn't it a good thing that they don't pop up in your bad dreams?"

"Yes... But the fundamental problem is that I don't want to have bad dreams!"

"Maybe you've got some worry that you haven't realized yourself?"

"Oh Ange, have you reached that delicate age?"

"Shut up, Merry. Show some respect for your leader..."

Still, this isn't like me at all... There shouldn't have been anything for Angeline to worry about. Maybe it has something to do with Solomon, then?

From what Angeline had learned from Satie, she knew she was a demon—and what's more, that she was most likely the product of Schwartz's successful experiment. Angeline didn't feel troubled by that at all, but that didn't mean she wasn't overlooking the troubles happening right under her nose. "We should see granny soon."

"The hag? About demons, you mean?"

"Yeah. I need to do some digging too."

Surely there was some information Angeline could only obtain herself. If she could share her findings once she returned to Turnera, perhaps they would all make some progress. Not that she was overly worried about it, but she couldn't overlook Schwartz's existence. He was like a small bone caught in her throat. Angeline wasn't interested in his objectives, but she didn't want to get wrapped up in whatever he was scheming either.

Anessa folded her arms. "The demons... Ultimately, they're still a complete unknown to us."

"And apparently, Solomon fought the old gods for the sake of humanity. Do you think that's true?"

Miriam's gaze wandered. "Hmm, I can't say for sure. But according to that Nica-something book, Solomon and Vienna were drawn to one another but never actually joined, right? Maybe it really is true, then."

Angeline finished off the remaining medicine in her cup in one gulp. "Phew... That's a bit romantic."

"You think so too, Ange?"

Two people drawn to one another but never to meet... It sounded like something right out of a play. Angeline and Miriam turned to each other, giggling.

Anessa scratched her cheek. "It's an outrageous tale, as far as the church is concerned... We can't even tell the sister about this one."

"That's another issue..."

"What sort of person was Solomon, anyways...?"

"Yeah, I wonder. They talk about him like he's the root of all evil, but I doubt it's that simple."

"But it doesn't seem like he was all that good of a guy either."

"There are no perfect saints or complete villains out there. That's what my dad told

me.”

“Point taken.”

“Hmm, if we can’t take any requests for a while, maybe we should devote our energies to researching it,” said Anessa.

Angeline nodded. After all, it was best not to do any adventuring work when she was in this state. Since she had nothing better to do, it was better to find something to distract her. A misstep in battle with fiends could be fatal, but research wasn’t nearly as risky.

Yeah, we should see Maria sometime soon. If Angeline could consult with her about her nightmares, that was killing two birds with one stone. She might even get to see Ishmael too if the timing worked out. He seemed to be quite knowledgeable, and being sociable seemed to help her forget about her dreams.

All right, it’s settled, then. There’s no time like the present. Just that morning, Angeline had given up on seeing Ishmael out of lethargy, but now that she had some vitality in her, it was best to strike while the iron was hot.

Yet even with that determination, her eyelids began to droop again. Angeline scowled and rubbed her eyes. *Is it because I ate too much for lunch?*

But this was far stronger than the drowsiness she usually felt in the afternoons.

“I feel sleepy... But why?”

Miriam had been biting into a cookie when she seemed to have some kind of realization. “Ah. I tried mixing it a bit stronger for you. Is it already taking effect?”

“You should warn me... ahead of time...”

“Are you okay? You can use one of the beds,” said Anessa.

Angeline struggled to keep her eyes open for a bit, but it was a losing battle—she was at her limit. She got up on unsteady legs, teetered over to an empty bed, and practically collapsed onto it. The soft, fluffy covers immediately lulled her body into a relaxed state. Perhaps she had been far more exhausted than she’d thought. She rubbed her face against the pillow and picked up the smell of Miriam’s hair.

Oh, this is Merry's bed, she thought as the strength drained from her body and she descended back into her dreams.

○

The cloudless blue sky seemed impossibly vast and deep, and the early afternoon sun shone all the brighter for it, casting shadows with sharp outlines.

Duncan swung his battle-axe with a groan while Percival moved aside to avoid it before swiftly rushing forth and putting his hand on the warrior's solar plexus.

"Ah! I admit defeat!"

Percival laughed and waved his hand dismissively. "Ha ha! You'll have to do better than that next time!"

Duncan, smiling wryly, lowered his weapon. "My word, you're just as masterful as I expected, Sir Percival. To think I couldn't even make you draw your sword!"

"Maybe you've gotten a bit dull after all the lumberjacking?"

"Ha ha ha! Yes, it's true—I've gotten too used to cutting things that don't move!"

Duncan laughed heartily and sat down with a thud. Percival sat beside him, staring up at the wide-open sky. Up in the endless blue, a kite let out an audible screech as it flew in a circle.

After helping out the younger villagers with their training, Percival had had time to kill and had been wandering around the village outskirts when he came across Duncan practicing with his battle-axe. He'd figured if the man was training anyways, they might as well make it a bout.

The village was busily preparing for the winter, and lately, Belgrieve's time was occupied with talking to Seren, Hoffman, and Kerry about various matters, mostly concerning the new guild. Since Percival did not plan on having any active involvement with guild management, he had no intentions of butting in on those meetings. And Satie, for her part, had housework to do, as well as get-togethers with the other women to prepare for winter, while Graham was tasked with looking after the kids. Percival would play with the twins now and then, but Charlotte and Mit had recently begun to look after them like older siblings, which left him no part to play. Lastly, lazing

about with Kasim for every hour of the day wasn't an option. In short, he was bored.

Duncan laid his axe down. "But now that everyone's talking about this new dungeon, I must sharpen my edge. Not that dungeon exploration was ever my forte..."

"Then head into one with Bell. That'll do wonders for you."

"That sounds like a jolly time indeed. Back when that disaster happened in the forest, I did venture out with Sir Bell."

"Oh, when Mit first came here, right?"

"Correct. We were chasing after Maggie and Graham, who had gone in ahead of us, but the woods were in the process of turning into a dungeon, and I couldn't keep my bearings. But just as I thought we were completely lost, Sir Bell was able to figure out where to go, and we arrived right where we needed to be."

"That's the sort of guy he is. He can keep a cool head in times of crisis—that's what saved us countless times," Percival said, smiling.

Just like that time... His smile was self-deprecating now.

Duncan twisted at the hairs of his beard. "I know I might be barking up the wrong tree, but... are you still fixated on *that*?"

"Yes. Those feelings just don't go away on their own. Even if I plastered over them with something else, the color beneath bleeds through when you least expect it. I fought a long time, feeling like the world was dark as hell—and I still feel the same way, no matter how bright my days are right now. That doesn't change."

"I see..." Duncan mulled that over.

Percival burst out laughing. "Don't be so serious. This is my problem—no need for you to worry about it."

"Ah, perhaps I've overstepped my bounds."

"No, that's not what I meant." Percival smiled morosely. *He's as earnest as ever...*

Duncan scratched his head. "Well, I can be rather boorish... Hannah says so often

enough.”

“Oh, I haven’t seen her lately. Is the missus doing well?”

“She’s far better off than me. I don’t deserve her.”

“Good to hear. A household is at peace with a strong wife, apparently.”

“Ha ha! Dame Satie *is* strong, come to think of it...”

Percival laughed too. “Bell is overmatched against pretty much everyone.”

“Ha ha ha, certainly. But that softness of his is also his strong suit. I think it manifests itself well in his swordsmanship too.”

“I’ll bet... His swordsmanship is the complete opposite of mine.”

“Come to think of it, Sir Percival, are you self-taught?”

“Yeah, though it only developed this way after I’d been wandering on my own for a while. After recklessly charging at one fiend after another, this is what I came up with before I even realized it.”

Duncan’s mouth hung open in surprise. “Incredible... To think you could survive so long living like that!”

“Well, when you put it that way... Well, I said ‘recklessly’ but I *did* run whenever I thought my foe was beyond my capabilities. I’d immediately throw up a smoke screen... Despite everything, I guess I still valued my life. And...”

“And?”

“Bell was always good at retreating like that, and I learned to imitate him. Whenever I did, it was like... we were still fighting together. Although I doubt I even had the leisure to think of it like that back then.”

“I see.”

“Don’t hesitate to run from someone you can’t beat. That’s what he’d say. It’s ironic... Back when I was in a party, I was the reckless one, but once I was left alone, I suddenly

had to shape up."

"But it was because of that that you managed to eventually reunite, right?"

"Yeah... What woke me from my delirium was the memories of the time I spent with all of them. Until we reunited, even that much was a scourge to me though."

"You had it hard... And here I am, awestruck that you polished your craft to this level despite the pain."

With Duncan looking at him with open admiration, Percival suddenly began to feel embarrassed and awkwardly scratched his cheek. "Dammit, I've said too much. Hey, keep this a secret from the others. Especially Kasim—he always takes things too far."

"Ha ha ha! I understand. If you need someone to listen, you can come to me anytime."

"No, today was just... Whatever! It's time for round two."

"Very well. I shall keep it to myself, in any case."

The two faced off once more. Percival was again bare-handed against Duncan and his battle-axe, each of them carefully searching for their opportunity to close in. Last time, Duncan had taken the initiative, and it had backfired on him; he was a bit more cautious this time around, but Percival turned his hesitation into another opportunity. The swordsman approached in the blink of an eye and pinned Duncan's arm before he could even swing his axe.

"Grah! Splendid work..."

"Despite everything, I'm an S-Rank. I'm not going to lose so easily," Percival said with a dry laugh.

Duncan smiled self-deprecatingly and hoisted his axe up again. "I need to train myself more... Are you going to settle in Turnera, Sir Percival?"

"No, I plan to go on a journey one of these days. Well, I'll be around until the dungeon and the guild are established at least."

"Hmm... You're a natural-born adventure-seeker, I see. You strive for it."

"Well, there's that... But there's something I need to slay no matter what."

Duncan looked at him curiously. "By that, you mean... the creature that took Sir Bell's leg?"

"Yeah. Our life right now is pretty nice, don't get me wrong... But I can't bear the thought that that *thing* is still out there, living without a care. Bell's not so keen on it, but this is one thing I won't back down on. I was the one who caused it all to happen, so I have to be the one to settle the score." Percival clenched his fist before sighing deeply and expelling the tension from his body with that exhaled breath. "Though that's some ways into the future."

And I'm curious about Lady Winter's warning too, Percival thought, yawning.

Duncan folded his arms. "Speaking for myself... I can't even imagine having something I detest so much."

"Ha ha... You're better off that way. A lot happier too. Now then, I should be heading back. By the way, didn't Hannah tell you to do something?"

Duncan's eyes suddenly widened at the reminder. "That's right! I must return and help with her sanding! Pardon me!" he shouted, already running off.

Percival chuckled. "Seems like all those married men are kept pretty busy... Now, then..." It was time for him to return too. *If I don't at least take care of chopping the wood, Kasim will tease me over it, and Satie will get on my case too. Or, I could play with the kids...*

Percival treasured these moments, but beneath it all, his dark fixation on vengeance still smoldered. He knew nothing good could come of it, but he didn't have it in him to put it aside—not after so many long years of fighting for nothing else but to find and kill that fiend. But for now, it was time to prepare for winter. He couldn't enact his vengeance if he froze to death first.

Percival's cape flared behind him in the breeze that blew down upon him from the mountain as he went on his way.

○

Angeline was left in wide-eyed alarm as she was subjected to the scorching heat of a

sudden gust of wind. The craggy landscape around her was illuminated by crimson light, but it was seemingly night, and the sky was dark. The light source seemed to be cracks in the earth through which the red light was visible.

She heard a bizarre sound like a cross between the rumbling of an earthquake and a roar. Smoke billowed up from below the sheer cliffs to either side of her. The noxious fumes belched up from the earth appeared monstrous in the red light from below, lingering in the air without dissipating and obscuring her vision.

Angeline felt a sharp jolt from below which resonated from her toes to the top of her head. Her gaze was drawn upward again—beyond the red light and dark smoke, she could see something moving. Her hand went for her sword, but it wasn't strapped to her belt. She pressed onward through the smoke, her heart racing. She gingerly reached out to feel her way along the rocky cliff beside her, only to pull back in shock—what she had thought was a cliff had actually been the corpse of a small dragon, its black scales glistening in the red light.

On closer inspection, she realized the entire area was littered with these corpses—each of them small but unmistakably a member of the species that stood near the highest tiers of all fiends. Each corpse bore the wounds of a sword; their scales, which should have rivaled hefty plate armor, had been mercilessly carved up or brutally pierced and crushed. There were no signs that long-range magic or arrows had been involved.

Even Angeline had never taken on this number of dragons at once. She didn't think she would ever lose against a dragon, but there was still strength in numbers—it would be dangerous if she let her guard down for even a second against this many foes. Weaving her way through the dead dragons, she cautiously pressed on. The farther she went, the more closely the corpses were packed together, and she began to see conspicuously larger corpses. For a second she wondered if there were any survivors—it didn't seem to be the case.

Suddenly, a roar rippled through the air, forcing her to cover her ears. A blast of hot wind blew away all the smoke that had shrouded her vision to reveal a massive dragon. Its entire body was covered in pitch-black scales, and its eyes glowed red.

Before it, there stood a man of solid build with curly, flaxen hair that swayed in the wind. It was Percival. As soon as Angeline's gaze fell upon him, she was filled with immense helplessness, anger, sorrow, and hatred, causing her to clasp her hands over

her chest. *These emotions aren't mine*, she realized. *Does that mean that Percival's emotions are flooding into me?*

"It wasn't you... Not you either..." Percival muttered softly.

A closer look showed Percival had been put through the wringer. A trickle of blood flowed down from his brow, his cape was torn off, and his armor was dented; his left arm was bent in a direction it shouldn't have been, and more blood dribbled from his fingertips.

"Why can't any of you kill me? How about you, then...?" Percival pointed at a dragon with the sword in his right hand. The dragon was missing an eye, and there were cuts running down its body. Blood seeped out from the places where several of its scales had been broken off. The beast seemed to be enraged.

Angeline shuddered. *Why do you have to fight until your body's almost falling apart?*

"That's enough... Let's end this. This is already... Ah, dammit. These wounds, these aren't enough..." Percival clicked his tongue bitterly.

The dragon howled in distress. As a being of absolute might, it had probably never been in such dire straits before. It didn't seem to fully comprehend its predicament, but its remaining eye blazed with anger.



The dragon bared its fangs and launched itself at Percival, who did not back down a single step—instead, he sallied forth to meet it. Sword and fang clashed with an explosive burst of mana. Percival did not attempt to defend himself—he used his crooked left arm as though it weren't injured at all as he raced forth in his vicious offensive. The dragon was gradually being pushed back by his tempestuous attacks, seemingly fearful to be faced with a man with such little regard for his own injuries. Percival's sword should have been nothing more than a toothpick to such a beast, yet it easily cut through the otherwise impenetrable scales, flesh, and bones. This was no battle between dragon and man—it was a fight between a dragon and a monster in the guise of a man.

Angeline felt nothing when fighting fiends—it was perfectly natural to her and something she had done plenty of times. But a fight like this was simply miserable and wretched to witness.

Percival rained blows upon his foe. The dragon was being sliced up even as it tore into Percival with claws and fangs and scorched him with fire breath. Each time Percival was struck, Angeline would feel like she was being stabbed in the chest, and she understood that this was the suffering Percival felt. *He fights while bearing this pain?* Her heart was pounding.

Eventually, the black dragon was felled. The ground quaked as its massive body collapsed, and then everything was ominously silent but for the rumbling echoes of the beast's demise. Percival's labored breathing was amplified by the sudden stillness.

He had fought a dragon alone and won. This should have been the kind of triumph that bards would sing of, but there wasn't an iota of joy on Percival's face. In fact, he looked disappointed. He sat down beside the dragon's husk and took a deep breath. His exhaustion and despair cast his face in shadow, and he looked more alone than ever before.

"No matter how many I kill..."

Suddenly, he pressed a hand to his chest. He broke into a coughing fit, shoving a hand into his breast pocket to take out his sachet and shove it against his face. For a while, he repeated this labored breathing treatment, then spat on the ground. There was blood mixed with his saliva.

He longed for salvation, but it was his own heart that would deny him of it. This

internal dissonance resulted in nothing but suffering. Percival's pain continued to flow into her, and she understood it all too well. She could even feel it in her throat.

She tried to say something, but no words would come. She tried to draw closer, but her legs wouldn't move. There was only the pain and suffering in her heart. Gradually, the darkness deepened into impenetrable blackness obscuring all sight. The last thing she saw was Percival's clenched fist quivering.

CHAPTER 146

GRADUALLY, THE WIND TURNED AUTUMNAL

Gradually, the wind turned autumnal. Breezes that would have been pleasant in summer now left a chill as they brushed against exposed necks, forcing the villagers to draw their garments tighter. In Turnera, the first hints of winter could be felt even as early as the height of summer. It would only get colder from then on, so after midsummer, the villagers knew to begin preparing for the coming cold months. It was no exaggeration to say that almost all the work done in northern lands was in order to survive the winter. In order to make it through the long and bitter cold months, everyone worked hard the rest of the year. In such a remote village, guaranteed to be sealed away in snow, it was not possible to head out in the biting cold to forage for provisions—their stores *must* last the whole season.

Belgrieve nodded as he examined the firewood rack, evidently satisfied. It was fully laden with chopped wood. But even this much wasn't certain to last the whole winter, given that the fireplace would be needed throughout the season for cooking as well as warmth. In order to ensure that fuel was never lacking, the villagers also kept communal stores of firewood as well. Once everyone had secured enough for their own home, the villagers would then begin gathering wood for the communal stores as well. The wood stored during the summer months would be sufficiently dried by then and would burn well. Half-dried wood would merely smoke and accumulate soot with little else to show for it.

Lately, Belgrieve had found most of his time occupied by administrative work and meetings. Everything pertaining to the dungeon and guild management would be settled come next spring, and what until now had only existed in his head would finally be concretely realized. He could feel the sense of finality in his bones just by watching as the construction neared its completion, especially with Seren's practical advice on management and the guild system.

As Belgrieve cleaned up the wood-splitting area, his thoughts turned to Angeline. She had said she would come before the autumn festival, so she shouldn't be long now. His expression softened slightly as he recalled how determined she was to eat cowberries this year for sure. No matter how big she got, Angeline was no different to him now

than the small girl he had known so many years ago. With Angeline coming, Anessa and Miriam would probably be with her, and perhaps Marguerite too. Belgrieve chuckled. *It's going to be a large party again...*

He finished by gathering the scattered wood splinters into a basket. They would make for fine kindling. Nearby, he could see Satie hanging up laundry. The light breeze caused the clothes to sway on the line. The sky overhead had been blue and clear in the morning, but clouds had since drifted in to block off the sun. The wind felt a little colder than usual today, though perhaps that was only because his body had grown too accustomed to summer's warmth. He knew this chill was incomparable to winter.

After hanging up the last garment, Satie took a deep breath and rubbed her hands together.

"Finished?" Belgrieve asked.

"Yeah, that's the last one. Ugh... It just had to get cloudy when I put them out to dry... The water's getting cold too."

"Summer's already over." Belgrieve took Satie's hand. Her slender fingers were utterly chilled. "Wow, you really are cold."

Satie smiled a little bashfully. "But *your* hands are warm, Bell."

Washing anything with water was a chore in cold weather. The well water didn't change in temperature much throughout the year, but wet hands could get frostbitten in no time at all. And this was still better than it would be in the midst of winter—it only got worse from here.

The two held hands for a spell. After some time, Satie looked around to see if the coast was clear before pulling Belgrieve into an embrace. She rubbed her cheek against his chest and breathed in deeply.

"Ahh... Nice and warm."

"Hey now, you're acting just like Ange."

"Hee hee... We're mother and daughter; what am I supposed to do about that? Or do you hate it?"

"I didn't say that..."

Satie grinned as she wrapped her arms around Belgrieve's back. "What a shy boy you are." Belgrieve smiled wryly as he reciprocated her hug and rubbed her back. She seemed so delicate and small in his arms. Her silky, silver hair draped ticklishly over the back of his hand. Gradually, he could feel her warmth through their clothes. She turned and looked up at Belgrieve.

"Okay, I'm a bit warmer now."

"Yeah. I think I'll go tend to the fire..."

When he entered the house, Charlotte—who had been wiping down the floorboards—looked up at him.

"Ah, welcome back. Are you done with your work outside?"

"Yeah, all good on my end. Are you feeling cold, Char?"

Satie followed him inside and went to hold Charlotte's hand.

Charlotte smiled. "I'm okay. I mixed a little bit of hot water in. It is a little cold today after all."

Satie chuckled. "Oh, that's clever. Heh heh... Good girl, good girl..." Satie hugged Charlotte and patted her head. The girl groaned embarrassedly and twisted in her embrace.

With all the time Charlotte had spent doing household chores and using field implements, the young girl's hands had become a bit coarse. Belgrieve felt a little guilty that her formerly pale and dainty hands had turned out like this, but he figured that Charlotte would simply smile joyfully if he said so. "Do my hands look a little more like Angeline's now?" she could probably ask. She had grown to be a strong girl.

Bundles of dried tree vines were hung all around the house. Graham would gather them each time he went out into the mountain so that he could occupy himself with basket weaving during the winter. It seemed that Charlotte and Mit had picked up the craft from him while Belgrieve and the others were away, and they could weave small but tidy little baskets. It wasn't hard to find a use for a basket, and if they were made well enough, they could even be sold to peddlers too. It was a fine way to pass time

when stuck inside.

Graham, Mit, and Byaku had gone off to the forest. They'd probably taken the village children to gather fruits, nuts, herbs, and more tree vines.

Percival and Kasim, as was their wont, wandered about as they pleased. They did help out when necessary, but they were adventurers first and foremost and hadn't settled into the rhythm of daily life in a farming village. Hal and Mal had gone with them. Percival would let them dangle from his arms and would swing them around or toss them in the air. He played with them a bit rougher than the others did, but the twins enjoyed the chance to act out a little more.

It was almost noon. Graham and his team had left with packed lunches, but the others would come home soon, and Belgrieve needed to prepare for lunch. After the dough was kneaded and left to rest, he added more wood to the smoldering fireplace. Water and various ingredients were added to bolster some leftover soup; then, he sliced green beans and stewed them with their pods. That was it for preparation. Just before lunch was to be served, he would roll out the dough and cook it in a skillet.

After all of that was handled, Charlotte went to Kerry's house to check up on the sheep. Apparently, she'd been especially fond of a young lamb lately.

For want of anything better to do, Belgrieve busied himself with mending a sack with a hole in it. Satie, for her part, used the downtime to inspect the bottles and boxes of dried goods and pickling pots on the shelf. They silently worked at their respective chores until Satie spoke up.

"It's so strange... I left my homeland because I hated this sort of thing. But now, it's so dear to me."

Belgrieve smiled. "I see... To me, this is just my everyday life."

"Heh heh... That sounds nice. When I was young, I guess I just didn't understand how important it was." Satie chuckled as she dusted the bottles. "When do you think Ange will be back?"

"She said she'd return before the autumn festival, but... she might end up being too busy. She's an S-Rank adventurer, after all."

"I hope not. For some reason, I really, really want to see her..." Satie caught her breath.

"You know, I feel like there's something special about that girl."

"Perhaps... But Ange has always been special to me."

"I don't doubt it. It's thanks to her that we all got back together. Hee hee..." Satie returned the final bottle to the shelf and took a seat beside Belgrieve. "Winter will be here soon... Do you think Ange will spend the winter here?"

"I couldn't say. It's quite likely though." Though she had developed peerless strength and attained fame as an adventurer, Angeline was and always would be a pampered girl. If she could spend the winter in Turnera with her parents, family, and friends, she would be all too happy to do so.

Even so, she was certainly growing, little by little. Her nature was unchanged, but she was working towards independence in her own way. Whether she said she wanted to spend the winter with him or if she planned to leave Turnera after the festival, Belgrieve would accept whatever she chose.

They fell into companionable silence again for a time, broken only by the quiet crackling of the fireplace or the occasional rattling of the windows in the breeze. If he really strained to listen, he might be able to hear the bleating of goats and sheep off in the distance. Satie leaned against him as he worked to darn the sack. Her drowsy eyes closed and her breathing became shallow and rhythmic. *Did she really fall asleep?* Belgrieve wondered, stealing a glance at her.

"Satie?"

"I'm awake..." Her eyes fluttered open to meet his gaze. "Ahh," she groaned, stretching. "Sigh... Will they be back soon? Ah, that's right. We still have a few of those pickles left over. We should use up the last of them."

Satie went to grab the pickle jar from the shelf and set to work finely mincing the contents. Belgrieve watched her from behind, yawning.

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Maria's house was a little ways off from Orphen, so Angeline couldn't just casually drop by whenever she wanted. But now she had something to talk to her about, so she was doing her best to make the trip today. She had yet to meet Ishmael, who was apparently renting a room at an inn in the city. Although he had told her he was going

to work to pay for his daily needs during his stay, she had asked Yuri about him and learned he hadn't taken on a single guild job since he had been in Orphen. In fact, no one she asked even knew where he was staying.

It was already past noon by the time she reached Maria's retreat. As she sluggishly disembarked the stagecoach, she descended into an awful cloud of dust. For once, she had come alone. There had been a rather large-scale fiend hunt request and a demand for their party to assist with it, and so the other three had gone off to help. Angeline was not in any state to take on jobs, but the others were in perfect condition. It also seemed like they were working especially hard to make up for her condition. High-ranking adventurers could take on whatever job they pleased, but when high-difficulty jobs came around, they were expected to prioritize them.

Angeline hoisted her bag over her shoulder. The early autumn sun was blinding to her eyes. She licked her dry lips and slowly trudged on. Soon, she had passed through the small town and passed by the large white structure, and she now stood before the small wooden home where Maria dwelled. The last time she had come here, there had been all sorts of folks loitering around, but there were none today. This was explained when she saw Maria out in front of the house, sitting peacefully in a rocking chair.

Generally speaking, Maria did not welcome any visitors. Her abilities and her reputation had earned her great respect, but she was just as feared as revered. If she turned her sharp eyes and ill humor on an uninvited guest, even most half-wits would beat feet. Anybody who carelessly tried to call out to her would be on the receiving end of a merciless tongue-lashing. The most obstinate might even be driven off by a spell or two.

Maria cracked open one eye as Angeline approached. "Hmm, Ange, huh..."

"Are you having an afternoon nap, Granny?"

"Yeah, the sun hasn't been too bad these days. *Cough...*" Maria covered her mouth. Angeline walked over to her and rubbed her back.

"Are you alone?" Maria asked quizzically, looking around with eyes squinted against the sunlight.

"Yeah."

"That's rare... Are you feeling sick or something?"

"Yeah..." Angeline said with a sigh.

Maria wearily lay back in her rocking chair. "Good grief. Your health's pretty much all you have going for you... So what brings you here?"

"I can't sleep. When I do, I have nothing but strange dreams, and I only wake up more tired..."

"Even that stupid cat could have thrown together a sleeping potion for you."

"Merry made one. It didn't work..."

"Tsk, that stupid disciple... Come in." Maria stood up languidly before walking to her door, bidding Angeline to follow. The house was dusty, as it usually was, but the door and windows had been left open while Maria basked in the sun, so the wind had aired it out some.

"Did you do some cleaning? That's rare."

"I just left the windows open... Here, take it. It's just some leftover stuff, so I won't charge you." Maria handed her a small vial containing a light purple liquid.

Angeline wrapped it carefully with a handkerchief before stowing it away in her bag.
"Thanks, granny."

Maria sat down in a chair in the corner and nodded towards the kettle hanging over the fire. Angeline dutifully (if somewhat listlessly) prepared two cups of tea.

Maria watched over her work. "It's eerie to see you so weak. What sort of dreams are you having?"

"That's the problem... I can't remember. I just know they're bad dreams..."

"That's a pain... Do you have any idea what could be causing it?"

"I don't know... It isn't as though I did anything that should have made me so tired, and I don't have anything bothering me... Ah, did you figure out anything more about Solomon?" Angeline asked.

Maria sighed. "Well, I've got a rough idea as to why you're human despite having an

elven mother."

Angeline poured hot water into the teapot and set it on a tray. "Really? You're pretty smart, granny."

"Of course I am. Are you mocking me or something? *Cough.*"

Angeline giggled and handed Maria her cup of tea. "I can't work like this, but I have nothing else to do... So I thought I'd look into Solomon."

"You won't figure anything out. Not someone like you, and especially not in your free time. Many smarter people have tried and failed."

"Yeah, that's why I came to you, granny," Angeline said nonchalantly.

Maria blew on her cup and took a sip of tea. "For starters... I looked into the relationship between Solomon and Vienna. I searched through forbidden historical records, epic poems, and folktales, among other things... It looks like it's true—they *did* work together to battle the old gods."

"So they did... Then why did they become enemies?"

"It would be reasonable to think that Vienna's attitude changed once Solomon began to grow arrogant with the power he had seized. Vienna was one of the old gods too, but she was known as the goddess of affection and was especially fond of humans. Seeing how Solomon subjected those humans to his tyranny... *Cough...* It's not strange that she would turn on him."

Certainly, the false Benjamin that she'd fought in the capital had said that Solomon had grown jaded with humanity and taken it upon himself to guide the masses. Someone like that would have no mercy for those who defied his authority. *But would that be enough to make an enemy of Vienna, who had been his comrade for so long?*

"But, in the, um, Ni... Nica..."

"*Nicaillu Chishma?*"

"Yes, that. It said they were 'drawn' to one another..."

"But they could never be together. It's not rare for a man and a woman to have a falling-

out."

"Are you speaking from experience? Did you ever have someone like that, granny?"

"Silence. Don't change the topic," Maria scolded her before taking another sip of tea. "In any case, though they were helping one another, the nature of their mana was diametrically opposed. Vienna held a pure white mana like the elves, and Solomon, a mere human who had managed to create the demons, held a mana that was pitch-black in nature. Perhaps it was this opposite nature that drew them to one another... But they couldn't come together in the end."

"Um... Because their souls were black and white?"

"That's right. They had terrible compatibility. But, if you mix polar opposites well enough, you'll get something right in the middle. A human's mana is neither black nor white. Demons are masses of pure mana. If that corrupted mana was mixed just right with an elf's purifying mana... I bet you'd get a close approximation of a human. And that does explain why a demon's soul and an elven mother resulted in your birth."

"I see... So that's why I'm human." Angeline found this logic to be compelling. Two opposite forces that should have never been able to mix had achieved a good balance, and the result was her. She drank some tea as she mulled this over. "Did you learn anything else...?"

"I can't make heads or tails of Schwartz's objective. If you were the successful trial he was looking for, I don't see why he'd let you get away and become his enemy. He's not the sort of guy who would make such a mistake."

"I guess so... Mom said the same thing." Angeline leaned back in her chair and clasped her hands behind her head.

If the man had intended to use her as a weapon, he'd failed long ago. On top of this, his base in the imperial capital had been completely destroyed, and the real Benjamin had been rescued. It was for this reason that Schwartz's true goal remained a complete mystery.

Maria thought for a moment before looking at Angeline. "Schwartz... He had collaborators, did he?"

"Hmm? Yeah. A necromancer who took on the form of the crown prince, and this

adventurer named Hector... There were some Inquisitors too, but one of them died, and the other was being controlled. Then, there was the archduke's... third son, I think? He was being tricked too, though."

"Anyone else?"

"Um... Well, apart from them..."

Were there any? Angeline felt that perhaps there had been... She folded her arms as she tried to remember. The ones she had named had been the members she'd actually fought herself, but she got the feeling that there had been someone else too. The one who had created that peculiar space that had been the stage of their last battle had not been Schwartz or the fake Benjamin—Kasim had explained that to her after the fact. Tracing her hazy memories that far, the answer finally came to her.

"Ah... that's right. As I recall, there was some archmage named Salazar. He was the creator of the time-space prison that I was sealed in, apparently."

"Salazar? Cough... You mean old 'Snake-Eyes'?"

"Yeah—that guy kept shape-shifting continuously, and he was always yammering on about nonsense."

"If he had Salazar on board... Did he entice him with new space-time magic? Or was it 'the flow of events'...? Did Schwartz actually make headway on that nonsensical theory...? No, if he discerned something that none of us know about... It's not impossible..." Maria muttered to herself, her brow furrowed.

"Granny?" Angeline called out timidly.

The old archmage's face snapped up to look at her. "I have something new to think about. Give me some time."

"Huh? Okay, I will..."

Angeline didn't really get it, but it seemed like Maria had a new lead. Though Angeline was bewildered, she decided to stay put. Even if she hurried home now, there was nothing for her to do there. "I'll brew some more tea..."

Maria gave no answer to that—she was completely immersed in her own thoughts.

Angeline shrugged, then went to make some more tea. She put some withered-looking tea leaves into the pot and poured in hot water.

The sun was setting, and the light filtering in through the slatted windows was now tinged with red. Angeline sat there waiting absentmindedly with a steaming cup in hand and felt her eyelids begin to droop. She always became oddly tired around this time of day.

I'm scared of falling asleep... But the strength was steadily draining from Angeline's body, and before she knew it, she had leaned over the table and laid down her head to sleep.

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The piercing scent of blood filled Angeline's senses. Her eyes shot open in shock, and what she saw was a stone wall illuminated with pale light. Wherever she was, it seemed to be some place underground permeated with cold, heavy air. There were no windows; the light came from the pale-blue flames that burned in small glass tubes hanging from the wall.

Angeline looked ahead, then behind, and discovered she was in a narrow corridor. Behind her was a stairway leading up, while the path ahead took a sharp turn nearby. This was an unfamiliar place indeed.

The floor, walls, and ceiling above were hard, dreary stone. Angeline wondered if she could make a loud, echoing sound by tapping the heels of her boots against the floor, yet her feet made no sound at all when she tried. On closer inspection, she could see blood pooling at her feet. It was still wet and was apparently the source of that peculiar pungent stench. She began to feel ill.

The silence pained Angeline's ears—it made the pounding of her heartbeat seem all the louder. As she stood there, unsettled, she could hear someone's anguished breathing. She looked up and tried to discern the direction of the sound. It was coming from just around the bend. She gulped nervously before stumbling forth. Her footsteps made no sound, but she could still feel the cold stone through her shoes. When she turned the corner, she found a row of jail cells, each sealed with iron bars illuminated by the same pale flames as the other hallway. The bars appeared to be somewhat damp.

Someone was groaning in one of the cells—it sounded like a woman.

“Ahhh! Urgh... Gah!”

Angeline raced over without hesitation and grasped the cell’s bars. A woman was crouched down on the other side, her chestnut hair a disheveled mess. The woman writhed in agony.

What’s wrong? Is there anything I can do? Angeline’s lips moved fruitlessly without producing any sound.

“It looks like number thirteen shouldn’t be long.”

Angeline turned to where the masculine voice had come from to see a number of robed figures standing there. Their attention seemed to be split between the cells and the documents in their hands.

“But there’s little hope of success. If this trial succeeded, it wouldn’t explain any of the abnormal growth we’ve witnessed up to this point.”

“Yeah, they mature in a little over a month, after all.”

You bastards! Angeline, incensed, charged forth to strike the robed figures down, but she ended up toppling to the ground when she phased through them incorporeally. They seemed to pay her no mind as they stared at the woman behind the bars.

What just happened? Angeline stared perplexedly down at her hands. When she clenched them, she could feel the sensation. Her legs were clearly making contact with the ground. And yet, she couldn’t save the woman, nor could she kill these robed figures.

Angeline was stuck there, helpless to intervene, when she suddenly saw the air before her ripple when a “hole” appeared in that spot with a sound like an earthen pot shattering. A figure burst forth from the portal, her silver hair trailing behind her and glistening in the dim light.

Mom?

It was indeed Satie. Her gaze rapidly took in her surroundings as she landed, grasping the situation in an instant. Immediately, she bounded forth with the fire of wrath in

her eyes.

“Huh?!”

Before the robed figures could ready themselves for combat, Satie had already closed in and swung her arm, beheading one of the figures instantly. Though she held no weapon, her motions were distinctly those of a sword fighter. Hers was a blade of pure mana.

“You little—”

Satie was merciless. In the blink of an eye, she had slain the robed figures. She raced over to the cell.

“You’re going to be okay!” she cried out, then swung her spectral weapon. The bars were severed and clattered to the stone floor. Satie rushed inside and wrapped an arm around the woman’s shoulders while her free hand probed the woman’s swollen belly. The woman gasped in pain and grasped the hem of Satie’s garments.

“S-Save...”

“Don’t worry... It’ll all be okay...” With a desperate look on her face, Satie chanted something under her breath. But the woman’s cries of anguish did not stop.

No matter what Angeline did, she could not touch them. Her hands passed through their bodies, and even her words of encouragement would not reach them.

She watched over the grim tableau frustratedly as the woman let out one conspicuously louder cry. Her doubled-over body suddenly went rigid as she writhed on the ground. Her swollen belly almost seemed like it was bubbling and roiling from something rampaging beneath her tormented flesh.

Satie gritted her teeth. “No! Please, calm down!”

“Gah...” The woman’s cries ceased. With one final, faint breath, her head slumped down and her limbs dangled limply. Only her stomach continued to thrash about as before.

Satie gasped and quickly leaped away. At almost that instant, a shadowy, formless *thing* burst through the woman’s stomach. It had what could charitably be recognized

as a human face and limbs, but all of them were disproportionate. The creature immediately lost its balance and tumbled to the floor, splattering blood all around it.

Angeline couldn't bear to watch this gruesome scene, but she couldn't avert her eyes from the ghoul yet pitiful creature either. Tears poured from her eyes, and she was almost instantly congested with tears and snot. Her breathing was labored through her sobs.

"Mas... ter...? Master... whe... re...?" the dark entity muttered as its limbs wriggled like tendrils.

Satie was the picture of pure misery as she clutched a hand to her chest. Her breathing was labored and painful, but even with tears in her eyes, she stared unflinchingly at the abomination.

"Sorry... I'm sorry..."

Satie closed her eyes for just a moment before snapping them open. She raised both arms before swinging them ahead of her. The creature was instantly vivisected with countless slashes of her mana blades, its pieces splattering all over the cell. Its gory remains seemed to melt into a viscous liquid that mixed with the dead woman's blood in a ghastly swirl of red and black gore.

Satie fell to her knees, her shoulders quaking, and wept bitterly into her hands. "I'm sorry... I couldn't save another one... Urgh... Aaaaah..." She clung to the dead woman, her tears flowing like water through a raised floodgate. She didn't seem to notice or care how her clothes were covered in the filth of this terrible place.



Angeline was racked with tears at the sorrowful tableau. Her own natural feelings were amplified by the sympathetic pain and sadness flowing into her from her mother as well.

Mom...

Angeline wanted to cry out to her mother and embrace her, but though she'd managed to move only moments before, she was now frozen and unable to speak. She could only stand there watching and crying helplessly.

Eventually, the sounds of her mother's sorrow grew distant, and gradually, it was like a veil was cast over Angeline's eyes. Everything faded into darkness.

CHAPTER 147

ANGELINE WANTED TO GO HOME AS SOON AS POSSIBLE

Angeline wanted to go home as soon as possible, as fast as her legs could take her. She wanted nothing more right now than to dive into her father's chest.

Angeline was jolted out of sleep by a terrible nightmare after dozing off in Maria's cottage, as expected. She was soaked with sweat, and though her entire body felt painfully hot, she felt chilled to her core at the same time.

Even after awakening so abruptly, she didn't have the strength to do much more than flop into a chair and wrap her arms around her shivering body. Maria immediately cast some sort of magic and gave her something warm and sweet to drink. That helped her calm down a bit.

Even so, Angeline's body was sluggish and beset by fatigue. She even had pain in her joints like she'd come down with a terrible cold, but without a fever. She simply did not have any strength, and it was draining just to move. At this point, she couldn't write her condition off as mere lack of sleep. Her spirit was utterly exhausted, and that was what was making her body so heavy. She would even occasionally burst into uncontrollable bouts of sobbing.

Maria refilled Angeline's cup, her customary scowl fixed on her face. "Don't make a sickly woman look after you. You really are a handful, girl."

Angeline hung her head. "Sorry..." She sipped from the cup. The concoction had a peculiar aroma, something like several different kinds of herbs mixed with sugar and honey. Unsurprisingly, Maria's brew was far better than Miriam's; this drink was sweet, calming, and went down smoothly.

Maria flopped down into her chair, sighing. "*Cough...* Another bad dream?"

"The worst one so far."

"Do you remember it?"

"No... But mom was in it. She was really sad, and I was sad too..." Her dreams were starting to become as vivid as real life, but as soon as she awoke, everything was shrouded in mist. Only the surge of emotions from the events she had witnessed remained vividly in her heart, the cause of her agony.

Angeline felt like she had been asleep for a long time, but the sun was still up, and the reddish afternoon light still beamed through the window, illuminating every particle of dust in the air. She sat there silently, head still hung, until Maria took a deep breath.

"Ange... Hurry and get back to Turnera."

"Huh...?"

"I don't know what's causing your nightmares, and Schwartz's goal is also unknown... But none of that matters if you end up falling apart first. I reckon meeting Belgrieve would be the best medicine for you."

Angeline fidgeted. "But..." She wanted to return soon—that much was true. But to her, it felt like returning in such a terrible state would be like bringing all her problems straight to her beloved family and homeland, and she was loath to do so. If possible, she wanted to leave with nothing weighing her down but the mountain of gifts in her arms and the smile on her face.

Maria scratched her head. "I always thought it was absolute nonsense, but... have you ever heard of something called the flow of events?"

Angeline cocked her head thoughtfully. *Come to think of it...* When she had met Salazar in the imperial capital, she recalled him mentioning something like that. It had been too difficult to wrap her head around at the time, and Kasim had said it was completely meaningless, so she hadn't paid it any mind until now.

"I think Mr. Salazar said something about it... But Kasim told me not to read too deeply into his nonsense."

"I'll bet he did. To be honest with you, of all the fields of magic, it's the one with the least basis. But Snake-Eyes—putting aside his personality—is a top-class magician. If he's gotten himself involved with Schwartz, then we can't completely write off his drivel."

“What is the flow of events? Does it have something to do with me?”

“I don’t know if it’s related to you. Essentially, it’s a natural flow separate from mana... You know how they say some things are just fated to happen? Cause and effect, karma, and all that? Well, those fated happenings come in all sorts, big and small. The bigger ones apparently have an influence on time and space. It doesn’t come from an external power like mana; instead, this flow arises from the will and actions of human souls. At least, that’s the theory. *Cough, hack...*”

“Um...” Angeline’s face gave away how lost she was.

Maria sighed. “Don’t look at me like that... I think it’s nonsense too. If it’s got nothing to do with mana, then we can’t observe it with any existing methods and we can’t even confirm it exists. There was a time when those folks dabbling in time-space magic made a huge fuss over it, but it didn’t get any farther than metaphysics—an abstract theory. I’ve heard that Snake-Eyes has been trying to approach it as a practical rather than philosophical matter, but...”

Angeline was completely out of her depth, and would have been even if she weren’t in such poor condition. She reached for her cup, instantly discarding any possibility of wrapping her head around the matter.

Maria picked up on Angeline’s befuddlement and shrugged. “Anyways, if they’re plotting something around that nonsensical concept, it’s going to be difficult for me to think of any way to counteract them. Dammit, they must really enjoy getting under my skin...”

“But... will I be okay returning to Turnera, then?” Angeline asked.

Maria seemed a little conflicted, but eventually, she shook her head. “I don’t know. But the Paladin is in Turnera, and there’s also Kasim and the Exalted Blade, right?”

“And dad...”

“Right, him too... I can’t imagine what Schwartz is scheming, but if these nightmares are his means of attack, then letting them destabilize you is the worst thing you can do. In that case, you’re better off somewhere where you can have peace of mind. No matter what happens, Turnera has a lineup that can deal with almost anything, and given whom we’re up against, whatever countermeasures you could prepare in Orphen wouldn’t fare much better than what you can pull off out there.”

"I guess so..." This seemed to be the best course of action to Angeline right now. All else aside, she felt that everything would work out as long as she was by her father's side. Angeline finished off her tea and let out a long sigh. The longer she talked, the more her mind was roused awake and the more the details of her dream faded away. The sickening feeling remained, but she didn't have the slightest clue what specifically had caused her to wake up in tears now.

"That's what I'll do... I'll need to talk to the guild master, then."

"Sounds like a plan. As things stand, the guild should be just fine even if you took extended leave." Maria wearily slouched back in her chair. "If you're leaving, could you close the windows on your way out?"

"Hmm..."

Angeline got up and slung her bag over her shoulder, then went around shutting any open windows she could find. She was halfway to the door when she suddenly recalled something. "Hey... Do you want to come to Turnera with me, granny?"

"I'll consider it..."

Maria seemed to be thinking long and hard about something. She buried her mouth in her muffler and curled up in her chair. *She's like a little bird on a cold day*, Angeline thought.

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Angeline managed to catch the last stagecoach of the day, and though it made for a bumpy ride, she was back in Orphen soon enough. The sun had already set by the time she entered the city; the sky was dark and a cold wind had descended. She walked down a familiar path and realized she was feeling a lot more cheerful than she had in a long time. It was like her decision to return home had put an end to many of her worries.

Even so, that didn't mean she could just take off immediately. She would need to talk to the guild and run it by her party members. She would probably have to handle anything urgent before she could leave, not to mention the additional procedures S-Rank adventurers had to go through before they could take a leave of absence.

Angeline figured she should get some dinner and made her way to the usual pub. It

was as crowded and boisterous as ever. There were no seats left at the bar, so she looked around for whatever seating she could get, only to find her party members sitting at one of the tables.

That worked out nicely... Angeline walked over to them with a skip in her step.

"Oh!" Marguerite was the first to notice her, and she called out while gesturing with her glass. "Where the hell have you been? We went to your room and you weren't there."

"I went to see Granny Maria..."

"Huh? The hag?" asked Miriam. "That's a long way to go when you're so sick, Ange."

"But you look a bit better now," Anessa noted, pouring a glass of wine for her friend. Angeline drained it in one gulp, even as weary as she was.

Angeline took a deep breath before speaking her mind. "I've decided—we're leaving for Turnera right away. As soon as we're ready, anyways."

Her friends looked at her wide-eyed, though none of them were really that shocked.

"Seriously?" Marguerite exclaimed. "Not that I've got anything against it..."

"Well, we're going anyways, so what's the harm? If Ange can't go on requests anyways, it makes no difference whether we're in Orphen or Turnera," Anessa reasoned.

"Then we'll need to hurry up and get ready. We should buy some souvenirs to take with us!" Miriam chimed in.

The three girls all knew just how much Angeline longed to go home. It was a *bit* of a surprise that they were now going to leave so soon, but it wasn't an outrageous proposition either.

Anessa put in another order with a waitress before asking Angeline, "Did Maria give you some good medicine?"

"Hmm... She did, but she also told me that my dad is my best medicine for me and I should hurry back to Turnera."

Her friends immediately burst into laughter at that.

"Aha ha ha ha! Of course he is! Bell's a cure-all for Ange," Marguerite teased.

"Is that why your complexion is better now?" Anessa observed. "Well, good for you."

"The hag says some smart things now and then," Miriam said.

When Angeline was having a hard time making up her mind, it was nice to have someone who would give her a nudge in the right direction. Angeline nodded and reached for her second cup of wine. She still felt a bit glum, knowing another nightmare would strike that night, but the cheery energy of the pub helped to put her at ease even in spite of that. She wished she could spend the entire sleepless night here and not have to leave the buoyant environment, but she knew that wasn't an option.

"So, what did you talk about with Ms. Maria?" Anessa asked.

"Um... About why I turned out to be human even though mom is an elf."

"Oh yeah, did you figure anything out?"

Angeline slowly recounted all the details she could remember of what Maria had told her. Anessa seemed convinced by that reasoning.

"I see... That makes sense."

"Anything else?" Marguerite chimed in.

Angeline mulled that over. "Other than that... Um, something about the 'flow of events' that Mr. Salazar kept talking about."

Marguerite scowled openly at the mention of Salazar. "Ick, I didn't understand a word of that stuff. I haven't got a clue what Salazar was talking about... Did you get any of it, Ange?"

"Do you think I would have?"

"Good. Glad we're on the same page," Marguerite said, happily refilling Angeline's glass.

Anessa and Miriam smiled wryly as well. If even Kasim had waved off Salazar's ramblings as nonsense, they weren't in any better position to understand it themselves.

The conversation turned to the fiend hunt that the three girls had helped out with, and then to what gifts would be best to bring to Turnera and whether they'd ultimately end up spending the winter there, and then, what would become of their journey to the east if they did. Their enthusiasm seemed to fuel the rapidly shifting conversation topics.

"Come to think of it, what ever happened to Ishmael?" Marguerite asked around a mouthful of steamed potatoes. "Didn't he say he wanted to go to Turnera too?"

"Oh, you're right," Miriam said. "What do you think he's getting up to? I haven't seen him once since that time we met him here."

Anessa put a hand to her mouth in thought. "Maybe he's working to pay for his travels?"

Angeline had a ready answer to that. "No, I asked Yuri—he hasn't taken on a single request." It was because she couldn't get in touch with him that she had gone to see Maria first. All four of them silently puzzled over what was turning out to be an even bigger mystery than they could have expected.

"And then there's Yakumo and Lucille," Anessa said, leaving aside the questions surrounding Ishmael for the time being.

"If we plan on heading east, they're going to join us, right?" said Miriam. "If they're not going to Turnera, will they be waiting for us in Orphen, then?"

Angeline folded her arms—she hadn't considered that. If Yakumo and Lucille would wait in Orphen, then they couldn't spend the entire winter in Turnera. Though perhaps there was a chance that the duo might want to join them in Turnera and spend the winter there too. The last time she had spoken with Yakumo, she hadn't seemed too keen on the idea, while Lucille's opinion was unknown. To Angeline, Turnera was her irreplaceable homeland, but to those two, it was just a cold place in the countryside. Surely Ishmael would feel the same too.

Angeline leaned back in her chair. Though she wanted to set off as soon as possible, this issue was bigger than her own whims. "What should we do...? This is

troublesome.”

“Now, now. We’ll have to talk to them first before anything else. Let’s all try finding them tomorrow,” Miriam suggested while poking at Angeline’s cheeks.

Angeline pinched Miriam back. “Merry... You’re getting kinda chubby.”

“What was that?!” Miriam cried out, pouting.

The night passed by slowly. Angeline had already slept a bit, albeit not without nightmares. Now that she had calmed down somewhat, she didn’t feel particularly sleepy. But the rest of her party had gone off to work earlier, and they were a bit tired now.

Marguerite stretched her arms above her head and yawned. “Ahh... I’m tuckered out.”

“Right? It’s been so long since we had a joint request. It was kinda exhausting.”

The job they’d completed was a fiend hunt that had taken several parties working together to complete. The number of fiends in a nearby dungeon had grown to an unmanageable level, and there was a danger of fiends flooding out into the world. Although the fiends themselves were all low rank, the sheer number of them was a force to be reckoned with.

“You should hit the sack early...” Angeline said, listlessly leaning back into her chair.
“Let’s meet tomorrow at the guild.”

“What about you, Ange?” asked Anessa.

“I’ll drink a bit more... I’m not sleepy yet.”

The other three turned to each other, and after a moment’s silent contemplation, Anessa spoke for them. “Take care of yourself. Honestly, not having you around... made today’s job a lot more exhausting for us.”

“I know, right? Maggie got in over her head and tried to charge straight at them.”

Marguerite pouted. “I already said I was sorry...”

Anessa and Miriam laughed at her.

With that, the others headed back, and Angeline was left alone at the table. The pub as a whole was a little less crowded now that the dinner rush had passed. For a while, Angeline simply nursed her wine with a distant, unfocused gaze, enjoying this moment of calm. She felt so calm, in fact, that she found it quite peculiar on reflection. She hadn't felt like this in a while. She was slowly polishing off the food that remained on her plate when she heard a familiar voice call out to her.

"Ah, there you are."

"Guild master...?" Angeline looked over to find Lionel standing there, seemingly relieved to see her. *I don't see him here too often...*

"I'm really glad I found you."

"What's wrong? Do you need something from me?"

"Well, not me." Lionel leaned aside a bit to reveal Ishmael standing behind him.

Hmm? What's this? "Mr. Ishmael! I've been looking for you... Where have you been?" Angeline asked.

Ishmael awkwardly scratched his head. "I must apologize. I've actually been holed up in Elmer's library all this time... I thought I would only stay for a bit, but quite a long time had passed before I knew it."

I see, so that's what happened... thought Angeline. It was just a place with a lot of books as far as a nonmagician was concerned. But it was a veritable treasure trove for anybody who could use magic. *Still, what's he doing with Lionel?*

"Well, Mr. Ishmael came to me, see," explained Lionel. "He asked if I knew where to find you. Something about going to Turnera... I don't really know how you two are related, so I thought it best to tag along with him. Anyways, we went to your room, but you weren't in, so I was hoping to run into you here."

Angeline was an S-Rank adventurer; the name of the Black-Haired Valkyrie had spread to many lands beyond Orphen. It wasn't inconceivable that some scoundrel might try to track her down with malicious intent—that sort of thing wasn't completely unheard of. So Lionel had come along with Ishmael out of due concern. Even so, Angeline wearily propped up her head. "Do you think I'm so weak that I couldn't handle myself?"

"No, I don't. But there's no harm in being careful. You've been pretty ill lately, after all... Well, it looks like I was worried for nothing." Lionel smiled awkwardly.

Angeline sighed and bid the two of them to sit.

"No, I still have some stuff to do," Lionel protested, scratching his cheek.

"Just sit already. I have something to talk to you about."

"To me?" Lionel seemed a little pleased to hear that—it gave him an excuse to slack off.

Angeline ordered another bottle of wine before beginning. "I'm pretty sure I told you I'd be going to Turnera again..."

"You did, yes."

"I want to leave earlier—right away, if possible," Angeline said.

Lionel chuckled. "I see, so that's what this is about. Don't tell me your desire to go home is what's causing this slump of yours?"

Angeline pouted. That wasn't *exactly* the case, but she could see why he would take it that way. "Can I?"

"I don't see why not. We're not in the same straits as we were during that incident with the demon. We have enough adventurers to go around now—and you'll check back in again before winter hits, right?"

"That's the plan, for what it's worth..."

"Ha ha! 'For what it's worth,' huh? Well, you can spend the winter there if you'd like... Once you get back from Turnera, you're going on a journey to the east, right? You'll be off for a long time anyway. Going to Turnera a little earlier isn't going to do any harm."

Apparently, there were now a few other S-Rank adventurers apart from Angeline at the guild, and there was no shortage of manpower. Of course, considering their achievements, Angeline's party was still ranked at the top in terms of capability and reputation, but that didn't mean there were jobs that only they could complete. Perhaps it would be a different matter if the archduke were to request her specifically

again, but that wasn't likely. There was still paperwork to handle, but it seemed like the guild would be fine without her for the time being.

Angeline drank from her wineglass before turning to Ishmael. "That's the gist of it. What do you want to do, Mr. Ishmael?"

"Huh? About what?" Ishmael, apparently lost in thought, was snapped out of his ruminations by Angeline.

"You wanted to go to Turnera, right? Isn't that why you were looking for me?"

"Oh yes, that's right... Um, I did intend to go... But from what I just heard, am I right in assuming you're going to be leaving within the next few days?"

"Yeah... Hopefully." *I guess that's too sudden...* Angeline thought, scratching her cheek. Her party members were one thing, but Ishmael, Yakumo, and Lucille might not be able to make it if she pushed their itinerary forward. But there was no getting around her need to depart as soon as logistically possible. Now that her mind was made up on that score, she realized just how badly she was aching to leave. During the incident with the demon, she had been prevented from going home several times and had been driven up a wall by the delays. There was no such underlying circumstance this time, but she still wanted to hurry home regardless.

Ishmael thought it over for a while before looking up from his musings. "All right, I'll join you... Though I may not be able to spend the winter. I was planning on going anyways, after all," he said, laughing.

Angeline put a relieved hand over her heart. "Thank you... If you leave Turnera right after the autumn festival, you'll make it back to Orphen before the winter."

"I see. If there's a festival, I should be able to hitch a ride with one of the peddlers."

If Angeline decided she would stay in Turnera, he still had the means to return on his own. Angeline realized that Yakumo and Lucille had that option too. Yakumo had said she was fine with going to Turnera but that she didn't want to spend the long winter there. But if they parted ways there, then it would dim their prospects of heading east together—in which case, Angeline knew she really would have to return to Orphen after all. She nodded to herself. Thinking it through helped calm her nerves.

In any case, Angeline would need to find the other two and talk to them about it before

she could do anything else. She'd already met Ishmael, so tomorrow, she'd search for Yakumo and Lucille. If they said it was too sudden to be feasible for them, then that was that.

Lionel, who was drinking his wine slowly, seemed to have more to say. "Ms. Ange... You've been having a succession of bad dreams, right?"

"Yeah... But I forget what they're about as soon as I wake up. That just makes me feel even worse..." Angeline turned to Ishmael. "Mr. Ishmael, do you know any spells to deal with that? I asked Granny Maria, but her medicine wasn't very effective..."

"Hmm... If even Maria the Ashen couldn't do anything, I doubt I could either."

"Huh? Not even Ms. Maria could solve it?" Lionel wondered.

"I don't really get it, but granny said I should hurry back to Turnera and that my dad is the best medicine for me."

Lionel burst out laughing, and Ishmael chuckled too.

"Sure enough, Mr. Belgrieve could be just what you need. That's Ms. Maria for you. She knows what she's doing."

"I guess your love for your dad is famous now."

"Of course it is. You know, some time ago she was held up in Orphen unable to return home for all sorts of reasons, and I thought she was going to murder me."

"I mean... I just wanted to go home..." Angeline puffed out her cheeks, eliciting further laughter from the two men.

Their conversation went on a while longer before Lionel had to go. "They'll get mad if I'm gone for too long."

Does he still have to work this late at night? Angeline wondered. But the guild had been doing good business lately, and perhaps that meant there was much to do.

Gradually, the pub emptied. She was left alone with Ishmael, who still sat drinking with her. Ishmael's complexion didn't seem to change no matter how much he drank, but from the way his hands moved, Angeline could tell that the drink was still getting

to him.

"It's a very busy job they have, those guild masters," Ishmael observed idly.

"That it is... Hey, there's something we never got to talk about the last time we met. You didn't finish talking about Solomon."

"Oh, now that you mention it. I was pretty sloshed at the time." Ishmael raised a hand and ordered some water before turning back to Angeline. "So what do you want to know about Solomon?"

"Well..."

Angeline summarized what she'd heard from Elmer and what Maria had told her. She left out the fact that she herself was a demon, but she did mention that Schwartz was conducting experiments to turn demons into humans.

Ishmael's eyes seemed to be spinning as he took it all in. Aside from offering an occasional interjection to tell her he was still paying attention, he listened in near silence.

"So... I want to do some digging on my end," Angeline concluded.

"I see, so that's what this is about. To think, such experiments..." Ishmael folded his arms and thought for a bit. "I am also aware that Solomon and Vienna fought alongside one another. Putting aside whether it was true or not, the fact was often mentioned in old documents. However, after Solomon disappeared, the demons went out of control and were slain by Vienna's champion. There aren't many impartial records of that period of history. I'm sure the Church of Vienna had become rather powerful by then."

"Huh... Then up to the end, Vienna and Solomon were never hostile to one another?"

"No, they never fought each other, as far as I can tell. Vienna kept quiet when Solomon conquered the continent. It was only after Solomon was gone and his demons were wreaking havoc all across the lands that Vienna granted her power to a hero. Well, that's what one of the histories said; whether it's credible or not, I couldn't say."

Angeline crossed her arms. *Things are getting complicated. Does that mean that Vienna endorsed Solomon's methods? Or was Solomon simply so strong that Vienna couldn't go against him?* Whichever it was, Angeline was certain this was a story that the church

would want to suppress. She was beginning to understand why so many records from that time had been lost.

Angeline flopped down over the table and sighed. "This is difficult stuff. I'm not cut out for this sort of work..."

Ishmael was smiling faintly as he drank some water. "That's just how history is. Even if there are records, there's no guarantee that they contain the truth. As long as there is a writer, we will only be able to grasp events from that individual's perspective. That's why you need to go through numerous different accounts and put together the fragmented perspectives to get an outline of the whole. Even then, it will still be quite a distortion of the actual events."

"I guess... But there's only one truth, isn't there?"

"Yes, but we perceive that truth through our eyes, our minds, and our hearts. Even if you were to describe what somebody looked like in exacting detail from the front, that doesn't mean you could necessarily describe them the same way from behind. There may be only one truth, but we can only perceive things from a single viewpoint."

"If only we could talk to Solomon and Vienna directly..."

"Ha ha ha! If only. That would be an incredible feat."

Angeline had had a bit too much to drink, and her tongue was feeling leaden. She drank some water and took a deep breath. Meanwhile, Ishmael was rummaging around in his bag, perhaps looking for his wallet. Suddenly, Angeline noticed the apple tree branch from before peeking out from amidst his other things. Angeline's heart skipped a beat. She remembered the jolt that had raced through her body when she had touched it the last time they met.

Ishmael fished out his wallet, then noticed Angeline's stillness. "Is something wrong?" he asked curiously.

"That branch... What is it?"

"Branch? Oh, are you talking about this?" Ishmael took it out and placed it on the table. He took another sip of water before going on: "One of my fellow researchers pushed it onto me. Apparently, it's a replica of a staff used by a magician from ancient days."

Angeline stared at it long and hard, taking great care not to touch it. It still looked as freshly plucked as before, the leaves not any more withered despite having been crammed into a bag. They looked firm and fresh, and she could make out each individual vein on their surface.

"This is a staff?" Angeline asked, looking at it doubtfully. It was quite different from Miriam's staff or the staff of any other magician she knew. Those other staves were all longer, with some craftsmanship put into them. She had never seen someone use what looked like a stick plucked straight from a tree.

Ishmael gulped down another mouthful of water and nodded. "The staves of modern magicians are all beautifully crafted and take on the same general form as modern walking canes. However, in ancient times—before the era of Solomon, even—the two items were distinct. On top of walking canes, they additionally carried staves to focus their magic. Many would simply snap a twig off of a tree—the young, fresh branches of old trees were preferable."

"Are apple trees particularly powerful...?"

"I don't know if it has anything to do with it being an apple tree or not, but the prevailing theory is that power resides in trees that have lived very long lives. That was an era without most of the formal spell sequences we have today. There was apparently a greater focus placed on the strength of the tools themselves."

"Hmm..." Angeline cautiously reached out and brushed her fingertips against the branch. She didn't feel any numbness. Next, she tried grabbing it, but she wasn't struck by the jolt she had been so wary of. It was like any other new branch and felt smooth to the touch.

"I saw it last time too. I'm surprised it hasn't withered yet."

"Yes. My friend carved a spell sequence into it and poured in quite a bit of mana. That's why the leaves won't fall off and will stay vibrant for the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, since most of this staff's power has gone towards maintaining that spell, its capabilities as an aid to spellcasting are... Well, honestly, it's not very useful," Ishmael said with a sardonic smile.

Angeline held it up and examined it closely. There was something peculiar about it, and she found herself strangely drawn to this mysterious stick. As she stared at it, it

started to look as though the tips of its leaves were swaying in a nonexistent breeze. At the same time, a chiming sound seemed to ring out from somewhere within her. Her body shuddered, yet she didn't feel anything particularly out of place. After returning the staff to Ishmael, she finished off her wine.

When one of the other patrons left the pub, the open door admitted the cool night air in. It was chilly but comfortable on her wine-warmed body. One by one, more guests left, and the barkeep seemed to be preparing to close up shop. Angeline yawned and rubbed her eyes.

"We should get going..."

"Yes, let's."

"But... I'm scared to go to sleep."

"You said something about nightmares, right?"

"Yeah." The very thought put a damper on her mood. But she couldn't loiter in the pub indefinitely.

Ishmael took a moment to consider that. "I have strange dreams from time to time. And sometimes, there are peculiar gaps in my memory. Well, I do tend to lose myself in my work when I get too invested, so I think it's just fatigue, frankly."

"Do you think that's what's happening to me?"

"I couldn't say. The point is, nightmares aren't anything special. You're not alone, so you don't have to be too anxious about it."

"Yeah..."

With that, they both got up to leave together—up to a certain point, they would be going in the same direction. Angeline's braid swayed in the cool night breeze as they walked along the cobbled path.

"Um, I'll tell you once we decide when we're leaving. Tell me where your inn is."

"Oh, right. I'm staying at the Key and Horse inn. It's on a street with many businesses that deal with enchanted items and medicines."

“Got it.”

Angeline racked her brains until she hit on it. *Oh, that place.* She had been in that area quite often back when she was just starting out as an adventurer. Though she hadn’t actually entered the inn, the wooden key and horse hanging over the door had left an impression on her.

“Take care...”

She parted with Ishmael and followed the path to her room. She was feeling a nice, comfortable buzz from the wine, and strangely, she didn’t feel depressed anymore.

She stopped for a moment to let out a deep breath and gazed up at the sky. It was slightly cloudy out, but that didn’t obscure the twinkling stars as far as the eye could see.

“I’ll be home soon... Wait for me, dad.”

CHAPTER 148

IN THE PLAINS OUTSIDE THE VILLAGE

In the plains outside the village, the autumn nights were alive with echoing bug song. Whenever Belgrieve would walk with a lantern, flying bugs of all sizes would dive for the light and end up colliding with his body and face. The grass was coated in evening dew that dampened his clothing with every step, and his bare ankles would end up chilled. But his twelve-year-old daughter paid no heed to any of this as she raced around the field.

"Ange, it's dangerous to run," Belgrieve called out while trying to shoo away the bugs buzzing his face.

"Hee hee..." Angeline giggled, turning to her father. She ran back to him and latched on. "The stars are so pretty!"

"Yeah, they are." Belgrieve patted his daughter on the head before extinguishing the lantern, instantly cloaking them in darkness. But the black silhouettes of the mountains were still visible under the clear starry sky, and after their eyes adjusted, they could vaguely see the grass around them.

Angeline squeezed her father's hand tighter, blinking in astonishment at the transformed nightscape. "It's even prettier than before..."

"Isn't it? When other lights are gone, those little stars out there shine all the brighter."

Without turning away from the night sky, Angeline held out both her hands to Belgrieve. "Hold me."

"Hmm? Ha ha! Up you go." Belgrieve stooped over slightly and hoisted Angeline up.

They could faintly hear the sounds of the feast being held in the village behind them. The peddlers had started to arrive a few days ago, and soon it would be time for the autumn festival. The festive atmosphere in Turnera would increase with every caravan that arrived.

Soon, his daughter would set off for the city of Orphen. Once the festivities ended, she would leave along with the last caravan—he had already arranged for it.

Belgrieve watched as Angeline nuzzled into his chest and smiled. “You’re going to be leaving soon, Ange.”

“Yeah...” Angeline adjusted her position without moving her face.

Belgrieve gently patted her head as he slowly made his way through the wet grass.

“You’ll see all sorts of things and meet all sorts of people.”

“Yeah...”

“I’m sure it’ll be fun. You’ll see sights you could never even dream of in Turnera.”

“Yeah.” Angeline gently looked up at Belgrieve. “But today, I heard something from the peddler...”

“Hmm?”

“He said there are loads of bad people in the city. They’re cunning, and sometimes they fool you into being a bad person too. He said I need to be careful!”

Belgrieve smiled wryly as he tapped her on the head. “That’s right. There are all sorts of people in the world. Good people and bad people...”

“What do I do if they trick me? What if I become a bad girl...?” Angeline’s face became anguished at the prospect.

Belgrieve laughed softly and rubbed her back. “It’s all right. That’s not going to happen. You’re strong-willed. Didn’t you promise daddy that you would become a strong and kind adventurer?”

“I did.”

“And...”

“And...?” Angeline looked at him curiously.

Belgrieve's smile never wavered as he shifted her into a slightly stronger embrace.

"No matter what sort of person you become, even if the entire world is against you, daddy will always be on your side. No matter what happens."

Angeline seemed to consider that for a moment. "Okay!" Angeline hugged him back. The stars shone brilliantly above them.

○

Angeline had been in high spirits ever since deciding to go home. The nightmares that had plagued her finally ceased their assault, and though she would still lie in bed each night fearful of what was to come, she would wake up the next morning without having suffered any bad dreams. After a few days of this, it was like all those restless nights had been nothing but a bad dream in their own right.

That being so, her poor health could no longer be used as a reason for their early return. But the plan had been settled, and now there was no other course in Angeline's head. If she was feeling better now, so much the better. Taking advantage of her newfound health, she happily accompanied her party members as they searched for good gifts in the capital.

Now that I'm back on my feet, I won't have to spend the winter in Turnera anymore, she thought. That meant Yakumo and Lucille could return after the autumn festival too. Perhaps that had helped in persuading them, as they'd both agreed to accompany her to Turnera—though Yakumo hadn't looked entirely satisfied. She'd passed the message on to Ishmael too. It was shaping up to be quite a merry homecoming, all told. Angeline was exhilarated and couldn't ask for much more. Perhaps it would be even merrier if Maria came too, but when she'd enthusiastically made her appeal, Maria had answered by giving her the boot.

In any case, Angeline whiled away the time skipping about on various errands until there was only a day left before their departure. Everything was in order, and her spirits were high. Angeline was now lounging around Anessa, Miriam, and Marguerite's house instead of sleeping in her own lodgings. She'd even roped Yakumo and Lucille into this arrangement, insisting that getting together the next day would be too much of a hassle.

Yakumo was leaning against the wall, gesturing with an empty wine bottle as she

spoke. "Hmm, we're leaving tomorrow. Is it really okay to drink this much?"

"Don't say that after you've already drunk it all," Marguerite retorted, unfazed as ever by her own drinking. Anessa still seemed perfectly fine, but Miriam's eyes were already closed and she was rocking back and forth. Lucille had dozed off hugging her guitar.

Angeline uncorked a fresh bottle, an unaffected grin on her face. "It's okay... We're not leaving *that* early in the morning."

Yakumo smiled sardonically. "Is that really what's at issue here...? Well, whatever," she said, sticking the stem of her pipe in her mouth.

Anessa held out her glass to be filled by Angeline and looked over her friend curiously. "Now you're *too* energetic... Did something happen?"

"I don't know. But I'm fine. Nothing wrong with me," Angeline replied as she overfilled her own cup slightly, with some wine trickling down the brim.

"'Energetic' would be one thing, but *this* is strange..." Marguerite gave Angeline a funny look. "Are you drunk?"

"Of course she's drunk; look at how much she's had," Yakumo retorted.

"Huh, I guess. Well, it's not the first time Ange has acted strangely"

Angeline gulped down every last drop from her cup and slammed it down on the table loudly. "I'm not strange... That's just delight oozing from every pore on my body."

"That's what would be called strange, generally speaking," said Anessa.

"It's a bit too extreme," Marguerite added.

Yakumo suggested, "Ange, why don't you go to sleep already?"

"Gah!" Angeline pouted, frustrated at the haranguing from the other three women. She didn't mean to act differently, but perhaps that was what it looked like to them. For all of them to label her that way made her feel a little bit obstinate. She donned her coat sulkily.

"What? Where are you going?"

"For a walk!" And so, she swiftly took off. Behind her, the other three turned to each other and shrugged.

Angeline was enveloped in chilly night air the second she stepped outside. She took a deep, refreshing breath. *I really am a bit tipsy after all.*

Angeline had no fixed destination in mind; she just wanted to go for a walk. All of her luggage had already been brought over, so there wasn't any need to return to her place now. They'd done all their shopping, so loitering around the stores would be just as pointless. Angeline simply patrolled the familiar streets, her boots tapping an aimless rhythm against the stone pavement.

The main thoroughfares were still full of pedestrians going every which way, but all that hustle and bustle faded away the moment she entered an alleyway. Now that she was alone with nothing but the breeze for company, the lingering cheer she had felt while drinking with everyone began to diminish, though this quiet, calm atmosphere was rather nice too. *Huh... Maybe I really was acting off.*

The narrow slice of skyline she could see through the tall buildings around her was adorned with a waning half-moon. The light it cast let her see the ground ahead without a streetlight. Angeline hummed a tune as she walked with springy steps.

It wasn't long before she'd depart from this city, and after she would return from Turnera, she would then go on a journey that would take her away from here for even longer. Thinking about it like that made quiet moments like these quite valuable to her.

Before Angeline even thought about what she was doing, she found herself hopping from one stone to another. Back when she'd first arrived in Orphen when she was twelve, she would play around like this, taking care not to step on any cracks. It had been winter at the time. Back home, it was normal for everyone to be shut away in their homes during the cold months, but in Orphen, even when the streets were covered in snow, someone would clear it away, and nobody was stopped from going about their business. Both places lay in the great expanse of the north, yet she was surprised to see just how different things were between them.

Her aimless strolling eventually took her to roads that gradually inclined upward, and

she came out into an open area—the top of a small hillock with a nice view of the rest of the city and nothing to shield against the wind. It was nearly midnight now, and there was no one else around, not even any soldiers on patrol or vagrant tents. It was so quiet her breathing sounded loud to her. The rooftop of every house around reflected the pale moonlight, and off in the distance beyond them, she could see the vast plains, and the hazy shapes of distant mountains farther still. Billowing clouds hung over these far-off peaks as though threatening to crush them.

With a clearer head, Angeline gazed out over these distant sights. She turned to the north, in the direction of her hometown. Her family was getting on with their everyday lives in Turnera even as she stood here now. It was a curious thing to think about.

Angeline's nose felt itchy, and a large yawn escaped her unbidden. She felt like she would begin to shiver if she didn't get moving again, so she turned around and continued her stroll until she made it back to the main road, where there were still some people about. It wasn't as populated as at midday, naturally, but Orphen was large enough that there would always be some people active during the night. The endless parade of passersby cast a long shadow over the road.

Angeline idly observed a drunkard ahead of her who was singing off-key tunes as he stumbled along. She'd imbibed quite a bit herself, but oddly enough, her mind felt crystal clear now. Perhaps the chill of the night breeze on her face had sobered her up.

Whenever Angeline was in a mood like this, it seemed such a waste to her to go to bed. Angeline was still young, and reckless enough to enjoy a little foolishness, with a body strong enough to handle it. She wanted to drink a little bit more, in other words. But she hadn't forgotten that she would have to leave tomorrow. There would be nothing to do while she sat aboard the carriage, and no one would care if she slept, sprawled out over the seats. But she doubted she would have a very comfortable rest on the hard benches of a typical stagecoach. It wasn't that long ago that she had willfully run off into the night, but Anessa was right—it was best to go back and get some rest.

A simple camp stove had been placed under the eaves of a shop along the road. A red flame was lit within it, and the steam of the kettle slung over it seemed almost exaggerated as it spewed out into the cold night air. *What sort of shop is it?* she wondered. The first thing she saw as she looked at the open storefront was a bookshelf. *A bookstore, perhaps.*

A table and chairs were set up next to the stove, seemingly an invitation for customers

to sit down and read. The middle-aged shopkeeper sat in one of those chairs with his head buried in an enormous tome.

What a strange store, Angeline thought as she was passing by. No sooner than that thought entered her mind, a customer emerged from the store.

“Mr. Ishmael?”

“Oh? What a coincidence.”

It was indeed Ishmael, carrying an old-looking book under one arm.

The shopkeeper looked up from his own reading. “So you’ve made your choice?”

“Yes, I’ll go with this one.” Evidently, he had found something to buy. Ishmael paid for his purchase and tucked the book into his bag.

“Out shopping, huh?”

“Yes, I stumbled upon a book that was far more interesting than I thought it would be... It seems I won’t be bored along the road,” he explained as he slung his bag over his shoulder. “But Ms. Angeline, we’re leaving tomorrow. Did you have some business here at this hour?”

“No... I was drinking with the others, and I went for a stroll to sober up. I’m going back now. Do you want to come too, Ishmael? Yakumo and Lucille are with us.”

“I’ll have to decline. I’m a little hesitant to be alone in a room with so many women.”

Angeline nodded. *I guess he has a point.* “It really is nothing but women there, come to think of it. For some reason, dad never looked out of place when he was with us,” Angeline murmured. But the same couldn’t be said for most other men.

Ishmael chuckled. “Yes, that may be so. That man does have a motherly propensity, after all.”

“Uh-huh, that’s my dad for you,” Angeline said with as much pride as someone receiving a compliment herself.

They began walking down the road together. Angeline noticed her breath was coming

out as puffs of white vapor again. “It’s almost winter already...”

“The plan is to return as soon as the autumn festival is over, right?”

“Yes. Then I’ll be traveling out east... What about you?”

“I plan to return to the capital eventually... But the renowned Elmer library is here, so for the time being, perhaps I shall work as an adventurer around Orphen a little longer.”

It seemed that the library really was a priceless treasure to all magicians. Because Angeline happened to know the nature of its owner, she never wanted to go back there again. Even so, she was starting to get invested in their conversation, and it felt like a waste to part so quickly. Angeline pointed to a pub that still had its lights on and seemed to be boisterous.

“How about a drink?”

“Oh? What about tomorrow?”

“We’re leaving at noon, so a little won’t hurt... Or are you already sleepy?”

“No, I don’t mind keeping you company.”

So they entered the pub. Angeline had never been here before, but it had the familiar aroma of any other pub she had been to and the same kind of energy of any such business that kept open so late at night.

Angeline and Ishmael snatched up the nearest seating they could find and ordered some light snacks and drinks.

“It must take quite a while to get to the capital from here.”

“Indeed. It can take as long as a month and a half, accounting for the stops along the way. If you avoided any detours and traveled as fast as possible, I’d say it would still take about a month.”

“As I thought...” Angeline murmured. Back when there had been a fiend outbreak around Orphen, Lionel had sent for Yuri, Edgar, and Gilmenja in the capital, but they’d never made it in time to help, and the situation had been resolved without them. It

wasn't that they had been dawdling along the way—it was really just that long of a journey.

Back when Angeline had answered the summons of Archduke Estogal, the journey to the city of Estogal had taken half a month. As an adventurer, she was accustomed to travel, but long trips still left her considerably fatigued. Given that, it was rather amazing to her in hindsight how her previous journey had taken her as far as the Earth Navel in Tyldes and then to the imperial capital after that.

Angeline leaned against the bar top with her head propped up as she nursed the wine that was brought out. "Do you travel often, Mr. Ishmael?"

"Ever since I started gathering my own materials for my research, I've been to quite a few places. You know how it is—once I head out, I start thinking, 'Well, I'm out anyways, so I might as well go *there* too.' As a result, I'm often away from home for very long stretches of time... I only ever plan for small journeys at the outset, but I can't help myself."

Angeline giggled. "You're surprisingly spontaneous. I took you for the type to plan things meticulously."

Ishmael scratched his head embarrassedly. "Ha ha ha... Well..." He took a sip of his beer for want of an answer to her pointed observation.

"I've been practically everywhere around Orphen..." Angeline said around a mouthful of salted beans. "But the last time we met was the first time I'd ever left the dukedom of Estogal."

"I'm not much of a world traveler myself. Lucrecia is as far as I would usually go... And even then, only to outlying towns near the border."

Lucrecia was Charlotte's homeland, situated just south of the Rhodesian Empire. She recalled hearing that it was a temperate land blessed by bountiful seas. The roads connecting from the empire's borderlands into Lucrecia were well maintained, making for a relatively easy journey. "It must be pretty warm in the south."

"Yes, and it's quite cold in the north. This will be my first time going anywhere farther north than Estogal."

"It's even colder in Turnera..."

"That almost sounds like a threat," Ishmael joked awkwardly.

Angeline grinned gamely. Before she knew it, she had drained her wineglass. Forgetting that she had only intended to have a single drink, she soon ordered another.

"You have all sorts of encounters when you're on a journey. Some of them are good, but..."

"There are bad ones too?"

"Yes. One time, I made a rather painful mistake that resulted in what you might call a betrayal. There was someone I was working with to earn my way... He was a very warm and genial fellow, and I trusted him implicitly." Ishmael shook his head.

"So what happened...?" Angeline asked, drinking from her new glass.

"We were working together. He seemed to be very knowledgeable, and he had a way with words. I trusted him, and I trusted him to manage the work we took. We were supposed to split our earnings fifty-fifty, but he was shrewdly taking a larger portion. Just a little at first, and then a little more over time, and still more... This went on for a while, and by the time I realized that something was amiss, he had vanished altogether along with my wallet. I had essentially worked for free and was left destitute. It was quite terrible."

"Blech, that's a nasty piece of work..."

"Do you remember how I was a little wary of your party when we first met in Istafar? Ever since that time, I've been a little cautious whenever I work with others... Well, I knew there was no way an S-Rank adventurer was going to get up to that kind of petty scam, so I dropped it quite quickly with you."

"Hmm..." Angeline mumbled through pursed lips, still slouching with her head propped up against the table. *There really are some bad people in the world...* Back when her whole world had consisted of good people, she would get to thinking that the world at large wasn't so bad. But inevitably, there would be a certain proportion of people who came into her life with malice in their hearts. Perhaps it was just her good fortune that she had never fallen victim to such a person.

"I've never met anyone like that... I've mostly come across good people in my life," Angeline said, idly rolling a salted bean between her fingers.

"Yes, in the short time I traveled with you, I experienced that firsthand. Mr. Belgrieve in particular had a shockingly good nature... Honestly, I couldn't believe he didn't have any ulterior motives at first. In fact, I feel more at ease around people like Mr. Kasim and Mr. Percival—the kind of folks whose eyes are always shadowed by a touch of wariness."

Angeline beamed at the sudden compliment for her father. "That's why everyone loves dad..."

"I can imagine." Ishmael finished off his beer. He seemed a bit reluctant, but he eventually ordered another. "I'm surprised he hasn't been used by any bad people when he's like that. He does have a good eye for character, though, so perhaps he simply avoids people who have ill intent..."

"Dad had his share of trouble when he was younger... I think he's discerning about who he associates with..."

"Indeed... Betrayal can be very painful. The more you think you know someone, the more painful it can be. Worse yet when it's someone you love and trust deeply... A party member, for instance, or perhaps even family."

Could dad ever betray me? Angeline cocked her head as she tried to picture that, but the idea was truly unthinkable to her. "I can't even imagine it."

"Yes, you're much better off not having to experience that. It's no laughing matter... Have you ever heard of a bird called a cuckoo?"

"Yes, I know about them... What of it?"

Ishmael took a rather large gulp from his glass of beer. "A cuckoo's egg is laid in the nest of another bird. The cuckoo chick hatches faster than the other eggs in the nest, and it pushes all the other eggs out of the tree—the eggs of the birds that *belonged* there."

"Huh... That's morbid..."

"And it settles into the life that the other chicks *should* have had. The parent birds will diligently raise the cuckoo and watch it grow none the wiser. I don't know if birds are capable of conscious thought... But consider the parent's perspective: they've raised an impostor. They think of it as their own, unsparingly showering it with care and love.

But it is not their child—the cuckoo is the one who *killed* their children.”

“Yeah...”

“The child they held so dear turned out to be an impostor who took on the role of their real children. Well, I’m sure that would never happen with humans, but what do you think? What would happen if it did?”

“I don’t know... I’ve never thought about it...”

So she said—but Angeline could hear her heart beginning to beat rapidly even as she drank her wine. *That would certainly be terrifying if it happened.* For some reason, she saw herself in the image of the cuckoo, and the notion that it wasn’t the bird’s real child felt like a dagger through her heart.

But her father had no natural children of his own, and Satie had actually given birth to her. She *was* different from a cuckoo—there was merely a similarity in that she had been raised by different parents. Angeline shook her head. “I’m thinking too hard about this...”

“Really? Do you honestly think that?”

“Huh?”

“You were having those nightmares, weren’t you?”

“I did... But I can’t remember them now. I’ve been feeling quite good lately, even.”

“Ms. Angeline, it really is foolish to delude yourself like that.”

“What...?”

“And it’s absurd. Why don’t you come to terms with it already?” His voice was so gentle, but it had a peculiar sharpness to it.

Angeline was nonplussed. “What’s wrong? Did I say something to offend you somehow...?”

“You can’t play dumb forever. You know there’s no place for you to go back to. Aha ha ha! Isn’t that right? Isn’t it? Isn’t *that* why you forgot?” Ishmael’s face, which had been

so serene only moments ago, seemed to be gradually warping into something unrecognizable. Angeline couldn't process what was happening and didn't know how to react. But even as he was laughing to himself, Ishmael suddenly glanced at Angeline's disquieted expression and shook his head. "Sorry. I think I'm a little drunk."

"No, don't worry about it..."

He pushed up his glasses, pressing his fingers to the corners of his eyes as he wearily shook his head. "Lately, I've been having lapses in memory. What's more, my thoughts and emotions are being pulled in all sorts of directions. It comes on all of a sudden, like someone else is pulling the levers in my mind... It used to happen once in a while, but it's gotten more frequent lately. There are times I can't even remember the recent past... Maybe this unfamiliar land is wearing me out."

"Um, are you all right to go to Turnera...?"

"That should be fine. I assume this is happening because I've stayed in the library too long. A trip to the countryside could be just what I need—if it's not a bother, that is."

Angeline smiled. "It's no trouble at all. The Turnera air will do wonders for your health... Should we take our leave, then?"

"Yes, it is getting late."

With that, the two of them left the pub. As was to be expected, the night air was still chilly and her breaths came out as vaporous puffs. The stars were twinkling in the sky, heedless of the wispy clouds that were a patchwork shroud over the starry void. The clearer the sky, the colder it would be; the wind was dying down, but at times, she would feel it over her face or neck and it would make her shudder.

"I'll be going this way."

"Have a good night..." Angeline staggered back alone.

When she finally returned to her friends' home, she walked in on Marguerite still tipping back her glass with gusto. Miriam and Lucille were down for the night, fast asleep on the sofa in the corner of the room. Yakumo was smoking with an irritable expression, while Anessa nursed her wine and blinked owlishly.

"Hiya," Marguerite said, lifting her cup. "Finally back. I thought you went and passed

out somewhere."

"That was a long walk," Yakumo said through a puff of smoke.

Angeline pulled up one of the chairs and sat down. "I ran into Mr. Ishmael by chance... We talked for a bit."

"Hmm. He's going with us too, right? You could have brought him over."

"He said it would be hard to do that when it's nothing but women..."

"Of course he would. Well, we'll just have to meet up tomorrow." Yakumo then let out a great yawn. "I'll be going to bed. The drink has worn me down; I'm not going to hold out for much longer against a great serpent."

"What do you mean by that?" Marguerite curiously asked.

"That's what we call people like you in my homeland. Anessa, where can I sleep?" Yakumo asked as she emptied the ashes from her pipe.

Anessa, on the verge of passing out herself, snapped to and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. "Oh, that sofa... or Merry's bed, since it's empty. That room over there..."

Marguerite helped herself to another drink, cackling all the while. "So I'm a great serpent... That's a new one!"

"It means a heavy drinker. Sasha might be one too," Anessa tiredly explained. She poured herself some mint water instead of wine this time.

"Between Sasha and Maggie, who's stronger?" Angeline mused.

"Last time we stopped by Bordeaux, they were still going strong after the rest of us had nodded off," Anessa said.

The two of them stared at Marguerite, who was still drinking the distilled spirits she favored. The elf quirked her head at them. "Hmm?" she mumbled.

Marguerite seemed fine, but perhaps her skin was a little rosier than usual, and her mood was cheerier. It was almost cute to see her in this state, but even so, she didn't seem to be anywhere close to drinking herself under the table. When she had emptied

another cup, Marguerite stretched out her arms. “Phew. Sasha, huh... I wanna see her again. Drinking with her was pretty fun.”

When they had left Turnera to return to Orphen, their route had taken them past the Bordeaux estate. Sasha and Marguerite had seemed to hit it off immediately. Sasha had been moved to tears at the chance meeting with the grandchild of Graham and had been thrilled to learn that the elven maiden possessed skill with a blade that rivaled Angeline’s. As was her wont, she’d immediately challenged Marguerite to a sparring match.

Sasha’s skills had grown considerably, and Marguerite had started out by cautiously testing the waters. At first, the fighters had seemed evenly matched, but it’d ended with Marguerite’s victory. A drinking party had commenced soon after, and the two new friends had continued to go at it even after everyone else had fallen asleep, ultimately drinking late into the night.

Anessa poured herself another glass of mint water. “We’ll see her on the way to Turnera, probably.”

“Heh heh heh... I’ll bring her some of this stuff as a gift.” Marguerite kicked her legs under the table playfully. She seemed so pure and innocent that Angeline couldn’t help herself from laughing. It hadn’t been so long ago that she had suffered the torments of routine nightmares, but now here she was, filled with so much joy.

Still, why did Ishmael say something like that? Angeline wondered. At the time, his face had been horrifying. It must have been the drink. It happens—something is said that gets on your nerves, and then anyone can get emotional while drunk. I should just chalk it up to the beer talking—it didn’t matter, anyways.

Angeline yawned. “It’s about time to sleep...”

“Finally. But before that, it’s cleanup time. We’ll be gone for a while starting tomorrow.”

Anessa spoke truly, and the only three left standing did a bit of cleanup work before they all went to sleep.

Angeline didn’t bother to find a bed. She sat in her chair and closed her eyes there, her mind enjoying the numbing feeling that accompanied drowsiness. Going home was always an occasion of great joy to her, and leaving on a new journey was its own kind of joy too.

Gradually, her conscious thoughts became jumbled and abruptly descended into a series of images and words crossing her mind, never lingering for more than a second before being replaced by something else. This constant stream of nonsense would soon lull her into dreamland.

Suddenly, she had a glimpse into a room unfamiliar to her, seemingly an inn judging by the small bed, desk, and chair. Someone with unkempt hair and glasses was seated at the desk. It seemed to be Ishmael. There was a book spread out in front of him. Perhaps he was in the middle of reading, but his eyes weren't focused on the book. In fact, his eyes were completely glazed over, and he was seated limply like no strength animated his body. His mouth was agape; he didn't appear to be moving at all. It was almost like his soul had been drawn out, and what was left behind was an empty, lifeless husk. The morbid tableau was beyond Angeline's ability to make sense of—and then the scene faded. The room was gone, replaced by something else, and there was no time to contemplate what she had just seen.

As a child, Angeline had once witnessed a little chick fall from its nest. The image briefly crossed her mind before she descended into deep sleep.

CHAPTER 149

THE STAGECOACH PRESSED ONWARD

The stagecoach pressed onward, its wheels rumbling over the terrain. The large, four-horse carriage was crammed full of passengers; Angeline's party had managed to find a spot at the back.

The weather was fine, and there was a pleasant breeze, so the canopy had been partially opened up to allow the passengers to enjoy the sunlight.

Miriam stretched her arms overhead, groaning. "Ahh... Maybe I drank a bit too much last night. I'm still feeling a little off."

"From that measly bit of wine? You're a bit of a lightweight, ain'tcha?"

"From your standards, everyone's a lightweight, Maggie. I'm a delicate little girl!"

"You? Delicate?"

"Aw, don't say it like that!"

"Putting aside whether Merry is 'delicate' or not, I'm still a little sleepy too," Anessa said, rubbing her eyes.

Perhaps they'd overdone it with their drinking party the night before, as all of them but one had woken up with a hangover. Marguerite, who had undoubtedly drunk more than anyone else, was the only one of them with any pep today. Even as the rest of her party remained listless and despondent, she was having a good time of it.

Angeline's head felt a big foggy. After drinking her fill with her friends, she had also had a few more cups of wine with Ishmael. She had become a stronger drinker by now compared to how she had once been, but she was still a long shot from truly strong drinkers like Sasha and Marguerite. The throbbing headache she had woken up with had only just subsided. The wagon was riding against the wind, which carried the scent of soil and grass somewhere along the road ahead. The refreshing scents seemed to ease her lingering stupor and make her feel better even if everything that had

happened the night before was still somewhat of a blur to her.

In spite of the reprieve, she was feeling a bit pent-up and took it out on Marguerite beside her by pinching her cheeks.

“Agh!”

“It’s unfair that you’re the only one in a good mood...”

“Lay off me! Your weakness ain’t my fault.” Marguerite pinched Angeline back, leading to a rowdy tussle.

Anessa, frowning, chastised the two. “Now, now. Don’t act up on public transport. You’re being a bother”

“You’re a noisy bunch...” Yakumo groused from the seat behind.

Angeline turned around to face Yakumo. Lucille was sitting next to her with her eyes shut, arms wrapped around her guitar. A moment ago, she had been quite interested in Ishmael’s scent, but she had piped down ever since the front canopy had been opened up to let in the pleasant light of the autumn sun. She was either sunbathing or napping now.

“Are you sleepy too, Ms. Yakumo...?”

“Not really. We weren’t looking forward to going to Turnera nearly as much as you were, so I’m not particularly fired up.”

“Even when you can meet dad?”

“You’re the one who wants to see him.”

“Of course I’m happy, but so are Anne and Merry. Maggie too.”

“Says who?” Marguerite cut in. “It’s nothing but lectures when Bell’s around.”

Angeline puffed out her cheeks. “Dad never gives any unnecessary lectures.”

“I’ll give you that, but, uh... Let’s leave it at that. I never get anywhere arguing with you about Bell,” Marguerite said with a dismissive wave of her hand.

Angeline's mouth worked soundlessly—there was clearly something more she wanted to say, but in the end, she held her tongue and settled comfortably back into her seat. These quarrels weren't rare, and they'd never reached a resolution before. Of course, Angeline always came out of them with the impression that she'd won. But right now, she wasn't really in the mood for it, so she decided to drop it with the elf just this once.

Marguerite leaned against the walls of the carriage and stared out at the distant scenery. Miriam yawned and restlessly hugged her knees, while Anessa furnished a book from her bag.

What a peaceful scene... Angeline mused that this serene journey would soon bring them to Turnera, and the autumn festival wouldn't be far away by the time they arrived. In the meantime, she'd enjoy being pampered by her father to her heart's content and cooking with her mother; she'd help out with the harvest, play with her younger siblings, tease Byaku, and maybe get in some sparring with Percival and Graham. Her head was filled with all the fun things ahead of her. Angeline recalled the bag stuffed full of gifts of sweets, dolls, and books she had brought with her. Mit, the twins, and Charlotte would be delighted, surely. She'd purchased wine and distilled spirits too, which wouldn't go amiss with Kasim and Percival.

Oh, and I can't forget this time—I'm going to pick those cowberries. Angeline had visited the grove in early spring, when the thickets had been teeming with deep green leaves. Once fall came around, they would be abundantly covered with small, vibrant berries. She could fill a whole basket and the bushes wouldn't look any less full of the berries. She yearned for the mountain, and the festival, and sitting in front of the hearth late into the night. She could already imagine the tales Graham would tell when she told them about her plans to head east. His tales of adventure were always so interesting, and everyone would listen carefully to each word he said. And surely his tales of the east would come in handy on their own journey.

Apparently, Seren was supposed to establish herself in Turnera before the winter; Angeline had learned this from a letter that had arrived not too long ago. She was prone to only writing simple letters herself, but Belgrieve's monthly missives were much more comprehensive, and he would tell her about his day-to-day life along with lines upon lines of encouragement. Sometimes, the letters would include sentences penned by Satie, Percival, and Kasim too. One time, the letter had even come enclosed with a pressed flower, courtesy of Charlotte.

In any case, that letter had told of the establishment of the guild, the various facilities ancillary to it, and the groundwork being laid for new industries with Kerry leading the charge. The many long passages on these topics made it clear to Angeline that her father was looking forward to it all. Thus, Angeline was kept up to date with what was happening in Turnera in a general sense. The letters stoked her homesickness, and just picturing all these changes made her even more eager to return.

It wouldn't be long until their arrival; there was still a bit of a journey ahead, but that was of little consequence to Angeline now. She adjusted her posture in her seat and hugged her knees, then stripped off her boots to air out her toes. There was still a long way ahead, and she wanted to rest her feet when she had the chance. Since this was a passenger stagecoach, it was filled with the chatter of all kinds of people—men and women, young and old, and all other sorts besides. *Where are they all headed?* she wondered.

Marguerite was in the window seat next to Angeline. A narrow aisle ran down the center of the carriage, dividing them from where Anessa and Miriam sat. Behind them, next to the aisle, Ishmael was chatting with Yakumo across the way about something or other.

"No, that's not necessarily the case. You have too many dreams because you're not sleeping deeply enough. Dreams themselves come most certainly with every form of sleep. The crux of the matter is whether you are lucid enough to recognize them or not."

"Then what? Does that mean everyone dreams every night even if they can't remember them?"

"Correct. It is said that dreams are a pastiche of images created by the process of organizing memories. However, if one sleeps too deeply, we simply remain unaware of that process. The dreams come to us in times of shallow slumber, and we can only recognize our dreams when our brain is still half-awake."

"Hmm, interesting..."

"Hence why it's rare to wake up completely refreshed right after a dream. That's a sign that you haven't slept properly."

"Yes, I usually dream after I've woken up once and fallen asleep again... So the reason

I have such strange dreams after drinking is because I'm not sleeping well."

"I'd imagine so. In the end, we can't actually consciously dream if we're not partially awake. It is quite the conundrum."

"That actually sounded halfway clever," Yakumo said teasingly.

"Ha ha... But it does make me wonder, now and then—are we even awake at this very moment? Maybe all of this is happening within an illusory reality, and perhaps I am only one moment away from awakening. The reality we perceive isn't nearly as stable as we may think it is. Perhaps it would take only the slightest push to cause it to fall apart."

"I've heard something similar before," Yakumo said, exhaling a puff of smoke. "It was a tale from my homeland, Keatai. In it, a man dreams of becoming a butterfly, fluttering freely through the world until he comes across a sleeping man—himself. When he awoke, he asked himself if he had become a butterfly in his dream, or if he was himself merely a man within a *butterfly's* dream."

Angeline leaned into the back of her seat and let their conversation go through one ear and out the other. Lately, she hadn't experienced any nightmares. There were times when she would wake up with the faint awareness that she had been dreaming, but she was unable to recall it afterward. If nothing else, she hadn't woken up with the anguish and pain that had accompanied the plague of nightmares not so long ago.

Am I just worn out? Angeline wondered. If she was merely exhausted, she would sleep soundly an entire dreamless night and wake up fine the next morning. But, when there was something she was thinking long and hard about, her thoughts would be scattered, and even when her body was asleep, it was like her mind was still racing. Perhaps that was what had led to those strange dreams.

Yet, if that is the process of organizing memories, then surely I could have only seen images that were already in my head. But those nightmares... Angeline didn't pursue that thought any farther. Even that much gave her a throbbing headache.

Angeline couldn't recall what the dreams were about, exactly, but she was reasonably sure that she had seen things that hadn't actually happened to her before. Given that she couldn't clearly recall them, though, it was possible she was just seeing things she had read in a book once, or her wildest imaginings got muddled up with real

memories.

No... What if it's like what Yakumo said about dreams being a world unto themselves? If, for some reason, images beyond her own memories were flowing into her head, perhaps those were events that really had transpired before in another time or place.

Huh... Angeline folded her arms. She still couldn't remember anything clearly, but she felt like she had gleaned *something* just now. She felt subtly off, like having a small bone stuck in the back of her throat.

In any case, there's no use mulling over it now. Angeline yawned loudly—the early afternoon sun was lulling her into a drowsy state.

The mountains in Turnera will be covered in red leaves by now... Angeline was still picturing those autumnal woodlands she had explored with her father so many times even as she drifted off into a heavy sleep.

○

The piercing blue sky over a forest painted in vivid yellows and reds was evidence that fall was in full swing. It graced these lands earlier than it did anywhere else in the duchy, but that was as expected for the residents of Turnera. The arrival of the season marked the beginning of the harvest of the wheat sown in the spring, as well as potatoes and beans. Fields that had lain fallow through the summer were now tilled again for the winter wheat crop to be planted; the villagers had even finished seeding some of the fields already. The pens where the sheep would spend the winter had been prepared. It was chilly at dawn and dusk now, and it was no longer prudent to go outdoors lightly dressed.

Peddlers were arriving early thanks to the improvements that had been made to the roads. Rumors of a new dungeon near Turnera were already carried on the breeze, and those with ears sharp enough to hear them were coming to stake an early claim on the emerging business opportunities this presented. Belgrieve was hard-pressed to deal with all these visitors, but Seren stepped in to manage such matters with little difficulty. Even against these crafty merchants, who had enough vision to venture to the middle of nowhere in pursuit of opportunity, Seren did not concede a single inch. She more than matched these slick-tongued salesmen—she far surpassed them, in fact—and those who came with dishonorable and ulterior motives were mercilessly brushed off in favor of earnest negotiations with more forthright merchants.

Belgrieve's naturally mild nature suited him poorly for such negotiations, but he could only admire Seren's talents and welcomed her help. With her around, no one was going to take advantage of Turnera.

"This year... will people be able to come and go during the winter?" Belgrieve muttered, perusing a pile of contracts before him.

"I haven't actually seen how bad the snow here can get, so I can't be certain. I suspect the larger merchant caravans can probably manage," Seren answered.

Belgrieve looked up at her, startled. "Pardon me—did I say that aloud?"

"Hee hee... I heard you loud and clear."

Belgrieve bashfully scratched his head. "That's troublesome..." *The older I get, the more I've been talking to myself...*

The guild building wasn't yet complete. The governor's manor had been the top priority, so work on the guild had inevitably been put off. In the meantime, the guild's administrative work was being carried out in the office of the manor. Seren had brought all sorts of reference materials with her, so it ended up being a rather efficient arrangement. And the reason Seren had taken this post in the first place had been the dungeon, so it was by no means peculiar for her to be involved in the guild's running. Belgrieve's mind was put at ease by having somebody as talented at administrative duties as her by his side.

Even so, Belgrieve found himself staring out the window. With weather this fine, his instincts urged him to go tend to planting or the harvest like everyone else in Turnera. Their efforts were focused on growing vegetables that could survive beneath the snow during the winter. The mountain was also bountiful this time of year, and there wasn't a single day that went by that didn't have work he could be doing outside.

Seren giggled at his palpable restlessness. "You look like you're raring to grab a shovel, Sir Belgrieve."

"Yes, well... I've worked outdoors for most of my life."

"I understand. I'm sorry that I've kept you holed up in here for so long."

"Not at all. This is my responsibility as well..."

The prospect of having merchants constantly coming and going necessitated establishing a proper system to manage them all. This would cover the unloading of monster materials, stocking necessary goods for adventurers, and the like. Seren had advised that it would be better if the guild took these matters in hand. In Bordeaux and Orphen, doing so had lent a bit of stability to the guild management. It was different from how the central guild handled things, but Turnera was completely free from its influence, so there was nothing to stop them from adopting their own way of doing things.

Belgrieve knew himself to be out of his element when it came to such things, so he was practically accepting it all without objection. He could at least understand the logic behind such decisions, so he was doing his best to study up. A part of him was happy to find there was still so much to learn at his age; another part of him needed a break. In any case, it was up to him to handle the work before him.

At last, he was done; he filed away the paperwork he had been completing along with the documents he'd referenced to complete it. His body felt stiff after sitting for so long. Belgrieve rolled his shoulders and massaged his eyelids to ease the strain of staring at tiny letters for so long, realizing that he was slowly starting to become farsighted. *I'm going to need glasses one of these days...*

One of Seren's maids brought in a tea service and set out a plate of sugar candy.

"Please help yourself."

"Oh, thank you..."

Seren sat down across from Belgrieve and chose one of the pieces of candy for herself. "It's already autumn, huh? Do you think Angeline will be here for the festival?"

"She said she would, though she's been so busy lately that I haven't gotten a single letter from her... She's always had a bit of a mischievous streak though, so I think she might just suddenly show up out of the blue to surprise us," Belgrieve explained.

This got an amused laugh from Seren. "For somebody so strong and reliable, Angeline certainly has a cutesy side. I really like that about her."

"Ha ha... So do I. She's never put aside that childish side... Perhaps she's just being honest with herself."

The combination of tea and sweet candy proved to be quite refreshing, though Seren soon realized every sip of hot tea was fogging up her glasses. She removed them to wipe the lenses with a handkerchief.

"It won't be long now until the festival," Seren mused.

"Yes, time flies."

"I should help out with the preparations..."

"You don't need to do that. There isn't much we have to do to prepare for the festival itself, in any case," said Belgrieve.

Seren looked somewhat surprised. "Really?"

"Yes. We carry the statue out from the church, and we cook up a feast... Frankly, other seasonal chores take up more time than does preparing for the festival. After all, the festival is chiefly a celebration of the harvest and of all the work that goes into preparing for the winter."

"Is that so...? Back when I first visited Turnera, I did take part along with my sister. Thank you for mediating for us."

"Everyone was delighted to have you. They said it really helped liven up the festivities."

"Hee hee! That's good to know. My eldest sister was very insistent that she would go this time too... I don't think she'll get up to anything *too* outrageous this time..." Seren sighed as she put her glasses back on.

Belgrieve chuckled, realizing that the sisters really did get along well.

"It's strange... It all started with Angeline saving me, and now here I am, serving as the governor of Turnera," Seren murmured, her hands occupied with her teacup.

Belgrieve shrugged. "That's how life goes. I never would have imagined ending up playing the part of guild master, for that matter."

"Pfft!" Seren snorted, failing to contain her laughter. "Aha ha ha... Sorry... You're right. You may have ended up the one most put upon between the two of us, come to think of it."

Belgrieve laughed. "I'll say!" If life had gone as he'd expected, he wouldn't be here in this lavish suite right now. He'd be out there with everyone else tilling the fields, his hands and clothes caked in dirt, or perhaps leading the village children to forage in the mountains and bring back the bountiful blessings of nature, to the joy of children and adults alike. Some of the foraged goods would be dried and preserved for future use, but he would also relish in the taste of the fresh ones. Then his thoughts turned to memories of Angeline gamboling about in high spirits through the patches of wild cowberries then to how his little girl had grown to be the hero of not only Estogal but the entire empire. It was thanks to her that he enjoyed this friendship with House Bordeaux and that he had reunited with his old friends.

Somehow, everything came back to that mountain. Belgrieve stared out the window again. *It was right around this season too... Contrary to the chill autumnal breeze, the forest was ablaze with red leaves. That fall, on that mountain... If I hadn't found Angeline back then...*

"I'm sure something changed for me the moment I found Ange. Life has been all surprises for me... But I loved every moment of it, and I'm grateful to her for it all."

"I could say the same. It really was my good fortune that I came to know everyone in Turnera," Seren said.

They both sat there in contemplative silence for a while at that table. Their teacups were still warm enough for hot vapor to trail off into the air before vanishing.

The distant sound of a rooster's crowing roused Belgrieve. "Now then, it's about time I head out to work."

"Yes, sorry for holding you up. I'm looking forward to when Angeline returns. I'm sure she has plenty of new stories to tell."

"Yes, I'm sure—and she'll be thrilled to share them with all of us, no doubt."

Belgrieve was smiling unreservedly when he left the office.



"Dad, look! There's so many of them!" Angeline raced over with a handbasket overfilled with cowberries. She didn't even seem to care when a few of them tumbled over the edge and scattered at her feet.

Belgrieve smiled and patted his daughter on the head. “Now, now... There’s no need for hurrying.”

She held aloft her basket triumphantly, proudly sniffing and puffing herself up. Judging from the red splotches of juice around her mouth, she had already done some snacking.

Belgrieve teasingly prodded her forehead. “You ate a few, didn’t you?”

“Nooo!” Angeline protested, but she was clearly mirthful as she held up her basket. “We’ll eat well tonight!”

“Hey now, you’re not going to eat *all* of those, are you?”

“I can’t get enough of them!”

“You’ll make your tummy upset if you eat too many at once. Enjoy them in moderation.”

“Ugh... Fine.” Angeline grumbled, a bit discontented, but didn’t complain as she pushed the basket onto her father and rushed back into the thicket with an empty basket. This grove of cowberries was in the middle of the forest, but in a rocky, sloping clearing with ample sunlight thanks to the lack of tall trees around, which also accounted for the ample autumn sunlight that made the red fruits glisten like gemstones.

Angeline stooped down without a word to pluck the berries and toss them into her basket. There were far too many of them strewn about for this to qualify as a treasure hunt, but it was the sort of work that a child could enjoy. Perhaps it didn’t hurt her enthusiasm that she could eat a couple of the berries whenever she wanted, her face glowing every time.

Belgrieve ate one of the cowberries, popping it between his teeth and enjoying the sensation of chewing the small seeds within. The initial wave of potent sourness instantly gave way to mellow sweetness urging him to have another. This was one of the season’s greatest treats for good reason.

Unlike Belgrieve, who needed to exercise caution when navigating the brush with his peg leg, Angeline could get around nimbly and fill a basket far faster than he could, a fact that seemed to delight her. Sometimes she would compare her own basket to Belgrieve’s and laugh triumphantly.

"Are we going to make jam?"

"We could. We dried them out last time."

"We're going to need a lot of jars, then."

Canning was an effective way to preserve the berries through the winter. Aside from jams, they would also store boiled vegetables and mushrooms pickled in oil this way. Most of this was done in earthenware pots, but sometimes, they would use glass bottles bought from peddlers. The sight of all those jars and pots of preserved foods lined up on the shelf made Angeline feel practically affluent.

As evening drew nearer, they transferred the cowberries from their handbaskets to the larger one slung over Belgrieve's shoulder. And with that, they made their way back down the mountain. The sun was setting before them, casting long shadows along the trail behind.

Angeline was swinging around a stick she had picked up along the way as she marched on ahead of her father, who was slowly following her. They had climbed the mountain together so many times before that Angeline knew the path well enough.

"Ah, Ange. Not that way."

Even so, she made occasional mistakes. Belgrieve's warning stopped Angeline from wandering down an animal trail.

"Really?" she asked, turning to him.

"Really. That path was made by wild animals." Angeline looked back and forth between the animal trail and the one they ought to take before running back to Belgrieve's side and clutching his hand.

Crimson boughs loomed overhead, and it was fast growing dim out. The forest's atmosphere was changing from what it was when they had arrived earlier in the day, and it was making her feel a bit anxious.

Belgrieve smiled. "We might get lost if we're not careful. Now let's go."

"Yeah..." Angeline squeezed his hand and looked up at him. "Will we make jam when we get home?"

"Sure. We'll need to make a whole lot, or we'll gobble it all up before spring."

"Do you think the first snow will come soon?"

"I'm not sure about that."

Whenever the first snowfall of the season happened, Angeline would have fun scooping up a layer of the soft, topmost layer of frost into a bowl, which she would then drizzle with cowberry jam to eat. Even so, she still loved fresh cowberries more than anything.

Before long, they had come down from the mountain. The sky had turned purple, and there were no longer any shadows at their feet. The cold descended upon them from the sky, and the wind made her skin feel prickly. Not far off ahead of them, she could see columns of smoke drifting lazily into the air from chimneys all over the village as they approached.

The autumn festival was coming soon, and not long after, winter would be upon them.

CHAPTER 150

AFTER THE WHEAT HARVEST

After the wheat harvest, the children of Turnera scoured the field with baskets in hand for any remaining ears of wheat that had been dropped. As vast as the village's collective farmland was and as quickly as it had to be harvested, they did not have the time to be careful and tidy with it. In every step of the process of reaping, binding, and carrying off the cereal, some wheat would inevitably be dropped, and even this spillage accounted for quite a large quantity.

The harvested ears would be threshed with sticks to separate the wheat from the chaff, and then the grain would be spread out to dry. Driving off the birds that would attempt to descend upon this feast was also a job for the children.

Thus fall marched ever onward. By the time the spring wheat was gathered, the newly sown wheat fields were already showing fresh green sprouts, and the autumn festival was near at hand. It was around this time that peddlers began to arrive one by one, eager for the opportunities the festival would present.

Turnera had a good reputation for the quality of its produce and craft goods. At the start of autumn, the wool sheared in early summer would be woven into cloth, and any bolts of cloth or spools of yarn that weren't used to make their own winter garments would be sold. Nearly all the proceeds of their trade would be spent on the spot. Aside from food and supplies, the peddlers also sold books, games, and toys of wood or tin to provide some entertainment through the winter. There was a long winter ahead of them, so it was necessary to stockpile goods to last them until spring. It might have been handy to put away some lucre, but coins would be cold comfort if they ran out of food or fuel in the snow. The knowledge that Turnera would loosen their collective purse strings this time of year was why there were so many peddlers.

With the arrival of the traders, Turnera's seasonal preparations became all the more fervent and energetic—this year more so than usual, as many of the younger villagers had earned some extra money by working on the road improvements. All of them had since returned to help prepare for the winter, resulting in households with much fuller pockets than usual. Consequently, the market at the square was even busier than

usual, and the villagers would drop by the square whenever they got a break from work to see whatever goods the peddlers were touting.

After Belgrieve finished planting the onions, he took the kids along to see the whole spectacle. The twins were now giggling over a tin toy, a figure fashioned in the shape of a dragon. Although it was rather cheaply made, the twins didn't seem to care, and they proudly held it up to show to Mit.

"It's a dragon, Mit!"

"It's so spiky and cool!"

Mit nodded solemnly. "Dragons are strong."

"Strong?"

"Who's stronger? Dragons or grampa?"

"Grampa."

"Then what about Ange?"

"Sis is stronger"

"And Percy?"

"Percy is stronger."

"Huh? Dragons aren't so strong, then..."

"Right?"

"Hmm..."

The three of them mulled that over, but even so, they still seemed rather fond of the doll and hadn't put it down just yet. The peddler looked on amusedly before turning to Belgrieve.

"How about it?"

“Yeah, we’ll take it. Oh, and this book too.”

“Glad to do business with you.”

Belgrieve ended up buying toys for the twins and Mit, and books for Charlotte and Byaku. As he browsed the other wares, Satie came over from the neighboring stall with a hunk of cheese wrapped in paper.

“Bell, Bell! Can I buy this aged cheese too?”

“Sure, go ahead.”

“Bell, I’d like some of these spirits,” Kasim said, holding up a bottle.



"All right."

"Bell, check out this smoked meat," Percival proclaimed, waving around some bacon.

"All right... Wait a minute, why are you all checking with me over every little thing?"

"I mean, looking after the party's wallet is your job."

"Oh, I see... Wait, is it?" *Are we still keeping that up?* Belgrieve wondered, cocking his head. Never mind that he was quite certain that Kasim and Percival had their own savings. *Well, whatever...*

As Belgrieve was checking to see how much was still in his own wallet, another wagon pulled up to the square.

"Hey, Mr. Belgrieve," the driver called out, waving to him. It was the blue-haired peddler who had by now become quite a familiar face to Belgrieve. She parked the wagon and hopped down before racing over to him. "Long time no see. You seem well."

"Yes, it has been a while. It must be hard to make the long trek every year."

The peddler smiled and bowed her head. "Oh no, I'm quite fond of Turnera. It's no trouble compared to farming, at least."

When you put it that way... "Come to think of it, have you seen my daughter Angeline lately?"

"Ms. Angeline? No, not recently. Lately, I've been traveling around Elvgren to the west... Oh, but I do hear tales of her exploits."

"I see... Well, she did say she'd be back in time for the autumn festival, so I thought she might be with you."

"Hmm, I guess the timing didn't really work out... But if Ms. Angeline said she was coming, I'm sure she'll be here soon." The blue-haired peddler had allowed Angeline to ride with her several times before, and it seemed she had a decent grasp of her personality.

Percival chuckled. "You'd be hard-pressed to find anyone easier to understand than that girl."

"Well, we haven't seen her in a while. I'd imagine Bell is getting lonely," Kasim said, grinning.

Satie nodded. "That's right. I mean, Bell here has been pretty restless since summer ended. He keeps saying no news is good news, but I'm sure he'd like to hear something."

Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his cheek. *With friends like these...*

In any case, Angeline seemed to be doing well for herself. The peddler told Belgrieve she hadn't heard of any particular trouble around Orphen, so she should arrive right on time, presumably.

Belgrieve smiled wryly. *I can never just stop worrying about her, can I?* He'd seen her in action at the Earth Navel and the capital, and he knew she was far stronger and more reliable than he was. Yet, troublingly enough, he would still end up worrying about her nonetheless.

Satie put away the cheese and bacon in her basket before closing her eyes to think. "Hmm... What should we do for dinner, Bell? Anything you want to eat?"

"No, whatever you want. But we should really do something about the dried vegetables. Some of them are getting old."

"I see. Well, we finished off the stew for lunch. I'll have to make some more..."

"The dough is kneaded already though," Byaku said, reminding Satie that she already had something else lined up.

Satie opened her eyes. "Oh, right—did I ask you to do that?"

"Yeah, while you were busy doing something else."

"Hmm, I tend to forget things when I'm multitasking. Sorry, sorry... Then let's make stuffed bread with a filling of dried veggies, bacon, and cheese."

"Mom, I'll help out!" Charlotte declared, grabbing Satie's hand.

"Ha ha! Thanks. All right, let's head back, then. The laundry is out drying and... Kids, c'mon."

Satie took the kids and returned home, leaving Belgrieve with the other men to continue buying and selling. The day wore on, and their shadows gradually stretched out behind them. But this was the time of day when the folks who worked through the afternoon tended to do their shopping, so the square was still as busy as ever.

Kasim was already sampling the liquor and in high spirits. "Already fall, huh? Time flies."

"It sure does," Percival mused before turning to Belgrieve. "So, Bell... Am I right in thinking you've pretty much decided on where the dungeon's going to be?"

"Yeah. Apparently, we need to use that orb to slowly form a dungeon around the area. Since you already helped to expend its mana once, it shouldn't cause any sudden changes."

Percival nodded. "I see. Well, whatever it is, I doubt we'll have many visitors in the winter. This might be just the right time to do it." He then snatched away Kasim's bottle and took a swig of spirits.

Even if the roads had been overhauled, that didn't mean they would suddenly have an influx of people. Belgrieve was still fumbling around to have the dungeon and the guild take shape. If everything became chaotic from the very start, it would be far too much for him to handle. He was quite grateful to have more time for preparations before things really took off. The prospect of his life suddenly changing from farming and foraging in the shadows of the mountain to something else entirely was something Belgrieve could never have expected. "Can I do it...?" he muttered.

Belgrieve had learned during his recent journeys and all the combat along the way that he was stronger than he had ever given himself credit for, but a lifetime of negative self-image didn't go away just like that. He still lacked confidence, and in anything he did, he couldn't be satisfied unless he worked out every small detail to make sure it was perfect. On the other hand, it was exactly this cautiousness that had earned him the high regard of those who knew him best.

"Percy... What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I heard you're going to go on a journey one of these days... Do you know when?"

"No clue. I'll head out once things settle down here. It's too soon to tell."

"I see... Kasim?"

"Oh, what to do, what to do? Well, we're pretty much here to make sure the dungeon doesn't go out of control and to wrangle the adventurers coming to Turnera, right? Once that gets sorted, I don't see anything else to do here. I wouldn't want to take work away from the young ones."

"You have a woman, don't you? Don't keep her waiting."

Kasim seemed to shrivel up a bit. "Well, that's... That's true, but..."

Percival frowned. "What, drunk already?"

"Of course not, stupid. I'm being forced to choose between two things that are important to me and I don't know what to do. Take a hint," Kasim said, smacking Percival on the shoulder.

"Hmph, you sure are a pain. When were you ever this delicate?"

"Shut it. I'm a fragile guy... deep down."

Belgrieve watched the two grown men glaring and shoving, and could only chuckle at their rowdiness. So much time had passed since they were young, but this all felt very familiar. It wasn't the same, but it was good enough for him—better, in some ways. All they needed now was for Angeline and her friends to arrive and add their boisterousness to the mix.

The sun kissed the western mountains; the town square was getting dark. *I should go back and start preparing for tonight's work*, Belgrieve thought.

○

Angeline's anticipation grew with every day on the road. In every town along the way, she and her friends enjoyed delicious meals or the comforts of saunas, fondly reminiscing over times gone by all the while.

The farther north they traveled, the colder the wind seemed to get, but the days were still warm. There was a curious span of time that went from not being chilly enough

to warrant a jacket to being unbearable to go without one. The change was so gradual and subtle that none of them even realized when it happened.

They were now putting Bordeaux behind them; it was only a little longer to go now. Unfortunately, the stagecoaches only went as far as Bordeaux. No one had ever arranged public transport that went all the way to Turnera. Anybody continuing north would have to arrange transportation for herself. It was a sure bet that there would be peddlers or merchant caravans making their way past Bordeaux for the fall festival, so Angeline had planned to take a job guarding one of them the rest of the way. It was a surprising turn of events for her to now be sitting in a carriage across from Lady Helvetica Bordeaux.

"Hee hee... I have nothing to worry about if I have such reliable guards by my side," Helvetica said, smiling.

Angeline giggled. "I guess so..."

After reaching Bordeaux, Angeline's party had naturally dropped by the estate of the countess. They were friends, and she'd felt it was appropriate to pay her respects when passing through. That was all she had expected their brief stay to amount to, but Helvetica had suddenly demanded to attend Turnera's autumn festival no matter what, forcefully arguing down Ashcroft, who was less keen on the idea. Without hesitating, Helvetica had arranged a caravan, invited Angeline's party to join her, and set off.

Marguerite clasped her hands behind her head and chuckled. "What was it again? 'Would you rather I slip away later instead of when I have such reliable guards around? What are you going to do if I'm attacked?' That one was a masterpiece."

"Well, I could imagine Ms. Helvetica sneaking out in secret," said Miriam. "Ashcroft probably permitted it because he was afraid she might actually do it."

"Perhaps... But she's got Sasha, so I'm sure she'd be just fine regardless," Anessa reasoned.

Sasha, who was sitting beside Helvetica, fervently shook her head. "What are you saying?! It would be presumptuous to compare me to all of you!"

It seemed that Helvetica had initially intended to take her sister with her as a guard. With Angeline and her friends around, Sasha hadn't really needed to come along—but

Sasha had seemed to just assume that she would come along for the ride, and no one had had the heart to tell her otherwise. In the end, they were all traveling together, and Ashcroft was left holding his head.

"Still, that means all the Bordeaux sisters will be in Turnera. Isn't that a first?" Anessa asked, taking out a box of sugar candy.

Sasha nodded. "Yes, come to think of it." Before now, they'd only ever visited Turnera alone or in pairs, so it would in fact be a first for the three of them.

This year's festival will be the most fun ever! Angeline thought to herself delightedly.

Helvetica cheerfully helped herself to some of the offered candy. "Come to think of it, we returned from Turnera with almost this same lineup last spring. It feels like just yesterday, but I guess it's already been that long."

"Ah, that's right—though it was Seren back then, not Sasha," Miriam corrected.

"That was right after the spring festival when Helvetica was shot down big time, huh."

Helvetica puffed out her cheeks. "Oh, Maggie! Please don't bring that up!"

Everybody else broke out into laughter, except for Sasha, who put a hand to her chin and nodded.

"I hear that Dame Satie is an old flame of Master Belgrieve. She's beautiful, kind, and skilled, so it feels like he was never taking my sister seriously from the start!"

"H-Hey now! That may be true, but you could be a little more tactful, Sasha!"

"Huh? Oh, sorry, sis!" Sasha apologized profusely, but the damage was done, and the fact she had said it without any ill intent only made it worse.

Helvetica placed a hand to her forehead and sighed wearily. "I know Ashe is around to help, but leaving *this* girl on her own back home would be a bit of a problem... Perhaps it was a mistake to send Seren to Turnera, even if it affords her the opportunity to gain some experience."

"Sounds rough," Anessa consoled her, feeling a strange affinity for the noblewoman.

They expected to reach Rodina today. Unlike a cheaper wagon, the lord's carriage was furnished with reliable wheels and axles, and the roadwork from Bordeaux to Rodina made it quite an easy and comfortable ride.

The two sisters and Angeline's party filled the carriage, so Yakumo, Lucille, and Ishmael were following in another. They could hear Lucille strumming her guitar from behind them and could faintly make out the lyrics of some sort of traveler's tune.

Angeline leaned back into her seat. It was cushioned, covered in leather, and very comfortable to sit in; her posterior didn't ache if she stayed seated for too long, and she did not need to make conscious efforts to adjust her posture periodically. Even the rhythm of the wheels rolling over the road was comforting enough for her to start to feel drowsy.

Helvetica was gazing out the window when she began to speak again. "The first time I went to Turnera was during the autumn festival... I was welcomed to join in on the festivities with open arms, and I enjoyed myself very much. It's hard to believe it now, but though I had traveled all over the county to survey the territory, I'd never been to Turnera before."

"This is going to be my first autumn festival! I'm looking forward to seeing what it's like!" Sasha exclaimed, gesticulating eagerly.

Angeline giggled. "It's nothing too special. We all sing and dance and eat delicious food..."

"But that *does* sound special!"

"Come to think of it, we've been to the spring festival a couple times now, but this is going to be our first autumn festival too," Miriam mused.

"That's right. Whenever we tried to return this time of year, something would come up..."

"But we'll be fine this year, heh heh... The very first thing I'm doing when we get there is gathering cowberries," Angeline said with a proud smile. The most delicious cowberries of all were the ones she would sneakily scarf down while filling her basket. She hadn't eaten them like that in years, but the memory of it alone was enough to make her drool. No other fruit could ever compare to that bittersweet bliss.

Miriam nodded. "Uh-huh, you've been going on about that this whole time. You've got my anticipation all built up, Ange."

"Cowberries, huh... I've eaten them dried or jellied but never fresh."

"They're delicious! I've had some myself!" Sasha gushed.

Angeline pouted and pinched her cheek. "That's unfair... Receive your punishment."

Sasha's eyes were spinning from the painful measure of justice. "Ow..."

Marguerite laughed. "We're in the homestretch. Keep it together now," she teased.

"*I am* keeping it together," Angeline protested—so she said, but her words were undermined by the drool in her mouth. She swallowed it down and pressed the back of her hand to her mouth. "Anne, mint water, please..."

"Sure." Anessa rummaged through her bag for the beverage.

After they settled down again, Angeline sipped mint water and lost herself in watching the scenery slowly drift by out the window. The sun was getting lower, but the sky was still blue, and the handful of wispy clouds looked like they could have been put there with delicate strokes of a paintbrush. The sky was radiant at this time of day.

Her musings were interrupted when one of the mounted guards rode up next to the window frame. "Pardon me. We will arrive in Rodina soon."

"I see—well done. Could you ride ahead and reserve an inn for all of us?"

"Yes ma'am!" He saluted to Helvetica before spurring on his horse.

"Just a little farther..." Once they left Rodina, it would only be a half day's ride to Turnera. Angeline would go to sleep tonight and be there by noon tomorrow. She could already picture trees adorned with red and gold leaves under the shockingly blue sky above and chimney smoke fading away into it. She could already imagine herself sitting in front of a flickering fireplace late into the night with a warm drink in her hands and the feeling of bedsheets over rugged straw rustling beneath whenever she would roll over in bed. That sound had been a lullaby to Angeline when she was little. It wouldn't be too long until she could experience it all for herself, but the memories made Angeline smile, and when she closed her eyes, it was Turnera she saw in the

dark behind her eyelids—and the face of her father in the center of it all.

“Just a little longer...”

CHAPTER 151

THE THIN CLOUDS SCATTERED THE MORNING LIGHT

The thin clouds scattered the morning light in luminous prismatic colors across the sky. The world below was still hazy, illuminated only by the scant pillars of light that found an opening through the clouds. It wasn't especially cold, but enough so for breaths to come out as puffs of white vapor. Mit swung his hand around, fruitlessly trying to erase his lingering breaths.

"They don't go away..."

Belgrieve laughed. "Ha ha... Strange, isn't it? Now, let's go home."

The view from the hilltop was gradually getting colored in by the light of dawn. Belgrieve had always loved to see these changes happen at daybreak and in the moments that followed. With his morning patrol over, it was time for Belgrieve to return home. In the yard, he found Percival swinging his sword. Though the mornings were already getting chilly, Percival only wore a thin shirt up top, and his body was steaming.

"We're back."

"Oh, welcome. Nothing to report, I take it?"

"Same as always."

"Percy, are you training?" Mit asked.

Percival grinned. "That's right. Wanna join?"

"Yeah." Mit puffed out his chest and rushed into the house to grab his wooden sword. Belgrieve followed in after him. It was much warmer inside, and Belgrieve hung up his cloak on the wall. The smoldering embers from last night's fire had been replaced with a blazing fire, over which was hung a bubbling stewpot. Satie had been kneading the

dough that had been left to rest all night when they came in, and she looked up from her work to greet him.

"Welcome back. The bread will take a while."

"That's fine. We're going to go practice for a while. Where are Kasim and Graham?"

"They went out to meditate—Byaku too."

Charlotte was sitting by the twins on the floor, where they seemed to be playing with their new dragon toy—a common sight in the mornings recently.

Belgrieve retrieved his sword and went out again to find Mit standing beside Percival and swinging his wooden sword like he did every day. Slowly, his form was beginning to come together. The three of them practiced their swings for some time. When they were done, they cooled down and washed their faces with the chilly, refreshing water from the well.

"You're going to the mountain today, right?" Percival asked, drying his face with a towel.

"Things have mostly settled with the guild and field, for the time being at least. I'm going to gather some fruit and vines."

"Is that part of preparing for the winter?"

"We're stuck indoors all winter, after all. I generally keep busy with spinning yarn or basket weaving."

"Things got pretty rowdy last winter. I wonder how it'll be this year."

"That depends on Ange... Well, they can't just take off work every winter, so I don't think they'll be spending it here with us."

Still, it was Angeline they were talking about—all bets were off. Even if she didn't leave Orphen with that intention, it was easy to imagine her enjoying her life here so much that she'd forget herself all the way up to the first snowfall.

"Even if that does happen, the roads have been cleaned up, so she should still be able to get back in the snow..."

"What, you want her gone that badly?"

"Of course not. But there are people counting on her in Orphen. I can't keep her held up here forever." Belgrieve wryly twisted at his hair.

Percival burst out laughing. "What an earnest guy. Once she's back, *you* will be the one who doesn't want her to go back."

"I... can't really deny it..."

Mit tugged at Belgrieve's sleeve. "I want to be with sis forever too."

"Yeah..." Belgrieve smiled and patted the boy on the head.

After breakfast was over, everyone got to work on their own tasks. Charlotte took Mit and the twins with her to Kerry's house, while Byaku went out to help with the farming. Kasim and Percival went to the river with fishing rods, Graham sat down with the orb and racked his brain over spell sequences, and Satie busied herself with cooking and cleaning. Belgrieve, for his part, left the house with a basket slung over his back and a packed lunch in hand.

The thin clouds from earlier had disappeared when the sun rose, leaving nothing but blue skies above. He crossed the plains and entered the forest. Some of the trees there were evergreen, but many had turned red and would scatter their leaves before long. Some of them were already bare, leaving a blue gap in the forest canopy. Forested land got a lot more sunlight now than it did in the summer. Mushrooms were growing wherever there was shade, but some were overripe and had already burst. A nearby bird flew from the thicket and took to the sky, loudly chirping. Looking up, Belgrieve noticed a branch wrapped in akebia vines, its fruit dangling tantalizingly below.

"Not happening," he muttered, lightly kicking his peg leg against the ground. Tree climbing was not his forte. Collecting fruit from such high places had always been Angeline's job. She was nimble and could swiftly clamber up any tree, and whenever she was around, they would always return with a basket heaping with mountain grapes and akebia fruit.

That's right... It was just around this time of year that I first found her... It had been deep into the autumn season, just before the autumn festival. Back then, he had been searching for wild herbs at the behest of Old Caiya, the apothecary. But that was a long time ago—Caiya had passed on, and Angeline had grown up. Belgrieve heaved a deep

sigh, wreathing his face in frost vapor. The fact that every little thing reminded him of Angeline made him smile wistfully. *I guess I'm lonely after all...* He could go on all he wanted about duty and responsibility, but if he was being honest with himself, he was always happier to have her around.

"I'm a hopeless father," he murmured. He scratched his head before collecting himself and resuming his trek. The ground was gradually grading upward, and he meant to venture farther up the mountain today. Belgrieve had spent much of his time on desk work this year, and he yearned to be surrounded by trees for a while. From time to time, he would reach for low-hanging fruits and grapes or vines and put them in the basket. He continued his ascent, ever mindful of his surroundings. Foraging on his own was fun work, as far as he was concerned. When he led the children through the woods, he would always need to be attentive to them, so he could never allow himself to relax like this.

Finding a clearing, Belgrieve took the chance to catch his breath. He sat down on a nearby stone and drank a mouthful of water from his canteen. He could just see chimney smoke in the distance from this vantage.

"I've gathered a good amount of vines... And now..." When he had started, he'd meant to climb farther and look for cowberries too, but he thought better of it now. "No... I'll wait." It was a job best done when Angeline was around. Aside from wanting to actually get to eat some, she was especially looking forward to picking them herself. If he went on without her today and brought some back home, she'd end up eating them before she could look for them herself, and perhaps that would diminish the joy she felt.

These will be her first cowberries in years. Is wanting to let her have as much fun as possible too overbearing of me? Belgrieve wondered.

"It's a good time to head back."

Belgrieve took another sip of water and gazed up into the untamed blue. In the distance, he saw a kite swooping down sharply upon some unsuspecting prey.

○

The newly paved roads definitely made it far easier to travel. The distance they were traveling was hard to gauge until they reached the craggy, as-yet unimproved roads on

the way to Turnera. Compared to the level roads they had been enjoying riding on until now, which were smooth enough for a passenger to enjoy an afternoon nap, the carriage rocked so much it was hard to ever relax.

Work on the road had been conducted simultaneously from both Rodina and Turnera. In between these two projects was an untamed span of road, where sleeping was the least of their worries. If they tried to speak, the carriage could suddenly lurch and cause them to bite their tongues, so everyone kept their utterances to a minimum. But it didn't last for too long, and soon they were riding comfortably once again on the stretch of road being constructed from Turnera.

Are any of my friends part of the construction team? Angeline wondered. It was a busy season, so it was likely all of them had returned home to help out early in the fall.

In any case, Turnera was near. They'd left Rodina in the early morning with the expectation that they would arrive before noon. When they'd stayed at Rodina's inn the night before, Angeline had been so excited that she hadn't gotten a wink of sleep, and dawn had come even as she was still tossing and turning in bed. The soft rocking of the wagon lulled her into an inadvertent sleep until she was patted on the shoulder, jolting her awake again.

"Huh?!"

"Whoa!" Miriam was startled. "W-Was it that surprising?"

"Did I... nod off?" Angeline asked.

Anessa smiled. "You were pretty soundly asleep, with a happy look on your face."

"Ugh..." Angeline bashfully scratched her head.

Marguerite, who had been gazing out the window, turned to her. "We're almost there. Look—the forest's completely turned red."

Angeline peered over Marguerite's shoulder out the window. Fall grass swayed all over the rolling hills along the gently sloping road. The distant peaks above the crimson tree canopy glistened in the sunlight, reflecting the blue color of the sky above. The nostalgic sight and scent of chimney smoke greeted her.

Angeline gently pinched her own cheek. "I'm home..."

Just seeing the scenery of her homeland was enough to fill her with joy. She had only been away for half a year, but she was so happy she didn't know what to do with herself. She was amazed she had managed to hold out for five years before that.

Even when Angeline returned to her seat, she was so restless she felt she might burst out of the carriage at any time, but they still had a little ways to go. She consoled herself for the time being by hugging Miriam. The girl was soft and, conveniently, sitting right next to her.

"Eep," Miriam groaned. "What are you doing?"

"Heh heh heh..." Angeline buried her face in Miriam's softness and nuzzled. Miriam writhed ticklishly, but Angeline had a firm hold on her and wasn't about to let her get away.

"Quit it!"

"Stay still..."

Anessa sighed. "What do you think you're doing?"

Marguerite and Helvetica laughed at their antics.

"It's not Merry you want to indulge you though, right?"

"I'm *not* trying to be indulged..." *I'm trying to contain my urge to run off*, she wanted to say, but she was too overcome to be articulate, and after stumbling over her words, she gave up and grabbed Miriam again.

"Eep!"

"So soft..."

Their grappling went on until Sasha peered in through the window. She had wanted to ride a horse today, so she had taken the lead on horseback since they'd left Rodina in the morning.

"Ange! We're almost there!"

"I know. I'm happy."

"Sasha, could you go on ahead and inform Seren we're arriving?"

"Understood, sis!" Sasha called out before galloping off down the road.

Angeline released Miriam and pouted. "So unfair... All those people who can ride horses are cheating."

Helvetica seemed surprised. "Oh, are you not good at riding, Ange?"

Angeline nodded. "I'm just kinda... bad at it."

"Hee hee... So even you have some flaws."

"This girl is nothing *but* flaws," Marguerite teased, poking Angeline in the cheek.

Angeline grabbed her wrist and tugged. Because Marguerite was already off-balance, she was easily captured and held in Miriam's stead, struggling to resist. "Stop!"

"Cheeky Maggie. Take this, and this!"

"Agh!"

Angeline tickled her all over. No matter how much Marguerite kicked and flailed, she couldn't escape Angeline.

"This is bad," Anessa muttered. "She's going mad from joy."

The carriage trundled onward even as they tussled, and eventually it passed through the village gates. Angeline knew there were nomad troubadours in the square because she could already hear their joyful tunes.

Helvetica peered out at the teeming crowds. "Oh dear, has the festival started already?"

"No, not yet... A lot of people arrive before the festival. Even more, I'd wager, now that the roads have been improved," Angeline explained. She was still restless, but she released Marguerite. Finally freed, the elf straightened out her disheveled clothing and caught her breath.

The carriage rode on into the town square, where it began to slow down. From outside, they could hear somebody loudly call out, "Lady Helvetica is here!"

Angeline couldn't wait any longer. Before the carriage had even come to a complete stop, she opened the door and jumped out, causing the eyes of onlookers to widen.

"Huh? It's a Bordeaux carriage, but Ange came out!"

"She's always flashy."

"Welcome back, Ange."

Familiar faces greeted her in turn. "I'm back!" Angeline exclaimed, waving her hands and looking around. Since the peddlers had set up shop, she thought she might have seen someone from her family, but none of them were around.

"You're so impatient. Settle down a bit," Anessa chided her as she got down from the carriage and smacked Angeline on the back of her head.

Angeline turned around, biting her lip. "I mean..."

"I know. I get that you're happy."

"Ms. Angeline!" the blue-haired peddler called out, rushing over to greet them.

"Oh!" Angeline grasped the woman's outstretched hand. "It's been a while... Have you been well?"

"Yes, thanks to you! I must have just missed you—I arrived only yesterday, myself."

"Huh, so you did...? Did you see dad?"

"I did, yesterday. I haven't seen him around today though."

"I see..." Angeline glanced at the woman's stall. "Um... I'll take a good look at what you have later."

The peddler nodded, a bright smile on her face. "Of course. I'll be waiting!"

Yakumo and Lucille climbed down from their carriage, followed shortly by a haggard-looking Ishmael. Lucille's drooping dog ears flapped around as she strummed her instrument.

“Oh, it’s a fiesta! Let the good times roll!”

“This is as good a place as any to disembark. I was just feeling hungry... Hey, Ange, how about we find something to eat here?” Yakumo suggested.

“I’m fine... I’ll eat at home.”

“Oh? I see. Very well, I’ll buy something before I stop by.”

While Angeline was thinking about dropping her bags off at home, Sasha and Seren walked out of an unfamiliar building.

“Angeline!” Seren said, racing over. “You’ve all come!”

“Oh...” Angeline gently patted her on the head. “Have you gotten used to Turnera yet, Seren? Are you going to live here now?” she asked.

Seren smiled. “Yes, it looks like I’m going to spend the winter here this year. Sir Belgrieve is helping me out so much, and so is everyone else. Somehow or another, I think I’ll be all right.”

“I see. That’s good,” Angeline said, and she meant it. She looked up at the new building. It was Seren’s manor and the new center of government in Turnera. It was a splendid building with whitewashed walls, made in an architectural style unlike any other building in the village. It occurred to Angeline that she could spend a lot more time with Seren if she stayed the winter. The idea was growing more tantalizing all the time, and her determination was wavering. She began to wonder if she might put off returning to Orphen until spring.

Helvetica exited the carriage next. “Seren, you look like you’re doing well for yourself. Are you managing your workload properly?”

“Yes, sis—somehow, with everyone’s help.”

Come to think of it... In her father’s letters, he had mentioned founding and managing the guild alongside Seren. Perhaps she could find him here now. “That’s right—is dad here?” Angeline asked.

“Sir Belgrieve? No, he mentioned going up the mountain today.”

"Huh? He's not in?" Helvetica whined, her shoulders drooping.

Angeline shrugged. She was a little disappointed to not see her father right away after such a long journey, but there was nothing she could do about that. "If he went up the mountain, he'll probably be back by evening."

"Hmm, I thought I could get another lesson from Master," Sasha said, her arms folded.

"My granduncle's still around. Probably," Marguerite suggested, casually clasping her hands behind her head.

"Oh! Then to Graham we go!"

Seren shook her head. "Calm down, Sasha. You only just got here." Angeline and her friends giggled at her.

Changing gears, Angeline turned to Helvetica. "I'm going home... Could I get my things?"

"Right, I'm sure you want to see your mother. I'll prepare some tea, so please come back later."

"Okay!"

As they unloaded the carriages, Lucille—who should have been off shopping—came up to Angeline and whispered in her ear. "I'm sure of it now. Mr. Ishmael smells different."

"Really...? But what's wrong with that?"

"My nose is good enough to sniff out differences in mana... It used to be subtle, but I think the difference is gradually growing. Is that person really Mr. Ishmael?"

"I mean, he remembered all the things we did on our adventure together..."

"Well... It could just be my imagination. But be careful, Ange. As the people of the past once said, '*prepare for the worst.*'"

"Yeah... I'll keep that in mind."

Lucille trotted back over to the vendors. Angeline recalled how Ishmael had become quite scary the night before they'd left Orphen, but she shook her head. *He was just drunk at the time. There can't be more to it than that.*

Angeline and her party members headed for her home with their bags slung over their backs. Just looking at the hedges and shrubs on the road home put her mind at ease. The feeling of coming home was in her very bones now.

"Still the same," said Marguerite. "Well, I guess that's no surprise."

"It's only been half a year. It's not going to change that much... Well, the path's a lot tidier though," Anessa observed.

"Yeah, and Seren's manor was so pretty. I wonder what it's like inside," Miriam wondered.

The weather was splendid, with only a few small clouds in the sky. They could still hear the music from the square behind them. The roaming folk were in high spirits; most of them were playing an instrument or dancing to the music. Having them around always made the festival more fun.

The mingled aromas of livestock, straw, and smoke, among other things, were all characteristic of the air of Turnera, and Angeline was delighted to bask in it. It was more frigid than it had been in Orphen or Bordeaux, but that just made every breath feel invigorating.

Though she looked forward to seeing all of her friends and family waiting for her at home, she still felt something would be missing. "Dad... hurry and come home," she muttered. No matter what else happened, seeing her father was always what was best for Angeline.

Angeline giggled. *It's strange—we're the ones visiting, and yet now we're going to wait for dad to return.* She mulled over what she would say when Belgrieve finally came back. "Welcome home" was the proper thing to say when welcoming someone who had gone out, but that seemed off to Angeline.

"No... Not exactly 'off,' but..." *I want dad to welcome me home, not the other way around.*

"What are you mumbling about?" Marguerite poked her in the back.

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

"Phew, the air sure is nice and clean," Miriam gushed, stretching her back as they walked.

"Even though this isn't my home, it's calming, somehow..." said Anessa.

Angeline peered into her face. "Really? It's pretty much your homeland by now, isn't it?"

"Huh, um, w-well... maybe...?" Anessa said, bashfully scratching her cheek. Miriam giggled at her.

Angeline gazed up at the nearby mountain. *I wonder what part dad is on?* Angeline wondered. Her eyes lingered on the forest dyed in vivid autumn hues, and she was suddenly reminded of cowberries.

I think I'll head out first thing in the morning. I'll take Char, and Mit, and Hal and Mal. There are so many cowberries you can pick as many as you want, and we'll fill all our baskets. Just thinking about it caused her expression to soften.

They chatted idly all the while. Before long, a familiar house was in view. Laundry fluttered on the line in the yard, and near the well, Angeline could see her mother stooped down and working on something. She was driven by overwhelming joy and practically flew over to her mother's side despite the heavy bags on her back.

Satie heard the pounding footsteps and turned around. As soon as she was in the yard, Angeline tossed the bags aside and latched on to Satie.

"Mom! I'm home!"

"Whoa there!" Satie was staggered by the sudden charge, but she just managed to keep her balance without tumbling over and hugged Angeline back, smirking. "What a mischievous girl. Don't surprise me like that." She gently rubbed Angeline's back with one hand and patted her head with the other.

They were about the same height, but Angeline still felt reassured in her arms. She laughed and nuzzled her mother with her cheek.

Satie smiled. "Welcome home, Ange. Have you been good?"

"Yeah! So, you know, I mean, there are lots of things I want to talk about..."

"That's quite all right. No need to hurry. Everyone's out right now. Are you going to stick around this time?"

"I don't know. I'll be here until the festival is over, at least... Is dad out too?"

"Yes. He left for the mountain with a packed lunch, so I think he'll be back in the evening... He really does have the worst timing."

Anessa looked at the pair of them standing before one another. "They really don't look like mother and daughter..."

"Yeah," Miriam concurred. "They're more like sisters."

"Hey, Satie. We're here too," Marguerite said, tactlessly interrupting their reunion. "You got anything to eat?"

They all helped bring in their bags even as they were reconnecting. It had only been half a year, but that time frame was dense with various happenings, and there was no dearth of subjects to talk about. The main problem became where to begin.

Elated by her homecoming, Angeline flitted about almost like her feet weren't touching the ground. She even embraced Byaku as he returned from the field, earning a nasty scowl from him. Eventually, lunchtime came around, and Kasim and Percival returned from their fishing trip. They were soon joined by the children who had gone to tend to the sheep, and the house was immediately filled with energy. Angeline gushed over what she was looking forward to doing during their stay, and without missing a beat, she pulled Charlotte, Mit, and the twins into hugs. She was simply overwhelmed by joy.

Hal and Mal squealed delightedly in her embrace.

"Ange's so strong!"

"Amazing!"

"Heh heh, behold my big-sister power..."

"Still, Bell just had to be up the mountain, huh?" Marguerite said. "It's rare for him to

go alone.”

“He’s been holed up with guild work lately,” said Kasim. “Maybe he just needs to work off some pent-up frustration?”

Kasim nodded. “I’ll bet. I’m sure he needs a breather now and then.”

“Boys...” Satie scolded. “If you think it’s that serious, why not lend him a hand once in a while?”

The two men shamefacedly averted their eyes.

For the first time in a while, all of them sat at a table among friends who could keep up with each other’s energy. Even if the meal hadn’t been prepared by Angeline’s father, anything tasted delicious to Angeline when she was eating it at home. Oddly enough, the food Satie made would often resemble Belgrieve’s cooking in its seasoning. When Angeline pointed that out, her mother smiled and scratched her cheek.

“Well, Bell was the one who taught me how to cook, initially... And we’ve been living together for a while. I guess you can say he’s had an effect on me.”

Percival and Kasim grinned.

“Sure, he taught you... But back *then*, the stuff you made couldn’t even be called food.”

“You just boiled it all without stirring, so the stew was always burnt, and when you served it, you scraped up the bottom, so the nasty charred bits just floated around with all the good stuff.”

“Hey, why do you jerks remember *that* so clearly?!”

Amidst this banter, Yakumo and Lucille made their appearance.

“Pardon the intrusion. What’s this? Already back in the swing of things?”

“You’re here too?” Percival seemed surprised to see them, but he didn’t skip a beat and continued slicing bread to pass around the table.

Yakumo smiled wryly as she found a nearby chair. “Ange coaxed us. Good grief, I didn’t

think I'd be back here so soon..."

"Heh heh heh... That's fate at work. Are you hungry?"

"You could say that. We already bought some things before we got here though."

"This is very good stuff..." Lucille held out a fillet of roasted pork wrapped in paper. Its aroma wafted through the kitchen.

Mit and the twins cheered. Even if they had a meal to look forward to, children did love meat.

Miriam cocked her head. "What about Mr. Ishmael?"

"He went off to talk with a peddler. I told him how to get here, so I think he'll be by sooner or later."

Turnera was not a large village. Belgrieve's house was a bit off the beaten path, but that also meant there was nothing around it, and it was hard to miss.

The conversation turned to their respective memories and travels over the past year. Once their bellies were full, they all helped clean the table and went their separate ways. Sasha had begged Graham for a bout, so he left for the village square with his greatsword; Mit, Charlotte, and the twins followed after him. Kasim headed for the guild hall's construction site to help move heavy lumber with his magic. Yakumo and Lucille wanted to have a look at that and joined him. Meanwhile, Miriam lay supine on the floor, holding a cushion in her arms, Anessa tended to her bow, Percival and Marguerite sat with a checkerboard in between them, and Byaku returned to weaving a basket that had been left half-finished.

Angeline was looking forward to Belgrieve's return so much that she didn't want to leave the house, but her enthusiasm was also starting to drain her. Sitting around left her feeling drowsy, but if she fell asleep now, she'd miss her chance to tell him, "I'm home." So she shook her head and went out to get some fresh air. Leaning against the fence in the yard, she gazed absently out at the rows of houses.

The sun had dipped just a little bit, and the sunlight was losing a bit of its warmth. The light cast on the mountain was beginning to be tinged with red. Thin clouds gradually rolled in from the north, and now it was like a thin veil had been cast over the blue sky. She could see even darker clouds farther north. Those clouds were making their way

over, and slowly, the veil grew thicker and loomed heavily overhead. The wind was damp and cold; it felt like rain was ahead. *At this time of year, a good rainstorm would bring down all the leaves from the trees*, Angeline thought.

Satie dashed out into the yard. “The weather’s taking a turn. Ange, help me take in the laundry.”

“Yes, mom.” Theirs was a large family, so there was plenty to bring in. As she raced along the clotheslines, Anessa and Miriam came out of the house to help, while Byaku raced out back to retrieve the farming implements he had left out.

“Agh, the wind’s so cold,” Miriam said as she stuffed a pile of laundry into a basket, which Anessa then picked up.

“It’ll get pretty nasty outside... Everyone should be on their way back now.”

The town square had gone quiet. The minstrels of the wandering folk had stopped playing their songs as the wind chilled their hands. Angeline anxiously prayed that it would warm up again in time for the autumn festival.

As Angeline frantically brought in the laundry as well as vegetables that had been set out to dry, she could hear somebody coming up the road behind her.

“What a nice household. I can feel the kindness and warmth.”

Angeline turned with a start. There was Ishmael, his scruffy hair tossing in the breeze.

“Mr. Ishmael?”

“A guest?” Satie asked, her hands momentarily stopping.

“Yes, this is Mr. Ishmael. We fought alongside him at the Earth Navel, and he guided us to the capital from there.”

Ishmael politely bowed his head. “It’s a pleasure. I’ve heard all about you from Angeline.”

“The pleasure is all mine. It seems you’ve looked after our Ange. Thank you,” Satie said, though she had a somewhat perturbed expression on her face.

“What’s wrong, mom?”

“It’s nothing...” Satie glanced down at Ishmael’s bag and cocked her head. “Um, did you bring some enchanted tools with you?”

“Huh? Oh yes, I am a magician after all. I always have some on my person. For instance, this here...” Ishmael reached into his bag to pull something out. He was clutching an apple branch with fresh leaves still growing on it.

CHAPTER 152

THE WIND SUDDENLY GREW COLDER

The wind suddenly grew colder. For a moment, it felt like the frigid wind was pressing down on Belgrieve from above, and then all of a sudden, his phantom pain began to act up. Belgrieve had been walking along the forest path when he fell to his knees, startled. It was like his amputated right leg was on fire, and no matter how desperately he clutched at the prosthetic that had come to replace it, it didn't ease the pain in the slightest. His forehead oozed with sweat; it had been a long time since it had hurt like this. His pulse pounded in his ears, and he was clenching his teeth so tightly that his jaws quickly began to ache.

The cold wind continued to weave between the trees and cast a sinister pressure from on high. There seemed to be some snowflakes in the breeze, as he could feel the icy crystals dancing coldly across his skin.

"Graah..." He groaned, grimacing in anguish. Every second felt like an hour, and despite the cold that assailed him, his body felt like it was on fire.

Eventually, the pain receded. It had only lasted for ten seconds, but it had felt like an eternity to Belgrieve. He finally managed to breathe again once he was released from the episode, though only shallow hyperventilation. With the pain gone, he could feel how cold the wind was, especially now that he was drenched in sweat.

"What was that...?" He looked up to the sky above, densely packed with clouds that had seemingly crossed over the northern mountains and brought the cold air of those climes with them. What had been a smattering of snowflakes was now a flurry. He'd intended to venture a little higher up the mountain, but it didn't seem like that was possible now. His intuition was telling him that something was wrong and that he needed to descend at once. Belgrieve straightened the basket on his back, which had been knocked askew when he had collapsed.

"This is strange... The weather shouldn't change this suddenly." There were no absolutes when it came to Mother Nature, but still, his many years of experience told him that such a sudden turn in this season was downright abnormal.

He looked skyward again and was startled to see something floating in the midst of the grayness—pure white hair, billowing in the breeze.

“Lady Winter...?”

It was none other than the great spirit of winter. Knowing she was here somewhat explained the cold, but he had already met her in the early days of summer, and it was still strange that she had returned so soon. *It has to be an abnormal situation after all...*

Lady Winter was gazing down at the foothills of the mountain. The noble lady simply traveled the world on the winter winds, but clearly, she had come today with some purpose in mind. Something was happening—either in the village or somewhere nearby.

Belgrieve ignored the impatience threatening to burst from his chest as he began his hasty descent.

○

“That’s the replica of...” Angeline began, but she was startled by her mother’s expression. Satie had gone as pale as a ghost.

“Why... Why do you have that?!”

As Satie closed in on him, Ishmael thrust the tip of the branch against the bridge of her nose. Satie stumbled and retreated a few steps before stiffening.

“Mom?”

“Ange, get back!” Satie called out, still locked in place.

Angeline knew something was wrong. She rushed over to her mother’s side but felt a strange tightness in her chest when she glanced at the apple branch in Ishmael’s hand, and suddenly, her body no longer responded to her will. *Is this what’s happening to mom too?*

Anessa and Miriam frantically raced over to hold her up before she collapsed.

“Ange?”

"Hey, you look like hell. Are you okay?"

"I don't understand it," Ishmael said, his voice gentle. "Thinking back on it now, I haven't the slightest idea when I came to possess this. Hey, Ms. Angeline. All humans have memories to reflect on, right? But it seems that I have no past."

"What are you talking about...? What's gotten into you, Mr. Ishmael?"

"You're still saying that... You really are a fool, Ms. Angeline. I mean, Mr. Percival said it, and I think it too. And I'm sure you believe it as well, Mrs. Satie. I mean, it would be strange if you didn't. That goes without saying."

"Hey, wait... I don't get it at all..."

"Perhaps it's a lot easier to have no past. You have no burdens to carry. You threw it all away, I'd imagine. You forged a new past for yourself, I'd imagine. That's why you can sit there acting like nothing happened. And yet, you're the only one who gets to act all innocent."

Angeline was so confused she couldn't say a word. The tip of the branch was pointed at Satie, and like a frog mesmerized by a serpent's stare, Satie couldn't move. Her eyes were locked on Ishmael, and her hands were quivering, poised to unleash her invisible swords at any moment. Anessa and Miriam didn't know what to do. They had just been in the yard—none of them were armed for combat. Even if they wanted to return to the house to get their weapons, it seemed foolish to turn their backs to Ishmael now. Be that as it may, Anessa positioned her feet so she could rush him the moment she got the chance.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you."

Anessa flinched.

"I assure you, I can cast before you reach me." Although Ishmael was smiling, there was a note of annoyance in his voice. When he turned his gaze back on Angeline, it was like he was looking at something else entirely. "Didn't you start having nightmares after you touched this?"

"I don't remember."

"I'm sure people you knew came up in your dreams. Mr. Kasim, Mr. Percival, Mrs. Satie.

They must have been in pain. After all, you stole away the futures they should have had."

Angeline shivered. His words were like a bucket of icy water dumped over her head.
Why does he know that?

"You see, dreams are about organizing memories. Your own memories, laid bare, with nothing to hide them away. Now, don't you kind of think the events you saw really did happen? You can't pretend you've forgotten."

Angeline clutched her head. Her head was filled with a sound like sifting grains of sand as fragmented images flitted through her mind's eye. Her heart was palpitating, and she felt like she was about to throw up.

"Don't listen to him, Ange..." Satie said, struggling to speak even that much.

"Of course, I've forgotten too. I have no idea when I obtained this. But when I hold it in my hand... gradually, I start to forget who I am anymore. All those small feelings of something being *off* grow larger and more prominent. It feels like my memories and emotions are all a cheap imitation of someone else."

"Didn't you say that was a reproduction of a..."

"I thought so—truly. But it's not. This is the Key. This is *real*. And I am not. How about it—do you want to test it out?" With a subtle movement of his hand, the branch swayed, and suddenly the area was filled with burgeoning mana.

Suddenly, Percival rushed out from the house at tremendous speed, and with a fist as tough as steel, he punched Ishmael off his feet. Percival didn't even know whom he was striking until after he'd struck Ishmael. He stared blankly at his hand as he opened and closed it.

"Ishmael...? Hey, what's going on here? What was that strange mana...?"

Satie fell to her knees, finally free, and struggled to steady her breath. "I don't know what's going on. But that branch... I broke it to bits and used up every last bit of mana contained within... It shouldn't even exist anymore... Yes, we need to get rid of it."

Ishmael, who had been blasted all the way to the opposite side of the fence, staggered to his feet. "Ah, dammit... Even the pain is fake. I never existed from the start, so it's

stupid that I should act like I ever did.”

“Mr. Ishmael?” Angeline called out as she approached. But he held up a hand to hold her back.

“It’s quite all right. I... See, I’m already tired. I’ve had enough of being tormented by feelings that don’t exist. All of this, it’s all this thing’s fault. So I...” Ishmael gripped the branch tightly, almost like he was trying to snap it. Satie shot forth, her hand outstretched to snatch it away. But before she could reach him, Ishmael turned the tip of the branch to his own head.

It happened in an instant. A bolt of magic shot from the tip and bored into Ishmael’s skull, spraying blood through the air. Everyone was taken aback save for Satie, who didn’t stop for a second. She continued to reach for the apple branch in Ishmael’s hand even as he fell.

“I must...”

But though he appeared to be quite dead, Ishmael’s left hand seized Satie’s wrist. His corpse had stopped just short of hitting the ground, as though he were being held up by strings. Like a marionette, his head rose, followed by his body. The contours of his body seemed to blur like mist, and where he had stood moments before was a man in a white robe and a hood that cast a shadow over his face.

“That’s...”

“Schwartz!” Satie swung her invisible blade, but before she could cut him down, Schwartz channeled mana into the branch and unleashed a shock wave of energy. Satie took the full force of this powerful blast point-blank and was thrown backward. Angeline raced to catch her while Percival interposed himself to protect them. “Get our weapons!” he called out without turning away from the threat.

“Oh, right!” Anessa turned and ran.

Percival stood like a wall between Angeline and Schwartz. His muscular back put Angeline at ease, but Satie was shivering in her arms, all the color drained from her.

“Why...? I’m sure I...”

“Mom, are you okay?”

"Ange..." Satie looked up at Angeline, full of fear and fatigue, and grabbed her sleeve.
"I'm sorry... If only I... If I'd just made sure of it..."

Strangely, Angeline could feel power welling from deep within her chest. The compassion she felt for her mother and the anger she felt towards Schwartz served as a stimulant of sorts, helping her muster her strength.

"Ange," Anessa called out and handed over her sword.

"Dammit, just when I was about to win!" Marguerite complained, appearing with her rapier drawn. She seemed to be in a foul mood to have had her checkers match with Percival interrupted.

Byaku, who had rushed over from the field after sensing the presence of Schwartz, glared at him with deep loathing. "That bastard..."

"Long time no see, failure," Schwartz said with a grin.

"Shut up!" Byaku deployed his three-dimensional circle constructs, rage plastered over his face.

That peculiar surge of mana had surely tipped off Kasim and Graham, and Angeline's team would soon assemble as well. Regardless of how skilled Schwartz was as a magician, he was certainly outmatched. Bolstered by that thought, she got up and readied her blade. The man had no openings in his stance, and now that she was facing him for real, she could feel the immense pressure weighing down on her. His presence was almost as heavy as Graham's. Percival was motionless, waiting for someone to make the first move. Schwartz's peculiar intensity made even armed S-Rank adventurers hesitant to engage with him.

A cold wind blew down from the north and brought snowflakes and piercing coldness with it. The sky was covered in dark clouds, cutting off every last ray of sunlight.

"What did you do to Mr. Ishmael?" Angeline asked.

Schwartz scoffed. "That man never existed to begin with. If it makes you feel any better, he actually wanted to help you people."

"You're lying!" Angeline strengthened her grip on her hilt. "Lucille said you smelled completely different. I don't know what you did with the real Ishmael, but I won't

forgive you... This time, I'll take you down once and for all."

Schwartz cackled. "Of course we smell different. The Ishmael that traveled all the way to the capital with you was a different Ishmael from the one you met in Orphen. The first one was a complete persona—that was why he could enter your midst without being suspected. But there were some tasks I needed to get done in Orphen on short notice, and his personality and memories turned out unstable. That was a trivial matter in the end."

"Huh...? I don't know what you're talking about. You can't dissemble your way out of this one."

"That elf never told you about false personas?"

"I don't have a clue what you mean."

Schwartz chuckled. "Perhaps your mother doesn't trust you as much as you thought she did."

"That's not true!" Angeline said through gritted teeth. He was trying to sow dissension, and she wasn't about to let him get away with it.

Angeline pointed the tip of her sword at Schwartz. "Everyone's here in Turnera. Percy and Kasim and Grandpa. Even dad is nearby. You won't get away."

"I have no intention of running. This was my objective." Schwartz gestured subtly with the branch.

Whenever Angeline looked at the branch, she would feel an aching pain deep in her heart. Perhaps he had already used some form of magic on her; simply standing before him made it hard for her to breathe, and her emotional equilibrium was completely shot.

"Was it painful to be betrayed?" Schwartz asked.

Angeline furrowed her brow. "I wasn't betrayed. I was tricked... by you."

"I see. That may be so. But do *you* have the right to say that?"

"What...? Who did I ever trick!?" Angeline roared.

Anessa tried to pacify her. “Calm down, Ange. Don’t let him get in your head.”

“That’s right,” Miriam whispered. She held out her staff. “And if he keeps emanating that strange energy, it won’t be long.”

Just as she’d implied, they could hear the sound of hasty footsteps coming their way. Kasim and Graham were running over at full speed. Kasim skidded to a halt, staring straight at Schwartz, a look of shock on his face.

“Ah, guess he wasn’t dead after all...”

Schwartz smiled merrily and swung the branch again, teleporting himself a short distance away, just far enough that he wouldn’t have to fend off attacks from two sides at once.

“The events are starting to amass. But the Red Ogre isn’t here yet.”

“You’ve changed a bit. You’ve got a more dangerous vibe to you than when we fought before.” Kasim straightened his cap with a troubled expression.

Graham’s holy sword was roaring more fiercely than ever before, and Graham’s gaze was locked on Schwartz, his face set in grim determination.

Faced by Angeline, Graham, Percival and Kasim, all S-Rank adventurers, Schwartz didn’t seem the least bit perturbed. Surely he was aware of the threat they presented, and that was precisely what made it so ominous, never mind the strange aura that seemed to lock everyone in place.

The source of this twisted power was most certainly the apple tree branch. It wasn’t Schwartz himself but his possession of that branch which prevented all these powerful combatants from lifting a finger against him.

“Mom, what’s a false persona...?” Angeline asked softly.

“That man named Ishmael... was a false persona created by Schwartz’s magic. Memory, personality, appearance, it’s possible to completely falsify them. However, if you want to do it perfectly, you have to seal away the memories and personality of the original individual. I’d reckon that since Schwartz needed to get something done, he had to leave a little bit of himself, which made the Ishmael persona unstable.”

That seemed to explain how Ishmael had at times seemingly become a completely different person, going off on peculiar tangents. That knowledge was cold comfort in the face of the realization that Ishmael really had never existed. But this was no time to get depressed. Angeline glared at Schwartz and at the branch that seemed to suffocate her every time she looked at it.

“Hey... What is that branch? What does he mean by ‘the Key?’”

Satie took a deep breath. “That... is Solomon’s Key. A relic that anybody researching demons would be desperate to lay their hands on.”

“Huh?! But didn’t you say you stole it and broke it?”

“I thought so... I shattered it and expended all its mana... It should have been completely unusable.”

Schwartz cackled, brandishing his prize. “Did you think someone on your level could destroy it?”

“There were no signs of it regaining its power after everything I did to it. What’s more, after I left the capital, that space should have ceased to exist. It should have disappeared without a trace.”

“Solomon’s power is greater than you can comprehend. That space was maintained purely by the remnants of the Key’s mana.”

“No...” Satie murmured, crestfallen.

“How naive you are,” Schwartz said scornfully. “If you’re so foolish when left to your own devices, you should have just let me use you... But you couldn’t, could you? You feared that you’d be immersed.”

Satie bit her lip and glared at Schwartz.

“So that’s Solomon’s Key? The one you told us about?” Kasim asked, his eyes narrowed.

“Yeah...”

“The real one? You’re sure about it?” Angeline swallowed her breath. She never could have imagined it. Back in Orphen, she’d picked it up herself and had inspected it up

close. She'd never had any idea of its true nature.

"I'm sorry, Ange. If I'd just talked about it, if I'd told you everything..." Satie murmured.

"It's not your fault, mom."

"Hmm. And that stick of yours is why you can stand so boldly against us?" Percival said, pointing his sword. "Going point by point is agonizing. Let's just get down to it—what're you trying to do here?"

"You'll see."

"Hmph. Not talking, huh? Then we beat you and that's the end of it. You're gonna regret revealing yourself to us."

Schwartz smirked and waved the branch, generating a shock wave great enough to warp space. Percival's eyes shot open as he stepped out and took it head-on with his sword. The mana of his blade clashed with the magical energy, erupting in a great gust of wind that swept over everything around them.

"Testing the waters, huh? Don't underestimate me!" Ignoring the violent tempest, Percival rushed forth.

Schwartz waved the Key again. "*Flauros*." A black, humanoid thing emerged from his shadow and intercepted Percival's blade. Two bulging eyes were the only evidence of a face. Its torso was vaguely human other than having two sets of arms, but it was a four-legged beast from the waist down.

The shadow caught Percival's sword with two hands and swung its other two arms down upon the swordsman. Percival yanked his sword free and retreated.

"A demon?"

While Percival was recovering from his hasty retreat, Byaku's sand-colored circles flew over his head and crashed down upon Schwartz like meteors. However, a swing of the demon's arms was enough to knock them aside. Byaku fell to his knees, his breathing pained and erratic, yet his eyes were blazing. He had deployed a vast array of circles, but they were flickering and unstable. His hair was now speckled with black.

Angeline grabbed his shoulder. "Don't push yourself, Bucky..."

“Shit... I feel strange... Don’t come out!”

“*Botis.*”

Schwartz waved the branch again. Another figure emerged from his shadow, this one long and serpentine.

“Out of the way!” Percival joined the fray again and engaged in a violent clash with the serpent. The demon’s strength seemed to have been considerably amplified by Solomon’s Key, to the point that it could even hold its own against Percival.

Schwartz pointed the branch at Byaku. “*Caim.*”

“Gah?!” Byaku doubled over in pain as his hair began turning entirely black. The sand-colored magic circles floating all around the battlefield melted away, and the sleeves of his shirt ripped as his hands were replaced with bestial claws, almost like bird talons. His arms and head were covered in black strands somewhere between hair and feathers.

“Bucky?!”

“Gaaaaaaaah!” Byaku cried out as he pounced at Angeline, who hurriedly parried with her blade.

“Quit it, stupid!” shouted Marguerite as she slid in from behind Angeline and kicked Byaku away. As he flew, he recovered in midair and landed on all fours like an animal.

“Guh, urgh... Stop... it. Don’t come—gaaaaaaaah!”

Solomon’s Key had seemingly brought out the demon’s soul. Although Byaku desperately tried to resist it, his body was no longer his own. Once again, he raised his talons to strike.

“I’ll hold him back! Do something about Schwartz!” Marguerite howled, deflecting Byaku’s talons with her blade.

The scattered snowflakes were now a whirling blizzard spiraling around them.

Satie bounded forth, Angeline wasting no time following along.

"Ange! Please, just stay back! I'll handle it!" Satie pleaded.

"What are you talking about, mom?! Percy and Maggie can't help... He's not someone we can hold back against!"

"Fine! But don't get too close to Schwartz, and watch out for the Key!"

"Got it!"

Angeline raised her sword. Solomon's Key was uncanny, but it wasn't so bad that she would give up and sit on the sidelines. Satie approached from the left while Angeline approached from the right. They had him pincered, and signaling to one another with their eyes, they rushed him in tandem.

"Eligor."

Schwartz swung the branch again. This time, the shadow resembled an armored knight. The one with four arms caught Satie's invisible blade, while the one in armor blocked Angeline's sword.

Satie clicked her tongue. "Tsk, when did you get so many...?"

After exchanging some blows with the shadow, Angeline cried out, "Mom! Get back!" as she retreated herself. Satie quickly followed suit.

Miriam's Lightning Emperor spell rumbled above Schwartz's head, a powerful bolt of lightning crashing down upon him. But Schwartz merely waved the branch upward, erasing the lightning.

Not giving him a moment's rest, Kasim's spell came next. It spiraled through the air, sharpening to a point like a jousting lance as it shot straight for Schwartz at breakneck speeds. This was Hart Langer's Spear, his signature spell.

"Nicely done," Schwartz said, holding the branch before himself. The grand magic spell that could skewer S-Rank fiends not only failed to breach what appeared to be a mere piece of wood, it was absorbed into it. Schwartz swung the branch again; the volley of arrows that had been hidden behind the spell all split at their points like blooming flowers, softly and fruitlessly colliding with his body before falling to the ground without leaving a scratch on him.

Anessa gritted her teeth. "He's a real piece of work..."

"An outrageous bastard found an outrageous toy to play with," Kasim said dismissively, shrugging.

But as they all prepared to attack again, Graham bid them all to stand down. His voice was heavy and solemn, and his simple words reverberated in all of their bodies even without having to raise his voice. Angeline, Satie, and Percival (who was still contending with the serpent) immediately retreated.

Graham brandished his greatsword and took a step forward. He'd spent the duration of the fight until now concentrating and molding his mana. An immense pressure now filled the air and sent shivers down everybody's spine.

The look on Schwartz's face changed. "So you've decided to make your move, Paladin." The three shadows stood in front of Schwartz protectively.

The holy sword growled bestially as Graham swung the blade downward. A torrent of light surged from the sword in a wave of mana, consuming and pulverizing the shadowy beings all at once. Byaku, who had been locked in combat with Marguerite, stopped moving before toppling over face down in the dirt. His claws and plumage faded away.

"Splendid," said Schwartz. His three minions had disappeared, but he still stood there, albeit missing his left arm from the shoulder down. It didn't seem that he had completely avoided the attack.

Graham was leaning against his sword, breathing heavily. He had clearly put his all into that swing. Percival was a ways behind him, and it didn't seem that Marguerite could jump into battle at that instant.

I need to settle this now, Angeline thought as she raced in for the kill. "This time... it's over!"

"Ange, wait! You can't!"

Satie's yell came just as Angeline thrust forth with her sword. Schwartz moved his body aside slightly, and the tip of her blade only stabbed into his shoulder. Angeline clicked her tongue. *I was aiming for the heart...*

"I've been waiting for this." That was all Schwartz had to say about it.

Angeline tried to leap away, but before she could, the tip of the branch lightly poked at her chest. Her heart beat with one loud, conspicuous thump. Something closed off within her... and something else opened up.

"Huh? Ah..."

The strength drained from her body. She pulled her sword out of Schwartz as she staggered away from him unsteadily one pace, then another. Schwartz's cold gaze was focused on her, even as he teleported out of striking range.

"Ange?"

"Hey, what's wrong?"

She heard Percival and Kasim. Angeline turned to them. The light was gone from her eyes.

"Ahh..."

"Ange?! Get a hold of yourself!" Satie rushed over to her.

Her vision was cloudy. All of a sudden, a bizarre loneliness filled her chest. She wanted to return. She wanted to return and be praised. And what did she have to do to be praised? She had to kill more.

Angeline swung her sword suddenly. The sharp blow was blocked by Satie's invisible blade.

"Ange!"

"I need to return... So I..." Angeline muttered unintelligibly as a palpable aura of danger emanated from her. While her sword was locked against the invisible blades, she kicked her mother away. Percival caught Satie with a look of shock. She broke into a coughing fit from the blow to her solar plexus.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing? Have you gone mad?!"

"Brainwashing magic...? No, it's Solomon's Key... Angeline is a demon, so... Dammit,

I'm an idiot. Why didn't I realize earlier?"

"What does that mean, exactly?" Percival frowned.

Satie spoke through her coughs. "Cough... Ange's a demon, so she's highly susceptible to magic focused through Solomon's Key... I didn't know what would happen exactly, but I didn't want her anywhere near it..."

Kasim groaned frustratedly. "By Vienna... We'll need to take some drastic measures." Gritting his teeth, he swiftly wove together a net of magic to ensnare Angeline, who was in hot pursuit of the three of them. She was temporarily halted but quickly tore through the spell with brute force.

"Ugh, that should have been stronger than metal."

"You magicians... Just stay out of it!" Marguerite jumped in before them with her rapier drawn. As soon as Angeline was close enough, she slashed at Marguerite with hollow eyes. The Black-Haired Valkyrie was maneuvering like a vengeful specter. Marguerite was startled, and though she managed to dodge the first strike, it was immediately followed up by a second and then a third. This lethal style was completely different from how Angeline normally fought when they sparred, and Marguerite's skin was mercilessly sliced up. They were hardly fatal injuries, but she was covered in seeping red lines all along her arms and legs.

Marguerite gritted her teeth. "Ange... You seriously tried to kill me there!"

"Uh-huh..." Angeline mumbled, delivering further emotionless strikes.

Marguerite had no intention of killing Angeline, so she inevitably held back. Against an implacable Angeline fighting to kill, she was forced onto the defensive. *Would I even be able to beat Ange as she is now, even if I weren't holding back?* Her wounds were only growing in number, and her foe was gaining momentum.

"Ange! Quit it!"

"You have to stop! Maggie's gonna die!"

Anessa and Miriam desperately cried out. But their voices did not reach Angeline.

It was at that point that Percival stepped in and blocked her onslaught, wrathfully

radiating with monstrous strength that he hadn't shown in a while. "Don't just let yourself be controlled so easily. You're not that weak, are you?"

"Kill..." Angeline didn't waste a second before launching her sword at Percival, but he had been through many more battles than any of them. He had no intention of killing her, but he responded with blows that should have been forceful enough to break her blade. Angeline's one-sided offensive was halted, and now she was forced to defend herself.

But the more their blades met, the faster Angeline seemed to get. Bit by bit, she seemed to be learning from Percival. She began to weave feints into her mindless assault, and she started to find opportunities to get in her own attacks.

Percival scowled. "I'd be delighted under any other circumstance..."

Even as he was saying that, Angeline stooped down and raced in under his guard, her slash gouging Percival's forearm and scattering droplets of his blood through the air. Percival's eyes widened—he realized that Angeline had frozen at the end of that motion. Using his unmaimed left hand, he hammered her chest with a palm strike, doubling her over and sending her careening backward.

"Lone... ly..." Angeline muttered.

Graham's sword howled with rage, its blade glimmering. It wasn't the same fierce light as before, however, and it shone gently upon Angeline instead. Angeline halted and let out an anguished groan. Her sword slipped through her fingers and clattered to the ground.

It seemed that the fog had cleared from her mind. The overwhelming loneliness was contained, and her consciousness was returning, but what had been closed away before was still left open. Those nightmares of suffering and all that she should have forgotten were now flooding into Angeline's head: Kasim's eyes after he had given up on everything; Percival soaked in blood, hiding from his hatred and helplessness; Satie's quivering back as she wept in despair—those nightmares now overlaid the people before her very eyes.

And there were memories that were hidden even further beyond those surfacing within her mind. "No... No, no, no, no!" Angeline pulled and twisted her hair into an unkempt mess.

Suddenly, Percival's eyes widened as they watched her; Kasim, too, peered intently at her, and Satie froze, her mouth opening and closing wordlessly.

The shadow at Angeline's feet gained substance and rose to stand alongside her, taking on the form of a four-legged beast—a great and powerful wolf, which then enveloped Angeline, its form flickering in and out of being.

"I... I..." Angeline could taste blood inside her mouth. Her eyes were overflowing with tears.

Satie clutched at her chest, gasping for breath. "No, it can't be..."

"You're kidding..."

"Wh-What?! What's gotten into you three?" Marguerite asked insensitively, having no grasp of the situation.

With a stern face, Percival spoke up. "I could never forget it... That fiend, that wolflike shadow... is the one who took Bell's leg."

"Huh...?"

"No... That can't be! You're saying Ange was the fiend all along?!"

Miriam and Anessa looked between Angeline and Percival.

"I don't want to believe it, but it's true," Kasim said, tilting his cap down over his eyes.

Percival scratched his head. "This is absurd, absurd! Then what am I— What am I supposed to do?!"

"The human called Angeline never existed!" Schwartz declared coldly.

Angeline turned to him. "No... I-I definitely..."

"You stole his leg and forced a cruel fate upon him, then swindled him out of his love, and for what? You *cheated* him. That is the truth!"

"Wrong, I..."

"Ange!" Her head snapped up and she turned towards the voice.

Through the falling snow, she could see red hair billowing in the wind. Belgrieve was running to her. But he looked like he was in pain. Judging by his steps that seemed to keep the weight off his right leg, surely it was his phantom pain acting up.

Angeline held her chest, her heart pounding.

She lurked in the dark. The presence of prey approached, announced by boisterous voices and four sets of footsteps. She saw the blond-haired boy, and the red-haired boy behind him.

I stole that leg.

She coiled up her rear legs; she would pounce to take life. She would eat flesh and drink blood. And for that...

The taste of fresh blood when I tore off his right leg was delicious.

She leaped. The tepid air of the cave whipped against her face. She bared her fangs. She opened her mouth.

No, it wasn't delicious... It couldn't have been.

She saw a surprised face. They were unable to react to her—and that was all the better. They just had to lie down and die. They just had to lie down and let themselves be devoured.

It was delicious. I wanted to eat more.

Someone leaped forth from behind the blond-haired boy and pushed him aside, so she took a bite out of him instead. She bit into his right leg with all her might. Her fangs tore through meat and bone.

That's not true. I would never think that.

The taste of blood filled her mouth.

What a delicacy. I wanted to kill more. To kill and eat.

The one with red hair twisted his body to resist, pushing her head away. But that wasn't nearly enough to stop her. With a roar, she forcefully lunged free and tore the leg off with that motion.

Delicious.

Her mouth was filled with the taste of blood.

No, I don't want to eat that. I don't wish for any of that.

So much blood. Another mouthful. Once she was done with him, there were still three more to go. What a joy it was.

But the red-haired one opened what looked like a scroll. The four adventurers faded and were soon gone. Her mouth was full of blood. The smell permeated through her nasal cavity.

Delicious. But not nearly enough.

Ah, but... even if I deny it, it's the truth. "I'm... the cause of everything."

She was the reason Kasim had turned to villainy, why Percival had continued to recklessly throw himself into battle, and why Satie had gone through so many cycles of sadness and despair. It was all because she had taken Belgrieve's leg.

And my father too—how much suffering has he gone through because of the loss of his leg? The remembered taste and smell of the blood in her mouth reinforced the memories in all their vivid detail.

An ugly little bird that had kicked all the other chicks from the nest. What wonderful futures awaited all those eggs that fell to the ground below?

"Urgh... Uwaaaaah!" Angeline fell to her knees, burying her face in her hands.

How could I possibly face Belgrieve now? How could I possibly call him dad? I don't have the right...

The shadow enveloping Angeline swelled in size. The air was filled with what sounded like an earthquake, and the flurry was now a blizzard. The space behind her seemed to twist out of shape. The shadow swirled behind Angeline, and the center of the spiral, gradually growing wider and wider, revealed a pitch-black space within.

Every time she remembered the happy days she had spent as Angeline, each time she recalled those warm memories with friends and family, her sense of guilt only grew stronger. It felt like she was the only one who had been happy—that she had stolen the happiness of everyone else.

I can't be here. It's better if I'm not. Someone like me should just disappear.

Her hair began to thrash about like a tangled brood of writhing snakes. Her braid came undone, and the hair clip fixed to her bangs fell away.

“I’m sorry...”

The pitch-black space behind her swallowed Angeline whole.

“Ange!” Anessa cried out.

In a quavering voice, Miriam asked, “Wh-What is that...?”

“A hole in space produced by the flow of events,” Schwartz muttered. “A stream of phenomena tracing back from a distant past has coalesced here. You have my thanks.”

“You little...” Marguerite rushed him with her sword poised to strike, but before she could reach him, Schwartz teleported in front of the pitch-black space and entered it himself. Marguerite stopped short of the darkness, her ardor faltering. “Why... Why’s it gotta be like this?!?” Marguerite punched at the ground.

Dragging along his peg leg, Belgrieve finally arrived. He frowned, a perplexed look on his face. “What happened?”

“Bell...” Satie looked at him with tearful eyes.

Percival sat on the ground with his head hung, utterly drained. Kasim stood with his arms folded, his hat pulled low over his eyes. Byaku had collapsed and lay limply on the ground, breathing roughly.

Anessa had broken down in tears. “Mr. Bell...”

Miriam sobbed and hugged him. “Ange... Ange is...”

“Graham?”

“I’m sorry. I wasn’t strong enough.”

Graham had fallen to one knee, leaning against his sword and staring at his shaking palm. He seemed frustrated that his full-powered attack had failed to take down Schwartz.

Belgrieve looked up—the hole in space was still open, the void of nothingness still swirling.

The snow was letting up ever so slightly.

CHAPTER 153

BELGRIEVE AWOKE TO THE SOUND OF CRYING

Belgrieve awoke to the sound of crying. His five-year-old daughter was sleeping beside him, and she seemed to be weeping in her sleep.

The moonlight streamed in through the window, casting the room in dim light. Belgrieve gently placed a hand on her belly and softly patted her. Her eyes faintly cracked open.

“Dad...?”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

Angeline wriggled her way over and hugged him. He smiled at her as he gently rubbed her head. “What’s wrong?”

“Had a bad dream...” Angeline buried her face in his chest. “Dad was gone. I was alone... Everything was black.”

“Yeah... I see. That must have been scary.”

“But it was just a dream. That’s good.” Angeline looked up at Belgrieve, smiling through her tears.

Returning the smile, Belgrieve patted Angeline’s head. “Do you think you can go back to sleep?”

“Dunno.”

“How about something to drink?” he said as he climbed out of bed. He lit the lamp and stoked the embers in the fireplace. There was still some of the goat milk from Kerry left over, so he warmed it up in a small pan with a bit of sugar. As soon as it began to steam, he poured it into a wooden cup and handed it to Angeline. “Make sure you blow on it before you drink. *Whew, whew.*”

"Okay!" Angeline happily took the cup, blowing on the warm goat milk as she drank it.
"So sweet. It's tasty."

"That's good. Once you're done drinking, let's go back to bed." Belgrieve smiled as he sipped at his own cup of goat milk.

A piece of burning wood snapped in the fireplace, giving off a trail of smoke that disappeared up the chimney.

Angeline cradled the cup in both hands as she sat on Belgrieve's lap and gazed absently at the flickering flames until she had drunk the last of her milk. She stood up.
"I'll rinse my mouth... then sleep."

"Yes, yes. Good girl."

They rinsed out their cups and washed their mouths with water before returning to bed. Angeline clung fast to Belgrieve, her hands clamped like vices to his sleeve.

"Dad..."

"Hmm?"

"You're not going anywhere, right, dad?"

"Yeah, dad isn't going anywhere." Belgrieve smiled and gently patted Angeline's head.

○

After he'd gotten an explanation of everything that had transpired, Belgrieve did not hesitate a moment before he said he would follow Angeline. He put down his basket and straightened the sword on his belt. Phantom pain still pulsed faintly in his amputated leg, but it was a lot better now than it had been earlier.

Belgrieve's heart was surprisingly calm even after learning that Angeline had been the creature that had taken his leg away. Even he thought he should have been a little more perturbed by that and didn't exactly know why he was feeling so levelheaded, but there wasn't any particular resentment surging within him, so there wasn't much he could do about that.

What he was certain of was that Angeline would be feeling sad now and that reaching

out a hand to her was his duty. “She’s a kind girl. I’m sure she’s beating herself up over it and hurting,” Belgrieve muttered.

“I... wasn’t able to believe in Ange,” Satie said, sniffling. “I’m her mother, but for a moment, I was scared of her... I’m the worst.”

“It’s all right. It’s not your fault.” Belgrieve gently rubbed her back.

“What should I have done?” Kasim muttered, clutching his knees. “I’d think about it now and then. If we hadn’t run into that fiend back then, if your leg wasn’t taken away, maybe the four of us would still be on adventures together. Maybe I wouldn’t have gotten so twisted and wasted half my life getting up to no good... That’s why I couldn’t do anything. I mean, I know that she’s still Ange, but...”

“Kasim...” Satie sobbed.

Perhaps Kasim was right—had they never come across Angeline, perhaps they wouldn’t have gone through so much pain in the past. *Even so...* Belgrieve inspected his bag of tools. He carefully made sure his peg leg was properly attached before tapping it against the ground. Everything seemed to be in order. Belgrieve nodded slightly before turning to Graham.

“Graham, what happened to you...?”

“I cannot triumph over old age. One swing put me in this state. It’s pathetic.” Graham closed his eyes and sighed. Then, he held out his greatsword, which was growling softly. “Take it. I can’t move, but *this one* still has energy to spare.”

Belgrieve accepted it with a smile. “Thanks.”

“Take care.”

“Mr. Bell.” Anessa had come up to him with her bow and arrows. She had a nervous look on her face, and so did Miriam. They both held their weapons tight as they looked at Belgrieve.

“We’re going too.”

“I don’t know about everyone’s past and whatnot, but Ange’s our ally and leader, and... you know.”

"If that's what you want. No one has any right to stop you," said Belgrieve.

Marguerite raced in carrying a basket filled with a great many hanks of yarn. "I got them!"

"Thanks. How were the kids?"

"Apparently, they suddenly started to act up. They had a hard time getting under control, but they're sleeping now."

Belgrieve frowned. *So that branch has the power to awaken all demons...* Apparently, this had caused a bit of a ruckus in the village, but with Yakumo, Lucille, Duncan, and the Bordeaux sisters there to handle it, nobody had been injured. It helped that the adventurers hired to guard the peddlers had chipped in when it counted.

To think that the effects of the magic reached as far as the children that weren't even around... Solomon's powers were fearsome indeed, and it was only through sheer luck that nothing significant had come of the incident.

Marguerite, having treated her wounds, stamped her feet with a pout on her face. "That's everything, right? I won't let Ange get away with a win. I need to give her what's coming to her. I won't let the curtain fall with me on a losing streak."

Although she was hurt, she seemed keen on going anyway, and Graham wasn't about to stop her. Angeline's three party members did not have any past trauma weighing them down. They appeared to be very reliable in Belgrieve's eyes.

Percival scratched his head. "Are you really fine with this, Bell?"

"With what?"

"Ange may be Ange. But she's also our sworn enemy."

"I guess she is."

"I've chased after her for years, and I was planning on picking up the trail from here onward too. But to think it would turn out like this..."

"Percy..."

"What am I supposed to do? I hated her so much that I didn't know what to do with myself. No matter what I had to abandon, I knew I'd never be satisfied until I struck her dead. She's the one that tore us all apart. And yet... What is this? What the hell am I supposed to do?!"

"Percy." Belgrieve placed a hand on Percival's shoulder and looked the man straight in the eye. "Ange is my daughter. She is either family or friend to everyone here, nothing more, nothing less."

Percival looked like he had something to say, but in the end, he gave up. He closed his eyes, folded his arms, and sat down. "Got it." He smacked his cheeks without holding back, and they were a bit red when his hands came away.

"No more dragging out the past! Not like we can ever return to those times anyway. In that case, it makes sense to grab hold of the best future we can get right now! How's that sound, Kasim?!" It had been a while since Percival's last coughing fit, but the excitement got him coughing, and he took out his sachet.

Kasim stood and pulled back his hat. "Heh heh... If the leader says so!" He sounded happy and resolute. After all, Kasim hadn't been as resentful as Percival.

The snow had ceased, but the sky was still a pearly gray, and the scattered ashen clouds lower in the sky flowed fast in the powerful wind. *What happened to Lady Winter? If the snow stopped, does that mean she went off somewhere else? Was she drawn to these happenings?* Belgrieve wondered.

He stood before the twisted space. It was pitch-black within, and he had no idea what he might find. The holy sword growled in his hands.

Miriam swallowed her breath. "How long... will this space remain open? It won't suddenly close on us, will it?"

"Don't ask me," said Anessa. "But we have to go, right?"

Marguerite nodded. "We're adventurers. Let's go on an adventure, why don't we?!" Marguerite still marched to the beat of her own drum, though her attitude had softened a bit.

Miriam chuckled. "Heh heh! Well said, Maggie."

Belgrieve scooped up Angeline's hair clip from where it had fallen to the ground. After clenching it tightly in his hand, he tucked it into his tool bag.

He turned to Satie. "Please stay here. I'm counting on you to treat Byaku and look after the kids."

Satie bit her lip. "You might not come back, you know. Are you really going to leave me behind?"

"I'm sorry. But I think this is my duty."

"I know... You're right. Give my love to Ange." Satie smiled with tears still in her eyes. Belgrieve softly drew her close and locked her in a tight embrace.

"Don't worry. I'll definitely come back."

"I'll hold you to it." Satie pressed her lips to Belgrieve's before parting.

Percival drew his sword from its sheath. "Let's go."

"Yeah."

"Old man!" Belgrieve turned to see Byaku staring at him. "I'm counting on you."

"Yeah, leave it to me." Belgrieve smiled.

○

Though the world around Angeline was pitch-black, she could still see her own feet. Step by step, she continued to move forward aimlessly. Perhaps she wasn't even moving forward at all—it was possible she was simply walking in place. Even so, she felt like she had to keep moving her feet.

The smell of blood still lingered. It was unbearably unpleasant, but she also felt it fit her perfectly. Tears poured from her eyes—she wouldn't be able to see her family or her friends ever again, and she wouldn't want to even if she could. After all, she had stolen the future away from the one she held dearest, then infiltrated his home and lived a carefree life as though nothing had happened. For that, she could never forgive herself.

"His 'daughter'? Please..." she murmured, her own words like daggers in her heart. *Why don't I just take my own life?* But she was scared, and despite her deep despair, she still held on to hope.

You can't hold on to something like that. You don't deserve it.

From the tips of her toes, she could feel something creeping over her. Looking down, she saw that she was beginning to change into a black, featureless form, almost like a shadow.

Oh, I see. I'm returning to being a demon.

Angeline accepted it. She thought it was right and for the best. There was a tightness in the back of her throat. She felt lonely. Her nose was runny, and there was heat behind her eyelids. Her tears wouldn't stop.

I'll never see dad again. That thought made her sadder than anything else. No matter how she convinced herself that it was what she deserved, she could not shake off the sorrow. *Just hurry and make me a demon already. Once I stop being Angeline, won't this suffering end? I'll forget about my friends, my comrades, my family... I'll forget everything.*

"Urgh..." Her feet stopped. She fell to her knees and covered her face with her hands. *I don't want that. I don't want to forget. Nothing good comes from forgetting.*

But her warm memories were nothing but torture to her now. It was like they were eating her from within. Having a heart was painful. She couldn't walk anymore, so she curled up, burying her face in her knees, and cried.

Black mist began to coil around her.

○

The other side of the portal was just as pitch-black as it had seemed from outside, but Belgrieve could still see himself clearly when he looked down. It was neither particularly hot nor cold, and since their footsteps made no sound, they were surrounded by ominous stillness. Only the breathing of his companions and the beating of his own heart remained to be heard, amplified by the silence.

They were moving forward at a considerable pace—or at least, it felt like they were—

but there was no sign yet of Angeline or Schwartz. The same pitch-black void simply seemed to continue on for eternity. With that said, now and then, a transparent ghostly apparition with a humanlike shape would float by overhead.

Belgrieve looked back. The trail of yarn extended back farther than he could see. He was cautiously leaving a trail behind as he walked. He didn't know if there was any point to it, but doing so put his mind at ease, knowing that there was a way back. Of course, he had no way of knowing if he had enough yarn for the journey.

For a while, the party warily pressed on without a word, but eventually, the silence became unbearable. It wasn't clear who had started the conversation that was now bouncing back and forth.

"He said this was a coalescence of events, right?"

"Yeah." Kasim scratched his head. "I thought it was the drivel of a madman, but it looks like it was true..."

Everything that Salazar had said about the flow of events had been a complete enigma to Belgrieve as well, though if even Kasim couldn't fully grasp it, perhaps that went without saying. However, one thing seemed clear—Schwartz had applied the theory with the end goal of punching a hole through space. Why was Angeline the key to doing that? This was still unknown.

Anessa spoke up. "Apparently, Ange is human because she was born with a demon's soul in an elven body."

"Where did you get that from?" Kasim asked.

Miriam answered, "Ange said so herself. She went off to that old hag and asked her a few things on her own."

"If it's from Maria, then that's credible information..."

"But a child between a demon and an elf is human? I don't really get it," said Marguerite.

Anessa folded her arms. "Um, a human's soul is like the middle of the road. Neither black nor white..."

"Hmm... So they can roll both ways, huh? Just like how there are good people and bad people."

"But what's that got to do with the 'flow of events'...? That blasted Schwartz, working on the most esoteric of things..." Kasim sighed and shook his head wearily.

Unlike everyone else following him, Percival kept his peace as he led them. Belgrieve looked at him with concern.

"Percy... Are you all right?"

"Don't worry. I'm not planning on cutting Ange down," Percival answered bluntly.

He's really trying to keep a lid on his emotions, by the sound of it... This was the man who had sought out the demon hiding within Angeline for over twenty years. Sorting out his feelings on the matter would not be an easy task.

Belgrieve closed his eyes and twisted the hairs of his beard. "Sorry... But this is one thing I won't back down on."

Percival heaved a deep sigh. "It's fine. It was originally my own self-conceit, anyways. For me... it was anger and hatred of that fiend that kept me going. Sure, hating something so unrelentingly did harden my heart, but the fiend also made it clear where I stood and what my role was... I thought it was something I could chase and kill with nothing to hold me back. *Cough, hack...*"

Percival took out his sachet and pressed it against his mouth. "But to think it would turn out to be your daughter. Good grief... I don't have it in me to kill my friend's little girl. So now, what am I supposed to do with all that anger?"

Percival had tried to play the matter off as a joke, but his levity was so forced that it was painful to listen to. Belgrieve struggled to find the right words to say to that, but not for long.

"In that case, just stop being angry, right?" Marguerite chimed in from behind. "Don't you think you're a bit too old to be going around everywhere with that sour look on your face? This is why everyone calls you a monster."

"What was that?" Percival yelled.

"What, you wanna have a go?" Marguerite yelled back.

Percival scowled at her for a moment, but he couldn't stop the laughter from spewing out. "Ha ha ha ha! You've got a point there! Just how long am I going to hold on to this anger?"

Kasim burst out laughing. "Looks like you just needed an idiot to set you straight, Percy."

"Who are you calling an idiot?" Marguerite pouted.

The mood softened, and the party pressed on. But the scenery around them showed no signs of change. *So we're still at a loss here*, Belgrieve thought, a somewhat perturbed look on his face.

Percival smacked him on the back. "Don't make that face, Bell."

"Ow... Sorry."

"It's not like I'm completely over it. But I won't talk about it for now."

Belgrieve smiled. "Thank you."

They continued onward, picking up the pace a little. It was a mysterious space, and the ground—if it could even be called that—was perfectly level all throughout. He had already run through two hanks of yarn. Whenever one ran out, he would tie its end to the next one and begin unraveling that, but at this rate, he wasn't sure if he'd have enough.

A peculiar presence filled the air. A black mist was gradually beginning to overtake the area. As everything around them had been black to begin with, no one paid it much attention, but it was clearly growing thicker. The holy sword roared loudly.

"Something's coming!" Belgrieve warned.

Everybody immediately readied their weapon and stood on guard. A number of black shadows were approaching, blending in with the mist. Just before the nearest one could lunge at them, Kasim blasted it away with his magic.

"Demons...? No, doesn't look like it. But they don't seem to be allies either."

"Heh heh... Just what I needed. I was getting bored!"

Marguerite enthusiastically brandished her sword and sliced through an approaching figure. There seemed to be a great number of them lurking beyond the darkness. They moved unsteadily like zombies as they approached.

With one swing of his sword, Percival sent six of them flying at once. "I'm in a bad mood... I'll be taking it out on all of you."

The shadows dissipated as soon as they were sliced through. The more of them they defeated, the more the mist seemed to clear. *What exactly are they? And what sort of place are we in to begin with?* Belgrieve wondered. Suddenly, his amputated leg began to throb, and Graham's sword growled. Beyond the thinning mist, he saw a seated figure clutching its knees. The mist seemed to be concentrated around the being.

"Ah! Ange!" Belgrieve shouted.

The huddled-up figure shuddered and looked towards them. It was certainly Angeline. Her expression was fearful as could be, and she looked at them with teary eyes, bewildered.

"Ange! Come back! It's not like you to run away!" Anessa called out.

"That's right! Are you going to abandon us?" Miriam cried.

Angeline covered her ears and shook her head.

I don't have the right to be with everyone.

She hadn't spoken aloud, but it was as though the void itself resonated to convey her words.

"What 'right' are you even talking about?!" Marguerite angrily called out. "You're not getting away with a win against me, stupid Ange!"

Marguerite scattered all the encroaching shadows in one burst before rushing straight at Angeline. Angeline fearfully cowered, pushing her hands out at Marguerite.

Don't come any closer, Maggie!

Black-stained fingertips stretched out like spears. Marguerite, wide-eyed, twisted her body to avoid them. Even so, new lacerations were opened across her body, and fresh blood oozed down her skin.

"You wench... Fine, I'll beat you up and drag you back by force!" Losing her temper, Marguerite readied her sword again, but she detected a peculiar presence descending from above. When she looked up, she saw a conspicuously larger shadow falling straight for her, its unnaturally long hand reaching out as though to crush her flat.

"Another one?!" Miriam murmured, conjuring lightning.

"Dammit, there's too many of them..." Anessa's enchanted arrows exploded all around them. Even so, the shadows were gaining momentum. They continued to shamble out from beyond the mist.

"Hmm... It'd be nice if I could fire off some grand magic, but Ange would get caught up in it..." Kasim grumbled as he settled for rapidly firing off bolts of magic.

"Mr. Bell..." Miriam pleaded to Belgrieve. Anessa was looking at him too.

"I'll do it."

Belgrieve squeezed the hilt of the holy sword and began walking towards Angeline's shuddering figure.

Stay away!

Belgrieve raised the sword aloft, undaunted. He took a deep breath before letting loose a powerful downward swing along with his exhaled breath. A turbulent torrent of mana raged forth from the blade, immediately pushing back all the seething shadows.

The light emitted by the sword and the ensuing mana blast illuminated the void, dulling the movement of their foes. Angeline held her head in pain as she got up and stumbled away into the darkness where the mist was heavier. There appeared to be a faintly visible hole there which she had seemingly fled into. Belgrieve raced forth after Angeline.

"Ange! Wait! If you don't pull yourself together, I'm surely going to get angry, really!" Percival yelled as he made to follow behind Belgrieve, but the shadows surged forth to impede him.

As Belgrieve passed through the dark mist, the light of the holy sword grew dimmer. The shadows were like an expression of Angeline's will to keep everyone away from her, surrounding the party and separating the rest of them from Belgrieve, who had rushed ahead. Unlike before, defeating these ones did not thin the mist. In fact, it seemed to be growing thicker. It coiled around them, weighing down their bodies.

"Out of the way!"

"Bell!"

Belgrieve glanced back as he ran. The gap between him and his companions had been completely crammed full of shadows, and it didn't look like he would be able to reunite with them. He couldn't let this go on. Belgrieve whispered to the holy sword, "Please protect everyone." Then he drew the blade back, took aim, and threw it with all his might. The tip pierced into the ground with a mighty tremor. The sword growled, and within the soft glowing light it emanated, the shadows all instantly began moving several magnitudes slower.

Kasim stared in disbelief. "Bell, what do you think you're doing?!"

"She wants to see me. A father doesn't need a weapon to talk to his daughter," Belgrieve said before turning back to follow Angeline.

The hole beyond the mist was growing smaller. Strangely, the shadows never went after Belgrieve. If these were a manifestation of Angeline's will, then she was calling for him—that was how he saw it.

"Hey, Bell!" Percival shouted, slicing through the shadows.

"Wait for me. I'll definitely return."

"You... You fool! You'd better return! And you better not come back alone!" Percival yelled, punctuating his words by cutting a large hand that came down from above to ribbons.

"I believe in you, Bell! Let's all have dinner together later!" Kasim encouraged him.

"Please, Mr. Bell!" said Anessa.

"Make sure you come back with Ange!" Miriam pleaded.

And finally, Marguerite shouted, "You won't hear the end of it if you die!"

Belgrieve answered with a sharp, wordless nod.

The farther he went, the worse his phantom pain grew. But Belgrieve gritted his teeth.
This is nothing.

Eventually, he too had disappeared from everyone's sight.

CHAPTER 154

AFTER PASSING THROUGH THE HOLE BEYOND THE FOG

After passing through the hole beyond the fog, Belgrieve's vision was unobstructed once more, but it was still as dark as it had been before. In this endless void, it was hard to even tell what was in front of or behind him. Belgrieve turned around; the yarn dangling behind him seemed to simply disappear somewhere down the line.

"I suppose I just have to go for it."

He could only continue forward. That was what he had intended to do from the start—he couldn't lose his nerve now. Curiously, his phantom pain had died down. He wondered if it had perhaps been caused by the fog, but he could do little more than speculate.

Belgrieve walked quickly but cautiously. He had nothing to guide him, but he knew that Angeline lay just beyond. He didn't know how far he had gone. Even his sense of time had become hazy. He hurried onward regardless, and eventually, he could make out a humanoid shape a little farther down the path.

"Ange!" Belgrieve called out as he ran to join her. But as he got closer, it soon became apparent it wasn't Angeline at all. He reached for his sword, his heart racing, as he took in the form of a man in a hooded white robe—it was Schwartz. He was still missing the left arm that Graham had taken from him, but he didn't seem to be bleeding.

Schwartz stopped and looked at him. "So you're here, Red Ogre."

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes, poised to draw his sword at any moment.

Schwartz chuckled. "Don't be afraid. I have no reason to fight you."

That's rich, coming from someone who made such a mess, Belgrieve thought sullenly. But it was true enough that he couldn't imagine any reason to fight Schwartz here and now—never mind that Belgrieve couldn't possibly defeat such a foe.

"You're searching for your daughter, aren't you?" asked Schwartz.

Belgrieve looked at him. "Do you know where she is?"

"She ran past me."

Schwartz tilted his head in the same direction they had both been heading. Belgrieve squinted and gazed into the distance, but it was futile. It was still nothing more than a dark, endless void.

"Want to come with me? We're both headed in the same direction, in any case."

"What are you scheming?"

"We simply share a destination, that's all. So are you coming or not?"

Schwartz had laid it out simply, urging him to make a choice quickly.

Belgrieve gave it a moment's thought; sure enough, they were going the same way, and reluctant as he was about it, he would need to share the road with this man. Thus, he followed a short distance behind the robed man.

Schwartz began to speak without turning his gaze from the darkness ahead. "I owe a lot to you. If you weren't around, I wouldn't have been able to reach this place."

"Where are we...?"

"Somewhere beyond time and space. The same place that Solomon disappeared to, long ago."

"Solomon..." Belgrieve peered around, but there was still nothing to see. Judging from his tone, it was clear that Schwartz was telling the truth about wanting to come here, yet Belgrieve couldn't imagine what specifically motivated him. Belgrieve stared dubiously at the man's back. "What were you even trying to accomplish in the end?"

"Two things. First, to come here, and second, to see the other side," Schwartz nonchalantly explained. "I'd grown sick and tired of that world. Part of it was that I'd just lived a little too long. I'd come to know the limits of magic. And more than anything, I grew curious about where the strongest magician in history had gone. It wasn't the world beyond death—that's something I figured out after all my research

into necromancy—which is how I arrived at time-space magic as the answer. My interest turned to the alternate dimension that Solomon had disappeared to.”

With the curtains pulled back on his motives, Belgrieve found them to be surprisingly simple. It was just as Graham had surmised—Schwartz was driven by the boundless curiosity and inquisitive nature of a magician.

“Just for something like that...” Belgrieve muttered.

Schwartz burst out laughing. “*Just* something like that? Certainly, it might seem trivial to you people. But from my point of view, the happiness all of you pursue is just as inconsequential. Joy and delight, in the end, are nothing more than passing emotions. They leave absolutely nothing behind when they’re gone.”

“Curiosity’s the same.”

“It is not. Curiosity gives birth to something new. Magic in its entirety is the result of the curiosity of magicians. Development and innovation stems from curiosity. Happiness is satisfaction, and satisfaction is stagnation. It cannot produce anything. Though it could also be said that curiosity has a nature like a binding spell.”

“And you were bound by it, then?” Belgrieve asked, surprised to hear that note of cynicism from Schwartz, who only acknowledged his question with a burst of laughter.

“But that too had its limits. The massive flow of events required to bore the path to this space would only move with a strong surge of emotion. The greater the height, the greater the impact of the fall. If I wanted to produce energy, joy and love were indispensable. This was impossible for me no matter what I did. But then you came and did it for me.”

“In the first place, what is the flow of events? Why did you use Ange?”

“Let me explain things one at a time. For starters, any and all events are linked. Just as the wind drives ocean waves, a breath can stir the heart. One action gives way to another phenomenon, all of them becoming a great flow that constructs the world.”

Belgrieve nodded. *I can accept that. Anything and everything has a cause.*

“But human beings have wills—and not even just humans. Those who research time-space magic, especially with a focus on the flow of events, call this the soul. The soul

makes different demands from the primal, animalistic survival instinct that all living things possess. Demands for authority, fame, pleasure... I would classify love as one of these too."

"And those come together to make a 'flow of events'?"

"That's right. A new flow, a subconscious flow. Unlike the phenomenon of the wind driving the waves, the soul acts with intention to make or manipulate the flow. Those who have souls that can affect great things will come to be known as heroes. Such people take their surroundings along with them and cause massive shifts in events. A hero changes the course of a war, becomes the founder of a nation, or hunts down a great evil. These individuals become the center of a major flow of events."

"Do they all end up here, then?"

"Not necessarily. But I've heard of several cases where it did happen. Those who are lauded as heroes in war become a nuisance to get rid of in peacetime. Some say the lament of such souls bored a hole through space. And such a flow can draw in those who are not human. I assume that is why Lady Winter appeared a moment ago." Schwartz paused for a moment.

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes and said, "And so?"

"The power to bore through time and space is usually born from despair. It was just so for Solomon, before—the realization that one has no place in the world causes an explosion of emotions that can create swirls in the current. Those spiraling motions can penetrate space-time. So at first, I thought to simply sow chaos through the world. That was why I had been raising Ba'al in Orphen, though that girl thwarted me then."

"You were trying to go for the despair of a hero born on the battlefield? But..." *Why Ange?* Belgrieve furrowed his brow. If despair for the world was the key, then he felt like Percival would have been a far more viable candidate. Belgrieve said as much, a quizzical look on his face.

"The Exalted Blade, huh?" said Schwartz. "Certainly, he has the caliber of a hero. However, when it comes to great phenomena, the flow leading up to them is just as important. Not only the Exalted Blade but all of your comrades have the makings of heroes, yet they never managed to reach this point. That is because there was no flow leading them here. Perhaps their despair came a little too early, too abruptly. Over the

course of her travels, that girl managed to take all their flows along with her. That is precisely why she managed to create such a massive current."

"It's almost like you were trying to orchestrate the climax to a play."

"Yes, precisely—that is a perfect way to put it. When I saw that girl up close at the archduke's estate, I realized that the flow of events seemed to be centered around her. She had power, and she had the ability to break down the trials before her and press on. That girl could repel all the pressure surrounding her. Even the ancient forest was driven back by her."

Belgrieve looked up, aghast. "So that attack..."

"Indeed, it was me. With that said, I simply figured a former demon would have a strong dependence on something. I aimed to heighten her emotions by attacking her homeland, but I missed the mark. The flow of events is complicated. To put it simply, my scheme was misplaced. That's why I crafted a false persona to observe you people."

And that was Ishmael, huh? Belgrieve had heard about that from his friends. To think that the companion whom he had fought alongside and swapped campfire stories with would turn out to be his greatest foe. It was a devastating realization.

Schwartz went on. "Meeting, growth, parting, love, fighting evil... All these various factors raised her up, and all who got involved with her added to her flow. I was convinced this girl was the center of the phenomenon I needed. However, I could not foresee the terminal point of the flow. So I directly intervened to cause it to spiral on my own."

"How...?"

"First, I purposely chose defeat at the capital. A reunion with friends and family, and a triumph over evil—your comrades all had the makings of great heroes. That would surely enhance the force behind the flow... But the effect was not as great as I had hoped for. Positive emotions weren't enough; I would need to have her negative emotions burst out. That's where I got a certain idea. First, I would give her happiness. I would give her relief that her problems had been resolved and her objective achieved. I would let her cling to the hope that it would continue forever. Then, I would take everything from her."

Belgrieve glared at Schwartz, but the man's gaze remained dispassionate in return.

"I have the ability to perceive the pasts of others. But I need more than a little contact to do so. That's why I used Ishmael to interact with you while I looked into your past. There was a time when the elf woman worked alongside us, so I had a plethora of memories to choose from. I picked the most painful scenes and emotions and showed them to Angeline as dreams using this right here."

From the folds of his robe, Schwartz produced a branch from an apple tree and showed it to Belgrieve—Solomon's Key.

"It was just the catalyst I needed. But the clincher was your leg. She was the one who had inflicted the greatest wound on the one she loved and depended on the most. This fact was more than enough to shake up her heart. She overflowed with emotion as she lost her place in the world."

"Don't tell me... That's the reason you had Satie give birth to Ange?"

"No, that was entirely coincidental," Schwartz flatly denied. "That was outside of my expectations. Naturally, I could have never even imagined that the baby would make its way to you either. However, perhaps events had begun to flow in a certain direction from that very moment. Like a fallen leaf riding the current of a mighty river, the direction that girl would drift was already decided. It was only natural to see it that way; I simply perceived the flow and directed it."

"Why did you try to make demons into humans?"

"Because I wanted to give birth to the strongest souls. Solomon's homunculi were powerful, but they were mere constructs. They were like soulless programs. It was impossible for them to direct events in their base forms."

"That's why you made them into humans?"

"That's right. With that said, everyone else seemed to regard them as merely powerful weapons. Not that I ever expected to come across anyone who could understand my designs in the first place. We were merely using one another, and making weapons out of demons turned out to be a complete joke. It is no exaggeration to say that everyone apart from myself failed at everything they set out to do."

Schwartz offhandedly tossed the branch aside. Belgrieve looked down at it, then at Schwartz.

“You’re casting it aside?”

“I don’t need it anymore. I’ve hopped aboard the flow. Now that I’m here, it’s no trouble if I’m swallowed up by it.”

Their conversation lulled there, and the two of them walked on in silence for a while longer until Schwartz broke it with a question.

“You’re not angry?”

“Me?”

“Yes. I have memories of traveling with you as Ishmael. I am the ringleader who put your daughter through such terrible things. I took you for quite the doting father... Was I wrong about that?”

“I’m livid. If killing you would bring Ange back, I’d do so even if I had to sacrifice myself in the process.”

“Oh?”

“But I’m here to get Ange. I didn’t come to kill you.” Belgrieve sighed. “I can’t sympathize with or understand anything you’ve done. But ironically... I would have never met Ange if you hadn’t been there. I would have never learned of Satie’s suffering, and I’d never have known Percy’s lament or Kasim’s sorrow either... I’m a bit disgusted by my own selfishness, frankly.”

Schwartz laughed loudly. “My word, what a strange one you are! It’s rare to come across a man like you. You’re risking your own life to save your daughter, but you won’t even direct your anger at the very cause of her torment.”

“Was your goal really just to come here?”

“That’s right.”

“That’s far stranger, in my opinion.”

Suddenly, Belgrieve realized there was finally a visible divide between the sky and the earth. A boundless horizon spread out before him, and soon, there were stars twinkling in the dark sky above. Try as he might, he couldn’t make out a single

recognizable constellation. Eventually, far off in the distance, he could make out a faint light. The two of them locked their eyes on it and walked on with single-minded focus. The ground was neither hard nor soft, but walking for so long was exhausting all the same. Just as their feet began to ache, they came near enough to begin to make out the shape of this peculiar light source.

“A tree?” Belgrieve squinted.

It was indeed a faintly glowing tree—an apple tree, with branches spread far and wide. It was teeming with countless leaves, not one of which showed any sign of being gnawed on by insects. The branches were abundant with plump, red apples. There was an indistinct figure sitting down next to the trunk. *Black hair... Ange?* Belgrieve thought, but it soon became apparent it wasn’t her.

Schwartz forthrightly marched up to the tree, while Belgrieve warily trailed after. He was close enough now to see the figure reclining against the trunk was a man in a voluminous robe, with coarse black hair long enough to reach the ground. He was tossing a ripe apple into the air and then catching it again one-handed as though it were a ball.

The black-haired man turned his head towards the interlopers, revealing features that were still young—childish, even. His eyes seemed sleepy at a glance, though they had a sharp glint to them.

“Oh dear... I’m getting a lot of visitors today.”

“Solomon. What lies beyond here?” Schwartz asked.

Belgrieve turned to Schwartz in surprise. Likewise, the black-haired man looked at them inquisitively.

“Hmm? You know me? Who are you?”

“Schwartz, a magician.”

Solomon tossed the apple up and caught it, an amused look on his face. “Hmm? A magician? So you came here after you ran out of things to see down there, huh?”

“If you understand, then that makes things quicker.”

"I'm sorry if you got your hopes up, but there's nothing here for you. Not a thing."

"Oh?"

"You look like you don't believe me."

"The fact that there's something *here* means that there has to be something *beyond*."

"Tsk... I hate guys like you the most," Solomon complained. He huffed on the apple and polished it with his sleeve. "Do you really want to see what's past here? It's not a nice and orderly world like this one."

"I don't mind."

"You've got strange tastes. Well, do what you want." Solomon snapped his fingers.

Belgrieve was startled by the sudden gesture and instinctively reached for his sword. At the same time, Schwartz's right arm immediately crumbled away as though it had been made of clumps of dirt.

Schwartz was momentarily taken aback, but that quickly gave way to laughter. "I see! This is wonderful! It looks like there are still so many things I don't know!"

"You're just as stupid as I used to be," Solomon wearily muttered.



Schwartz turned to Belgrieve. The face that peered out from his hood—the face that had always been shrouded in shadows—was the spitting image of Ishmael.

“That face...”

“This is the first time I’ve ever shown my real face since I started calling myself Schwartz.” Schwartz’s lips curled into a grin. “Farewell, Red Ogre! May we never meet again.”

“Wait! Hey!” Belgrieve reached for the man unconsciously, but Schwartz’s body continued to crumble until he was nothing but dust. The particles dispersed in the air, swept away by an imperceptible force. Only the echoes of his laughter remained, and even those soon diminished and then fell silent. Belgrieve was dumbfounded at what he had witnessed.

Solomon placed his polished apple down beside him before taking a new one and beginning to polish that too. His eyes barely glanced at Belgrieve. “How about you?”

“My name... is Belgrieve.”

Solomon seemed pleasantly surprised. “Oh, we have a polite one here. Don’t stand so far away. Here, come closer.”

Belgrieve cautiously approached, still taken aback by the surreality of his situation. The young man before him had once created demons and reigned at the highest seat of power in the world; he was the very archmage whose reign of terror had only ended when he vanished to the ends of time and space. Without even thinking to do so, Belgrieve’s hand remained on the hilt of his sword, though he could not detect any hostility from Solomon.

Solomon looked down at his polished, glowing apple and gave a satisfied nod. “Your friend went on to a formless world of magic. There, color, sound, emotion, all of it at once assails you with just as much substance as physical constructs. It’s enough to drive a fellow mad.”

“He wasn’t my friend. If I had to say, we were sworn enemies.”

“Enemies? Then why were you walking together all buddy-buddy-like?”

“I came here in search of my daughter. We just happened to be going in the same

direction.”

“Your daughter?”

“Have you seen her? She has black hair, just like you.”

“She was here. She came and went. But the girl who came here was *my* child, not yours.” Solomon tossed his apple into the air. “I’ve done a terrible thing to those children by leaving them behind... Do you know what’s become of them?”

“They went on a rampage. I’ve heard that almost everything you created was destroyed after you left.”

“I see.” Solomon caught the apple and took a deep breath. “Then what happened after that? Did the world fall apart? No, I’d guess not. I mean, you came here, after all.”

“Apparently, they were hunted down by a hero with the blessing of Almighty Vienna,” Belgrieve explained. “Even then, they couldn’t be completely destroyed.”

Solomon’s gaze softened as he reminisced. “Oh, what a nostalgic name... I see. So in the end, she cleaned up after my mess. ‘Almighty,’ huh? Well, I guess the other gods are all gone, so it makes sense.” Solomon continued muttering under his breath, heedless of Belgrieve’s ability to completely follow along. It was like he was talking to himself.

“She was a good girl. She loved humanity and hated bloodshed. I just wanted her to smile... I wonder where it all went wrong.”

“Are you sure it wasn’t at the point where you took control of the continent by force?”

“I did do that, yes—after I exterminated the old gods who were oppressing mankind. She was overjoyed by that, you know. Back then, humans were no more than slaves, squashed like bugs at the whim of the old gods and forced to wage pointless wars like it was some kind of board game. That girl alone... She was different.”

Solomon tossed his apple into the distance. The fruit bounced a few times and rolled a little ways before coming to a stop.

“She seemed so happy whenever humanity was happy. That’s why I did the best that I could. But once things began to get too convenient, everyone started to get carried away. They got arrogant and would quarrel over the littlest things. They even started

waging wars again. It devastated her to see it. I went around to all the kings and generals, pleading for them to put a stop to it—but it was hopeless. I was disappointed, and I didn't even know why I'd defeated the old gods anymore.”

“So that's why you seized power?”

“That's right. With my seventy-two powerful children, it was easily done, and it didn't get any harder after that. I could suppress all who opposed me with force—after all, no one was a match for my children. And yet, the line of people opposed to my rule was never-ending... So I killed them all and put an end to wars and human infighting. The ones I killed were all treacherous villains. But Vienna wasn't smiling anymore. We drifted further and further apart; I became annoyed that she couldn't understand me, even when I did it all for her sake!”

Solomon frustratedly scratched at his head with both hands, mussing up his hair.

“And after a time, humans began to see me as the enemy too. How selfish they were—when I was the one who had freed them from the old gods! After Vienna left, my children were the only allies I had left—but of course they were! They were born imbued with a spell sequence that made them revere me. They were mere constructs, impostors... In the end, no one ever truly understood me! It all just seemed so pointless to me. So I ran here, where I've remained ever since.”

Solomon prattled on animatedly before turning to Belgrieve. There was madness in his eyes. “Hey, what do you think? What do you think I should have done? Do you think I was wrong?”

“I think... you already know the answer,” Belgrieve answered gently.

Solomon froze, staring long and hard at Belgrieve, who simply returned his gaze, unmoved by the attention. Gradually, the madness in Solomon's eyes dimmed. At last, his shoulders drooped and he closed his eyes.

“I guess so. Truth be told, I understood back then, but I didn't want to. I was scared of understanding.” Solomon hugged his knees and stopped talking.

Belgrieve looked around. “You said my daughter passed through here. Do you know where she went?”

“What are you going to do if you find her? Sure, she has the body of a human, but half

of her has reverted to the same state I made her in. Do you think you can bring her back like that?"

Belgrieve silently stared at Solomon. Solomon uncomfortably shifted about. "She's your daughter, right? Did you raise her or something?" he mumbled.

"Yes, from when she was a very little girl."

"Do you treasure her?"

"No one in the world could take her place."

"She's a homunculus I made—there's no doubt about that. A sham of a soul. Even then?"

"That girl is *not* a sham." Belgrieve glared at Solomon. "She's my daughter, Angeline."

Solomon hung his head. After some time, he pointed with one of his hands. "That way. Go on."

"Thank you." Belgrieve's cloak fluttered behind him as he turned to leave. Before he could take more than a few steps, he heard Solomon's voice again.

"Hey."

Belgrieve turned to see Solomon watching him, fidgeting.

"A father... is supposed to pray for the happiness of his child, right?"

"At the very least. That's how I see it."

"I see..." Solomon said before leaning back against the tree and closing his eyes. "Angeline, huh... That's a good name."

Belgrieve nodded slightly before leaving.

The stars twinkling in the sky spurred him to pick up the pace. It wasn't long before Solomon and his apple tree were lost in the distance, and even the light of the tree no longer reached him. Before he knew it, the sky had been overtaken by pitch-black clouds. A faintly tepid wind brushed against his face.

Further still, the black fog was growing heavy, and he felt the throbbing of phantom pain once more.

"Ange..." Belgrieve muttered.

The closer he came, the more his amputated right leg ached. Even so, he couldn't stop, and soon his body was enshrouded in fog.

○

Angeline crouched and cowered, holding her head. She was like a young child trying to make herself smaller out of fear. Her arms and legs had already turned as black as the other shadowy figures, and that darkness had already slowly crept farther up her body, now encroaching on her face.

The wind whipped around her like a vicious storm, causing the black fog to spiral around. The howling wind was almost like a scornful laugh, sneering at her misfortune.

"Urgh..."

It's your fault. If it hadn't been for you, no one would have had to suffer.

A voice had continued to scream out in her head all the while. Percival, Kasim, Satie, and Belgrieve—it felt like all of them were pointing at her in rebuke.

"Dad... Dad would never say something like that..."

The words unconsciously poured from her mouth. But the moment they entered her ears, a different voice would cry out from her heart.

Who are you calling 'dad'? You stole his leg and snatched away the bright future he would have had. And then you infiltrated his life, pretending to be his daughter as though nothing had happened.

Ishmael—or rather, Schwartz—had been right. She was a brood parasite, a cuckoo. She—*parasite that I am*—had stolen his warmth and his love as though she had any right to it at all. A cuckoo would kick out the other eggs, but she was worse. She had taken the futures of Belgrieve and everyone around him.

Had he continued as an adventurer, then surely those four would have lived a blessed life as renowned adventurers. Kasim wouldn't have been trapped by his own pessimism and fallen into misdeeds, while Percival wouldn't have drowned in hatred, throwing himself into endless battle. Satie wouldn't have had to experience so many tragic goodbyes. And, surely, Belgrieve would have lived a better life too.

Angeline gritted her teeth at the endless mockery of that critical voice resounding in her head. She also heard the same voice she'd heard when she'd fought that shadow in Bordeaux once upon a time.

The same! The same!

"No... I don't..."

Tears poured from her eyes. She longed for salvation, but she knew she had no right to seek it.

Why was I even born? Why did I ever try to find happiness?

Finally, her entire body had become one with the shadows, featureless but for the clothes she wore. Her eyes and nose and mouth could no longer be discerned, and yet tears continued to pour from where her eyes had once been.

Hurry and become a demon. Hurry and forget about everything.

She tried to convince herself, but there she still was, lamenting that she couldn't do it. A voice continued to condemn her; a voice continued to call to her. She felt like she was going crazy.

"Urgh..." she groaned. The voice that came out no longer sounded like her own.

Her mind grew hazy. Warm memories of pleasant days she had spent as Angeline flashed before her mind's eye one by one before fading away.

Ah, now I can forget.

She felt relief—at last, she didn't have to be Angeline anymore. Her heart, pleading and lamenting for salvation, was still in the way, but that was just a matter of time. Just like the memories, it too would eventually melt away.

Just a little longer.

“Ange.”

Her heart skipped a beat when she heard Belgrieve’s voice beyond the howling wind. It wasn’t a hallucination—she heard that voice with her own ears. She looked up to see a figure standing just beyond the violent storm.

Why?

Her slowly calming heart was once again beset by tempestuous waves.

Why did he come here? Why couldn’t he let me forget?

Angeline stood, clutching her restless heart.

“Ange, are you there?”

Don’t come any closer! she tried to cry out, though it was more like the void itself had vibrated to her will.

Even so, the figure beyond the wind came closer, first one step, then another. Angeline staggered back, beset by the simultaneous desire to race over to him and cling to him and the urge to flee.

“Come home. You don’t belong in a dark place like this.”

She fled with teetering steps.

I don’t have the right to do that! she cried out. *So just leave me be!*

It was almost like she was pleading with him. The figure halted, but it had already come quite close now.

Belgrieve gazed at Angeline, his red hair swaying in the breeze, his eyes as kind as ever. But now, his presence was all the more painful to Angeline, and it felt like a dagger to her heart.

He knows everything. He knows that it’s all my fault, so why can he still look at me like that? she wondered, her tears still falling ceaselessly.

Please, just leave. Angeline buried her face in her hands. Everyone was hurt because of me. I don't have the right to be loved. It's just painful. Someone like me... should never have been born.

"Hey, Ange," Belgrieve called out softly.

Angeline shuddered.

"Back when you were still young, we went out for a walk one night. The moon was beautiful, and it made the nighttime dew twinkle all around us like stars. You rushed ahead and got your trousers sopping wet as you ran across the field."

Angeline clutched her chest. The memories that should have faded were coming back to her vividly.

"One time, you woke up in the middle of the night... We drank warm goat milk together."

Belgrieve gently set his foot forward, another step closer.

"You said you'd had a bad dream. That you were alone in the darkness. That you were terrified."

Daddy isn't going anywhere. The Belgrieve in her memories smiled warmly at her.

Angeline fell to her knees, holding her ears. *Stop. Stop!*

"Right before you set off for Orphen, daddy made a promise. Even if the whole world is against you, I'll always be on your side."

Stop!

"Ange... Thank you for being born. Thank you for coming to me." Belgrieve stood right before her now, holding out his arms. "Come home."

Angeline writhed in pain. There was a violent clash within her between the part of her that longed for her father and the part of her that rejected him. She struggled to breathe. She was in pain.

No. No! Go away!

She thrust out her hands to push him away, but without willing it herself, her shadowy arms turned into long, pointed spears. She heard a splattering sound and felt sudden warmth—the top of her right hand had pierced Belgrieve's side.

Ah, agh...

She pulled her arm out. It was covered in blood. Her knees quivered beneath her at the realization that she had wounded him again. The voice of condemnation within her grew louder, speaking over every other thought in her head.

I knew it, I knew it, I knew it. I'm hopeless. Hopeless. I don't have the right to be here with him.

Then, she felt a large, gentle hand pat her on the back, instantly quieting the reproachful words. She looked up at him in surprise.

Belgrieve was smiling. He didn't appear to be even slightly pained. "It's all right, Ange. It's all right now." He gently pulled her close and patted her head with the same rugged hands that had taught her to swing a sword, till a field, and that had hugged her many times—the same hands she loved.

Ah, ahhh... The shadowy carapace flaked away from Angeline's face, revealing her fair skin. It continued to slough away until all the shadows that had covered her body were gone.

"Agh..." she mumbled through her tears.

Belgrieve held Angeline tightly, gently caressing her hair. "It must have been painful. You did well, coming back."

"Yeah... yeah..." The inside of her chest was warm. This was the warmth she had yearned for even before she had existed. The strength drained from her body. "I'm sorry... I'm sorry..."

"It's okay, Angeline. It's okay."

"Will you... forgive me...?"

"I forgave you from the very start. For everything."

"Can I... Can I..." *Can I really be here?*

"Of course you can. You're daddy's little girl." Belgrieve combed his hand through her hair.

Angeline sniffled. Her dad was her dad after all, now and forever. She lifted her eyes.

Belgrieve softly put a hand on her cheek. "That expression doesn't suit you."



With her tear-ridden face, Angeline forced a smile. *What am I supposed to say? That's right. When I got back I always wanted to say it.*

“Dad... I’m home!”

Belgrieve smiled. “Welcome back, Angeline.”

EPILOGUE

“Satie, we brought in the veggies.” Anessa and Miriam entered the house totting baskets loaded with what little remained of the summer vegetables.

“You got a lot more than I was expecting.” Satie had been kneading the dough, and when she turned to greet them, she had flour on her nose. “Thanks. Could you hand them to Char? Hey, c’mom, Percy. Didn’t I tell you to bring in the firewood?”

“Ah, right, I totally forgot. Sorry.”

Percival hurriedly rushed out, harried by Satie’s scolding.

Satie placed hand on her hip and sighed wearily. “He’s getting forgetful these days. Now, I’ll put out the tableware, so please clear off the table. It’s still just as messy as it was last night. Maggie, get some water.”

“You got it.” Marguerite left with a bucket in hand just as the twins came in with the plates.

“Here, the plates.”

“Kasim, hurry.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Kasim hastily cleared away the bottles and cards that had been left out on the table.

“Uncle Kasim, please carry the pot,” Charlotte said, tapping the lid of the pot hanging over the fire with a wooden ladle.

“You’re a real slave driver, you know that?” Kasim said with a smile.

Byaku, who had been tending to the fire, looked at him suspiciously. “What’s so funny?”

“Ha ha... Well, I just felt happy for some reason.”

Satie began to giggle too. "Hee hee... Yeah."

Percival returned with the firewood under his arms, and he cocked his head curiously. "What's going on?"

"Nothing... Just basking in happiness."

"I see..."

"You look a bit out of it."

"Shut it. I'm a delicate guy." Percival pouted.

Then Mit looked at him, startled. "Percy, delicate?"

"You little... Mit, what's Kasim been teaching you?"

"Hey, why are you bringing me up?"

Lucille strummed her instrument. "As the people of the past once said, 'You get what you deserve.'"

Yakumo cackled. "I'll have to agree, for once," she said, puffing out some smoke.

Kasim twisted his beard. "Drat, I've got no allies here. Where are Bell and Ange?"

"They're on a stroll. Dad said he felt like walking," Charlotte explained as she served the stew.

Anessa giggled. "Despite everything, Mr. Bell's pretty hardy. I could feel the blood draining from my face back when it happened."

Merry nodded without pausing in her work of chopping vegetables. "It was a real shocker, wasn't it? Just as we were starting to get restless, he suddenly appeared, bleeding all over, with Ange helping him walk."

"Yeah, all of a sudden from where the yarn cut off. Good grief, how many times does he have to surprise me before he's satisfied?" Percival said, heaving a sigh.

"It's a good thing Helvetica had some elixir to spare. Thanks to that, he can at least

walk on his own now," Satie said, continuing to knead the dough.

"Good grief, Bell sure knows how to push himself. He's usually so cautious, but he doesn't even hesitate to put his life on the line. My heart almost stopped, you know," Kasim said.

"It's just good that everyone's back. I thought it was hopeless when the hole closed..." Anessa said.

Miriam nodded. "That's right. I wonder why that happened. I guess there's no point wondering about it now though."

"I mean, yeah, but I'm still curious about it. It's all over my head," said Marguerite, who had returned with water.

Graham, who was sitting on the raised floor, closed his eyes as he thought it over. "Isn't it because Angeline made it so?"

"Huh?"

"What do you mean, granduncle?"

"Angeline wanted to come home. That's why the path opened up. That's all it is."

"Perhaps..."

"Ha ha! It just goes to show that her place to return to was with Bell and not Solomon," Percival said.

His mirth was infectious; the entire house was soon filled with laughter.

"Anyways, Percival, what are you going to do? You've got no one to search for anymore."

"Who knows? I'll take my time thinking about it."

"Do you wanna go east with us?" Miriam mischievously suggested.

Percival chuckled. "Not a bad idea, but I'll be taking it easy in Turnera until everything with the dungeon's settled down."

"That's all well and good, but at least help out around the house," said Satie.

Percival frowned. There was another round of laughter—this time, at his expense.

The door opened with a loud thud, revealing Sasha. "Good morning! Oh, how jolly it is here!"

"Ah, it's Sasha. Morning!"

"What brings you here so early?" Anessa asked curiously.

"Well, they're carrying the statue out of the church. I came to see if any of you wanted to watch!"

"Huh? It's already that time of year?"

"Let's hurry and finish up breakfast, then."

"I wonder when Bell and Ange will get home."

○

There was only a day left until the autumn festival. A tremendous number of peddlers had dropped by the village, and traveling folk musicians were strumming merry tunes every day. It was like the festival had already begun. Because of the mood, the statue of Almighty Vienna was being carried out early instead of waiting for the start of the festival.

Atop the hill overlooking the village, Belgrieve stood with the help of a cane, and Angeline nestled herself next to him. The gemstone embedded in Angeline's hairpin gleamed as it caught the light.

"Does it hurt, dad?"

"No, I'm quite all right." Belgrieve placed a hand on his side. "You missed my vitals, after all. You really are a kind girl."

"Hmph..." Angeline grumbled through pursed lips. Belgrieve smiled and plopped a hand onto her head.

His side had been pierced by Angeline when she'd been on the cusp of becoming a demon, but whether it was intentional or pure coincidence, she had missed his vitals. After returning to the village, he had been treated with an elixir from Helvetica. Although it still hurt some, he'd gotten to the point where he could stand and walk with a cane.

The wind was rushing over the plains on its way to lands beyond their home. Angeline squeezed her father's hand. "It's the autumn festival already."

"Yeah, time sure flies."

Smoke from cooking fires all over the village trailed off into the sky before them, and though only faintly, they could hear all the hustle and bustle from this vantage point. This was the time of year when Turnera usually drew its largest crowds of visitors, but once the dungeon was operational, perhaps that would no longer be the case.

Belgrieve took a deep breath and slowly sat down on the ground, and Angeline immediately did the same.

Somehow, they had managed to make it back by following the trail of yarn through the endless darkness until they suddenly appeared before their friends. After they'd reunited, they'd continued to follow the strand, and they'd mysteriously made it out in far less time than it had taken to get there.

It was quite a bizarre space... Belgrieve mused. Even though they had retraced his steps, they'd never crossed paths with Solomon again. He wondered if he was still in that space, sitting alone under the apple tree. They'd had a way back, but perhaps for Solomon, the way had been closed off long ago.

"He looked lonely..."

"What's wrong, dad?"

"Ah, well... How long do you think your journey to the east will take?"

"I don't know... Probably over a year."

After the festival, Angeline would return to Orphen before setting off for eastern lands. Anessa, Miriam, and Marguerite would go with her, and even Yakumo and Lucille were tagging along, so it would be quite a spirited journey.

"I'll meet all sorts of people, see all sorts of things, and then... when I'm back, I'll have loads of stories to tell!"

"I'll be looking forward to it." Belgrieve smiled and patted Angeline's head. She closed her eyes, basking in the comfort.

So much had come to pass—and a great deal of pain, anger, and sadness—but they had somehow managed to overcome it. And that was why moments like this, when nothing was happening at all, felt so dear.

"Is running the guild going to be a lot of work?" Angeline asked, peering into Belgrieve's face.

Belgrieve smiled wryly and twisted his beard. "Yeah, looks like it's going to be rough going. But somebody has to do it."

"Heh heh... I'll help out when I get back then."

"That would take a load off. But you might make Mr. Leo cry."

"It's fine. The guild master will come to Turnera sooner or later."

"Hey now..."

Then again, maybe it really would happen. Belgrieve couldn't see the future, but it was a little frightening that he couldn't write it off as an impossibility. Belgrieve didn't hate when things got a little wild, but he would struggle to keep up if things got too chaotic.

With a troubled smile, Belgrieve looked at the sky. The sun was gradually climbing higher and higher.

Angeline stood. "I think breakfast should be ready."

"Right, we should head back." Belgrieve stood up, using the cane to support his weight.

Angeline hummed a tune as her eyes fell upon the forest. "We're going to pick cowberries, right?"

"After breakfast."

"Hee hee..." Angeline beamed and hugged her father.

His daughter's embrace caused a throbbing pain to race through Belgrieve's side.
"Ooh, ow."

"Ah, sorry... Are you okay, dad? Will you be able to go on?" Angeline timidly asked.

Patting himself, Belgrieve chuckled. "I should be fine if you're there to support me. Let's take it slowly and tell stories along the way. Mit and Charlotte can go too. We'll make it a day trip."

"Okay."

Angeline smiled, gently taking her father's arm.

"Let's get going."

"Yeah."

Slowly, the two of them descended the hill, taking each step with great care.

Schwartz had vanished beyond the bounds of time and space—even farther beyond that, perhaps. They would most likely never see him again. That wasn't to say all of their problems had been completely resolved, but at the very least, there wasn't anyone left who would disrupt their peace. But as Belgrieve recalled everything that had led up to the moment of their parting, he began to wonder if Ishmael truly had never existed. Perhaps Ishmael had been who Schwartz was before he had been taken captive by his own curiosity. Before he had earned the moniker of the Blue Flame of Calamity, perhaps he had been the same slightly awkward man who'd fought alongside them at the Earth Navel. Thinking about it now wouldn't yield any answers, but he did feel a touch of sadness at the possibility.

In any case, their enemy was gone, and they had returned to the normalcy of daily life. Granted, Belgrieve couldn't be certain what "normalcy" meant for his daily life anymore with so many new things beginning. Seren had settled in with the community, the dungeon was soon to come, and then the guild would follow soon after. People would come and go, and he would be involved with all of them. The life he had lived until now was effectively over. That thought stopped him in his tracks.

Angeline looked at him curiously. "What's wrong, dad? Does it hurt?"

"No..." He closed his eyes for a moment and felt the wind against his back. When he opened them again, he looked at his daughter. Angeline curiously stared back. Her black hair swayed in the breeze. Angeline had grown, and so had he. One day, he would die of old age; one day, Angeline would need to leave the nest for good.

It was true that their enemy was gone, but not everything was resolved. Percival was putting on a cheerful front, but he was still hurting in some ways. Angeline herself hadn't fully put all her feelings in order either—something she was evidently putting off until after her journey. She would distance herself from it for a time to take in other sights. Little by little, she wanted to find her bearings again.

But Angeline had undoubtedly come to terms with her past; time would resolve the rest. Eventually, there would come a day when they could have a laugh over all of this—that was what Belgrieve believed, though he didn't know how old he would be when that time came.

I'm an adult. My friends have aged too. As the years went by, time would turn children into adults, adults into elders, and elders into the dearly departed—and new life would be born to take their place. For better or worse, nothing could stay the same forever. The times would change, the world would change, and perhaps in a hundred years, the landscape before his eyes now would be completely unrecognizable to him.

Belgrieve gently placed a hand on Angeline's head. She closed her eyes, happily nuzzling into him.

"Hee hee. It's warm..."

"Let's go."

"Okay."

They went on their way again once more.

Until now, they had been pushed along by events they could have never imagined. But even now, change would come for them. Looking back on the past, it had been nothing but change.

Even so, the wind that was blowing down the hill hadn't changed in the slightest from that day so long ago, when it had first ushered him off on his journey. That was how Belgrieve saw it.

EXTRA DAD

Angeline had begun to cry in the night again. From the cradle resting just beside the bed, Belgrieve suddenly heard her loud wailing, and he jolted up. Without even sparing the time to strap his prosthetic leg on, he frantically peered into the cradle and saw the infant with black hair which melded with the darkness of night crying her heart out.

"Now, now. It's okay." He lifted her up and gently soothed her until the infant stopped crying and closed her eyes. He returned her to the cradle, but it wasn't long before she was crying again. These past few nights since he had picked up the girl in the mountains, Belgrieve had hardly gotten any sleep. As soon as he dozed off, the baby would cry him awake. During the day, he was busily navigating his crops or the mountains, so he wanted to at least rest easy at night, but the baby wasn't having any of it.

Belgrieve massaged his temple and resignedly lit the oil lamp. No matter how many times he tried to sleep, he knew he would just be woken up anyway, so he was better off staying awake.

Looking at the baby sleeping so soundly now, Belgrieve felt somewhat resentful. He shook his head—he didn't know who her parents were, but the baby was in an unfamiliar place with an unfamiliar man. Perhaps it was the faint lingering image of her parents, or the memory of their scent or their presence, that would wake her from her sleep. That was understandable. And he had taken on the responsibility to raise her when he had found her—so there was little sense in resenting her for the trouble of it all.

The autumn festival was near, and with winter following it, the nights had become terribly cold. He would never let the flames in the fireplace die out, but even so, as soon as he left the bed, his breath came out in puffs of vapor as he paced around the house.

Belgrieve flipped through an old book by lamplight, worn from the many times he had read through it. The book detailed the ecology, danger, and behavioral patterns of

various fiends, past and present. Furthermore, it detailed the vegetation and ores that could be found in the dungeons that these fiends inhabited. He had brought it back with him from his time as an adventurer in the big city and would give it a read whenever he found the time. His own notes had filled in all the margins on each page. Every time he reread it, he would still find something new to write in.

Where did I put my pen? he wondered, when suddenly his mind turned to the baby. With the lamp in hand, he inspected the crib. The baby's face was red by the light of the flame, and her glossy black hair reflected its light. She seemed to be asleep. Belgrieve gazed at her, relieved, but perhaps the lamplight was too radiant, as the baby grimaced and groaned.

"Ah, sorry..."

Belgrieve quickly pulled the lamp away and pulled the covers over her. That seemed to calm her down again. Strangely, it seemed the baby wouldn't cry so long as he was awake. She would keep him up at night, and over the course of his working day, he would have to feed her goat milk, change her diapers, or rock her in his arms. These past few days had been terribly busy. His friend Kerry's wife had helped out quite a bit, but curiously, the baby had taken to Belgrieve. Whenever she was in a bad temper, it did not matter how much anyone else tried to pacify her—she would only stop crying the very second Belgrieve lifted her in his arms. And so, he couldn't just leave her in anyone else's care. Belgrieve would head out to the fields or mountains with the baby slung over his back.

It was quite hectic. He had looked after kids from other houses before, but that had only been temporary. Once it was time to go, the children would all return home. But this child's home was right here. There was no breather to be had whenever he was "done" looking after her. If he'd had a wife to help him, perhaps he would have slowly built up his constitution and awareness as a parent over the course of her pregnancy—but this child had been dropped on Belgrieve out of nowhere. There was no way he was ready to be her father.

With all of that said, Belgrieve was in a bit of distress to have been roped into child-rearing he had never anticipated on top of his daily labors. He had friends with many children, and they made it seem easy enough, but this was far more than he had bargained for. He had to tend to her every need, and the diapers needed to be washed and dried every day. He didn't have enough of them and needed to borrow quite a few from Kerry's house. Only when he was looking after a baby did he realize the huge

difference between lending a hand with babysitting and actually being a father himself.

Winter was coming; once it was upon them, he would no longer be able to dry laundry under the blue sky, and the water would be cold too. There was less sweat-inducing work during the winter, so he had gotten used to doing his laundry less frequently in the cold months—there hadn't been much of it as a bachelor. But he couldn't just leave the baby's diapers soiled—he already dreaded the pain of plunging his hands into freezing water every day.

Belgrieve spread open the book, absently flipping through the pages without digesting the words. With winter approaching, he wanted to economize on his lamp oil usage, but when he considered that he would need to get up again as soon as he dared lie back down in bed, he did not feel inclined to snuff out the light.

Honestly, there was much that he saw as a hassle, and the thought would cross his mind at times that he had made a hasty decision. Even so, he never thought of it as a mistake. After he'd lost his leg, the thought of marrying hadn't once crossed his mind—yet somehow, a baby had come to him of all people. It was a lot of hard work, but whenever he looked at the baby's sleeping face, or when he felt her small hand grasp his finger, he felt enough warmth from the depths of his heart to dispel those hardships.

Raising a child came with its share of troubles, but his current biggest worry was coming up with a name, as the infant was still without one. Families with a lot of children seemed to grow rather arbitrary with their naming choices the more children that were born—perhaps a case of parents lashing out at their children, or perhaps a case of parents growing complacent after getting too used to child-rearing. But this was Belgrieve's first child, and he wouldn't even consider naming her without giving it some thought. His worries were compounding now—it had been seven days since he had taken her in, but he wasn't any closer to deciding on a name.

Belgrieve propped up his head. *It should be at least a little girly*, he thought. His mind wandered to various flowers and birds he could name her after, but none of them stuck. He sighed and turned his attention to the book once more. He felt it would be shameful to let her go without a name for too long, but he was so fixated on the problem that he was getting nowhere with solving it. He was simply too out of his depth to focus on it in the first place. He was still mulling over this dilemma as his eyes passed over a certain passage of the book.

“Evangeline...” That was the name of an adventurer who appeared in a heroic legend surrounding a certain fiend—a woman whose abilities were not the lesser of any man; a woman who was kind, wise, and self-assured.

Giving her that name didn’t seem like such a bad idea. Perhaps it would be good to name her with the earnest wish that she would turn out like the legendary woman. Not that he was hoping for her to grow up to be an adventurer, but he wanted her to grow to be a strong, kind person.

Even so, the sound of the name didn’t quite fit the baby. “She doesn’t strike me as an Eva... Let’s take off the front part and... Angeline.”

That seemed to fit right. Belgrieve nodded.

“Angeline... yeah.” *Not bad.*

Belgrieve went over to the baby’s side to find her soundly asleep. Looking at her face filled Belgrieve with boundless happiness.

“Angeline,” Belgrieve muttered.

He gently reached out and stroked her cheek with the tip of his finger. The baby incoherently moved her mouth and turned over in her sleep. She didn’t seem disgruntled; as a matter of fact, if he wasn’t just imagining it, she looked a little happy.

The lamp sputtered and began to streak black smoke. Belgrieve mulled over it for a moment, but he finally extinguished the light and lay down in bed. For some reason, he got the feeling that the baby wouldn’t cry again that night. And just as he’d foreseen, he managed to sleep soundly until morning.

○

Just a short while ago, Belgrieve had thought she was getting rather good at crawling, but now she had learned to stand while grabbing on to something. She could even walk a short distance, which meant he had to be incredibly vigilant with her. He couldn’t take his eyes off of a child who had just learned to move around on her own. She would frequently escape from the cradle, only to trip and cry as she made a bid for freedom.

Belgrieve decided that the day he had picked her up was her birthday, and that meant

she was already more than a year old. As winter gave way to spring, and as the fresh buds sprouted all over the fields and mountains, the eighteen-month-old girl graduated from crawling to using her legs to walk around. Angeline often moved her hands around too, and she had gotten good at grabbing things. Ever since she'd started moving around freely, he could no longer leave anything within her reach. There was a time she had tried to lift the blade he'd left in the middle of honing. He had raised his voice at her in horror, and she had burst into tears. It had taken a good long period of holding her before she'd calmed down.

Angeline was an energetic girl. She loved her father and always wanted to be by his side. She would grumble whenever Belgrieve would leave her with someone so he could work, and inevitably, he would end up taking her with him into the field where she could play nearby. Even then, he couldn't take his eyes off of her for long, and he found himself constantly glancing over at her.

"Dad..." Angeline waddled down the field, uneven after the tilling. Her arms were spread wide, and it looked like she was bracing her legs. But even that was still dangerous, and Belgrieve hurried over to her.

"Oh, you've really gotten good at walking."

"Uh-huh," Angeline mumbled proudly. She placed her hand over Belgrieve's, grabbing his finger and tugging it. "Dad, uppies."

"Yeah, sure." He lifted her up. She had gained weight and was much heavier than a year ago, though she was hardly enough to burden him. Each time she called him "dad" with her lispy voice, Belgrieve's expression would soften.

Angeline clung to him. "Mmm."

"There, there," he said, patting her lightly on the back. Angeline comfortably closed her eyes and nuzzled into his embrace. *Come to think of it, it's almost noon. Is it time for her nap? But she should eat something first.*

"Ange, let's have something to eat before you sleep."

"No." Angeline shook her head, clinging even tighter to Belgrieve as though to insist she wouldn't be peeled off of him. There were times when she would listen to him, but there were also times when she would get strangely obstinate. She was still too young to scold, and she worked far more on emotion than logic. Belgrieve, smiling wryly,

turned Angeline in his arms and carefully sat down by the side of the field. His prosthetic leg made squatting down a bit challenging, and it was all the more so when he was holding a child. But he finally settled down, cross-legged, with Angeline in his lap. Angeline leaned back against him, relaxing in his arms.

Belgrieve reached for the nearby picnic basket. He took out a canteen of goat milk that had been boiled and then cooled and poured some into a bottle.

“Here.” He tried to feed it to Angeline, but she would have no part of it.

“Nooo,” she insisted, turning her head this way and that to dodge out of the way. This was getting nowhere, so he held her head in place and pressed the bottle to her mouth. But with a strong breath, she sprayed out the milk.

“Ah, for crying out loud...” He smiled bitterly at Angeline, who seemed to be rejoicing at all the fun she was having. Belgrieve wiped the milk from her mouth.

“You’ll get hungry later. You need to eat properly.”

“No!” Her rebelliousness had evidently become a fun game, and Angeline wouldn’t eat no matter what.

Good grief... Belgrieve shook his head and put the bottle away. “Then daddy’s going to eat.”

He dipped his bread in the milk and ate it. Ange seemed discontented that he wasn’t paying attention to her and began to kick and scream.

“Ange too!”

“You’ll eat?”

“Yeah!” Once she started eating, it was simple. Angeline drank down the milk that her tongue had grown accustomed to. She also ate some softened bread and dried meat after Belgrieve had chewed it to soften it up. Since she had no mother, Angeline was well accustomed to goat milk by now, and since her first birthday, she’d naturally added milk-soddened bread and soft, boiled wheat porridge to her diet. Some children would cling to their mothers’ teats long past their due, so in that regard, perhaps he had it easier.

With her stomach full, she started to get sleepy. Her eyes became unfocused until she gave in to her exhaustion and collapsed against Belgrieve. He carefully held her up over his shoulder with a hand behind her back, which he gently rubbed.

Angeline's body was gradually growing warmer, and then she was soundly asleep. He carefully checked to make sure her eyes were closed. Relieved, he laid her to bed on a mat on the ground and laid his cloak over her.

During her afternoon naps, she rarely awoke when put to bed like this. This was the time of day when Belgrieve could relax the most and the time when he could get the most work done.

Even so, Belgrieve stayed by her side a while longer. He placed a hand on her stomach and gently patted her as he watched her sleep.

Babies grew at an astounding pace. It wasn't just a matter of one day to the next. He'd take his eyes off of her for a second, and then it would seem like her face had completely changed the next time he looked at her.

He thought he'd picked up a sense for it after looking after the kids of his friends, but when he shared each and every hour of the day with her, he was surprised by the changes. She'd learned to speak and had begun to unconsciously mimic the same things she saw him do. There were times when he would have to reflect on his own habits.

Belgrieve was delighted by it. When he had returned home less one leg than he'd started with, he had been filled with despair. Though he'd tried to carry himself as cheerfully and optimistically as possible, a part of him had still had no hope for the future. That was precisely why he did his best to contribute to the village and recklessly devoted his being to the pursuit of growth. But such deeds were always accompanied by a sense of futility. Certainly, Belgrieve's work benefited the village, and it was thanks to his work that he had improved his image in the eyes of those who had mocked and scorned him when he had first returned. But even so, when he thought of how he would continue to age, he would be assailed by a sort of vague anxiety that was curiously potent to him—the anxiety that, no matter how hard he worked, he would eventually die and be forgotten. After the painful failure of his experience in the big city, Belgrieve had a very low evaluation of himself. He had come to believe that his work for the village was merely what he owed to his neighbors, and it did not feel that he had accomplished anything worthwhile or that he would leave

anything behind.

But now, he had a daughter. This child had a future—he had a keen sense now of what it meant to raise up the future generation. And so, even if he was sleep-deprived and there was always much work to be done, to Belgrieve, his days had been far more precious and filled with joy ever since Angeline had arrived. It made him wonder if it had been the same for his own parents, and if so, if that meant he was sharing in the same feelings they had once had. By now, the faces of his parents had grown faint in his memory, but perhaps in this sense, they were still living on within him.

Angeline murmured in her sleep, making senseless sounds and words and clenching and unclenching her small hands. Belgrieve was smiling when he got up and shouldered his rake again. He heard the shrill cry of a skylark off in the distance as he headed out into the field.

○

When was it that Angeline said she would become an adventurer? Belgrieve couldn't remember when she'd first said it. Before he knew it, she was saying it all the time. That was why he had fashioned for her a small wooden sword and was teaching her to swing it.

Once the tea making and sheepshearing of early summer reached a good stopping point, the villagers of Turnera would be blessed with the best time of year. The short summer would liven up the dinner table with fresh vegetables and fruit, and this was the only time of year when they could swim in the river, to the delight of children and adults alike.

While Belgrieve washed vegetables by the well, Angeline came up to him with a bag and a fishing rod.

"Dad, I'm heading out..."

"Okay, be careful. I'm counting on you for dinner, you know."

"Leave it to me..." The seven-year-old girl was grinning as she raced out of the house. From morning 'til noon, she had helped out around the field, and in the afternoon, she apparently planned to play with her friends by the river. In summer, swimming in the river served as an opportunity to bathe as well. It felt heavenly to swim in the cool water after working up a sweat.

Until she had turned three, Angeline had had a remarkably obstinate streak to her, but before Belgrieve knew it, she had begun acting out less and less. In fact, she had started to proactively help him with his work and had picked up various chores for herself. Naturally, Belgrieve wasn't opposed to this development. She had begun doing everything from working in the field, to tending to the sheep, to picking apples and making lent-leaf tea. She had also learned how to do some cooking, cleaning, and laundry, and would often work alongside him. Meanwhile, Belgrieve taught her how to use a sword and navigate the mountain, and he would read books to her aloud.

By the time she had learned how to read at the church, she no longer wanted to stay by Belgrieve's side every waking hour of the day. Now and then, she would go out to play with the children who were her age. But rather than playing house and knitting with the other girls, Angeline preferred to race around the fields and play-fight with the boys. She liked her hair to be cut short and chose to wear garments that didn't flap about and that wouldn't restrict her movements. She wanted to be an adventurer, so perhaps these choices came naturally to her. However, Belgrieve had to wonder if this was really all right. If she had grown up like this because she happened to have been raised by a single father who was constantly swinging around a sword, then he felt a bit sorry for what he had done.

But Angeline seemed to be having the time of her life whenever she was swinging a sword or racing to and fro. It would have felt stranger at this point to try to get her to act more girly. The more navel-gazing he did over it, the more foolish it seemed to him to dwell over what was or wasn't "girly" in the first place.

"Ange is Ange," he would tell himself.

Even so, he still felt a desire to dress her up in fashionable clothes now and then—not that he had any sense of fashion himself. In the end, nothing came of such passing fancies except for the thought that he was indeed a hopeless father. He scratched his head and got back to washing the vegetables before putting them up in a draining basket and going back in the house.

When evening came around, Angeline returned with three fish. She had already gutted them, cleaned off the scales, and washed them well. *Was she just swimming a moment ago?* Belgrieve wondered, noticing her wet hair and damp clothes that stuck to her body here and there.

"I'm home!"

"Welcome back. You didn't dry off properly, did you?"

"Tee hee," Angeline giggled, trying to play it off. It was a safe bet she had been having so much fun swimming that she had failed to notice when the sun started setting, and when she had realized the time, she had thrown on her clothes without drying first.

Good grief... Belgrieve chuckled as he brought her a towel and patted her down.
"You've got a good haul."

"Yes. So, you see? I took a knife, and I took care of it..."

"I see. You prepared them nicely. Good work."

"Hee hee..."

In Turnera, everyone needed to know how to use a knife. Angeline had mastered the use of the knife he'd gifted her a while back.

Dinner was composed of the fish and summer vegetables, and not a bite of it went to waste. When the meal was consumed, the two of them sat by the fireplace and brewed some lent tea. In Turnera, the nights were still chilly even in the summer months, and a small flame was invariably crackling in the fireplace year-round.

"I want to hear the rest of the story..."

"Sure. How far did we get last time?"

"The grassland outside Orphen. A fiend came out when you were gathering medicinal herbs..."

"Oh, that's right. So daddy's friend was startled and let out a big yelp. The fiend was startled too, and..."

Each night, Belgrieve would tell her tales from his days as an active adventurer or would read books to her. Some of his stories from his adventurer days still prickled his heart. When it came to his party members, he still hadn't gotten his thoughts in order enough to tell those tales. Whenever they came up, they were just "friends"—indistinct friends that he would never describe.

Even so, Angeline would listen with enthusiasm, and every night she would look

reluctant to go to sleep when he was done. Still, the drowsiness would slowly take her, and before he knew it, she would oftentimes be snoring on his lap, as was the case tonight. Belgrieve gently lifted Angeline up and carried her to bed.

○

When Angeline was twelve years old, she could take care of most of the work there was to be done in Turnera. Although there were still some tasks that required adult supervision, her muscles were accustomed to every field-working task, and she knew how to tend to all of the livestock. Such tasks were often left to the village children, and slowly, in that manner, they would begin to be treated as working adults.

In that sense, there was nothing very strange about Angeline setting off for the big city at twelve years of age. Until now, her becoming an adventurer had only been a vague anticipation in Belgrieve's mind, but as her twelfth birthday drew nearer, it suddenly seemed far more realistic. Thus, Belgrieve instilled her with more knowledge than before. Every walk along mountain trails was an opportunity to teach practical lessons, and he was drilling her strictly on her use of the sword. Angeline was a fast learner, and she absorbed everything he taught her. Her sword arm was already better than that of any adult in the village, and there were times when even Belgrieve as her instructor would feel pressed in their bouts. Even so, Belgrieve was well aware of how she moved and what her habits were, so she still had yet to land a blow on him. Oddly enough, Angeline seemed to take delight in that fact.

Belgrieve was glad that his daughter had talent, but he also felt somewhat conflicted about that fact. Supposing she had no talent with the sword, he would have never allowed her to be an adventurer no matter how much she pleaded. Even if she'd come to resent him for it, that was far better than knowingly sending his own child to an untimely death. But Angeline *did* have talent—*incredible* talent, in fact—and he had no grounds to oppose her decision. On one hand, he was happy that his daughter had carried on the dream of becoming an adventurer that he had once chased after. But on the other hand, he didn't want to send his precious daughter anywhere dangerous. There was certainly a part of him that wanted her to live with him in peace.

Parents sure are selfish, Belgrieve thought as he scratched his head. He watched Angeline's back as she cleaned the dishes. It felt like he'd picked her up in the mountains just yesterday, but she had already grown so big.

"Time flies..." Belgrieve muttered as he watched her clean dishes. She was already

twelve. Her hair was cut short like a boy's, but her features were distinctly girly and cute. He mused that she would have surely made a good wife to someone if she hadn't decided to become an adventurer, but he shook off that thought. "I don't know when to give up, do I?" he murmured, smiling ruefully.

Once the dishes were done, Angeline pounced on him.

"Whoa!"

"Dad... Hug me..."

"Your hands are still wet... Good grief."

Belgrieve held her tight and Angeline melted into his embrace. Looking at her like this, the desire to have his daughter by his side forever became overwhelming. Rather than sending her off to Orphen, she could continue to be a farmer in Turnera and enjoy the spring and autumn festivals each year. Eventually, she would find someone to settle down with, and perhaps Belgrieve would have grandchildren someday. But he knew this was just his own selfishness coming to the fore. This girl had her own life to live. Belgrieve had only become an adventurer after his parents had died, so it wasn't like he had ever left them of his own volition, but had they still been alive at the time, he knew they would have opposed his choice—and as sure as they would have been against it, he knew that he still would have become an adventurer regardless. That was just in his nature.

"I'll do my best," Angeline murmured, nuzzling her cheek into his chest.

"Yeah."

"Even if I'm on my own... I'll do my best to become a splendid adventurer who can protect the weak."

"I know." When she put it like that, Belgrieve could only send her off with a smile. His daughter was far stronger than him. He lived in fear of the future that lay before him, but Angeline stared it down unflinchingly.

Angeline took a deep breath before meeting his gaze. "Then I'll land a hit on you one day."

"Ha ha! I'll be looking forward to it." Belgrieve was certain that "one day" wasn't very

far off at all.

He then quizzed her on how to tell directions, how to find water, how to confront fiends—questions that she could answer without skipping a beat. Finally, Belgrieve gave a satisfied nod. He had no doubt in his mind that she would become a splendid adventurer—that was precisely why he felt so lonely now.

“Good. Surviving is an adventurer’s top priority. Never go beyond your limits.”

Angeline nodded back, nuzzling her face into his beard. “I know. I got it... Nice and prickly...”

“The things my kid gets up to... You have an early day tomorrow. How about we call it a night?” he suggested, getting up.

“Dad...” she said softly, tugging on his sleeve before he could walk away. “Can we sleep together today...?”

“Hmm? Weren’t you training to sleep alone?” She had no answer for a beat before she settled on calling him a “meanie.” The sight of her pouty lips made Belgrieve laugh. “Just kidding. Come on.”

“Hooray!” Angeline gleefully clung to his arm.

He smothered the fire with ashes and got into bed. As the lamp was snuffed out, the house was left in pitch darkness. Gradually, as his eyes acclimated to the dark, he began to make out the outlines of things that had been left around. It was quiet. He could hear the breath and the heartbeat of Angeline as she lay beside him.

Angeline buried her face into his chest and held him tightly. She was faintly shaking. Belgrieve patted her back.

“Are you cold?” Angeline didn’t reply. She simply clung to him harder.

After a beat, he spoke up. “Ange.”

“Yeah,” she softly replied.

“Are you really all right? If you’re nervous, you don’t need to force yourself to go on this journey.”

What am I saying? he wondered as his mouth moved on its own. But these were undoubtedly his truest feelings on the matter. Looking at his daughter shaking in his arms, the words had naturally come from his heart.

Angeline was understandably scared. She only knew Turnera, yet suddenly she was setting off for the big city, filled with strangers and an unknown way of life. The home she'd grown up in would be distant from her, and she would need to leave the father she loved more than anything in the world. Regardless of her talent, regardless of how strong she was with a blade, she was still just a twelve-year-old girl.

Angeline didn't answer for a long while. Finally, she looked up at him. "I'm going. I'm nervous, but I'm going..."

Belgrieve wrestled with his words for a moment longer. "I see." He embraced her and patted her head. He loved his daughter more than anything.

Angeline happily hugged him back. "Dad. I'm going to do my best."

"Yeah... I know." He didn't know why, but he was on the verge of tears. As his daughter lay in his arms, he was desperately fighting back the urge to break down.

Eventually, Angeline closed her eyes with relief. Her soft snores filled the room. So many memories were flowing through Belgrieve's head, however, that it didn't seem he would be sleeping just yet.

"How pathetic..."

Angeline had it together far better than he did. By raising her, he felt that he had grown as well. His life as an adventurer had cost him a leg and his dearest friends; however, his return home had blessed him with something far greater. To Belgrieve, Angeline was the most important part of his entire life.

He stroked the hair of his sleeping daughter and muttered, "Thank you, Ange..."

Thank you for coming to me. I know you'll be all right. I know you'll make it. And one day, after you have made it big, you'll come to see me again. Oh, the stories you'll have to tell...

Belgrieve closed his eyes. His heart was at peace.

“Good luck.”

The story began.

The story continued.

FIN



AFTERWORD

Some artists are hailed as musicians' musicians—acknowledged by other musicians for their exceptional musicality and skill despite not garnering significant sales. This series began as an exploration of such a character, an unassuming protagonist highly esteemed among his peers. Initially conceived as a lighthearted tale, it revolved around Angeline's desire to return home amidst numerous obstacles. She would fly into a rage at these setbacks all while spreading overblown propaganda about her father, and Belgrieve ended up baffled by all the undeserved praise. The novel would end with their touching and heartfelt reunion. That was it—this was supposed to be a comedy novel wrapped up in one volume.

Writing has always been a hobby of mine, but crafting a satisfying conclusion for a ten-thousand-character-long story was something I hadn't attempted yet, so that was what I set out to do. As I delved into it, treating it as a game, I committed to writing until the story reached its natural end. After I submitted my work to a website featuring rankings based on ratings and bookmarks, the novel swiftly ascended to the top spot on the daily rankings within a week. It was originally planned as a short series, and yet my ambition got the better of me as I extended it into a lengthy tale surpassing one million characters. Curiously, various publishers began reaching out to me. After mulling it over for a bit, I decided to go with Earth Star Novels, who had been the very first to get in touch. Under their patronage, I've thankfully been able to get this work published all the way up to the final volume.

Each time I revised a volume for publication, I couldn't help but notice the lack of depth in world-building, a consequence of my initial casual approach. If even the author could feel it, then surely the readers would too. But even as the books hit the shelves, the online serialization went on; when an incompetent author like me has to create two different worlds for two different versions simultaneously, that author is bound to get all sorts of things mixed up. Consequently, the world was left in its haphazard state. Still, a part of me wondered: if I *had* fixated more on world-building and it ended up overly complicated, would I have gotten so many readers in the first place? Even now, I don't have my answer. Ultimately, the story centered on Angeline's return to Belgrieve, and that consistent thread from beginning to end was perhaps what sustained reader interest in spite of my poor writing.

During the series's run, numerous other web-adapted light novels emerged only to fade after a few volumes. I'm immensely grateful to have concluded this series the way I envisioned. Yet, this achievement wasn't solely the work of a lone author. It involved the efforts of many for this story to reach your eyes. Since this is the final volume, I would like to take this chance to thank them all.

First, I offer my thanks to the incredible illustrator, Master *toi8*, whose captivating artwork breathed life into all eleven volumes. What was nothing more than one of the many amateur stories on the net managed to reach so many readers, and I have no doubt in my mind that it was all thanks to the magnificent illustrations. They added much-needed depth to the world and immersed the readers in the story far more than what I could accomplish with words. I would like to express my appreciation once more. Truly, thank you.

Next, my sincerest gratitude goes to Urushibara-sensei, the maestro behind the manga edition. The manga impeccably captures the essence of the original work while infusing it with unique elements only achievable in manga. It remains a delightful read, and it brings me immense joy to hear from the readers who transitioned from the manga to the novel version. You have my deepest thanks for continuing to work around my shoddy writing. I earnestly hope we can continue our collaborative journey together.

My heartfelt thanks extend to my editors. Firstly, to M-san, the first to reach out to me for novelization. It's through your support that this book found its way into the world. Equally deserving of gratitude is M-san, who took on the double duty of editing alongside the other M-san (yes, it gets confusing), persisting as my editor even after the former M-san departed from the project. Your enduring involvement, including the time you traveled all the way to Oita to assist in building a roof over my deck, will never be forgotten. You faced my work with seriousness and sincerity, and you have my utmost gratitude. Thank you.

My gratitude also goes to I-san, who bravely undertook the challenge of inheriting this series during its final stages. Stepping into a project midway and assuming its completion is a very demanding task, and it's your unwavering patience and support that enabled me to reach the conclusion. Thank you.

I would like to acknowledge the editors of the manga edition, T-san and O-san, and everyone in the marketing department whose tireless efforts ensured the success of the book. To Earth Star Novels and all affiliated individuals, your contributions are

immensely appreciated. Thank you.

Finally to you, dear reader, who journeyed through this tale, I owe the deepest gratitude. Your enduring interest propelled this series forward. If the name “Mojikakiya” sparks curiosity in the future, even in the slightest, I’ll be content. Truly, thank you.

The story is now concluded. Where once I was an author crafting the narrative, I’m now but a reader revisiting it. If, like me, you could visualize Belgrieve and Angeline in motion, my aspirations are fulfilled.

As autumn unfolds, ushering in a crisp chill, nature’s vibrant hues hint at the imminent winter. I’m sure the dungeon and the guild are operating smoothly by now, and I’m sure that Angeline and her party members have returned laden with tales of eastern lands. After the rice harvest, perhaps I’ll visit Turnera to hear of their adventures.

MOJIKAKIYA, October 2021



We're done!
Let's celebrate!

Congratulations,
Mojikakiya-sensei!

2021
toi 8

BONUS SHORT STORY

COWBERRY FIELDS FOREVER

Though the mountain near Turnera was densely covered in trees, there were a few rocky places here and there where the tall trees couldn't grow. The lack of trees meant a good amount of sunlight made it to the surface, and thus, these areas were host to low-growing shrubs and creepers, which carpeted the ground. These plants were quite resistant to the cold and would grow freely in elven territory, but they fared far worse in warmer climates and could hardly be seen anywhere near Orphen.

Angeline supported her father with one arm and carried a basket in the other as they made their way down the mountain trail. A short distance ahead, Charlotte and Mit led the way with similar baskets, while Anessa and Miriam tagged along behind.

"Ah, not that way—we need to pass that rock on the left," Angeline called out as she noticed Charlotte glancing down an animal trail that veered off in the wrong direction.

"Okay, this way." Charlotte directed Mit down the correct path. The two children navigated the meandering way around boulders far larger than them. Gradually, the trees around them were getting shorter and sparser until they were hiking in the open sun. Craggy rocks of varying sizes poked out through the thick carpet of fallen leaves. The farther they went, the more rugged the terrain became.

Angeline already felt like jumping for joy at the knowledge that the cowberries were near, and she couldn't wipe the grin from her face. Her legs were trying to speed up on their own, but she restrained herself—she needed to help her father, as he was still injured. Owing to his condition, they were traveling slower than usual, but that just meant they had time to talk about all sorts of things along the way, and that was fun in its own right.

Belgrieve couldn't help from chuckling at Angeline's joyful expression. "You look happy."

"I am happy..." Angeline said, giving his arm a squeeze.

"Ahh, it really is nice and comfortable here..." Miriam said. She was walking behind them, languidly stretching her limbs as she walked.

Angeline nodded. "Yeah, my lungs feel refreshed."

The sky was strikingly blue, and from this high up, they could see how busy Turnera was with one day to go before the autumn festival. Curiously, there were far more people around than ever before, not to mention the three Bordeaux sisters, who helped to liven up the mood. The statue of Vienna had already been carried out to the square—if one didn't know any better, it might have looked like the festival was already underway.

Angeline and her friends had left that noisy scene behind to go pick cowberries. The goal was to offer them at tomorrow's festival, but naturally, they wanted to eat their fill too—especially Angeline, who had been waiting for this moment for years. Eventually, they reached a place where the light of the westering sun glistening in the sky above seemed to hit just right. Among the leaves carpeting the ground, a great number of bright red berries gleamed like gemstones. Charlotte and Mit cried out for joy.

"Found them!"

"Dad!" Angeline turned to Belgrieve with a fire in her eyes.

Belgrieve laughed and sat on a nearby stone. "Go and pick them to your heart's content."

Angeline bounded off into the cowberry patch, her basket at the ready. She danced through the plants cautiously in spite of her unbounded enthusiasm, taking care not to step on any of the berries, and stooped down to begin plucking them.

The ripe cowberries had been bathed in the chilly northern weather day and night and were now almost bursting with delicious juice. The skin of the overripe ones was too soft, and just the slightest touch would cause the juice to spill out. The best ones were just ripe enough to still have lustrous skins. It wasn't just their flavor that made them special—cowberries had a fine, supple texture and popped pleasantly in the mouth when eaten fresh. Angeline carefully chose a large, plump berry to eat first.

"Mmm!"

The tart sweetness spread through her mouth with a taste enhanced by memories that had come back to her after far too long, confirming for her that her vivid recollection of their taste was more substantial than the effects of rose-tinted glasses. The familiar taste felt like coming home, and it even tasted better than she remembered from all those years ago. She wasted no time eating a second, a third, and then a fourth. The tartness puckered her lips, while the sweetness lingered long after the berry was gone.

“Wow, they’re amazing!”

“They’re pretty good.”

Miriam and Anessa were also entranced by their flavor, while Charlotte and Mit’s partiality for the berries went without saying. For a long while, they all filled not their baskets but their mouths.

With each berry Angeline ate, another memory would be roused. Before she’d left for Orphen at twelve, it had been a regular fall event for her to come here, and she had done so almost every year. Most of their harvest would be dried or made into preserves, so there was only a very brief period of time where she could enjoy them freshly picked.

After she had filled just over half of her basket, Angeline sat down beside Belgrieve.

“Are you done?”

“No, just resting... Here, some for you too.”

“Oh, thank you.”

Together, they snacked on the berries in her basket like they had done in years long past. To Angeline, the memories stirred by eating cowberries were as important as their taste and texture. It seemed every bite brought back something forgotten, be it the joy of foraging, being led by the hand down these mountain trails by her father, or resting by the fireplace replete with berries.

Angeline glanced to her side. Belgrieve had a gentle smile on his face as he watched over his children and Angeline’s friends gathering the cowberries.

I’m glad I didn’t forget... I’m glad I didn’t become a demon. Angeline felt a pull deep within her heart and grabbed her father’s arm.

“Hmm? What’s wrong?”

“Hee hee... It’s nothing!” Angeline got up with her basket again. The sun was beginning to set; she would need to fill the basket up before they started on their way back.

I’m Belgrieve’s daughter. I’m here, where I belong.

Once more, Angeline raced out into the thicket. In that moment, she was the same little girl she had been before she first set out for Orphen.



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My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer: Volume 11
by MOJIKAKIYA

Translated by Roy Nukia
Edited by Brandon Koepp

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Cover illustration by toi8

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Original Japanese edition published in 2021 by Earth Star Entertainment

This English edition is published by arrangement with Earth Star Entertainment,
Tokyo

English translation © 2024 J-Novel Club LLC

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Ebook edition 1.0: January 2024

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PDF by: traitorAIZEN