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



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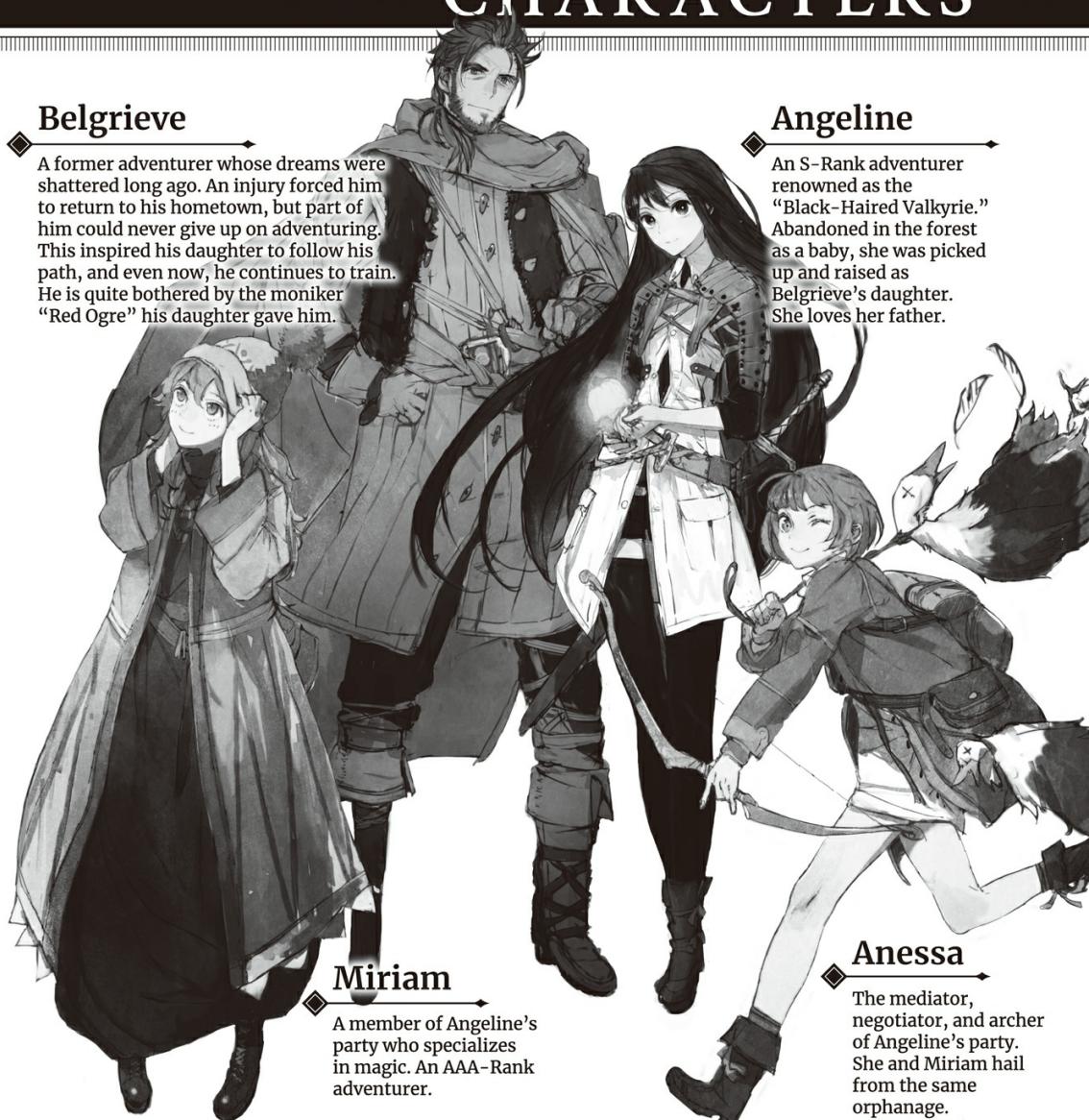




CHARACTERS

Belgrieve

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



Angeline

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

Miriam

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

Kasim

A man once trapped in despair and desperation. Thanks to Angeline, he managed to reunite with his old adventurer comrade, Belgrieve.

Charlotte

A girl who was on the run after causing a stir in Bordeaux. She was taken in by Angeline, and is slowly regaining her childish innocence.

Anessa

The mediator, negotiator, and archer of Angeline's party. She and Miriam hail from the same orphanage. An AAA-Rank adventurer.

Byaku

A boy who could not abandon Charlotte even after she was no longer his responsibility. Though his words are harsh, he is kind deep down.

STORY

Though Belgrieve had settled into a peaceful life in Turnera with his eleven houseguests and a child harboring demonic powers, he ultimately came to the conclusion that he had to face his past and settle matters with his former comrades, whom he had parted ways with after losing his leg. Thus, he set off for the City of Orphen.

It was right around that time that Angeline was looking forward to her return to Turnera, only for a letter to arrive addressed to Orphen's adventurers' guild. It was a message from a prominent noble—Archduke Estogal—summoning her to the City of Estogal to receive a medal for her achievements. Angeline begrudgingly obliged, not wanting to cause trouble for any of her friends, and it was in that city where she came across the former S-Rank adventurer Kasim, also known as the Aether Buster.

Out of nowhere, the Aether Buster bursts out with a question:

**“Wh-Wh-Wh-What did you just say?! Bel?!
Did you say Belgrieve?!”**

After realizing that Angeline was Belgrieve's daughter, he accompanied her back to Orphen, where he finally reunited with his comrade from so long ago.



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

WORLD MAP

Elf Territory



Ancient Forest

Rodina

Hazel

Bordeaux

Sid

Elvgren

Garuda

Orphen

Estogal City

Turnera

Haril Checkpoint

Northern Trade Route

Erin

Tyldes

Eastern Trade Route

Yobem Checkpoint

Benares

Asterinos



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Chapter 58: It Was a Memory Cast in Sepia

It was a memory cast in sepia: light and shadow were distinct, but other colors were rather muted, and neither the billowing breeze nor the rustling grass were discernible details. It was as though the whole scene was being viewed through a thin curtain. The sun was at its zenith and the light that filtered through the leaves was blindingly bright, so much so that the baby had to squint to look around.

There was another figure present—a woman, it seemed, with the radiant sun shining behind her. Her well-tailored clothes had worn out in places, and they were covered in conspicuous spots of grime. She appeared to be in pain, her every breath coming out as a shrill whistling sound; misery was etched on her pale face, and there were traces of tears lingering on her cheeks.

“I’m sorry... But, please...” she muttered, praying. She placed braided dried herbs over the baby and gently kissed her cheek as a gust of wind rocked her hair. Her smile seemed lonely, as though she was saying goodbye.

What’s wrong? the baby wanted to say, though she wasn’t yet up to the task of vocalization. She could only just manage to mewl out a whining noise from her vocal cords.

The woman took a deep breath and looked around.

“Before they find us...” the woman muttered, her hands clasped in front of her chest and her gaze cast sorrowfully downwards. “It will be all right... I’m sure someone...someone nice will find you.”

The woman’s form shimmered like a mirage, and then she was gone.

There was one final large gust that blew down the leaves from the autumnal trees. It wasn’t possible to know how long it had been since the woman had vanished. The sun was so warm, and yet the wind was cold. The child grimaced as a sense of desolation began to set in, before bursting into tearful wailing.

There was a sudden rustling noise—the sound of someone or something

parting the thicket, and of feet crushing dry grass and fallen leaves.

“Well, I’ll be...”

A warm, very reassuring hand raised the child. Her black eyes reflected red hair and a bewildered expression.

○

Orphen had entered the thick of winter, with snow falling day after day and turning the city white. The street sweepers could handle it for the first day, but they were soon so busy that the adventurers’ guild began receiving shoveling requests. Thus, the job was passed on to low-ranking adventurers and children who wanted some pocket change.

There was a vacant lot in a corner of the slums where there had once been a building that had collapsed, either from weathering or some other unknowable cause. After the debris had been cleared away, no one had any mind to erect anything else. It was usually a gathering place for street children and vagrants, but today, there was a large line of people gathered there. The church had taken it upon itself to distribute food to the people of the slums.

Under the sprinkling snow, a large pot of stew simmered which would be served with thin slices of hard bread. Those that would have otherwise shivered in dilapidated houses or even the streets were desperate for this long-awaited warmth.

“Hey, no cutting in line! There’s plenty to go around!” Rosetta called out.

After the poor were served stew by the sisters wearing aprons over their vestments, they would gather around the fire to keep warm, their breaths coming out in rising vapor clouds. There were ruddy-faced children there as well, blowing on their hot spoons.

Belgrieve carefully wove his way through this crowd with a bundle of wood under his arm.

“Where would you like the wood, Ms. Rosetta?”

“Oh, Mr. Belgrieve! Thank you so much! Um, yes, this should be good—right here!”

Belgrieve placed the wood where she had pointed with a noisy clatter. The flames beneath the pot had died down to smoldering embers now, though they still emitted plentiful heat. Belgrieve added a few logs atop the charcoal,

the fine splinters on their surfaces snapping as they burned.

Meanwhile, Charlotte was hard at work stirring so the stew didn't burn. She wore a fluffy knit cap pulled down so far it covered her eyebrows and almost concealed her face, even with her hair bundled up underneath it.

Having once proselytized for the glory of Solomon and sold talismans to the people of the slums, Charlotte wanted to do something to atone for her deceit. At first, she had tried to return their money, but there was no way of knowing who had actually bought the talismans. To make matters worse, many of her victims acted high-handed with her simply because she was a little girl. Without keeping a single coin for herself, she donated all the money to the church and hoped to, even in the slightest way, pay back the community she had wronged by helping with the food distribution programs.

Nevertheless, her albino features made her stand out. Although silver hair wasn't uncommon, pure white hair was an oddity. She couldn't accomplish much if people recognized her on sight and went after her, so she decided to disguise herself.

Charlotte held a deep loathing for the Church of Vienna ever since she was chased out of Lucrecia, but after spending time with Rosetta, the other sisters, and the orphans in their care, that hatred had abated somewhat—and she had once been a pious believer, in any case. Thus, she reached the conclusion that whatever "church" the higher-ups in Lucrecia had turned into a political tool had nothing to do with the faith itself, and that the tenets and beliefs of that faith should not just be denied.

With Charlotte as his connection, Belgrieve had visited the orphanage a few times and helped out with odd jobs here and there or played with the children. He didn't hate doing this sort of thing; in fact, he was quite used to working in the cold and was a better helper than most. The orphanage was mostly staffed by women, and they were delighted to have his man power at their disposal.

Eventually, once the sun had set and the last of the stew was gone, the pot was filled with melting snow and given a light scrub; the fire was put out, and everyone packed up to go.

"Can you hold that for me, Byaku?"

Byaku silently took hold of the handle on one side of the pot. Belgrieve took the other side, and they slowly hauled away the massive pot of thick, heavy iron. Although Byaku staggered a bit, he stubbornly braced his legs

and powered through. Belgrieve couldn't help but chuckle.

"What's your problem?" Byaku asked.

"No, I just thought you were working hard. But maybe you should try training a bit more."

"Tsk." The boy clicked his tongue and shifted his grip.

"Hey, hey, hold it like that, and you'll get soot on your clothes."

"Can it, you damn old-timer. Just get moving."

And with that, Byaku continued trudging, Belgrieve chuckling all the while.

After living together a bit, the two had developed a peculiar sense of trust. Byaku was still as brusque as ever, but he wasn't quite so contrarian in his actions now. He had even gone from calling Belgrieve "old man" to "damn old-timer." Although this might seem like a turn for the worse, it also meant Byaku was no longer treating him as a stranger.

As far as Belgrieve was concerned, it was like he had gained a rebellious son, and that was a bit fun in its own right. Everything else aside, Angeline was his daughter—as a single father, he would always end up treating her carefully. But with Byaku, on the other hand, he felt like he would be forgiven if he was a little less delicate, and teased him a bit more instead of pampering him as he did with Angeline. They would quarrel and yet somehow make it through the day together. It was quite an intriguing experience. Belgrieve glanced at Byaku to find him scowling and looking the other way. The boy stumbled again and irritably clicked his tongue.

They carried the pot back to the kitchen of the church orphanage, where it was then given a more thorough cleaning.

Sunset came early in the winter months, and while the skies were still bright, the setting sun was already hidden behind the taller buildings, and the churchyard was cloaked in shadow. The other sisters were scattered here and there, apparently preparing for evening prayer. The voices of children playing in the snow could be heard from the end of the yard.

Rosetta brewed a floral tea with a delightful smile. "You really helped us out there, Mr. Belgrieve. Thanks a bunch!"

"Oh no, I hardly did anything. Not to mention it was Char's suggestion."

After taking off her cap and letting her hair down, Charlotte began fidgeting. With all the scrubbing and washing after the cold winds, the rosiness had spread beyond her face all the way down to her fingertips.

“Er... Do you think I paid them back, even if only just a little?”

“Of course you did, Char. Those feelings will surely reach Great Vienna above.”

“Yeah... Thanks, Rosetta. For helping me out. And dad and Byaku too, of course.”

Belgrieve grinned and patted her on the head. Byaku shut his eyes and said nothing.

After a sip of tea, Belgrieve let out a long breath. The warm drink had been just the thing to fight off the chill.

Angeline and her party were out on a request. They were high-ranking adventurers, but that didn't mean they had all the time in the world to play around. It did mean, however, that the amount they earned from a single request was quite literally on a different magnitude from what low-ranking adventurers could earn.

Blowing on her cup, Charlotte muttered, “I wonder how they're doing.”

“They didn't go far. And Kasim's with them, so based on how it goes, they might be back already.”

They had left the day before to explore a nearby dungeon accompanied by Kasim, who insisted that he wanted to earn his keep and got himself reinstated as an adventurer. Lionel was delighted by the unexpected addition to the guild's ranks.

“Come to think of it, Mr. Belgrieve,” Rosetta said, already refilling her own tea, “you're not going to have your license reissued?”

Belgrieve had to give some thought to his answer. “I don't plan on it. In any case, I'm returning to Turnera come spring. Registering as an adventurer won't do much for me.”

Though Kasim had come to Orphen, this by no means put a stop to his search for Percival and Satie. However, he had yet to stumble across any noteworthy leads, and he was still stuck with his lingering regrets. However, Turnera was an important place to Belgrieve, and he couldn't just take off on a whim and leave Graham saddled with Mit forever.

Looks like I'm old enough to think about it circumspectly, he thought with a wry smile.

“I see, so you're leaving... I'm sorry to hear it,” Rosetta said, then took another sip.

Charlotte fixed her gaze on her and asked, “Do you like dad? Do you want

to marry him?"

"Pfft?! Hack, cough! Wh-What are you talking about?!" Rosetta wheezed, her face reddening.

Belgrieve wearily placed a hand on his brow. "Char, not you too..."

"I mean, sis said... Don't you like Rosetta?"

"Well, I like her as a person. But Ms. Rosetta is still young. She'd be wasted on an old man like me."

Belgrieve remained completely unperturbed as Charlotte poutingly puffed up her cheeks, as if to say, *That's not what I meant by "like."* Meanwhile, Rosetta let out a relieved chuckle.

The truth of the matter was that Belgrieve had a good reputation among the sisters tending to the orphanage. However, they regarded him in the same way as they would a celebrity that they were gossiping about—none of them was particularly driven to get to know him better and grow closer to him.

Owing to Angeline's ploy, Rosetta had initially been a tad self-conscious around Belgrieve, but now that she knew that he had no such intentions, that was no longer the case. She did adore him, but her affection was closer to what she would direct to a brother or father, completely separate from romantic love.

So she got hit by his fatherliness, Charlotte thought with a sigh.

Byaku cackled. "No response. Looks like love is dead."

"Urgh... Is Satie our only option?" Charlotte wondered, sticking out her lips.

Belgrieve offered a troubled smile. "I keep telling you it's not like that..."

The evening bell chimed, and Rosetta snapped to her senses.

"I'm sorry, I need to attend prayer."

"It's already this late. We should get going."

"Mr. Belgrieve, you really helped us out today. Feel free to stop by whenever you want. That goes for Char and Byaku too."

"Yes, of course. I'll bring Ange with me next time."

The four stood up and tidied their cups. Rosetta made for the chapel, while Belgrieve left with Charlotte and Byaku.



The wagon clattered as it rolled down the road, leaving behind tracks that

revealed the black dirt beneath the otherwise untrodden snow.

It was a rented, two-horse wagon. Anessa held the reins, while Angeline, Miriam, and Kasim rode behind. Much of the wagon was taken up by the hide, claws, fangs, and scales of a mutant dragon subspecies.

Angeline gazed longingly at the Orphen cityscape she could see in the distance.

“Anne...hurry up.”

“Be reasonable. We’ve got four people and a full load of materials.”

Angeline pouted. She wanted to return to Belgrieve as soon as possible. Swallowing her displeasure, she leaned her back against the sideboard of the wagon. “I wonder what’s for dinner...” she muttered, apropos of nothing.

She couldn’t contain her sudden happiness at the thought of her father waiting for her at home.

Caressing a massive fang, Miriam said, “I was a little expectant when I heard it was a mutant. Turns out it wasn’t anything special.”

“Right. But it might have been a bit rough on the lower ranks. I’d say it’s somewhere between A and AA.”

“Hmph. No match for us... We even had Mr. Kasim, huh?”

“Heh heh heh. I really didn’t do anything. You girls are pretty strong,” Kasim smirked as he adjusted his hat.

Perhaps it was easier for mana to gather in the region around Orphen due to the numerous dungeons dotting the land, a few of which were even high-ranking ones. Dungeons were a fundamental source of various materials, and hunting down the fiends within also prevented them from spilling over to the outside world. Hence, there was demand for as many adventurers as could be gathered to Orphen, which was one of the reasons the city had such a prospering adventurer industry.

The request this time was to hunt down a mutated fiend that had appeared in a low-ranking dungeon.

Over its long history, the guild had cataloged countless battles and identified the traits and weaknesses of all sorts of fiends. This resulted in an itemized list, which was used to divide fiends into ranks based on their danger level. The system allowed for a simple criterion to judge request difficulty, but there was always the risk of a fiend being born from a sudden aberration. In these cases, it would be impossible to judge the difficulty, and oftentimes, a competent team of adventurers would be sent to judge it and

personally assess the threat level.

This request happened to be one of them. Going up against a foe with no data required caution, and it was a bit much for the low-rankers. Of course, this fiend proved to be quite insignificant to a party of high-ranking adventurers.

“But I’ll always welcome a chance to explore a dungeon with Bell’s daughter.”

“I’m also happy to be able to fight alongside my dad’s friend...”

“Heh heh, this is pretty nice. It brings me back to all that fun I had with the party.”

“Hey, hey, Mr. Kasim—what were the roles in your party with Mr. Bell?” Miriam asked. “You had the Exalted Blade, right? Were the two of them on the front line together?”

Kasim gave that a moment’s thought, tousling his chin hairs. “Let’s see. You’re right—Percy was generally the vanguard. Bell and Satie would join him if needed—Satie more often than Bell, I’d say. I was always on the back line, and I remember Bell was next to me most of the time.”

“Even though he’s a swordsman?”

“Right, that’s what makes him so interesting. It’s his eyes—his observation skills were incredible. He was always keeping an eye on our surroundings when we were handling a request, and he’d be the first to react whenever something unexpected happened. When we were up against many fiends at once, Bell was the one directing us. And when Percy and Satie pushed forward without a care in the world, Bell would run out and be there, covering their backs. Long story short, he was something like a tactician and aide.”

“I see. Come to think of it, when that mess happened in Bordeaux, Ms. Helvetica was saved because Mr. Bell noticed something was wrong and ran to the manor.”

“I remember that... That’s pretty high-level stuff. You can’t do it without a great deal of composure,” Anessa said.

Kasim nodded. “You can say that again. He never really stood out, but his importance was really hammered in every time we rose in rank. Frankly, there are a lot of newcomers who just don’t understand it. See, at the low ranks, they can make it through without somebody filling that role, more often than not.”

“True.” Angeline nodded back. For low-ranking fiend hunts and material-gathering requests, it was possible to get by with brute force, without a proper strategy.

After becoming a high-ranking adventurer, Angeline had slowly begun to feel the limits of what she could accomplish on her own. The guild had recommended she form a party with Anessa and Miriam, and then she felt firsthand what a blessing they were. A front-line swordsman needed support to cover her back, while backline magicians and archers needed someone to keep their foes at bay.

“Once you rise through the ranks, you can’t just rely on force of will anymore, huh...”

“That’s right. So Bell was doing what high-ranking folks do, and he was doing it from the very start. Those guys didn’t understand—they were all pretty harsh on him, and he ended up passing from one party to the next. I get the feeling that’s part of why he has such a low opinion of himself.”

“I see... Heh heh, I knew it. Dad’s amazing.”

“Enemy detection, protecting the back line, and keeping tabs on the battle... I’d definitely like somebody like him in my party,” Anessa said.

Kasim placed a hand on her shoulder. “You get it? Well, I guess that’s what your role is right now, Anne.”

“You think so...? Hee hee...” Anessa lightly blushed as her role was compared to a man she admired. With the party’s current composition, Anessa was generally tasked with watching how the battle played out.

Angeline wasn’t as amused. “I’ll watch from the back next time,” she said with a pouty huff.

“No, c’mon. If you step back, who’s going to be at the front?”

“It’s not fair... I want to be like dad too.”

“Heh heh heh,” Kasim chuckled. “Well, you’ve got a completely different personality from him, Ange.”

Angeline prodded at the man. “How are we different?”

“Well let’s count ’em... First, Bell’s great at looking after people—real great. He’s mild-mannered and always takes a step back to look at things rationally. Everyone in our party had a pretty strong personality—me included—and we had our fair share of infighting. And it was always Bell who stepped in to scold us. We’d settle down a bit whenever he’d let us have it.” Kasim glanced at Angeline mischievously. “As for you, Ange. You’re

unsociable, you've got a bad attitude, and you're stubborn. Completely different.”

“Grr...” Angeline bit her lip.

With a satisfied look on his face, Kasim prodded Angeline back. “But you know, you’re a good kid! And that’s what matters!”

Miriam giggled. “It’s kinda like Mr. Bell was already a dad way back when.”

“Perhaps. When I look at Ange, I can really tell that Bell was a great father.”

Angeline’s spirits were instantly lifted. She wrapped a hand around Kasim’s shoulder. “You think so? You really do understand, Mr. Kasim...”

“Mmhmm. If you ever get the chance, try heading into a dungeon with Bell. You’ll feel a completely new sense of security.”

Angeline recalled the times she walked through the forest with Belgrieve as a child. Just having Belgrieve behind her certainly did fill her with a sort of peace of mind. However, perhaps the security Kasim spoke of was something else. What she felt back then was in the sense of a child having her father nearby. She still had yet to experience how it would feel to rely on Belgrieve as an adventurer. His sword skills were reassuring, but judging by Kasim’s words, that wasn’t the half of it.

Angeline planted her elbow on the edge of the wagon and rested her cheek on her hand.

“You think dad will ever make a comeback...?”

“He’s returning to Turnera in the spring, so I don’t think so,” said Miriam.

“But Mr. Kasim got his license, even though he’s heading to Turnera with him...”

Anessa shook her head. “Well, Mr. Kasim’s a former S-Rank with loads of achievements. Even though Mr. Bell’s an amazing person, his lack of tangible accomplishments means he’ll have to start from the bottom. That’s hardly any different from not coming back at all.”

“He should be fine if I vouch for him... The Orphen Guild can’t go against me.”

“Yeah, and my testimony should seal the deal. I bet those old men who came back will recommend him too. Bell’s name is famous in Orphen, right? No one would complain.”

“Wow, it’s an abuse of power. I live for that!”

As the other three cackled, Anessa broke into a cold sweat. “Wait, were you serious?!”

“I, for one, am serious... Think about it. We can add dad to our party here...”

“That’s incredible. The Black-Haired Valkyrie, the Aether Buster, and the Red Ogre. We’ll have the strongest party in history,” Miriam exclaimed with an exaggerated flourish.

“Well, given his personality, Bell’s definitely never coming back to the business,” Kasim said with a laugh and a shrug.

“Why? I think he’d appreciate the invitation...”

“Sure he would. But Bell—he’s an earnest guy. He’d hate the idea of jumping ranks when he hasn’t done a thing. Right—he’d say something about ‘making a mockery of all the people who diligently work their way up from the bottom.’”

“Hmm...”

It was easy to imagine Belgrieve saying something to that effect. And Belgrieve could be incredibly stubborn on that front. He wouldn’t go along with it no matter what Angeline said to him—he might even be angry at her.

“So you’re saying he has no intention of working from the ground up in Orphen...”

“I doubt it. Belgrieve thinks Turnera is where he belongs.”

Angeline remembered him saying that the last time she had returned home. Although she wished he had a higher opinion of himself, Angeline admired him for how much he loved his home, and for his simple humility. She hugged her knees and sighed. It was a shame, but she was also proud of him.

“That earnestness is the best part of him.”

“You can say that again! It’s saved our butts more than a few times.”

“Yeah... I wonder what Mr. Percy and Ms. Satie are doing right now.”

“We don’t know a thing at the moment. But hey, no need to rush. We’ll do what we can. For now, I’m at least relieved I got to meet Bell again. Now it’ll be fun no matter what I do.”

Before they knew it, the sun had already begun to set, but their wagon had entered Orphen by then. They returned to the guild to have their materials appraised and accepted payment for the request. After parting with Anessa and Miriam, Angeline headed home with Kasim.

The streets were filled with a mix of soldiers on the night watch and people returning home from work. Here and there, a fine scent wafted from buildings and stalls. The day's end elicited a mixture of fatigue and respite, filling the air with a pervasive sense of relief.

The closer she got to home, the more noticeable the smile tugging at the corners of her lips became, and the greater the excitement grew in her chest. She was already sprinting by the time she set foot on the first of the wooden steps.

A line of lamplight streamed through the gap in the door... She reached for the doorknob and twisted...

“I’m home!”

Chapter 59: Angeline's Room Was Built for One

Angeline's room was built for one, and it was no simple task to cram five sleepers inside. Though she had modest possessions, the room itself was rather small. This wasn't a problem when sitting around the table, but floor space was needed when it was time for bed.

For now, Belgrieve, Angeline, and Charlotte slept on the bigger bed, Byaku on the smaller one Belgrieve had bought, and Kasim on the sofa. They had lived like that for just over a week, feeling cramped all the while. The bed was just too narrow for three to sleep comfortably.

Furthermore, while he didn't really mind sharing a bed with Charlotte, something felt a little off about doing so with Angeline like this. No matter how old she was, she would always be his daughter—but it felt strange to treat her like a young child forever.

“There’s still some time before the snow melts... Maybe I should rent another room for the short term...” Belgrieve suggested as he sprinkled cheese over his breakfast of wheat porridge.

“Then I’ll go with you.”

“And me!”

“Count me in.”

“What’s with you people...” Byaku sighed as he looked at the three raising their hands. Belgrieve smiled long-sufferingly.



“I’m saying I want to move because it’s cramped. What’s the point if everyone goes with me? And if we’re dividing ourselves, shouldn’t it be by sex?”

“Why do you say that?! Family should get priority, dad!”

“That’s right, dad!”

“Huh? Then I’m left out of the loop?”

“You’re an adult, Mr. Kasim. You need to put up with it...”

“That’s right, Uncle Kasim!”

“Now you’re making me sad...” Kasim sorrowfully rocked back and forth.

“Kasim...” Belgrieve said with a sigh. “You don’t even need to live with us in the first place, do you?”

“You’re so heartless, Bell! I’m lonely! Can’t you understand that?!”

Kasim slapped the table. Then, it seemed that inspiration struck him. “In that case, how about we rent a bigger room and move everyone there? That should do it.”

“Good idea, Mr. Kasim. How does that sound?”

“Then what do we do about this room? It would be a waste.”

“We don’t have to do anything with it... We don’t have to worry about money, dad.”

These S-Rank adventurers are pretty crafty, Belgrieve mused. Unlike Turnera, where money was of little consequence, it cost money to do most anything in Orphen.

Belgrieve had brought his savings with him, but he had already eaten into them quite a bit. He had also brought the money Sasha had given him as thanks for Angeline saving Seren, but he considered that Angeline’s money and hadn’t touched it. The funds had only been tapped into when Angeline began using them to pay for their reunion banquet.

If he wanted to rent a room, he would have no choice but to turn to his daughter or Kasim. In which case, he would need to respect their opinions on the matter. Though it felt wrong to waste money like this, the snowmelt was still far off. They couldn’t cram into this small room for that long.

Belgrieve sighed and scratched his head. “Then let’s do that... I hope we find someplace nice.”

“Hmm—I can’t wait!”

“Hey, sis, what room would be nice? Maybe we should rent a whole house?”

“That’s a fine idea. But if it’s too big, it will be a pain to clean... Any requests, Mr. Kasim?”

“I can sleep anywhere, so I don’t really care.”

“Then why don’t you lie down at the side of the road...”

“Hey, Byaku!” Charlotte scolded, but Byaku simply turned away.

With a grin, Kasim reached across the table and patted Byaku on the head. “Heh heh heh... What a mouthy brat you are. Not that I’ve got a problem with that, mind you. There there, good boy.”

“Stop... H-Hey... What are you... Knock it off!”

“There, there. How’s that?”

Kasim roughly mussed up Byaku’s hair. Perhaps he had been pouring some magic from his palm, as the boy’s eyes were spinning. Belgrieve placed a tired hand on his arm.

“Hey now, Kasim. You’re acting immature.”

“I’m just fooling.” Kasim raised his hand and flippantly waved it around. Byaku took in a deep breath, his head evidently still spinning.

“See what happens when you act up, Bucky boy...?” Angeline giggled.

“Shut up. Blast, what an outrageous old man...”

“It’s because you ran your mouth. You know what they say—the mouth is the gate of misfortune, Byaku.”

Byaku clicked his tongue before gulping down the water in his cup.

Belgrieve sighed. “Don’t fight over such pointless things. Good grief...”

“Well, for now, we’re house hunting. Let’s finish up and head out,”

Kasim said as he dipped a spoon into his porridge with gusto.

It was yet another day of ashen skies and falling snow coating everything in an alabaster sheen. The streets were crowded with people, their breaths instantly turning into puffs of vapor so numerous it was almost as if they were creating the clouds overhead.

Orphen’s rows of stone buildings were a rather bleak sight to Belgrieve. The walls had been neatly painted when they were first erected, but the colors had all worn away by now, leaving only a peculiarly desolate feeling behind.

It had been over a month since he had arrived—the first time he’d roamed this city in twenty-five years. Now that he was here again, it felt far more weathered than he remembered. Perhaps that was a given, considering the passage of time, but he also suspected his memories had become increasingly idealized over the years. It all seemed so much more beautiful in his dreams.

However, having lived here for just over two years, Belgrieve was astonished that he could still remember it all so vividly after so much time had gone by. His days hadn't been very peaceful back then, but the memory of them glimmered in a way that nothing else could hope to match.

Whenever such thoughts crossed his mind, Belgrieve would smile wryly and acknowledge he had truly grown old. His nostalgia had only grown stronger once he reunited with Kasim, as those bygone scenes would be awakened whenever they spoke of their past. What had been faint vestiges of memory during his years in Turnera were becoming far more distinct.

Still, I have to treasure the time I have now, Belgrieve thought. To be blunt, laying the past to rest was a personal matter. Kasim shared the same goal, so Belgrieve was fine with his assistance, but he did not want to drag many others into the mix.

"Are Graham and Mit doing all right...?" He imagined that taciturn duo sitting before the fireplace, holding the same kind of incoherent conversations from before. *Are they eating properly? Have the preserved foods gone bad? Are they correctly spinning yarn like I taught them? Have they carefully sorted the beans?* Once he started thinking about it, the worries were unending.

Ultimately, the time he spent in Turnera was far longer than what he had spent in Orphen. Confronting the past was important, but now, Turnera was just as important to him. *I'm already feeling homesick...* He could no longer laugh at Angeline's antics after all of this.

He waited under the eaves to avoid the snow until Angeline emerged from the building, looking distinctly displeased.

"It's no good... No vacancies."

"On second thought, it doesn't matter if the room is small. Let's just rent two rooms."

"No. Absolutely not. Family needs to live together," Angeline obstinately insisted, shooting down Belgrieve's proposition. Belgrieve let out a sigh.

They had left her lodgings right after breakfast to visit real estate agents all over the city. Orphen reflected a wide cross section of society, so available properties ranged from estates for nobility to run-down huts in the slums. But the largest portion of the population belonged to the middle class, including merchants, craftsmen, and, for that matter, many adventurers. Thus, the housing market catered to this demographic. Angeline had harbored high

hopes that this would mean there would be at least one suitable room on the market, but ended up rather disappointed to find no vacancies no matter where she looked.

Kasim folded his arms behind his head. “Well, that’s a letdown. Orphen’s real estate market is pretty big, but it has the population density to match.”

“There’s nothing forcing us to find lodgings today...”

“I would be fine staying in my current room, dad,” Angeline reminded him.

Belgrieve wearily stroked his beard. His house in Turnera consisted of a single large room, so there was little he could have done about that when she was with him, but that wasn’t the case in Orphen.

“Ange... You’re a young woman. Don’t you want at least a little privacy in your life?”

“Nope,” she immediately replied. “I don’t have anything to hide.”

Unable to find the right response, Belgrieve’s shoulders sagged. She was a good kid, but there was something that seemed slightly off about her. He didn’t hate that she loved him sincerely, but he couldn’t help but feel anxious to see she was still like this at the age of eighteen.

What happened to all that time you practiced sleeping alone? He sighed.

Kasim seemed intrigued by the scene. “You have it rough, Bell.”

“If you get that, then lend me a hand, why don’t you...?”

“Heh heh, you think I’m tactless enough to come between the two of you?”

The snowflakes were growing larger and fluffier as they danced in the wind and stuck to his clothes. Though this region didn’t hold a candle to winters in Turnera, it was still quite cold.

Kasim placed his hands on Charlotte and Byaku’s heads. “But that should be enough for today, wouldn’t you say? I need to train these two.”

“Oh, that’s right... Yeah, we can find a room later,” Belgrieve said with a resigned chuckle.

Kasim had recently become Byaku and Charlotte’s magic teacher. Byaku aside, Belgrieve wanted to give Charlotte the chance to enjoy her childhood a bit longer, but the girl had been insistent on learning the craft.

Although Charlotte possessed vast reserves of mana to tap into, she didn’t quite know how to use it. During her time traveling as Solomon’s priestess, she had relied on the power of her magic ring. Back then, she could manage

with just a bit of mana and the bare minimum of incantations. But she hadn't used magic since she lost the ring.

Compared to the harsh and terrifying Maria, Kasim was mischievous yet mild, probably why Charlotte decided this was a good opportunity to learn. Kasim didn't seem to mind, and was actually quite eager to teach. There was no question of his skills—he was an archmage after all—but it came as quite the surprise that he was capable of teaching them. At least, it was to Belgrieve, who still remembered him as that shy but mischievous boy from long ago.

After eating lunch at a random stall along the way, Belgrieve entrusted the two children to Kasim and made for the guild with Angeline. As they walked side by side, Angeline gleefully grabbed him by the arm.

"You look happy, Ange," Belgrieve observed, chuckling.

"I am! It's a dream come true to walk around Orphen with my dad!" she said, tightening her grip on his arm.

Ever since she returned from Estogal and began living with Belgrieve, every little thing seemed to send Angeline into a frenzy of excitement. It was not the same thing as merely returning to day-to-day life in Turnera with her father. Instead, Belgrieve had become a part of her own routine in Orphen, and this excited her to no end. Until she had gotten a request and left for the dungeon, she had been dragging him around with her every day, showing him all the good shops and her favorite places. And of course, Belgrieve was also happy to walk these city streets he dimly remembered with her.

They reached the guild after a little less than an hour of walking. It was afternoon by then, and though there weren't as many adventurers there as there were during peak hours, the place was still just as lively.

Generally, the guild was at its busiest from morning to noon. After that, most nonurgent requests that came in wouldn't be posted until the next morning. Thus, the start of the day became a battleground to snap up the best jobs. Incidentally, that was also when the more impatient clients would come to bargain for the most competent hands willing to work on a budget.

The guild would settle down in the afternoon when it was largely occupied by high-ranking and veteran adventurers who could take jobs at their own leisure. In the afternoon, the guild staff's work mostly consisted of classifying requests, appraising materials brought in, and filling out paperwork.

Marguerite was currently at the counter, lining it with fiend claws, fangs, and bones from her sack. Perhaps because she was able to pick up on the sound of Belgrieve's peg leg tapping against the stone, she turned to the two of them with a smile.

"Yo, Bell. I see Ange's with you."

"Hey, Maggie. Are you finishing up?"

"Pretty much. They say I've just got a little ways to go before D-Rank. Still, it's all so easy. It feels a bit lacking," Marguerite griped, though she sounded like she was half-joking.

Angeline giggled. "Then want another sparring match...?"

"Oh! You're on! I'll drag you through the dirt today!"

"Oh ho, I'm not losing to the likes of you..."

"Now you've said it! I'll blast that composure to bits!"

Marguerite happily prodded Angeline in the shoulder. They were swordswomen the same age as each other, and their skills were roughly on par. It seemed Angeline and Marguerite regarded one another as worthy foes.

However, as things stood, Angeline was still the uncontested victor; their skills were on par, but perhaps the gap in experience was the deciding factor. Still, after several matches, Marguerite's movements were becoming further refined.

Their banter was quite pleasant to Belgrieve, who thought that having a rival would spur them to grow, and that they would be good friends by the end of it.

But now I have two geniuses to deal with. This is more than I can handle, Belgrieve thought as he scratched his head.

Angeline turned to him. "I'm going to fight Maggie. What about you, dad?"

"I'll be looking through the archives. Come back when you're done."

"What, you're not even gonna watch? I'm gonna win today."

"Ha ha, I'll be looking forward to hearing all about it. Good luck, Maggie."

Angeline pouted. "Give me some luck too!"

"Yeah, good luck, Ange. Take care not to get injured."

"Yeah!"

The woman at the receptionist's desk saw them off with a smile. Once they were gone, Belgrieve headed to the desk for high-ranking adventurers.

Across the counter sat Edgar, flipping through documents. He looked up as Belgrieve approached while straightening his bandana that had nearly fallen off.

“Hey, Mr. Bell. Researching again?”

“Yeah, I’m sorry for all the trouble, Mr. Ed.”

“What are you talking about? It’d be a huge help if that place gets sorted.” Edgar opened the waist-height counter door and beckoned him in. “We’re looking through the records when we have time, but we’re not coming up with anything promising...”

“This is my personal problem. You don’t have to worry about it.”

“You think so? But you know, it’s no lie that I want to help you out. Talk to me if anything happens, okay?”

“Thanks, I will.” Belgrieve nodded.

The guild staff felt obliged to Angeline, who had saved Orphen from a major crisis, and had a favorable impression of Belgrieve, who had been a factor in Angeline’s decision to stay and fight. There was also Angeline’s constant talk of the Red Ogre and the rumors that Belgrieve was difficult to approach.

However, Edgar seemed to show no concern for those tales. He was an active AAA-Rank adventurer who was interested in Belgrieve’s skills and had sparred with him a few times. When he had worked in Lionel’s party, he had fought on the middle line, where he became an expert at shifting between attack and defense. Their mock battles had been quite impactful on Belgrieve.

Just like that, they warmed up to one another and now spoke on friendly terms as if they were the same age. This was something Belgrieve was thankful for, and it helped him understand a bit of how he was seen by Graham.

“Come to think of it, where’s Ms. Yuri?”

“She’s off today. She needs to go on vacation now and then.”

“I see... She’s been here every time I’ve stopped by, so I’ve been wondering when she takes a break.”

“Ha ha ha, you got that right. It looks like we just sit around, but it’s surprisingly tiring work, you know. I’m amazed you can manage to do this every day.”

“Well in my case, I’m not here for work... Well, then.”

Before Belgrieve could walk away, Edgar suddenly recalled something.

“Come to think of it, can you make some time in the evening?”

“Evening?”

“Right. See, Leo’s been wearing himself out lately, so I’m thinking of inviting him for a drink or something to cheer him up. But it’s boring with just the two of us, so would you like to join us? Mr. Kasim too.”

“Hmm... Are you sure about inviting me?”

“Well, why wouldn’t I invite a friend? Don’t be a stranger.”

“Ha ha, I see. Then I’ll take you up on that. Should I bring Ange?”

“Go right ahead. I know a great Eastern restaurant.”

It was then that an adventurer returning from a completed request arrived at the counter, and Edgar turned to attend to him. He glanced at Belgrieve and nodded.

With a shrug, Belgrieve headed to the reference area.

The documents in this area pertained to high-ranking requests, so there weren’t as many documents to search through as there were at the low-ranking counter. But still, it was far too much to investigate alone. Many of the old requests weren’t properly sorted either. Since he was looking through them anyways, Belgrieve made sure to sort them where they belonged.

He scanned one title after another, searching for the kind of job Percival would jump at. When he found one that fit the bill, he would look through it in detail and try to find any leads, but he had yet to turn up anything noteworthy.

Percival had headed east—this much was certain, but it was still unknown where exactly he was headed and what he was hoping to find. It probably would be difficult to pin down his whereabouts from Orphen. To be honest, Belgrieve could not erase the feeling that he was wasting his time.

Even so, he was in Orphen for now, and he couldn’t maintain his composure unless he was keeping busy. He told himself it was also for the sake of Percival and Satie, though a part of him knew he was justifying his own desires.

By now, he felt like he better understood Kasim’s motivations. He closed the file and reached for another one.

“Umm...” someone said.

Surprised at the utterance, Belgrieve turned to see a young receptionist standing there fidgeting. She held a tray with a cup of floral tea.

“Um... You’re always working so hard! I brewed some tea, so...”

“Oh, you didn’t have to. Thank you so much.” Belgrieve chuckled and lowered his head.

Her cheeks reddening, the young receptionist set the tea down and quickly made her escape. *Did something come up?* he wondered, but her retreat had only taken her past a thin partitioning wall, and he could hear gossipy voices quite clearly.

“How was it? Did you do it?”

“I was so nervous... But he really is wonderful...”

“He’s got a charm the young men just don’t have. I can understand why Ms. Angeline is so obsessed with him.”

“I’ll bring him tea next time! You got that?”

“Is there no tea for me?” Edgar sighed.

“Ah, Mr. Edgar. Sorry about that. I will get some right away,” the woman answered perfunctorily, all business with him.

“Now look here... Well, it’s none of my business.”

Soon, the voices grew distant.

“How should I put this...” Belgrieve sipped on the tea to distract from the uncomfortable sensation coming over him.

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Marguerite let out a deep sigh. She sat beside Angeline on one of the long benches by the wall.

“Drat, a draw... How about you hold out a little longer next time?” Marguerite said as she looked at the wooden sword in her hands. Its blade had been reduced to splinters.

Angeline held a sword in a similar state. She passed it between her hands, looking over its condition before nodding to herself. “They couldn’t endure all the mana we were pumping into them...”

“Tsk, what a drag. How about we use real ones next time?”

“Hmm... Well, dad told me not to injure myself...”

“So you’re saying I’d be a threat to you with a real sword?” Marguerite teased.

Angeline pursed her lips. “I’m joking... Wood sword, real sword, it doesn’t matter. You still have a long way to go. But it’s commendable to bring me to a draw.”

“Ha, keep talking. You’ll be the one chasing after me, just you wait,” Marguerite cackled. Scoffing, Angeline began to poke her.

They had ventured to the training grounds where they borrowed practice swords and immediately faced off. Yet it hadn’t been even a few minutes before their swords shattered. They had only exchanged a few blows, so as Angeline had said, it must have been the mana.

Ultimately, past a certain level, one would need a weapon to match their skills. Angeline had changed swords several times over the course of her adventuring career.

But my wood sword’s never broken going against dad, thought Angeline. He’s super strong, though. I wonder why? She didn’t quite get it.

Marguerite curiously peered into her face. “What are you mulling over?”

“My sword doesn’t break when I spar with dad...”

“Well I’ll bet. Bell’s sword isn’t at that level yet.”

“Don’t be stupid. He’s stronger than me.”

“You sure you’re not just holding back?”

Angeline looked insulted. “You can’t even comprehend his skill. I guess that’s as far as you go...”

“What’s that, eh? I’ve never lost to him before.”

As a matter of fact, Marguerite had sparred with Belgrieve several times in Turnera. The first few matches were quite close but ultimately Marguerite was always the victor. Admittedly, she had felt a chill while facing him several times, but she was never pushed into a corner she could not recover from.

Consequently, Marguerite’s evaluation of Belgrieve was ambivalent—he wasn’t weak, per se, but he also wasn’t as strong as her. Of course, that only applied to swordsmanship; she certainly respected his capabilities as an adventurer.

Angeline tossed the wooden hilt into the air and caught it.

“He’s just holding back against you...”

“Yeah, I’m not buying it—wait, stop, enough! I know where this conversation’s going! I ain’t arguing with you about this.” Marguerite shook her head. “Ange, you know something? You suddenly become junk whenever Bell’s concerned.”

“What do you mean junk...? My dad really is strong. You’ve fought with him before, haven’t you? Then I’m sure you understand.”

“Hmm... Well, that’s true.” Marguerite nodded.

Though she didn’t think she’d lose with a sword, Belgrieve was certainly the better adventurer. If it wasn’t a mock battle and was instead a free-for-all where he was allowed to use the terrain and his tools, perhaps Belgrieve could take her. Marguerite understood that much.

“But Bell, you know. How did he get that strong when he’s been holed up in Turnera all this time?”

“That’s what’s so amazing about him... I’m sure it’s willpower.”

“Perhaps.” When it came to meditation—and the handling of mana that came with it—Marguerite felt as though Belgrieve had far surpassed her. “I see. That’s why Bell doesn’t break his wooden swords.”

“What do you mean?”

Marguerite began tracing circles over the splintered wood with her finger. “You know, the old elven word for mana is chi.”

“What does it mean...?”

“Hmm... Well, according to my granduncle, it’s the directionality—or orientation? Something or other of power.”

“I don’t really get it.”

“Um, you know. Like, how when we concentrate on something, we unknowingly start putting power into it? Chi flows along that line of consciousness. Once you can control the flow consciously, it will raise your skill with the sword.”

“Hmm... I guess. We’re not magicians, but we still put mana in our swords.”

“Something like that. So, if you want to be more aware of the flow, the first step is meditation. Then, after you grasp the flow of mana, you focus on swinging your sword with it. I only have half the sensation; I’m no good at focusing... But Bell’s pretty good at it. I’m guessing you’re the same, right?”

“That...might be true.” Angeline opened and closed her hand. She did channel mana into her sword. She could instinctively do this, but she had never quite stopped to think about it. Perhaps the focus she placed on her foe and her heightened awareness of her surroundings in battle was this flow of “chi” the elves spoke of.

“According to granduncle, mental strength is important. Then, you have to work it into your movements consciously. Bell’s sword might not break because he doesn’t have much mana to begin with, but I think he’s also

moving it efficiently, without wasting any.”

“Hee hee... As expected of my dad.” Angeline puffed up as proudly as though she had been praised herself.

She had, as a matter of fact, hit the nail on the head. This was largely the reason Belgrieve’s swordsmanship had advanced. He possessed an average amount of mana for a human, but he excelled in using it skillfully, pairing the minimum of movements with the least amount of mana.

Ironically, the loss of his leg had served to heighten his awareness. He could not move with the same dexterity as adventurers who had both legs, so he needed to be always aware of how his legs shifted and how the point of his sword moved. In short, he had unknowingly done precisely what would be necessary to skillfully handle his mana, and with Graham’s teachings, the path ahead was clear. Thus, he overcame one of his limitations. The simpleminded training he had carried on every day for over twenty years had born fruit. Of course, Belgrieve himself hadn’t analyzed it all to this degree.

Angeline hopped to her feet. “Another match, then?”

“Sure. Real swords?”

“Well... We’ll keep them sheathed.”

“All right! Now there’s no breaking them!”

Marguerite joyously picked up her sheathed blade and gave it a spin. What had taken Belgrieve twenty years of training and a master instructor to accomplish, these girls could pick up by sheer instinct, albeit imperfectly.

The second match was intense, but it ended with Angeline’s victory. It would still be a while longer before Marguerite came out on top.

Chapter 60: The Dry, Cold Wind Carried a Scant Sprinkling of Snowflakes

The dry, cold wind carried a scant sprinkling of snowflakes, caressing the passengers in the wagon. No matter how many layers they wore, the cold crawled through the layers and chilled their flesh. They shifted and squirmed in their seats, and those traveling with companions nestled up to them.

It was a clear winter day, which was rare to find in the north. Instead, the winds were drier and bone-chilling to compensate. The cloth canopy limply hanging over them did little to block the wind; in fact, it only cut off the light and made their journey even more dreary. The wagon would bounce with clattering wheels whenever they ran over a rock buried beneath the snow. The light of the sun made the snowscapes blinding to look at.

A woman in her midtwenties stood up from her seat only to squat down once more. She grimaced as she rubbed her back and behind. From her placid features and her exotic clothing that overlapped at the front, it could be surmised she had come from the east. She wasn't wearing a ritual tunic, so she probably was not from Tyldes—Keatai or Buryou were more likely. Her shoulder-length black hair was artlessly tied back, and she carried a long, cloth-wrapped item—a spear, perhaps.

In a heavy accent, she muttered, “Are we there yet? My bum hurts, I’m cold... What a bother it all is.”

“Soon,” said the young girl sitting beside her. She was short and in her mid to late teens. Her long coat was a deep reddish-brown, over which she wore a scarf and a fluffy fur hat with hanging flaps to cover her ears. The hair poking out from beneath it was the color of yellow ochre. Beside her was the sort of case that might house an instrument.

The woman sat back down and sighed, clearly discontented. She produced a pipe from her breast pouch and stuffed it with dried tobacco. Once she had the end hanging in her mouth, she lit it and sucked in a lungful of smoke. It gave off a faintly minty scent.



“It may be work, but why do I have to deal with this...? For what sad reason do I have to head north in the winter?”

“If it’s cold, well, *shake it up, baby*. That’s what they say,” the girl said and shook her body.

This prompted the woman to shake her head. “Yes, but what’s that supposed to mean?”

“The people of the past said it. When it gets tough, just *dance, twist, and shout*.”

The girl mumbled each syllable rhythmically as if she was attempting to sing. However, her companion simply took a resigned huff of her pipe. She tapped her pipe against the wagon rail to eject the ash outside.

“Speak in Southerness all you want. I don’t understand a word of it.”

“You just don’t have enough *rock* in your soul,” the girl scoffed. She took a swig from the flask in her hands, which caused her cheeks to turn faintly red.

The woman widened her eyes. “Hey, that’s my wine!”

“It’s as the people of the past said. *What’s yours is mine. What’s mine is mine*.”

“Enough out of you! You...stupid mutt! How about I do some twisting and shouting of my own, eh?!”

The woman pinched the “ear flaps” of the girl’s hat, causing her to yelp. Apparently, they were not part of the hat, but rather came from her own head —she was a beast-man.

“Ow, ow, ow.”

“So that’s why you’re so unfazed by the cold! Let me have some too!”

“How cruel...”

The woman snatched the flask away and tilted it back. Then she frowned. “You drank every last drop! You imbecile!”

“Eep. Forgive me. Ah, hey, look, you can see it. We’re there, we’re there.”

“Silence! You’re not pulling another one over me!”

“Yipe.”

She grabbed the girl’s head and gave her a noogie, all while the girl let out emotionless, quiet yelps. The other passengers cautiously drew away from the pair.

Orphen was in sight, glistening at the end of the road. However, a thick

layer of clouds loomed beyond it.

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The new house was more spacious but manageable. It wasn't so large that cleaning would be a pain, but it was large enough that the five people living there wouldn't feel cramped. The house had been made by Tyldesian immigrants with stone walls and wood floors. The entire structure consisted of a single room, reminding Belgrieve of his cottage in Turnera.

One difference was that in lieu of a hearth, there was a firepit in the center, with carpet laid over the bare earth around it for them to sit on. Furthermore, the ceiling was a dome with its highest point being right above the pit.

They had walked about for a few more days and finally found a good location. It was a small, detached property at the back end of the residential district. This was an area where immigrants from the east gathered together, and they were surrounded by houses of similar construction.

I didn't think we'd actually get a house, Belgrieve thought with a half smile.

They managed to rent it without issue, though their contract only lasted two months. Angeline didn't have many possessions to begin with, and Belgrieve never intended to stay long, so he hadn't brought much with him either. They were both accustomed to traveling lightly, so moving to the new residence took hardly any time at all.

The whereabouts of Belgrieve's old party members was still a mystery. Every day, Belgrieve would engage in a one-sided staring contest with the small print of various documents, so he was in the mood to rest his eyes a bit. Spending day after day to no appreciable results was only fostering a sense of futility in his actions.

Although the snow had been falling since early morning, the temperature turned it to sleet by noon, making it a hassle to head out. Belgrieve began to spin the wool he had brought from Turnera. Ever since he arrived in Orphen, he would get to work whenever he was bored. He turned the spindle round and round, twisting the fluffy tufts into threads of yarn. Spinning yarn helped to calm his heart; the work helped to keep his mind from wandering.

For a while, Angeline helped out, but she was so relaxed that she was

gradually becoming drowsy. She was now curled up on the cushion with her arms around her knees, sleeping soundly.

Belgrieve rolled the spun yarn into a ball and sighed, his breath lingering as vapor in the air. Though the weather was a bit warmer than usual, it was still much colder than he wanted to deal with, and he felt no inclination to leave the firepit.

Angeline wriggled and muttered something in her sleep. Belgrieve draped a blanket over her shoulders before resuming his idle gaze into the firepit. However, he suddenly remembered something and shook Angeline awake.

“Ange. Wake up, Ange.”

Angeline mumbled incomprehensibly before opening her eyes. “Mmm... Morning, dad.”

“It’s not morning anymore. Didn’t you say you had to prepare for a feast at Anne and Merry’s house?”

She rubbed her eyes. “That’s right... I fell asleep...”

“You looked so comfortable I didn’t want to wake you, but you should get going soon.”

“Yeah... I’ll do that...”

Angeline stood and stretched. She lifted up her braided hair, frowning. “It’s all scruffy. Braid it for me, dad.”

“Sure. Sit back down...”

“Yeah!”

She happily sat down with her back to him. After unraveling her tangled hair, Belgrieve brushed it and braided it again. Ever since she had tried braiding Charlotte’s hair, Angeline had taken quite a liking to the style and started braiding her own hair every day until Belgrieve came and took over the task of doing it for her every morning.

It was quite peculiar for Belgrieve to see his own large, rugged hands corralling her silky-smooth locks. But as a child, she had always kept it cut short, and seeing it long enough to style filled him with an emotion he couldn’t quite put into words.

“All right. Done.”

“Thank you!”

She stroked her hand down the braid with a satisfied smile. Then, just like that, she leaned her back against him.

“Who’s coming today...?”

“Hmm, Mr. Ed, Mr. Leo... Then me, Kasim, and Byaku.”

“Mr. Leo... Oh, you mean the guild master. Boys’ night out... That sounds fun.”

“Everyone besides Byaku’s an old man, though,” Belgrieve joked. “But are you sure you don’t want to come?”

“Will you be lonely without me?” Angeline teased, gauging his reaction.

Belgrieve scratched his head. “I might be. It’s rare for you to turn down an offer like this.”

“Hee hee... It’s fine. You need to spread your wings sometimes, dad...”

“You’re right.”

Belgrieve stroked his beard. It was his intention to accept Edgar’s invitation to go drinking with him. Everyone had been so busy that some time had passed since he first proposed the idea, but things were finally coming together for their gathering at that Eastern food restaurant. They planned to meet there after sunset.

Belgrieve had invited Angeline, but she had unexpectedly turned him down. She was apparently being tactful, insisting he would be more relaxed if it was only men.

He wasn’t sure whether to be sad or happy at this sign of his daughter’s maturity, but accepted her gesture of goodwill in any case. Though it wasn’t exactly a substitute, the girls planned on getting together at Anessa and Miriam’s house instead. They had bought food and wine, and planned on getting dead drunk and falling asleep on the spot.

How nice it is to be young, Belgrieve thought with a smile.

After jumping up, Angeline donned her coat and wrapped a scarf around her neck, and was soon prepared to leave.

“Don’t drink too much, dad...”

“I’ll be careful. You don’t overdo it either.”

“I know.” Angeline grinned. She left with light steps.

Belgrieve stared out the window. Perhaps the temperature was falling again; the sleet was changing back to snow.

Though the sky was cloudy, the fading light told him that the sun was on its way down. But it was still bright enough to tell him that sunset was still a way off.

He picked up his spindle, bundled the tufts, and began spinning again. The spindle emitted a faint sound as it turned, and at times the center would touch

the floor and make a louder rumbling noise.

○

The training hall was more than one large, open space used for sparring; it also consisted of several smaller rooms. These were sometimes used for instruction, and occasionally, the magicians would use them to meditate or construct their magic circles.

There was indeed a gathering of magicians in one of these rooms—Kasim, Miriam, Byaku, and Charlotte. Byaku and Charlotte were side by side while Kasim stood before them with folded arms. Miriam was leaning on her staff by the wall.

“It’s your own feet, yeah? You need to be aware of their shape at all times,” Kasim said.

Scowling, Byaku closed his eyes. He was standing barefoot, and he could feel the chill of the wood floor beneath him. He could certainly feel that sensation, and yet, between his toes and his heels, it was strangely uncertain what parts were actually touching the ground and how they supported his body.

The silence carried on a while longer until Charlotte heaved a deep sigh. She too was barefoot.

“*Sigh...* I’m just standing here, but it’s tiring.”

Kasim chuckled. “Well, no need to rush. You’re slowly improving. It’s all about keeping it up.”

“I’ve never seen this sort of training before. It’s pretty interesting,” said Miriam.

“Isn’t it? Magic is a technique to use your mana to interfere with the outside world. Those incantations and circles, they’re all just there to simplify and systemize the process. What we’re doing now are the bare fundamentals. First, you need to be aware of your own shape. Get a good idea of that, and you’ll be able to move mana around your body better. Simple, right? Incantations and sequences can come after that.”

“So you’re trying to make it instinctive. That hag in girl’s clothing starts with having you memorize all the words and symbols, then putting it to practice. I only meditated a bit on the side.”

“That’s not a bad way to go about it. But for these two, our goal is to let

them handle their mana better. The theory isn't that important."

"I see. So that's why the hag's always bullying Bucky boy in combat instead of teaching him."

"Pretty much. It's a brutal way to go about it, but she's personally hammering away all his bad habits." And with that, Kasim tapped Byaku on the head, causing the boy to scowl. "Fighting the Ashen Granny to pick up the feeling isn't a bad idea, but it's also important to confront yourself sometimes. Especially when you've got a demon living in there. Once you have a grasp on your own shape, it will be harder for the *shapeless* to mess with you."

"Oh, I see. I'm going to try it too!" Miriam immediately tossed her shoes off and stood with her feet together. "Wah, now that's cold. You want me to grasp the shape of the bottom of my feet, right?"

"That's right. Do you have a good idea of how you're standing?"

"Hmm..." Miriam closed her eyes and stood there for a while. "This is harder than it looks. The contours are a lot vaguer than I thought."

"Right? You're already a skilled magician, Merry. Try concentrating. Trace those contours with mana. You should be able to do it, lickety-split."

As instructed, she concentrated on directing the mana circulating all throughout her body, sending the flow to just barely graze the soles of her feet. Then, the indents and protrusions that had been unclear a moment before suddenly defined themselves, and she could tell exactly where she was touching.

"Ooh," she found herself crying out.

"Looks like you got it. By the time you can do that without even thinking about it, you'll be quite the master at moving mana."

"Is that why you're always barefoot, Uncle Kasim?" Charlotte asked, her eyes sparkling. Even in this cold, Kasim wore his usual open sandals. She had never seen him wear proper shoes or socks.

Kasim awkwardly scratched his head. "No... I just can't be bothered to wear shoes. I coat my body in mana, so I don't even feel the heat or the cold."

"It's pretty amazing to be able to do that..." Miriam muttered, sounding rather impressed.

Upon training to attain an accurate grasp of his own figure, Kasim had learned to apply a constant, thin coat of mana over his body. This intricate

degree of control would certainly be impossible without a complete understanding of the target. Miriam was stunned by the skill of the archmage standing before her.

Charlotte slapped her own cheeks and began psyching herself up. “I’ll do my best, and I’ll get dad to praise me!”

“Sounds like a plan. I might be able to reach the next level.”

So Charlotte and Miriam closed their eyes, side by side.

Kasim laughed quietly, then glanced at Byaku who had been standing there silently the entire time. The boy was motionless, his breath quiet and rhythmic. Kasim stroked his beard, impressed. His eyes could perceive the mana flowing around the boy.

Byaku’s eyebrow twitched. The flow changed, and the tips of his hair began to be peppered in black.

Kasim reached out and placed a hand on his shoulder. “Wake up.”

A small shock wave emanated from Kasim’s hand. Byaku’s eyes shot open with a start, and his hair returned to white.

Byaku stared at his palm dubiously, opening and closing it. “I...”

“It dragged you in, did it? You need to focus on your own shape. Leave the demon out of it.”

“Dammit...” Byaku shook his head and looked at Kasim. “Do I even exist?”

“Of course you do, right around there.” Kasim gestured towards him.

“Spare me the jokes. You should understand... You’ve hung around with folks similar to *them* before.”

“We can talk about that another time,” Kasim said with a shrug. “This isn’t the right place for that.”

“Fine...” Byaku frowned. He took in a lungful of air, then resumed breathing methodically.

Kasim yawned as he kept his vigil over the meditating trio. He lost track of how much time had passed before the door to the room eventually opened and he could hear tapping against the wooden floor.

Charlotte was the first one to open her eyes. She took off and jumped at the man who had come in. “Dad!”

“Whoa there,” Belgrieve said as he caught her. “Am I getting in the way?”

“Nah. If you’re here, it must be evening already.”

“It is.” Belgrieve nodded.

Kasim donned his hat and stretched. “So how was it? Did you get a bit of rest?”

“Yeah, thanks to you.”

“All right, let’s wrap up for today.”

The skies were already beginning to darken. Drops of water quivered on the ends of the icicles dangling from the eaves. Like that, they would slowly grow longer. The snow that fell from the thick looming clouds crumbled into small, frigid particles in the wind that smacked against their faces, forcing them to squint their eyes as they walked.

With Charlotte clinging to his arm, Belgrieve shifted his cloak to shield her and struck up a conversation with Miriam.

“So you came here today, Merry?”

“Yeah, I was curious about Mr. Kasim’s training, so I left things to Anne and headed out.”

“Ange might be there already. She left earlier this afternoon.”

“Hmm, I don’t know. She’s probably there—oh, but she went out shopping with Anne, so they might not be back yet.”

“I see.”

While Miriam had apparently come to the training hall out of curiosity for Kasim’s teachings, Angeline and Anessa were going around the pubs and markets preparing for their night of revelry. The day’s sleet had since turned back to snow, and the temperature was dropping. Belgrieve feared Angeline might catch a cold if she wasn’t careful. He hoped she had already returned home and begun cooking.

“It’s good to get to know your fellow men from time to time.” Miriam giggled. “Aren’t there a few things you wouldn’t want to talk about with Ange around, Mr. Bell?”

“Hmm, I don’t know... It’s not like I’ve got anything to hide...”

He smiled awkwardly. He wasn’t exactly keeping it from her, but he was at a loss for how to explain Mit’s identity. He had told Angeline about her younger brother who he had picked up in the forest, and Angeline had rejoiced, now having one more reason to return to Turnera.

However, he hadn’t gone so far as to tell her that Mit was a peculiar existence derived from a demon. He didn’t quite know how to bring that up, and he didn’t want to give her any strange preconceptions about him, but the time would come when he would need to tell her. It wasn’t like he feared

Angeline would do anything drastic if she knew what Mit was; it was just a matter of finding the right timing.

In any case, there was no need to hurry. Once they were both in Turnera, she'd meet Mit, and he could talk to her about the boy after they'd had a chance to get to know one another. That was what he had decided; there was no point in causing panic in Orphen.

"Then we'll be going this way," said Miriam.

"Be careful not to catch a cold! And don't drink too much!"

Parting ways with Miriam and Charlotte, Belgrieve, Kasim, and Byaku walked through the crowds, went up and down a hill, and turned through several streets.

"Heh heh," Kasim chuckled, holding down his cap. "Now this takes me back. We used to wander around like this, looking for equipment."

"Yeah, we did. I had no eye for enchanted items, so I needed to drag you along."

"Right, right. But with oil meal, bug repellent, and smoke bombs, you were the man for the job."

"Do you remember? That time Percy bought a smoke bomb for cheap, and nothing happened when he threw it?"

"I remember now! Right, he cocked his head and walked up to it, and that's when it chose to explode. Just remembering that face he made..." After cackling, Kasim's eyes suddenly turned sorrowful. "I hope I can see him again."

"So do I... But I'm sure Percy and Satie are doing just fine. We'll see them again, just like I reunited with you."

"Yeah... You're right."

"Hey... Isn't this the place?" Byaku called from behind them, causing Belgrieve to look around blankly for a moment. He had gotten so engrossed in the conversation he had nearly missed the restaurant.

Byaku let out a fed-up sigh at the sight of the two men hurriedly turning back. "Get a grip, old men..."

"Sorry, sorry." Belgrieve awkwardly laughed and tousled his beard.

Chapter 61: It Was a Two-Story Restaurant

It was a two-story restaurant. Wherever Belgrieve looked, his eyes would fall upon an ornament of Eastern make, creating quite the exotic atmosphere. Several red paper lanterns hung from the eaves.

If I chased after Percy and headed east, would I come across entire towns done up like this? Belgrieve wondered. He was strangely excited by the thought.

When he reached for the door, someone else opened it from the inside, and Belgrieve found himself enveloped in steam. A party of inebriates shambled out, muttering incomprehensibly as they went.

As he conceded the way, Kasim muttered, “Looks like business is booming.” He sounded quite impressed.

“Yeah, it’s lively... I’m sure Ed’s waiting for us.”

The magic heater made the interior comfortably warm. Belgrieve brushed off the snow, removed his cloak, and looked around. There were several rows of round tables, each surrounded by many a hearty soul partaking in food and drink. The waitresses, wearing clothes from the east, came and went with large trays in their hands. Their style of clothing seemed to come from Keatai: the upper half was skintight, while the loose, skirtlike cloth from the waist down had a slit along the side which allowed better mobility.

Edgar seemed to be nowhere in sight.

Kasim shook off his cap as he said, “Oh, it’s been a while since I’ve been to an Eastern restaurant. There were a few at the capital, I recall.”

“This is a first for me... It’s a bit perplexing, to be honest.”

Twenty-five years ago, back when he had been active in Orphen, there hadn’t been any Eastern influence as far as he could recall. He couldn’t remember ever seeing any restaurants in this style. It was somewhat refreshing, though it also made him feel like he was behind the times.

Putting aside his bemusement at the unfamiliar atmosphere and the

glimpses of pale thighs he would occasionally catch through the slits in the dresses, he informed the host of their reservation and was promptly led to the second floor.

Unlike the open first floor, the second floor was divided by several fretwork partitions for a bit more privacy. Even so, every table was crowded and lively. Edgar and Lionel were already seated, passing the time in idle chatter. When he noticed the newcomers, Edgar rubbed out his cigarette and waved his hand cheerily. “Thanks for braving the cold for us!”

Lionel offered a reserved nod. “I’m sorry. It really is coming down hard...”

“Oh no, I should apologize for keeping you waiting. Thanks for the invitation.” Belgrieve hung his cloak on the back of his chair and took a seat.

Kasim removed his hat with a flourish, twirling it on his finger, before stuffing it into a box on the side. “Now I’m getting hungry. What’re we having?”

“Let’s start with a drink, shall we? Pardon, ma’am, I’m ready to order.” Edgar raised a hand and called a waitress. “We’d like some huangjiu, warm. Can you drink, Byaku?”

“I don’t want to...”

“All right, then four cups of that, and one tea. Also, five or six dishes, chef’s choice. Just make sure there’s roast meat and steamed fish. The rest I’ll leave to you.”

“You sound like a regular, Mr. Ed.”

“Well, I am. See, ever since I hit up a good place in the capital, I’ve been addicted to Eastern—or rather, Keatai cuisine. I’m glad I found a good place in Orphen,” Edgar said with a chuckle.

Propping up his head, Kasim muttered, “The east, huh... You think Percy’s over there?”

At the moment, their only lead on Percival was that he stayed in the imperial capital for a short while before heading towards the Eastern Federation—not that there was any definitive documentation of this. The lead came from following the rumors and heroic tales of the Exalted Blade, which seemed to gradually trend eastward. It was all hearsay though. It was all too possible that it had all been exaggerated by traveling troubadours, peddlers, wayfarers, and roaming folk. Their stories were like valuable commodities to them; surely, they would not hesitate to dramatize a bit if it excited their

audiences.

The Eastern Federation was too far to venture off to on such uncertain information. Although Belgrieve had heard of Tyldes, Keatai, and Buryou, there were plenty of other small nations that made up the federation. For that matter, Tyldes was itself something of a federation of smaller nations.

Belgrieve patted Kasim on the shoulder. “No need to hurry. We’ll go at it at our own pace.”

“I...guess so.”

“I’m sorry,” Lionel said, apologetically rubbing his hands together. “I really am quite useless...”

“You’ve done plenty, Mr. Leo. Don’t take it so hard.”

“I’m glad to hear it, but, well... I just feel bad for Mr. Percy, who must be suffering under all the guilt he’s feeling, and...”

“Sorry, sorry, I brought down the mood!” Kasim suddenly shouted.

“C’mon, Leo. We’re here to take a load off, so pep up! There’s no reason you should feel responsible for any of that!”

“Ha, ha ha... Thanks, Mr. Kasim.”

The food and drink arrived at their round table to much bustle and acclaim. Before them lay a spread of vibrant dishes the likes of which had never been seen before in Turnera and were unfamiliar even in Orphen.

The huangjiu—a yellowish wine—was so hot that a heady vapor streamed from Belgrieve’s nose with his first mouthful. He found himself stunned for a moment; he was conceptually familiar with warm liquor, but this was completely different from mulled wine.

“That’s quite a peculiar taste...”

“Isn’t it? I hear they make it from fermenting rice and wheat together. Yeah, it’s an acquired taste, but once you’ve got it, you’re never letting go.”

“So this is the fish... It’s steamed? I don’t recognize the smell...”

“That’s the herbs you’re smelling. The fish is larded, then coated in Eastern aromatics and steamed. Not half bad.”

“That’s interesting... I might be able to do that in Turnera.”

He could use fish caught from the river, and while there was a different selection of aromatics, there were plenty of them around. The larger river fish tended to smell of mud, but perhaps the stench could be ignored if it was prepared like this. *Maybe I’ll be able to increase my repertoire*, thought Belgrieve.

“Do they sell the right appliances around here?”

“You mean a steaming basket? I think there’s an eastern specialty store at the flea market. I’ll show you around next time.”

“Thanks. That’d be great, yeah.”

“You’re too earnest, Mr. Belgrieve...” said Lionel.

“Huh?” Belgrieve stammered. “Why?”

“I mean, your first thought went to how to cook it and the tools you’d need. Usually, a person’d just be content to know the food’s good.”

“Y-You think so? I mean, aren’t you curious? What about you, Kasim?”

“I don’t cook, so I don’t know.”

“M-Mr. Ed?”

“Me? Well, me, Gil, and Yuri, we used to rotate cooking duty, but it was quite a pain. I never made anything too complicated... And now I don’t cook at all. I know how it’s made because I want to know why it’s tasty. But it’s not like I want to try making it myself.”

“Huh...”

Even with a mouthful of food, the sight of Belgrieve’s growing confusion elicited cackling from Kasim. “Same as ever, Bell. The food you cooked on the job was always delicious. Being able to eat a warm meal on a tough job’s a godsend.”

“So you were in charge of cooking even when you’re so strong?” Lionel asked. “But I guess you had to take a step back, what with the Exalted Blade and Aether Buster around.”

“No, that was before they got their monikers, and I told you I was E-Rank, right? It’s all about the right man for the right job,” Belgrieve explained.

“You had it good then, Mr. Kasim. It must have been a load off your mind with Mr. Belgrieve around,” Lionel declared, prompting Kasim to lean in closer to him.

“You can tell?”

“Of course I can tell. I mean, just having him around the guild is a weight off my shoulders...”

“What? How? I haven’t really done anything.”

“That’s not true. I mean, you offer advice, you’re receptive, and you’re pretty much sorting all our old documents... And just having someone to talk to is pretty nice,” Lionel said, tapping his fingertips against the table.

Belgrieve averted his eyes. “I really haven’t... And don’t you have Dortos

and Cheborg?”

“Mr. Dortos is too harsh, and Mr. Cheborg’s got muscles for brains...”

“Then you have Mr. Ed and Ms. Yuri, and Ms. Gil too. They should be perfectly fine to talk to, right?” Belgrieve looked to Edgar, who chugged down his drink with a smirk.

Lionel pouted. “They have no mercy on me. At least with you around, someone shows a bit of consideration to me, and you’re reasonable, so it’s just calming to talk to you.” Lionel drank the last drops of his cup and loudly set it on the table. “And, most importantly!” he loudly declared. “You have common sense! Those folks who’ve been out adventuring too long have none of it! For goodness’ sake, it’s not like I wanted to end up an incompetent...” He laid his face on the table and began to mutter. He had barely drunk anything so far, yet he already seemed soused.

Edgar sighed, then laughed as he patted Lionel on the shoulder. “The night’s still young... You’re as hopeless as ever.”

“Ha ha... I guess I have a bit of pent-up resentment...”

“I mean, the guild master’s job is the polar opposite of the free adventurer’s. It’s pretty ironic that’s where you get after climbing up the ranks in the guild,” Kasim said as he took a sip. “Hey, do they have any harder stuff here?”

“Oh, are you a strong drinker, Mr. Kasim?” Edgar placed another order before sticking a cigarette between his lips, lighting it, and blowing out a stream of smoke. “You know, I was sure Ange’d be coming today.”

“I thought so too, but she turned me down when I asked... Does that mean she’s growing up?” Belgrieve wondered.

“Ha ha ha! Well, she wouldn’t have too much fun around just a bunch of old men, I guess,” Edgar mused.

“I think Ms. Ange’s happy as long as you’re around, Mr. Belgrieve... Come to think of it, is your wife search on hold now?” Lionel asked.

Belgrieve smiled bitterly and took a mouthful of wine. “She went off and did that all on her own... Do you think Ange wants a mother?”

“I think she said something to that effect. But, Mr. Bell, even if she wants one, it’s your life. You shouldn’t do something you might end up regretting.”

“Hmm... I guess you’re right. Thanks, Mr. Ed. I’ll take that to heart.”

“And you’ve already got someone, right? That Satie girl.”

Belgrieve scratched his cheek. “It’s not like that, seriously...”

“Hmm? So what’s the real story, Mr. Kasim? Was it ‘like that’ between them when you were with them?”

Kasim stuffed his cheeks full of food and washed it down before answering. “Yeah, I don’t really know. I was a brat back then, and I didn’t really care about that sort of thing. Thinking back on it now, Satie was always so carefree. She had the three of us in the palm of her hand. She was a real tease, right, Bell?”

“Right... I can’t count the number of times she messed with me...”

“But she was pretty, I’ll admit it. My heart would feel kinda funny when I looked at her. Back then, I wasn’t too sure what it meant but now... Ah, I want to punch myself.”

“Are you sure you guys weren’t just overly conscious of her? This is starting to sound like a one-sided crush to me.”

“Well...that might be true.”

“Heh heh heh, you really hit where it hurts, Ed.”

“Hey, it’s man’s nature to be weak to beauty.”

“Ahh... Why do I feel so lonely and empty when we talk about these things...?” Lionel said with a sigh before downing another drink.

Edgar wearily rubbed out his cigarette and stuck a fresh one in his mouth before serving Lionel more liquor as he told him, “Then go get married already.”

“Huh? With whom? This old man’s got no one...” Lionel replied.

“You dense little... I guess there’s no cure for idiocy.” Edgar lit his smoke.

Kasim chuckled. “Come to think of it, we’re all single here. One of us has got a daughter, but none of us has got a wife.”

“Don’t say it, you’re just making it worse.” Edgar puffed out more smoke. “Still, if you’re married, I guess you’re gradually getting ready for the moment. But what’s it feel like to just suddenly have a daughter one day?”

“Oh, it was a huge mess. I’d taken care of the neighborhood kids before, but when it’s my own place, you know... And I still had my daily work to do, baby or not.”

“A girl, no less. I’m sure there are plenty of things a guy just wouldn’t get.”

“Yeah, I got a bunch of help and advice from my friend’s wife. Thanks to that, we managed to get through the rough patches.”

“So that’s why she’s so clingy with you,” Edgar remarked.

Belgrieve stroked his beard thoughtfully. “We were a family, just the two of us. It was pretty tough raising a girl, though. When she was little, she had her hair cut short, and she’d run around like the boys. I can’t even remember buying a single piece of pretty clothing for her... Yeah, I was no good, but I’m glad she turned out all right.”

“Hold up, if you’re no good, then I’m sure a majority of all the fathers in the world are no good,” Edgar argued.

“She’s resolute and reliable, Ms. Ange... Just how many times has she helped me out...?”

“Ha ha... She’s a tenacious one, I’ll give you that. But I’ll be worried if she doesn’t learn to be a bit more independent from me... She still wants to sleep in the same bed at her age.”

“Ha, well, she’s quite a daddy’s girl. She suddenly becomes hopeless whenever you’re involved, Mr. Bell... But, you know, I’m sure she’s just fine. You know how she is when you’re around, but she’s pretty diligent otherwise.”

“That’s right. Otherwise, she wouldn’t have been able to make it in Orphen at age twelve.”

“I think so too,” Kasim chimed in. “When I dived into that dungeon with her, she was strong and reliable. Almost brought me to tears.”

“I see... You may have a point. It’s only natural for her to have a side I don’t know about.”

Certainly, when he wasn’t watching, perhaps Angeline acted appropriately for her age, and that was precisely why everyone adored and depended on her. The thought made him feel the urge to pamper her while he had the chance. *I really am going soft*, he thought.

“Doing her best as an adventurer is good and all, but I think she should try a bit harder as a lady. Like dressing up a bit, or falling in love... Am I selfish as a father to think of it that way?”

“Nah, I wouldn’t say that. I think Ange would be pretty cute if she dressed up...”

“Come to think of it, she’s started braiding her hair lately. She didn’t do it last time she came home; according to her, she picked it up from doing Char’s hair.”

“Ha ha, come to think of it, maybe she does have a bit of a mind for

fashion then..." Edgar picked up the bottle and grimaced. "Ouch, all gone. Ma'am, another huangjiu... No, let's go with nigori this time. Also, there's dragon liver in the hot pot, right...? Yeah, then one hot pot. Enough for five."

"Hot pot?"

"Yeah, you throw food into a spicy soup, then pick it out and eat it. Dragon liver really brings out the flavor. The pot has a pretty interesting shape too—there's a wall in the center which lets you have two types of soup, and both are delicious."

"Hmm... Do you know where they sell those pots?"

"Ha ha ha, looks like you're not satisfied unless you can try it out yourself, Mr. Bell. Sure, I'll take you around next time I get a day off. I think they'll have some for sale," Edgar said with a laugh, then rubbed out his lit cigarette. Soon, Lionel was grumbling over his wine, Kasim was replying to his negativity with more laughter, and all the while, Byaku quietly munched on leaf buds from a small bowl.

This is fun, Belgrieve thought. He enjoyed a good feast with Turnera's farmers over talk of work, but this sort of meal wasn't bad either. It took him back to his adventurer days, and it was somewhat of a relief sitting shoulder to shoulder with men his age. It certainly wouldn't be bad to have young women around too, but he tended to feel inferior and unsettled in his old age. He couldn't help but feel grateful for this opportunity to talk openly and freely.

Glancing at Byaku as the boy silently ate, Kasim grinned. "We've got a shy boy here. Or is it boring without any girls around?"

"The hell are you on about?"

"Heh heh heh, you're at that age. So, Bucky boy, who's your type, anyway? Ange? Merry? Anne? Or maybe even Maggie? It's a long shot, but maybe Char?"

"Come to think of it, you're surrounded by beautiful girls. What I'd give to have had a youth like that, you little scamp." Edgar merrily reached out and prodded Byaku.

Byaku scowled. "Tsk, vulgar old men..."

"Don't be shy, don't be shy. I'll keep it a secret. So who is it?"

"Can it... What does it matter...?" Byaku pouted and turned away.

What's this? Belgrieve cocked his head. That was slightly different from the usual reaction. Usually, Byaku would just maintain a sullen silence.

“Do you have a fever, Byaku?”

“Do I look like I do?” His face was certainly a little red, and he was glassy-eyed.



“Are you drunk?” Belgrieve asked.

“No, he hasn’t had anything to... Ah.” Edgar lifted up an empty bowl with a wry smile. “The buds were dressed in sake lees...”

“Sake lees? Do you mean the draff after they squeeze out the liquid...? You must really be a lightweight, Byaku. Are you okay?”

“Shut it, damn geezer...”

The alcohol was getting to him now. He was slurring his words and subtly swaying from side to side.

Kasim burst into laughter. “I thought you were just some cheeky brat. I guess you can be cute if you want to, heh heh heh.”

“Grr... Ugh...” Byaku groaned as he planted a defeated elbow into the table. He was all too quickly nodding off.

Belgrieve rubbed him on the back with his usual wry smile. When he got like this, he was like any other fifteen-year-old boy. That was when the waitress arrived with a tabletop burner and a pot.

“Sorry for the wait.”

“Thanks. I’ll make some space, so...” Edgar cut himself off, his eyes open wide. The others were similarly surprised, with their mouths hung halfway open.

“What’s wrong? Hurry and make some space for it.”

“You... What are you doing here, Gil?”

There stood Gilmenja in the Eastern gown. The skintight southern Keatai clothing seemed to suit her athletic build perfectly.

Gilmenja giggled. “I’m working. How do I look?”

“You always seem to pop up where I least expect you. Are you gathering intel?”

“You know me too well, Ed.”

Evidently, Gilmenja would often infiltrate various places to gather information. Her slender, shapely body and casual way with words had surely drawn intel from a great many pairs of lips.

“Come on now, clear the table already. Good evening, Mr. Belgrieve, Mr. Kasim.”

“Y-Yeah, good evening, Ms. Gil...”

“How are you holding up, Gilly?”

Holding the burner with both hands and balancing a tray with a bottle of liquid on her head, Gilmenja skillfully shrugged her shoulders. “So-so...

Anyways, you two—are you having any fun being around these good-for-nothings? If so, I'd love to tag along next time, heh heh heh... I'll bring the goods."

She set down the burners and then a bottle brimming with cloudy liquor before leaving as though nothing had happened at all.

Kasim looked rather amused. "Gilly's an interesting girl. I think I like her."

"I've known her for a while, but she's the one person I don't get... And wait, they're both asleep. I ordered for five... Hey, wake up!"

Edgar prodded at Byaku and Lionel, who were both soundly asleep. And though they grumbled, neither showed any signs of waking, only barely shifting in response.

With a resigned sigh, Edgar took the bottle and held it out.

"It's hopeless... Well, sweet dreams then. Have a drink, Mr. Bell."

"Thanks... It's different from the previous one," Belgrieve noted as the liquid filled his cup. Then, coming to a sudden realization, he turned to Kasim. "Come to think of it, you've gotten over your fear of strangers."

"When you get to be my age, you can't be anxious around every Tom, Dick, and Harry anymore. That's the one part of me that grew up!" Kasim cackled.

Edgar held out the bottle to Kasim too. "So you used to be shy, Mr. Kasim?" he said, looking quite interested.

"Yeah, he used to be the worst to people he was meeting for the first time and..."

"Hey, Bell! I'll speak for myself! You stay out of it!"

Two different colors of soup bubbled in the pot as the steam coiled about like a snake.

○

Anessa and Miriam's house was conveniently compact. It was small enough that cleaning it wasn't any harder than it had to be, without feeling cramped. There were three main rooms: a living room in which to eat and lounge around, a bedroom, and a workroom where they kept their adventuring gear. Aside from these, there was also a kitchen.

Tonight they were having a girls' night. The men were going out drinking,

so they figured there was no reason not to have their own fun. Angeline's party earned enough that there wasn't a place in town out of their price range, but even if the pubs had a nice ambience, it would be quite a pain to get home after last call. Holding the gathering at someone's place meant it wouldn't matter whether or not they drank until they passed out.

With that said, Angeline and Anessa had gone out to buy food and drinks and were now in the middle of preparing. The table and chairs in the living room were moved out of the way, and in their place, a thick carpet from storage was spread over the floor. Loads of pillows were placed around it so everyone could sit on the floor; this way, no one would have to worry about falling off a chair if they began to doze. Thanks to the magic heater—modified with Miriam's own spell sequences—their home was kept warm without a fireplace.

Belgrieve had told her not to drink too much, and Angeline naturally intended to honor this. But once the drinking began and conversations bloomed, she knew she would not be prudent enough to distinguish the meaning of "too much."

Meanwhile, Marguerite was cooking in the kitchen. Ever since she stayed with them on her first day in Orphen, she had become a freeloader. Their place wasn't so small that her presence would make it feel cramped, and she was quite relieved to find friends her age to stay with in the vastness of Orphen. Now, she felt completely at home.

Once the living room was ready, Angeline entered the kitchen and narrowed her eyes curiously as she saw Marguerite in her apron.

"You look a bit lewd like that..."

"Huh? You think so?"

Marguerite gave herself a once-over. She had taken off her usual fur cardigan, and with only her chest wrapping and short pants under the apron, she looked as though she was completely naked underneath when viewed from the front.

"I can't tell from this side. Well, who cares? We're all friends here."

As Marguerite hummed and stirred the pot, Angeline reached out and ran a finger down her back.



“Yipes! What are you doing?!”

“Your back is defenseless... What else were you expecting?”

“That doesn’t mean you have to tickle me, stupid!”

“It’s your fault for letting your guard down...”

“On that note, I’m surprised you don’t feel cold like that,” said Anessa.

“I was always strong against the cold. And it’s even colder where I come from.” After all, elven territory was even farther north than Turnera. Having lived through those icy winters, the cold in Orphen was nothing to her.

The simmering concoction of meat and vegetables gurgled in front of her, letting off an intoxicating scent. Contrary to her wild personality, the tomboy elf princess was a good chef. She had a good sense for seasoning—or rather, a sharp instinct for flavor. Just a slight tweaking of the amount of herbs, spices, and salt would make even the same dish taste completely different when somebody else made it. Angeline tested the flavor and felt a bit ashamed of how delicious it was.

“Maggie... Did you ever cook at the elf palace?”

“Nope. Ah, but sometimes, I’d use my granduncle’s kitchen without permission when I stopped by,” Marguerite said as she flipped the meat in the skillet. Angeline lined up beside her, picking up a mushroom stalk and mincing it along with onion and garlic.

“You’re pretty skilled too, Ange. Do you cook for yourself?”

“Well, there’s that. But I helped out my dad in Turnera, so...”

“Oh, I see. Bell’s a pretty good cook.”

“Yeah. I’m happy that I can eat his cooking every day now.”

The simple fact that she could eat Belgrieve’s cooking for breakfast, lunch, and dinner while still living in Orphen filled Angeline with strength the likes of which she had never felt before.

The doorknob rattled, and a gust of outside air made it in. Someone had entered the house.

“I’m home! I picked up some side dishes on the way back.”

“Agh, it sure is cold.”

Miriam and Charlotte had returned from their training with Kasim. It was evidently snowing outside, as a fluffy layer of white stuck fast to their hats and clothing. Anessa took their bags and peered out the door.

“It’s coming down pretty hard.”

“Yeah, it’s that time of year again. *Sigh.*” Miriam rubbed her hands

together, then forcefully gave her coat a good shaking to snap the snow off of it.

Meanwhile, Marguerite was plating the meat. Steam wafted off of it and carried a mouth-watering scent. Angeline tossed the minced onion, garlic, and mushroom into the oil and juices that remained in the skillet. After pan-frying them a bit, she tossed in wine to deglaze, then salt and seasoning. Finally, she poured this sauce over steamed potatoes.

“All right... Char, can you carry this for me?”

“Sure!” Charlotte nervously carried the large plate. “Where should I put it, Anne?” she asked.

“Oh, just over there. Is practice going all right?”

“Yeah! I think I’m starting to get it.”

Anessa and Charlotte continued their friendly chat as they did their part to prepare for the banquet.

“Ahh, what an aroma. Now I’m hungry.” Miriam’s nose twitched.

“Did dad head out already?”

“Yeah, he went. I reckon they’re already eating by now.”

“Then we should get started too.” The sun was starting to set, and it would be a shame if anything they made went cold. And so, the girls took their seats on the cushions. A pot of hot, mulled wine filled the room with its spicy scent.

“Cheers,” Angeline said, leading their toast, the rest clinking their glasses against hers. The mulled wine they prepared themselves was a tad sweeter than the one at the pub. As Charlotte was too young to drink, she alone was served grape juice.

As the warm alcohol went down Angeline’s throat, it suddenly felt like she could relax her shoulders. Angeline took a good whiff of the cozy scent.

“Ah, it feels good to unwind.”

“I’m starved. Let’s eat already.”

“That’s quite a lot... You really went for it, all right.”

“Well, after I started cooking a bit, it started to get fun. Ah, these potatoes aren’t half bad.”

“Can you pass that, Char?”

“Here you go. Give me one of those fish balls, Merry.”

Hands passed over every plate. No one had to work to get the ball rolling; the topic of conversation would shift at the slightest keyword, only to flow

into yet another topic altogether. They spoke of strange fiends, of their failures in their travels, and of Turnera, the fairy tales from elven territory, the best shops in town, and the fish in Lucrecia... At times like these, it was a waste to speak on substantial matters. After all, they would most likely forget it all come the next day. The conversation was incoherent, fun, and inebriated —and that was how it should be.

A drink could lift or depress one's spirits. But there was no going down in *this* mood. The pot of mulled wine was quickly emptied and the next one was brought in. Their empty plates formed a pile in the corner.

From that point, it was unclear to Angeline when exactly she had fallen asleep. But the sun was already rising by the time she awakened. Unfortunately, it was behind a thick layer of clouds and not particularly bright. She could just barely discern that it wasn't night anymore.

Sitting up, Angeline scratched her head. She loosened her braid, allowing her messy bedhead to cascade over her shoulders. Still, it just took a rather violent combing through with her fingers before it became glossy and untangled.

She didn't know how much she had drunk the night before, but she knew it had been a lot. Though she was definitely awake, it was like a fog had been cast over her mind. Furthermore, it felt as though everything she had eaten and drunk was now swimming circles in her stomach.

"Hmm..." There was a sound from the kitchen, but she did not feel motivated enough to check. She glanced around roughly to see Anessa, Miriam, and Charlotte, all soundly asleep. They had all slept in a huddle, and with everyone locked together, it would have been impossible to head to bed. The empty wine jugs and tableware formed a messy pile on the table. The total amount of food they had, including what they had bought and what they had prepared themselves, had been quite a lot. But the plates were all empty.

Not feeling so inclined to get up, she was sitting holding her knees, staring absentmindedly out the window, when Marguerite emerged from the kitchen. She looked so full of life it was hard to imagine she had drunk so much as a drop the night before.

"Oh, you're up, Ange. Morning."

"Morning... You're up early."

"What, are you hungover? Get a grip, eh."

"You're sounding like the muscle general now... You're a strong drinker,

Maggie.”

“You think so? This is pretty normal. Oh, I made some soup. Do you want some?”

“Hmm...thanks. I’ll have some.”

She settled a bit upon ingesting a clean broth with winter cabbage and dried meat. As she stretched out, she felt her joints cracking and her muscles unknotting. Her meandering mind became somewhat more focused.

Angeline had had her fun, but now she wondered if Belgrieve had had his. His invitation had of course been a delight, but she had convinced herself that the man would prefer to drink unreservedly with the boys from time to time.

I’m amazed at my own tact, Angeline thought with a grin. I’ve become a girl who knows the meaning of self-control.

“Dad’s kind, so he’s always pushing himself...”

“What’s this, all of a sudden?”

“I’m just talking about how yesterday was fun...”

“Hmm? Well, I guess it was.”

“Do you think dad had fun too?”

“I imagine so. I can’t even picture what men like him talk about when they get together.”

Marguerite stretched out with a smile, and Angeline stared at her for a while, taking in the elven maiden’s silky, silver hair, slender body, and refined face, which was so lovely, she had to wonder if it was artificial. The princess of the western forest was beautiful indeed, as the entirety of her race was reputed to be. Angeline wondered if Belgrieve’s old comrade Satie was this pretty as well.

Perhaps all the staring had finally started to make her feel uncomfortable, as Marguerite restlessly shifted her shoulders.

“What’s up?” she asked.

“Oh, sorry... Hey, up to what age do elves look young?”

“Well, that depends on the person. Some of them start showing wrinkles at fifty, and others look like spring chickens at seventy. Apparently, it’s got to do with how much mana you have in you, but I don’t really get it.”

Satie was from Belgrieve’s generation, so she would have to be forty by now. *What sort of woman is she? Angeline wondered. Is she beautiful like Marguerite? I might be nervous if someone like that became my mother. Yes, I’ll need to steel myself...*

Angeline's musings were interrupted by a great yawn. She curled up, hugging the cushion, and blinked her eyes.

"I'll take off once Char is awake."

"Sounds like a plan. I'm going to head off to the guild." Brimming with energy, Marguerite spun her arms and cricked her neck. She was quite the strong drinker, and Angeline had to wonder if she was even stronger than Sasha in Bordeaux.

"Maggie... Are you okay? Are you sure the wine's not affecting you at all?"

"That much won't do a thing to me. I'm looking forward to going out on another request."

"Hmm... Weren't you saying they're too easy?"

"Yeah, the fiends are weak and the work's basic, but Bell's right—I've gotta build good habits. These jobs are pretty interesting if I go at them trying to find out new things. Adventuring's just as fun as I thought it would be! I'm glad I came to Orphen," Marguerite declared with a laugh.

Drawn in, Angeline found herself smiling along. "You've got that right. The types of herbs, where they grow, how to spot them, the small habits of fiends, they're all quite interesting if you observe them closely..."

"Right, right! Up to now, I always defeated fiends without a thought, but I finally realized there are a whole bunch of things I was ignoring."

And with that, Marguerite began to crack her fingers. When it came to combat strength, Marguerite was good enough to rival Angeline. With Angeline's recommendation, she would certainly have been permitted to jump straight into the upper ranks. However, Belgrieve had advised her to start from scratch. According to him, it took far more than skilled bladework to make an adventurer, with few exceptions.

There were some things that could only be seen by careful observation during seemingly dull tasks that anyone could accomplish. Containing one's arrogance and working steadily was a good way to extend an adventurer's life span. And it was clear that Marguerite was already beginning to understand this. Angeline was naturally rather fond of the straightforward (if somewhat crude) elf princess, yet she felt a faint bit of envy as well.

Marguerite stood on the same path Angeline herself had tread once before. Angeline felt no jealousy at this; if anything, she felt a bit of superiority as her senior in the field. However, it definitely did feel like

Belgrieve was being taken away from her. When Marguerite spoke of what Belgrieve taught her and what had transpired in Turnera, she spoke as gleefully as if she were Belgrieve's daughter instead.

Angeline, with a pouting expression, reached out and pinched Marguerite's own cheeks.

The elf princess blinked in surprise and protested, "Hwat ur yoo dooin..."

"Soft..." Angeline felt as though she could touch Marguerite's smooth skin forever. She had pinched her cheeks with a bit of envy and ill intent, but they felt far better than she could have imagined. Angeline quickly released her and instead pawed Marguerite's squishy cheeks with both hands.

"Don't get ahead of yourself," Angeline muttered. "Take this. And this."

"Stop it!" Marguerite grabbed her by the wrists, her cheeks reddened.

"You really are a weirdo."

"What's so weird about me...?"

"I mean, you hardly look like Bell's daughter. You've got a different face and personality... Here, payback." Marguerite reached out and grabbed Angeline by the cheeks.

"Hmph... I'm an orphan. Of course I don't look like him..."

"Oh, right... Have you ever thought about finding your real mom and dad?"

"Never even considered it."

If Belgrieve wasn't her real father, then surely her blood relations were somewhere out there. She had never even entertained the thought before, but now that it had been brought up, she did find herself somewhat curious.

However, those real parents had cast her aside. Perhaps there were some "circumstances" involved, but that did not change the fact that they had abdicated their duty to raise her. A sepia-toned scene crossed her mind for a split second, only to immediately fade away.

She stuck out her lips. "But they tossed me away, right? That means they didn't need me. I don't want to meet anyone like that, and I don't think they want to meet me either."

"I guess so... But it's pretty strange."

"What is?"

Marguerite pinched her hair and twisted it as she said, "I mean, there aren't any other villages around Turnera. But someone threw away a baby that no one else knew about. How did whoever abandoned you get there?

And why go all the way out to Turnera?"

Angeline folded her arms. Marguerite had a point—it took a whole day to reach Rodina, the nearest town, and if whoever did it had come from elsewhere, it was strange that there had been no witnesses whatsoever. It was hard to imagine that one of the villagers had done such a thing; it would be impossible to hide a pregnancy in Turnera where everyone knew one another.

Is dad hiding something from me? Something that would be bad if I found out...?

Apparently, Angeline had been making a scary face, because Marguerite hurriedly stammered, "S-Sorry, I didn't mean anything by it..."

"Nah, you're fine... Don't worry about it."

Angeline sighed. *Let's not dig too deep into it. It's conceivable that someone from a merchant caravan dropped me off, and even if they did come from somewhere far off, it's entirely possible that no one spotted them along the way.*

More than anything, Belgrieve's affection most certainly was not a lie, and that was what was most important to Angeline. She didn't care about her real parents. Angeline had reached a conclusion: "My father is Belgrieve, the Red Ogre...and no one else. That is enough for me." Yet, even as the words left her lips, she had to linger on them for a moment.

Marguerite nodded silently.

Chapter 62: The Unease Building in His Chest

The unease building in his chest caused Byaku to fall to one knee and roughly exhale. His hair became a mishmash of light and dark shades before settling on white. His breathing was labored now, as if something was blocking his airway.

“I’m telling you, don’t push it.” Kasim patted him on the back. “Rushing won’t get us anywhere.”

“Dammit!” Byaku slammed his clenched fist against the floor.

Kasim offered a troubled sigh. “But this is a puzzler. Looks like that demon comes out on its own once you go beyond a certain threshold.”

“This is ridiculous!”

Byaku took a deep breath and stood up. His body exuded a sense of fatigue; his complexion was pale, and there was sweat on his brow. From the corner, Charlotte looked at him with concern.

The day’s lesson had been a bit harsh. He had been instructed to output mana until just before he thought the demon’s influence might come out. Byaku had never had much of his own mana to begin with, and though he could operate his magic circles to a degree, he could not sustain them without the demon’s assistance in combat.

After training under Maria and Kasim, he had somewhat improved his handling of mana, but it seemed it was still difficult to maintain his strength with just his own mana. After his mana output rose above a certain level, the demon’s mana would automatically begin to burst out.

Kasim folded his arms and frowned. “What to do about this...? Well, it shouldn’t affect your day-to-day life.”

“That’s not what I wanted to hear...” Byaku grumbled, his head hung low as he clutched at his chest. It was a while before his breath was steady and he could lift his gaze. “Again.”

“What’s the rush? Your body won’t last at this rate.”

“You’d never understand...”

“What wouldn’t I?”

“I just want to exist as *me*—not just as some byproduct of an experiment.”

“Hmm... Then you just have to come to a decision on who you are. You exist just fine, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Spare me the platitudes!” Byaku glared at Kasim.

The magician shrugged. “You’re shouldering too much on your own... Hey, unlike me, you’ve got plenty of people to rely on. What do you think acting all rebellious is going to do for you? Keep forming walls in your heart, and it will start to hinder your mana flow, you know.”

“That damn old man... He doesn’t understand how dangerous a homunculus can be. I’ve had enough of playing house with him,” Byaku spat before roughly sitting on the floor.

“Hey, Byaku...” Charlotte timidly approached him. “I think Uncle Kasim’s right. You don’t need to keep it all to yourself. There’s sis and dad, and...”

“Can it! ‘Dad’? Where the hell is he, huh? Your old man died a long time ago!” Byaku yelled.

Charlotte recoiled in shock. She became teary-eyed as she clenched her fist.

“What’s your problem, Byaku?! You stupid idiot!”

Charlotte burst into tears as she struck him with her small hand. The boy took the blow silently with a scowl.

“No use taking it out on Char, right?” Kasim cautioned him, twisting the hairs of his beard.

“For crying out loud...”

And that was when the door to the room swung open.

“I thought I’d find you here, *cough...*”

“Hmm? Oh, Granny Maria.”

Warmly clad as ever, Maria entered with a coughing fit.

“Everyone’s together... That works out well.”

“Oh? Did you have something to talk about?”

“Yeah—him.”

“Byaku, eh... Yeah, that’s a talk we need to have... Let’s head home then. I’m sure Bell will be back in a bit if we wait there,” Kasim said, glancing at the boy. Byaku kept his sullen silence, while Charlotte, on hands and knees,

sniffled in quiet misery. Heaving a sigh, Kasim reached for his hat. “This calls for a family meeting.”

○

The snowmelt came a tad earlier in Orphen than in Turnera. It was still cold, but before Belgrieve knew it, there were more days where he could be outdoors without his coat or a scarf. The snow that did fall was softer and melted on contact, creating a small rivulet down the stone gutters that lined the streets.

At this point, it would be difficult to say that Belgrieve had made much headway in his research. He had given up on finding traces in the documents, and would instead walk around town, searching for any traders or travelers from the east to talk to. Even so, he failed to come up with anything significant. He was searching for a renowned S-Rank adventurer of legend, and another adventurer of a race rarely seen outside of elven territory, but in spite of their standout features, it wouldn’t be so easy to pinpoint their locations in the vastness of the world.

“I really was lucky just to run into Kasim,” he sighed, marveling again at the reunion Angeline had arranged.

The falling snow had become too watery for comfort, so he sought cover under the eaves of a nearby shop. The sky was unpleasantly bright and the breeze somewhat warm—signs that winter was coming to an end. But it was precisely when one’s guard was down that it was easiest to catch a cold. Belgrieve felt a chill as he straightened his posture and looked up at the pearl-gray sky. A little closer to the horizon, some thin, wispy clouds were riding the breeze. The sleet seemed like it would last a while longer.

Belgrieve leaned his weight on his prosthetic leg and sighed. He hadn’t given up, but it was still quite disheartening to go so far without a lead. Soon, it would be time to return to Turnera. It would not even be half a month before the scent of spring would fill the air.

Although Turnera was a little behind Orphen in the changing of seasons, as long as they left with the Orphen snowmelt and waited a few days in Bordeaux or Rodina, the roads to Turnera would be clear. It would be like their journey was a flight from spring in pursuit of the waning winter.

Of course, he hadn’t abandoned his search for Satie or Percival, but once

he returned to Turnera, he had no idea when he would set out again. He had to work every day of the year excluding wintertime, and his work in the fields and mountains left him with little time to spare. Not to mention, he wasn't getting any younger. Though he had kept up his training, his body had grown accustomed to life in Turnera, not a life of adventure. This made it far harder to set off on a fool's errand, but he knew he couldn't just remain idle.

"Que será, será, I guess..."

He took a deep breath to calm his impatient heart. The cold air filled his lungs and settled him down somewhat. Even so, he felt there was some worth in coming to Orphen. Angeline would have inevitably brought Kasim to Turnera anyways, but then, he wouldn't have established any connections with the people of the guild or of the city. Although he didn't find much of what he was looking for, he didn't want to write all these new encounters off as a waste of time.

Seeing the sleet weaken ever so slightly, Belgrieve set off on the path. It was coming down even stronger by the time he arrived at the house. He knocked the fine lumps of ice from his hair and coat and brushed aside his damp bangs sticking fast to his brow.

"Good grief." He removed his coat, shook it, and ran his hand across the surface to remove any remaining droplets. Standing on tiptoe, he stamped the ground to remove the water and grime from his shoe.

The house was empty and quiet; the embers in the firepit were buried beneath the ash. Although he found the silence unsettling, it was certainly warmer than it was outside.

Angeline was out on a job, while Kasim had taken Charlotte and Byaku for magic training. They weren't likely to be home until evening.

What to do now? he wondered. It was too early to prepare for dinner, and he had spun all the wool he had brought with him. In Turnera, there would have been plenty of chores to keep him occupied, but there was absolutely nothing to do here. After thinking for a bit, Belgrieve tucked a few bundles of spun yarn into his bag, put his coat back on, and headed out again.

The path was piled in snow that had turned transparent in the ongoing downpour. There was a peculiar crunching beneath his feet as he walked; although it felt firm enough, water would splash all over with each step.

Although the newly rented house was in the residential district, there was a cluster of shops close enough for convenience. The roads were packed with

people and wagons even in the sleet, and hiding under an overhang, a musician strummed a desolate tune. Yet despite all the hustle and bustle, the cold brought a peculiar gloom to the streets, perfectly fitting the melancholic melody.

Belgrieve looked around as he walked before entering the shop he was looking for. It was quite crowded and lively inside. Apprentices moved mountains of folded cloth while a noble and his female companion inspected the high-class selection of wares. The shelves and stands were piled high with skeins of yarn and thread.

Although he was slightly taken aback, Belgrieve spotted someone who looked to be an employee and tried to get his attention. “Um...”

“How can I help you?” Though the employee’s response was courteous enough, upon taking in Belgrieve’s appearance, his expression seemed to turn somewhat condescending. “If you would like to view our cheaper fabrics, might I direct you to...”

“No, I was hoping you would buy my yarn.” Belgrieve produced a bundle of yarn from his bag.

Without giving it a proper look, the employee scoffed. “We have enough.”

“I see.”

Belgrieve sighed and turned. He had already expected this when he saw the mountains of thread they had in stock. He visited another two cloth shops after that, yet was turned down at both. The demand was there, given the cold, but orders were generally placed in bulk, and none of them required a mere two or three extra bundles.

I don’t think it’s bad yarn, Belgrieve thought, closing his eyes. *I’ll try one more before heading back.*

The larger stores that had caught his eye had been on the main road, but this time he would try a smaller one. He had a bit of trouble navigating Orphen’s jumbled cityscape, but he eventually found a cozy little fabric store just inside the mouth of an alley.

There was carpet draped over the ground, but it had already been trodden with the watery grime of previous clients’ shoes. The shelves reached all the way to the ceiling in the dim interior, and each was piled high with colorful balls of yarn. There were no other customers at the moment, and the shop was serene.

A white-haired old man sat behind the counter, flipping through his ledger. He lifted his face as Belgrieve approached, narrowing his eyes behind his glasses.

“What brings you here? Are you here to buy fabric?”

“No, I was hoping you might buy yarn from me.”

He once again took out a bundle and placed it on the counter. The old man put a hand to his glasses, inspecting the yarn closely.

As the appraisal went on, Belgrieve found his eyes wandering around the store. Most of the skeins on the shelf were silk, and any wool that was there had been beautifully colored. He could not see any undyed wool like what he had brought with him.

Looks like it's hopeless again. He sighed.

“I’m sorry for taking your time,” Belgrieve said and reached out to collect his wares. However, the old man acted faster than he could, snatching it up and observing it up close. He picked up a loose end and stretched it out, twisting it with his fingertips.

“The wool is high quality... The finish is precise, and it’s been decently incorporated with air.” The old man glanced at him. “Did you spin this?”

“Yes, for what it’s worth...”

He fiddled with the threads and thought for a moment. “It is good wool,” he said before reaching into a box and taking out several silver coins. “Is this enough?”

“Huh? I can’t take that much.”

“Despite how I look, I consider myself an expert on yarn. I think it’s worth that much.”

Not knowing what to say, Belgrieve smiled wryly and scratched his cheek. It would feel rude to write off the man’s professional opinion after hearing that—and he agreed that it at least wasn’t *bad* yarn. After a moment’s hesitation, Belgrieve nodded.

“I see. Then I’ll gratefully accept.”

“Yarn can reveal the spinner’s heart.” The old man stared at Belgrieve through his glasses. “I pray that you can stay the same man who spun this wool forever.”

Belgrieve chuckled and said goodbye. He felt conflicted; out of a sense of guilt for letting Angeline pay for everything, he had gone to sell his yarn, but he didn’t know if it was all right to take so much money.

Such thoughts were on his mind when a street vendor caught his eye. “Well...she *is* a girl.” Belgrieve picked up a silver hair ornament shaped like a star, embedded with a small red gemstone. Although the design was perhaps too simple, it looked like it would suit Angeline better than anything overly complicated.

The middle-aged woman running the stall grinned. “Is it a gift?”

“Yes, for my daughter... She has black hair. Do you think this would look good on her?”

“That would depend on the rest of her clothes, but I think silver would look good on black.”

“Hmm...”

Belgrieve recalled his daughter’s choice of clothing. She generally wore simple clothes with either black or white at the base. Perhaps she didn’t like anything too flashy, in which case he didn’t want an ornament that drew too much attention.

“I’ll take it,” he said with a nod.

“Glad to do business with you.”

It was a bit pricey but within his budget. He had never bought her pretty clothes or accessories before, so perhaps this could be a start.

“Let’s hope she likes it,” he said to himself. Then, for a moment, he wondered what he would do if she called it lame. He had little confidence in his knowledge of what a young girl might like.

The clouds grew steadily thicker on the way home, and Belgrieve was starting to feel soaked to the core. Unable to bear it any longer, he ducked under a nearby awning and smacked the sleet from his hair and coat. *I guess the weather’s unstable when the seasons are changing*, he thought with a sigh.

His nose suddenly picked up the scent of mint; there was smoke lingering in the air. Belgrieve curiously glanced over.

A rather strange duo graced his vision. One was a black-haired woman smoking a pipe, her layers of overlapping attire implying she was from the east. Sitting down beside her was a young girl, perhaps in her midteens. She wore a coat, a muffler, and a fur cap with flaps to cover her ears. Her hair was the color of ocher, and instead of a chair, she sat on what looked to be an instrument case.

“How cold... I underestimated the north...” the eastern woman said,

accenting her words with a puff of smoke. She tapped her pipe against a nearby pillar to dump out the ash.

From beneath the girl's hat, what appeared to be hanging flaps twitched this way and that. Belgrieve recognized that they were in fact ears, and judging by their shape, she must have been a dog beast-man.

"As the people of the past would say, '*Oshikura manju, push me down, baby*'... How about it?"

"Yeah, no. Ah, I want some hot sake..." The woman let out a large yawn.

Belgrieve stroked his beard before deciding to open his mouth. "Excuse me, do you have a moment...?"

"Huh? Oh, what do you need?" The woman turned towards Belgrieve with an inviting smile.

"I'm sorry if this sounds rude, but did you two come from the east?"

"Oh, well, I can see why you'd think that, seeing as I'm dressed like this. As you might expect, I was born in Buryou." The woman pinched the hem of her shirt and smiled.

As far as western Rhodesia was concerned, the east consisted of a single federation, but each nation that comprised it naturally had its own culture. Buryou was on the easternmost edge. The country was a peaceful, great flatland facing the sea. *I can see why she'd have trouble in this cold*, thought Belgrieve.

The woman tapped the girl sitting beside her on the head. "And this one here comes from... Um, it was to the south... Where was it again?"

"My origins trace back to the town of Almeria in Dadan... Hey, mister, you want to '*shake it up baby*' with me?"

"Huh? Shake what...?" Belgrieve blinked.

The woman sighed. "Incomprehensible as ever... She's speaking that Southerness of hers."

I see, so the girl is from Dadan. Dadan was a country even farther south than Lucrecia. There were more beast-men there than in Rhodesia, and though it was now abolished, their system of slavery had been far harsher than Rhodesia's.

The enslaved beast-men had created words and codes that only they would understand, passing messages to rally against their oppressors. Even now, these odd sayings remained in their dialect. The climate in Dadan had also fostered quite a different culture than the northern region; they preferred

powerful music with a strong backbeat. While the north treated Vienna's hymns with austerity, southerners would often break into dance. Their land had produced many famed singers like Canta Rosa, whose name was known even in Rhodesia.

Is she a musician? Belgrieve wondered as he stared at her case.

The woman from Buryou tucked a hand into her pocket and turned back to Belgrieve.

“So what do you need?”

“Truth be told, I’m looking for someone. Rumor has it he headed to the Eastern Federation.”

“I...see. Would that be Buryou? Or Keatai?”

“I don’t know that much. His name is Percival; he’s an adventurer known as the Exalted Blade... Have you heard of him before?”

“Hmm...” The woman’s gaze wandered as she thought it over for a time, before regretfully closing her eyes. “I’m sorry, I have no recollection. I’m something of an adventurer myself, so I’ve at least heard the name...”

“I see... Thank you. And sorry for taking your...” He paused as he felt a strange presence. He looked down to see the dog-eared girl right up against his clothes, sniffing at him.

“Bonfires and straw... You give off a nostalgic scent, mister...”

“Ha ha, thanks...”

“What are you doing?” The woman grabbed the girl by the nape and pulled her off of him.

Belgrieve scratched his cheek. “So are you two traveling adventurers?”

“Yes, something like that. Coincidentally, we happen to be searching for someone as well, but Orphen is a big place. It has been a while since we arrived, but we’ve had no luck. We were considering going to the guild with a search request.”

“And then we got lost... Thanks to her.”

“Silence. You don’t know the way any better than I do. Aren’t you supposed to be a dog?” The woman prodded at the girl.

Belgrieve chuckled. “If you’re looking for the guild, you just have to go down this road and...”

The snow was letting up. After showing them the way, Belgrieve bade them farewell and took his leave. “Then if you’ll excuse me...”

“Of course. Watch your step.”

They saw him off. The black-haired woman stuck her pipe into her mouth again.

“Hmm, so he’s looking for the Exalted Blade... And do you see how smooth his movements are? His leg is clearly artificial, but you would never guess it... Who could he be?”

“That man reeks.”

“Of bonfires and straw?”

“No, no,” the girl said. She took a handkerchief from her pocket and took a deep whiff of it. “Of the person we’re looking for...faintly.”

“Oh? Well, I doubt there are any other Lucrecian nobles around here. Is this an unexpected gift from the heavens?” The woman grinned and breathed out a stream of smoke.

“Fate works in...*achoo*,” the dog-eared girl sneezed.

Chapter 63: The Incessant Watery Snow

The incessant watery snow plagued him all the way home, and standing in front of the door, he sensed that someone had beat him there. As soon as he opened the door, he found several faces looking at him.

Kasim lifted a hand. "Hey, Bell. Welcome back."

"What's wrong? You're early."

"This and that... We just got here."

Belgrieve took off his coat and entered the room. His eyes widened ever so slightly as he caught sight of a woman adorned in heavy layers of clothing crouched down by the blazing firepit.

"Madam Maria?"

"Huh? Oh, Belgrieve. Don't mind me."

Maria glanced at Belgrieve before taking a sip from the cup in her hands. In the few months he'd lived in Orphen, Belgrieve had met Maria before. She had been dragged into Angeline's wild fantasies, and consequently, he had received from her quite the harsh appraisal the first time they met.

Belgrieve cocked his head as he hung his coat, then sat by the fire.

"I think this is the first time I've seen you here."

"Yes, I need to talk with them about something. *Cough...*" Maria concealed her mouth with her sleeve and let out a light cough.

Belgrieve glanced at Kasim, who gave a theatrical shrug. Charlotte and Byaku sat quietly side by side; the girl's eyes were a bit red.

"Should I leave?" asked Belgrieve.

"No, it's something you ought to hear. If you're planning on looking after these two, then it is partly to do with you," Maria said, nudging her head towards Byaku and Charlotte.

So it's got to do with demons. Belgrieve frowned. This conversation was certainly unavoidable, then. It not only concerned the existence inhabiting Byaku, but there were plenty of mysteries surrounding Mit as well. He wanted as much information as he could get.

Kasim poured steaming hot floral tea from the kettle and handed it to

Belgrieve. “I also consider it something we have to talk about eventually. You’re about to leave Orphen, right? Then before that.”

“Yeah... You’re right.” Belgrieve took a sip from his cup.

After a moment of silence, Maria eventually opened her mouth. “The Blue Flame of Calamity, Schwartz.”

A frown had crossed Belgrieve’s face as Maria turned to him. “You know him, right?” she continued.

“Yes... Though just the name.”

He was notorious, and not in a good way. Schwartz, the Blue Flame of Calamity, was one of the most prominent archmages in Rhodesian history, and he was the most prominent researcher when it came to Solomon’s legacy.

He was also brilliant, developing countless spell sequences and contributing greatly to the development of magicology. But behind this veneer, he was performing ghastly human experimentation among other unethical acts. This culminated in an entire town’s population in the empire’s western region being reduced into vengeful spirits, the life of every resident extinguished. To this day, the site of the town remained as a dungeon prowled by vicious undead.

But he was a cautious man who covered his tracks. By the time the empire noticed his misdeeds, several surrounding villages were also gone, and the same spell was on the cusp of being cast on the imperial capital. His experiments were to satisfy his own curiosity, and he did not care about what became of anyone else along the way.

Once the full story came to light, he was killed at the end of an intense struggle with many of the prominent adventurers of the time; at least, that was the official story. Before then, he had been known as the Blue Flame. The “Calamity” part was added posthumously.

“I thought he was dead—but he’s alive,” said Maria.

“Did you know him?”

“He was my superior at the Magicology Research Lab at the capital. He taught me a thing or two...” A conflicted look crossed her face. “And because of him, I washed my hands of the lab. I didn’t know it at the time, but I had a hand in what he did, and I couldn’t stand it. I joined the team to take him down and became an adventurer.”

“You have my sympathy.”

“Hmm... Kasim, did you have anything to do with Schwartz?”

Kasim stroked his beard. “No, never met him. There are several groups trying to use the demons, but they’re all competing with each other—or rather, trying to murder one another. Anyways, they’re not cooperative. I was caught up with a different crowd,” he said. “But I heard a fair amount of rumors. The guys I was with weren’t incompetent, but Schwartz was more than a few steps ahead. He had far more demons in his possession to boot, and so our guys were getting pretty impatient.”

“I’m sure. I started to see all sorts of things once I began looking into it. *Cough cough...*” Maria covered her mouth.

“Are you okay, granny?” Charlotte said, rubbing her back.

“Tsk... So anyways. The one who tried to use these two was Schwartz.”

Belgrieve furrowed his brow. They had quite a big shot on their hands. “Then is he after them again?”

“*Cough...* I’m not so sure. That guy wouldn’t take the risk unless they were that valuable to him. But at the very least, he knows they’re here. I’ve fought him once in Orphen already.”

Byaku twitched. “When that homunculus showed up at the guild, huh?”

“You noticed...? That’s right. Schwartz was the one who brought that demon.”

“But the fact he hasn’t done anything since then means he must have some ulterior motive,” Kasim noted over a sip of his tea.

Maria nodded. “We don’t know much about the demons, or rather, Solomon’s homunculi. I’m sure even Schwartz hasn’t grasped even half of the truth. Maybe he’s letting Byaku roam freely to observe him, or maybe he’s lost interest and shifted to another experiment... But the probability of the latter is low. *Cough, cough...*” Maria’s shoulders shook. “Hey, throw in a few more logs. It’s cold.”

Belgrieve obediently added a few pieces of wood over the fire.

“I investigated the melted remains of the homunculus that appeared in Orphen,” Maria said with a sigh. “Outrageous stuff. I don’t have the full picture, but you could call it a mass of mana given physical form. In any case, there are several layers of complex spell sequences, with programs to produce ego and emotion on top of that. Although I wouldn’t say it’s perfect —something’s missing.”

“Is that why the demons went crazy once Solomon disappeared to the ends of time and space?”

“If the legends are to be believed... Well, I, for one, believe them. Those homunculi are only stable when they’re together with their practitioner. Presumably, their sense of self was stabilized through an immense sense of dependence towards their creator. Once the creator is removed, it’s clear why they would go mad.”

“I had a bit of a look earlier, but I couldn’t make heads or tails of it. What has to be going through someone’s head to make them like that?” Kasim said, sitting up a bit and shifting the position of his cushion. “Anyways, there are a few experiments Schwartz carried out. There was that mass fiend outbreak in Orphen last year, and then there’s this guy.” Kasim patted Byaku on the shoulder.

Belgrieve looked at him curiously. “I heard he had a demon living inside him...”

“Yeah, no doubt about that. But the experiment was pretty gruesome, you see.”

“He had them born from a human woman,” Byaku said. All eyes gathered on him. “I don’t know the specifics, but the homunculi can change shape. He somehow got it to enter a human woman. And the homunculus became her unborn baby.”

“In that case...”

“That’s right. That’s how I was born—with a human body, but the power of a demon,” Byaku said, looking at Belgrieve. “But according to them, I’m a failure. My soul coexists with the demon’s soul. With the successful trials, the demon’s presence vanishes. The souls meld with one another, and all the limitations of the homunculus are gone. The child no longer has a maddening dependence on Solomon.”

“Meaning their goal was to have the immense and unfathomable powers of a demon at their full disposal,” Maria said with a slight cough.

Kasim shrugged. “And according to him, that’s what Ange is.”

“What...? Ange?”

Byaku silently closed his eyes. The space around him bent slightly as his hair took on a blackened hue. “That’s clearly where her strength is coming from...not to mention, that’s what the demon inside of me is saying. Even if we humans can’t tell, it looks like demons can sense other demons.”

“What is the demon saying, exactly?”

“I want to go home. Why is she the only one? It’s unfair.”

“Hmm...” Belgrieve kneaded his beard.

Charlotte timidly opened her mouth. “Um, there’s no way to know for sure...”

“But there’s no way to know for sure that she’s *not*,” Maria said.

“Schwartz seemed to have an inkling, so even if it’s not completely true, it may not be far from the mark. It’s bad for my heart, but her skills are the real deal.”

“But... I can’t believe that sis is a demon.” Charlotte hung her head.

Belgrieve’s eyes wandered in thought. “Kasim... What are your thoughts?”

“I heard rumors about that experiment back when I was with the group I hung with. As for whether Ange’s one of them or not, that’s hard to say. If the fact she doesn’t give off a demon’s presence is your proof, then almost everyone in the world’s a demon in disguise. If it’s her strength, then hey, I could very well be a demon myself.”

Byaku shook his head. “There’s another trait. Black hair. My hair turns when I handle the homunculus’s mana.” He pinched his hair, which had already returned to white. But it had definitely turned black a moment ago—back when he had released his demon mana.

Maria sighed. “But she could just have a bit of Eastern blood in her too. Ange was abandoned, so we can’t deny the possibility that one of her parents was from the east. I’m not saying there’s no possibility, but her black hair color as evidence is too weak to prove anything.”

“The point is, we currently can’t say for sure,” Kasim said with a shrug.

“Even so, a homunculus’s powers defy common sense. Their entire principle of existence is based around their yearning for Solomon... There’s no telling when Keim within me will go mad,” Byaku said and turned to Belgrieve. “You saw what happened in Bordeaux, right? They can change their forms. They can become like gemstones, or like fluids... They can activate all sorts of powers just by injecting themselves with mana... The ring she had was also a homunculus.”

Charlotte shuddered at his words, and Belgrieve narrowed his eyes. He remembered Charlotte’s ring changing shape when he confronted her at the Bordeaux estate. He had assumed it had been a peculiarly enchanted item, but never considered that it was a demon. Had it tried to swallow Charlotte out of a longing to be with someone?

Seeing Charlotte fall into a depressed silence, Belgrieve smiled and patted her on the shoulder. “You don’t have to worry about it. It’s already over, Char.”

“Yeah,” she murmured, nodding.

Byaku closed his eyes. “Anyways, homunculi exist beyond your comprehension.” He stared straight into Belgrieve’s eyes. “I’m not going to Turnera.”

“You don’t want to go?”

“I’m done with playing house.”

Charlotte raised her eyebrows. “You don’t have to put it like that! Dad isn’t keeping us around as a game! You’re the one who’s being stubborn, Byaku!”

“Hmph... You’re right, it’s not a game. Old man... I don’t know what you’re thinking, but keeping us around is nothing but trouble. If you’re doing this out of a sense of self-righteousness, you should cut your losses.”

“Hmmm...” Belgrieve was at a loss for words.

“Well, I agree with him there,” Maria interjected. “It’s reassuring to know you have the elf paladin at your village, but he’ll be nothing but trouble if you take him in out of a sense of sympathy. Belgrieve, do you have the resolve to put up with it?”

“Um... Well, let’s see...”

“He’s being considerate in his own way, Bell. The demons are a great mystery. I agree that we shouldn’t be actively getting ourselves involved with them.”

“Do you think we should leave Byaku behind?”

Kasim gave a stiff smile. “That’s not what I’m saying. It’s not like I don’t like him...but I think the demon’s a bit too heavy to drag around if your heart isn’t really in it.”

“You heard him. You don’t understand how dangerous the homunculi are. Enough of that sickly sweet self-righteousness—just cut me loose already. I shouldn’t mean anything to you. You’ve got no obligation to me.”

“Dad... Are you going to throw Byaku away?” Charlotte looked like she was about to cry.

Scratching his head, Belgrieve stumbled over his words. “Well, the thing is... I already...”

Not knowing how to take his inability to articulate his point, Kasim

cocked his head. “You’re acting strange, Bell. What’s wrong?”

“How should I put this, uh...” Belgrieve stared at the fire in the pit a while before lifting his face. “You remember how I told you that I picked up a child named Mit in Turnera?”

“Yeah, you picked him up in the forest, right?”

“Uh... Well, this is according to Graham’s diagnosis, but that kid is...” Belgrieve hesitated a bit, choosing his words carefully as he told Mit’s story —about the strange events in the forest, and how the situation was resolved. According to Graham, Mit was either a demon or something close. Regardless, he was still being looked after in Turnera, and the villagers doted on him.

Maria and Byaku were both staring blankly by the end of it, while Kasim was clapping his hands.

“Aha ha ha ha ha ha! So that’s it?! You don’t just have a human-demon hybrid, you have a demon in the flesh as your child?! Now this is a treat!”

“Hey, is that true? This isn’t your personal judgment, the Paladin determined it to be so?” Maria said, leaning in.

Belgrieve pulled at the hairs on his beard. “Yes. I was a bit wary at first, but we’ve warmed up to one another. Like a grandfather with his grandson... I don’t know what will happen if they learn his identity, but the villagers adore him, and he poses no harm. That’s why I just can’t imagine the demons being that dangerous.”

“That’s amazing, dad! Why did you keep it a secret? You could have just told us!” Charlotte excitedly hopped onto his lap.

Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his cheek. “How should I put this... I didn’t know how to explain... But in any case, I have no intention of leaving you behind, Byaku.”

“What’s with you...? Seriously, you’re...” Byaku held his head, unable to keep up with the situation.

Belgrieve sighed and looked at Kasim. “But I’m a bit impressed, Kasim. If I said I was going to leave Byaku behind, were you really going to go along with it?”

“I never thought you’d say that...but if you did, I thought I’d stick around Orphen. With me and Granny Maria putting our heads together, I figured we could do something about him.”

Belgrieve was surprised to hear that Kasim had his own thoughts on the

matter and felt ashamed of his own shallow-mindedness.

“I see... So you thought this through. Forget that I asked.”

“Don’t worry about it. I’ve gotten here doing all sorts of nasty stuff, so I’m ready to put myself through some trouble. Even if it means we never get to meet again, I’m sure Percy and Satie would forgive me. Hey, Bell, we’re chasing the past, but this boy here’s got his future ahead of him. I don’t even have to say which one’s more important, right?”

“Good grief, I must really have lost a step if I’m getting schooled by you,” Belgrieve said with a bitter smile.

Maria sighed, and Charlotte laughed.

Belgrieve looked at Byaku and went on in a gentle tone. “Hey, Byaku. I’m no saint or anything. Of course, I don’t want to take on trouble if I can help it... But I don’t think anything of the fact you have a demon inside of you. Nothing would change even if that were true for Ange as well. You may be blunt, but I always feel a sort of kindness from you. You don’t want to come to Turnera because you don’t want to bother me, right?”

“Wrong. Don’t misunderstand me.”

“Really? But you’ve always protected Char even though no one asked you to. I like that part of you. Demon or not, I want you to see Turnera. Do you not want to?”

“Hmph. Do whatever you want!” Byaku turned his back to him.

“He’s embarrassed,” Kasim cackled.

“Oh, he’s embarrassed,” said Charlotte.

“How embarrassing,” noted Maria.

“I’m not embarrassed!” Byaku cried out, his voice slightly cracking.

Chapter 64: More Often Now, the Days Would Be Blessed

More often now, the days would be blessed with clear skies. What had been early sunsets started to come later and later, and there was more daylight to go around. Though the snow still fell, it did not accumulate, and the city's street sweepers' jobs gradually became easier.

As the world began to take on spring hues, the market echoed with the voices of lively touts as wagons of all sizes passed to and fro. All of this was accompanied by the sound of heavy soles tapping against the stone roads. One could easily tell how large the crowd was even with tightly closed eyes.

Angeline had taken Charlotte out shopping; they would soon be on their way to Turnera, and they needed to choose what they would take back with them. Angeline did not know how long she would be able to stay in her hometown, but she intended to linger as long as she could. There were plenty of high-ranking adventurers like Dortos and Cheborg around to handle her duties, so she could leave without any lingering regrets. It wasn't normal for an S-Rank adventurer to have a never-ending stream of work in the first place; they were supposed to be deployed more sparingly.

As she walked, she thought back to the sights of Turnera when the snow was melting. Though home was wherever Belgrieve was as far as she was concerned, it was at times like these, when her thoughts lingered on those rustic sights, that she knew it was time for her to return. She was astonished at the realization that it had almost been a year since she was last there.

"Time flies..." she muttered, then suddenly placed a hand on her chest.
"It's...fine. I'm still growing."

"How about this sugar candy, sis?" Charlotte called from in front of one of the stalls. The stall was filled with several rows of beautifully packaged boxes of candy. They looked like they would keep for a while too. Any confectionaries in Turnera were generally naturally sweet, so processed sugary treats like these would be welcome. More importantly, Angeline quite

liked them.

She tossed a morsel into her mouth and nodded. “Yes, this is a good one... Let’s get it.” After carefully picking out a few boxes, she stuffed them into a bag.

A trail of thawed water flowed just past the tips of her toes, and she feared it would drench her feet if she wasn’t careful. As she cleared it with a nimble hop, her barrette jostled on her bangs. She wasn’t used to wearing it yet. It was a silver star with a small red gemstone at the center, given to her by Belgrieve.

“Heh heh...” She grinned, placing a hand on it.

Now, Angeline was not one for fashion, and she never had a taste for anything too ornate, but she did take a liking to this one, chiefly for the fact that it was a gift from her beloved father. There was no way she wouldn’t be overjoyed. In fact, she had been so delighted when she received it that Belgrieve seemed absolutely perplexed.

Glancing at her, Charlotte giggled. “You’ve been smiling ever since you got that!”

“Heh heh... I mean, dad gave it to me...”

“It looks great on your hair! But he is a man, after all. The design is a bit basic.”

“That’s fine. This is just about enough for an adventurer.”

Angeline sharply tugged up on their linked hands, and Charlotte playfully yelped back.

Water fell, drop by drop, from the corner of every building’s roof. Mounds of snow had been pushed from the roads where they wouldn’t get in the way, each stuck with rocks and branches from the children’s games. After all the cycles of melting and refreezing, it was more ice than snow at this point.

Though the sunlight was warm, the winds were still cold. Angeline shivered each time the breeze caressed her exposed face. The half-hearted warmth of the day only made these meager bursts of cold far worse.

She chuckled as she noticed Charlotte’s red, sniffling nose. “It must be colder here than in Lucrecia.”

“Yes... It never got this cold in Lucrecia. Even if it snowed, it was gone the next day. It never piled up.”

“I see... It’s farther south than the empire, after all.” *It must be a warm*

country, Angeline thought. “It’s even colder in Turnera...”

“R-Right. Of course it is... I’ll need to be careful not to catch a cold...” Charlotte said, puffing out her chest.

The girl had fully immersed herself into the routine of acting like a little sister, and Angeline found it delightful. When they first met in Bordeaux, she found Charlotte to be arrogant, yet street-smart. Her parents’ executions and the pilgrimage she undertook at such a young age must have twisted her in a strange way. But now, she was sincere as could be.

Was she like this when she lived as a noble’s daughter in Lucrecia? Angeline wondered. *Cheerful, honest, showered in parental love...*

That train of thought was accompanied by ruminations over the differences between parents who were real and parents who were not. Charlotte had taken to Belgrieve as though he was her father, but of course, he was not her *real* father. Belgrieve would generously shower the young girl with love, but Angeline wondered what it was like for Charlotte—if the way she felt now was different from how she felt around her real parents.

And yet, Angeline could not bring herself to ask. It felt like she would be digging into an old wound, and satisfying her own curiosity would not bring Charlotte’s parents back to her. Then Angeline’s thoughts turned to her own parents. If they were still alive somewhere, she wondered what they might look like and how their lives were going. She didn’t want to meet them, but since Belgrieve was her foster father, she surely had a real father out there. It was hard to say she wasn’t at least a little curious.

“My real parents, eh?” Angeline muttered.

Charlotte looked at her quizzically. “What’s wrong?”

“Hmm... It’s nothing.”

Angeline softly touched her hairpin again. The silverwork was cold to the touch. She was genuinely pleased to be wearing it, but while her heart had been mostly full of joy until that point, a small dark shadow had been cast over it.

“Let’s go home. I’m hungry.”

“Yeah, let’s.”

The two went on their way, hand in hand.

Angeline muttered, “Has the snow started to melt there yet...?”

“When does the snow melt in Turnera?”

“Around the start of spring... For now, we’ll go to Bordeaux and see how

things look from there.”

“Bordeaux...”

Charlotte’s expression clouded over slightly, but she quickly shook her head and made her resolve. She needed to go to Bordeaux to apologize. She was looking forward to Turnera, but that was one big thing she needed to do first.

Angeline ruffled up Charlotte’s hair. “It’s all right. I’m sure they’ll understand.”

“Y-Yeah...” Though the girl was a little anxious, she still smiled and gripped Angeline’s hand more tightly.

○

Yuri placed a cup of floral tea on the table in the guild master’s office.
“Here you go.”

“Oh, thank you, Ms. Yuri.”

“Um... I’d like to ask, for what it’s worth—Mr. Belgrieve, you really don’t have any intention of coming back?” Lionel timidly asked.

Sitting across from him, Belgrieve pulled at his beard with an awkward smile. “I’m sorry, Mr. Leo.”

“Oh no, it’s none of my concern... I just thought it was a bit of a waste,” Lionel said, scratching his head.

Yuri giggled. “It feels like it’s been no time at all... I was surprised when you suddenly showed up at my desk with Maggie.”

“Yeah, that’s right... It looks like you’re taking good care of her now.”

“She’s doing her best, so I need to be responsive to her efforts. That’s all.”

“And it’s thanks to her own efforts that I can leave her in Orphen with peace of mind,” Belgrieve said with a chuckle.

He was scheduled to leave Orphen within the next few days. His time was now occupied with arrangements, preparations, and goodbyes. With that said, he was not an adventurer, and there was nothing tying him down here. Rather, Angeline and Kasim were the ones who needed to do some paperwork before they left with him.

Though he was Angeline’s father, he was merely an interloper here, and Belgrieve felt that the guild had gone to great lengths to accommodate his search. “Thank you, Mr. Leo. You’ve done a lot for me.”

“Not at all. I feel I haven’t done enough...”

“That’s not true. I’m an outsider, yet you helped out with most everything I needed... Thanks to you, I met all sorts of people. What I gained here might prove useful when I least expect it.”

“Do you think so...? It would be nice if that were the case.”

Lionel scratched his cheek, then looked at Belgrieve with a somewhat more serious expression. “Mr. Belgrieve... Please take this in the spirit it’s meant. It doesn’t matter if you’re an adventurer or not—as strong as you are, someone will eventually show up who needs your strength. You should put a bit of thought into what you will do when that time comes.”

“Yeah... You might be right.” Belgrieve smiled. “I’ll take that to heart. Thank you. I am a bit nosier than I should be.”

“Ha ha... That’s a good thing, as far as I’m concerned.”

“Really? That’s nice to hear... Well, I have some preparations to make, so I’ll be taking my leave.”

“Sorry for keeping you... Man, I might move to Turnera after I finally retire from this position. Just imagine it... Me, kicking back in the countryside...”

“You’d be nothing but trouble if you went there, Leo,” said Yuri. “Do you think you’re able to work a field?”

“I’ve never done it before, but... Well, won’t I just figure it out?”

“No, you won’t. It’s a recipe for lower back pain.”

“Is it really?”

“It is. Right, Mr. Bell? Fieldwork is pretty taxing, isn’t it?”

“Ha ha, it is. Have you ever farmed before, Ms. Yuri?”

“I’ll have you know I come from a farming village. I know my way around.”

“How reliable... In that case, why don’t you just bring Ms. Yuri with you, Mr. Leo? You’re welcome anytime.”

“Not a bad idea... Hey, Yuri. Once I retire, let’s get married and move somewhere nice and easy.”

“Marriage, huh... Wait, what? Huh?! W-Wait, hold on, hold on—that’s quite sudden!”

“I’m just joking. Please don’t take it that seriously.”

As Lionel cackled, Yuri’s bright red face twisted into an angry scowl. Her right fist shot out towards the guild master’s cheek. “Stupid!”

“That smarts! Huh? Why?! What did I do?! Ow, ow, ow! That really hurts!”

“Looks like Ms. Yuri has it rough,” Belgrieve said, smiling wryly. He left Yuri and Lionel behind and headed off.

Once he was outside the guild, he found himself blinking rapidly as his eyes adjusted to the almost blindingly sunny sky. When he had first arrived in the city, he had wondered what he would do to while away the long winter, but now that it was all over, it seemed so short. After having grown used to the country life, every day in Orphen seemed to go by at a dizzying pace. It wasn’t bad, but it did wear on him—not so much physically as mentally. Never did he expect he would be this relieved at the prospect of returning home.

Still, all the various connections that spread from Angeline were wonderful. He was delighted that he could reunite with Kasim, and it had been a good experience to cross blades with Dortos and Cheborg, among other skilled warriors.

Of course, he had more losses than wins—naturally enough against the S-Ranks, but even against other high-ranking adventurers like Edgar. However, he never felt completely outmatched. Surely he was more than strong enough for a retired life in the sticks. At the very least, he was happy to know that he still had room to improve the sword arts he had once given up on. When all was said and done, however, the name “Red Ogre” was still foreign to him, and he did not feel he had accomplished enough to warrant such a moniker.

At the same time, he reflected on Lionel’s words. Even if he hadn’t won, he had still held his own against S-Rank adventurers. Perhaps his skills would be wasted in Turnera. Those with power bore a certain responsibility—he had taught Angeline this before, and now it felt like his own words were a weight on his shoulders.

Belgrieve shook his head and struck his cheeks. *Think about this rationally. Your skills are advancing, but your body is on the way out. You may be following Graham’s teachings, but you still haven’t gotten rid of your own bad habits. You’re out of breath after every sparring match. You aren’t as nimble as you were back then. Even if those battles looked even, that’s just because they were matching your level. You can’t misjudge yourself simply because everyone talks you up.*

This meant that Dortos and Cheborg, who were never out of breath after

their matches, were exceptional. S-Ranks really were a cut above the rest, but even Edgar and the other adventurers who had climbed through the ranks knew how to conserve their strength. In that sense, Belgrieve knew he was still no more than a villager with an interest in swordsmanship.

“Don’t get in over your head,” he muttered. “Do you think you’ve become a master or something?”

He was but one man—Belgrieve of Turnera, father of Angeline. *And isn’t that fine?*

Once he made it through the soppy, half-melted snow and returned to the house, he found everyone hemming and hawing over their bags. Angeline pounced on him as he stepped through the doorway.

“Welcome back, dad!”

“Yeah, I’m home. You’re pretty excited.”

“Hey, dad, it’s cold in Turnera, isn’t it?” Charlotte held up a fluffy coat. “How much winter clothes should I take?”

Belgrieve chuckled. “You won’t need that much. It will be a pain to manage too much luggage.”

“That’s right. Just look at me—I’m like this year-round,” Kasim said, pinching the long sleeve of what seemed to be the only shirt he owned.

“That’s because you have magic, uncle!” Charlotte laughed. “But you really should change now and then. You’d look a lot less shabby.”

“Come to think of it, your clothes never get dirty. Did you imbue a spell into them?” Belgrieve asked, and Kasim shook his head.

“Nah, it’s not the clothes themselves. I just pass mana between the fibers to blast the dirt off, is all. It leaves it in the same state as a good wash...though it’s starting to get old and tattered, admittedly.”

“Sounds pretty tricky,” Belgrieve mused, stroking his beard. According to Maria and Miriam, fine control of mana was the mark of a master. That mischievous youth from his memory had grown into quite the outrageous individual.

“Is there anything you want to bring back, dad...?”

“Well, there’s the pot and steamer I bought the other day... I’d like a sack of salt and sugar too, but, well, we can buy that around Bordeaux, which would spare us the trouble of carrying it all the way.”

“Nothing but practicality with you.” Kasim patted him on the back.

Belgrieve shrugged. “Well, there’s no use in putting on airs out in the

countryside. And it's not like you'll find anywhere else as exciting as Orphen."

"Heh heh, but I like Turnera..." Angeline hopped onto Belgrieve's back, and Belgrieve hurriedly supported her weight. She buried her face into his hair.

Angeline likes Turnera, Belgrieve thought. She wants to return whenever she has the chance. But her own abilities and her fame often prevent that from happening.

He wondered if the responsibilities of power were a burden to her. She was a good girl, and because she followed her father's teachings to the word, she became renowned as a demon-slaying hero. However, Angeline had never wished for that herself.

She said that adventuring was her life's calling. It was, of course, her right to live how she wanted to live. Perhaps it sounded nice when she proclaimed it to be her father's teachings, but the thought that he had simply imposed his own sense of values onto her was troubling.

Belgrieve shifted his balance to better accommodate Angeline. "Hey, Ange."

"What's up?"

"Is it...ever hard for you?"

"Is what...?" Angeline ran her fingers through his hair with a perplexed look on her face.

He closed his eyes and gave some thought to his answer. "I told you to become an adventurer who protects the weak, didn't I?"

"Yeah!"

"Do you really wish for that from the bottom of your heart? Are there ever any times where that makes it so you can't do what you want to do, but you just accept it?"

"Hmm... I don't really know. I just want you to praise me..."

"I see... But..." Belgrieve searched for the right words, but couldn't work out what to say.

"What's wrong, dad?" Angeline anxiously asked.

"No... It's nothing."

"Okay..." Angeline hopped down. She looked a bit meek, her mouth moving as if she had something to say, but she ultimately returned to rummaging through her bags with Charlotte.

As he folded his coat and mantle, Belgrieve continued to ruminate. *That was awful. It felt like I was distrusting her.* He knew that his daughter's kindness was what drew people to her, and her desire to protect people was no lie either. Even so, he could not erase his fears that he was somehow holding her back.

The world was not filled with bad people, but it was not filled with good people either. There would be people out there who would try to take advantage of her kindness. When that happened, he wondered if his teachings would cause her to overexert herself.

Kasim, who had watched the exchange silently, patted him on the shoulder. "That's not like you. You shouldn't keep things to yourself."

"Sorry."

"You're getting ahead of yourself, old man." The voice had come from near the wall. Byaku had been there, sitting against the baseboards the entire time. He looked up at Belgrieve. "If you think you're her entire world, you've got another thing coming."

"Ha ha, you're right..." Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his head with a bitter smile. Coming to the capital seemed to have changed something in him. In any case, he needed to return to Turnera. Belgrieve got his bags in order and tidied up the room.

The night before their departure, they hosted a meager—albeit somewhat rowdy—gathering among friends, and Belgrieve found himself growing emotional as he reflected on what had only been a few months.

Now, the day had come. From the early morning, the weather had been fine and the skies were a piercing blue, apart from a few thin strands of clouds. The warm sunlight poured down generously.

Several wagons passed through the stagecoach station. Orphen was a center of trade, teeming with people ready to set off in every which direction. With luggage in hand, Belgrieve searched for one headed for Bordeaux.

There were plenty of people headed north now that the snow was melting, and he found transportation soon enough. It was a four-horse wagon with enough space for twenty people, even counting luggage. During the day, the cloth canopy was left open to let the breeze blow through.

Their bags were loaded; all that remained was to wait for their departure. In the interest of saving space, customers who had finished loading their belongings were asked to wait outside the wagon.

Marguerite came to see them off, her hands folded behind her head.

"Ah, it all went by just like that. It's gonna get a lot quieter around here... And wait." Marguerite stuck out her lips. "Why are you girls going? You're leaving me alone here."

Anessa and Miriam giggled.

"I mean, we're Ange's party members," said Miriam

"Hey, I like Turnera too," Marguerite retorted. "The air is nice, and it's quite a relaxing place to be."

"Have fun holding down the fort. You can use the house however you want."

Angeline's party members were tagging along. They could have taken jobs on their own, but they both liked Turnera well enough. Angeline grinned at the elf princess.

"Jealous? Oh, Maggie..."

"Hmph... What've I got to be jealous about, eh? See ya, Ange! I'll lay you out flat next time we fight! You better be ready for it!"

"I'd like to see you try."

After taking a sidelong glance at the girls, Belgrieve looked over the bustling city. The customers who had finished loading their bags were around, stretching and chatting with one another. Beyond them, he could see a wagon set off on its way, passing a platoon of soldiers on patrol. Street performers brought smiles to people's faces through cheerful tunes and silly acts. It was even livelier than Turnera's fall festival.

It was time to say goodbye. Although he felt reluctant, he also felt relieved.

Angeline stepped up behind him and took his hand. "You look glum..."

"Hmm? Yeah, just a bit."

"Hey, dad..."

"What is it?"

"Um..." Angeline fidgeted and hesitated, and finally shook her head. "It's nothing."

The cabman let out a loud shout. "We're going to depart soon! Everyone hop aboard!"

They mingled with the boarding crowd. The wooden seats were covered with flimsy blankets; most passengers brought their own cushions or set down layers of folded cloth. Many of them seemed quite accustomed to

riding.

Taking a page out of their books, Belgrieve folded up his mantle and was awaiting departure when someone came running towards the wagon.

“Stop! Stop! Please wait! Let us on too!”

This was somewhat of a surprise. These newcomers were the eastern woman and the girl with dog ears. The cabman took a look at them, making a sour face at the instrument case and the long parcel they had on hand.

“Please understand, we’re full as can be. We don’t have any space for your things either.”

“Can’t you do something about it? The others all turned us down, and we don’t know what to do!”

“*Like a rolling stone’...*”

“Even if you tell me that...”

Belgrieve leaned out and shouted, “We can make some space over here.”

“Hmm.” The cabman seemed a bit lost, but more than anything, he wanted to leave on time. He reluctantly let the two of them aboard.

Seeing Belgrieve scoot over to make space, the black-haired woman smiled. “Oh my, fancy meeting you here.”

“Ha ha, the world works in mysterious ways...”

“The people of the past used to say, *there’s no such thing as chance*. But hey, it’s all right. Thanks, mister...”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Angeline looked at the two of them dubiously. “You know them...?”

“I met them when I was taking shelter from the rain...”

“You pick up the strangest connections,” Kasim cackled, with Charlotte sitting on his lap.

The two women crammed into the space he somehow managed to make.

“You really helped us there. My sincerest gratitude. My name is Yakumo.”

“I’m Lucille... Wanna ‘*shake it up, baby*’?”

“You shut up,” Yakumo said, prodding at Lucille.

This feels like it’s going to be a lively trip, Belgrieve thought as he stroked his beard.

The wagon set off. Marguerite waved her arms. “Take care! Say hi to my granduncle and Mit for me!”

“Maggie, you can’t follow anyone you don’t know! Also, don’t rush at

things spur of the moment! Take every step with care!"

"Shut it! I know! Just go already, stupid Bell!"

The party chuckled at Marguerite's bright red face.

Chapter 65: The Thawing Roads Were Somewhat Slushy

The thawing roads were somewhat slushy, but the wagon pressed on without issue. Though the winds were brisk, the number of people loaded onto the wagon made it practically sweltering.

“Hmm, so you passed through Tyldes to Lucrecia and went north from there? That’s quite a long journey,” Miriam said, sounding ever impressed.

Yakumo bashfully scratched her head. “Oh, it’s nothing. You just have to get used to it. I’ve always been something of a wanderer, you see.”

Kasim grinned. “You’re quite the fighter, missy. What are you scheming?”

“Ha ha, how harsh... It’s an honor to meet the renowned Aether Buster.”

“Heh heh heh. Flattery will get you nowhere. Is that long thing a spear?”

“It is. It’s been my longtime companion.”

“As only a long spear can be,” Lucille chimed in, and Yakumo silently prodded her.

Miriam chuckled while Anessa pointed curiously at the case resting at Lucille’s feet. “Hey, Lucille. Is that an instrument?”

“It is indeed,” Lucille said and opened it up to reveal a six-stringed instrument.

“The people of the past used to say, just play the guitar, ‘*don’t worry, be happy*’. It’s been with me so long.”

“And it’s not even a spear,” Yakumo goaded, prompting the dog-eared girl to puff out her cheeks.

“You two get along well.” Belgrieve chuckled.

“Ha ha, despite everything, we’re stuck together,” Yakumo reservedly replied. “So, Sir Belgrieve, did you ever find the person you were looking for?”

“No, unfortunately not.”

“Is that so... I was sure you were headed north because you found a lead.”

“Not exactly. I hail from a northern village called Turnera, and I wanted to take these kids there.” Belgrieve gestured at Charlotte and Byaku.

Yakumo nodded. “I see, I see.”

“Come to think of it, you were searching for someone too. Did you find them?”

“No, it turns out they headed north, and here we are. Quite a bother, don’t you think?”

“I guess it’s troublesome to find people in general,” Anessa said with a wry smile.

Yakumo chuckled and took out her pipe. “Yes, quite troublesome indeed... Are you all right with me smoking?”

“Go ahead.”

Yakumo wrapped her lips around the pipe’s stem and skillfully blew out a stream of smoke.

“Does the smoke taste good?” Angeline asked curiously.

“Hmm? Yeah, nice stuff. You feel it in your chest. Do you want a puff?”

“I’d...rather not.” Angeline pushed back the pipe held out to her. Yakumo grinned.

Meanwhile, Lucille had drawn close to Charlotte to get a good whiff of her.

“A noble scent... Sweet...”

“Wh-What’s with you...?” Charlotte’s eyes were spinning.

Yakumo sighed. “She’s a dog beast-man... Her sense of smell makes her quite particular when it comes to scents.”

“Woof. Woof.”

“S-Stop... Eep!”

Lucille buried her nose in Charlotte’s hair; her breath was evidently tickling Charlotte, who stirred restlessly. Kasim pulled the dog girl’s head away.

“Hey now. It’s cramped enough as it is. I don’t need you leaning on me like that.”

“My apologies... Please forgive me,” Lucille said, flapping her ears.

The wagon lurched; this far from Orphen, the roads were not as well maintained. Belgrieve absentmindedly scanned the wagon. There was a peddler and his guard, a few adventurers, a party of traveling entertainers, warmly dressed roaming folk, and what appeared to be the third son of a poor

noble and his attendant. He could pick out various people at a glance.

“Dad. Caramel...”

“Oh, thanks.”

He took a piece of candy from Angeline. It was a hard drop made from boiled sugar and milk, and its rich sweetness spread through his mouth. He had made it before in Turnera with sugar bought from a peddler, but he would always end up burning it. His efforts couldn’t be compared to a master of the craft. Angeline seemed to be enjoying it.

The snow was melting in Orphen, but there was no knowing if it was melting in Turnera yet. The snowmelt’s timing would change from year to year, but it was generally a few weeks after spring began on the calendar.

For the time being, they would make their way to Bordeaux. From there, they would have more information about the situation in Turnera, and perhaps he would be able to see the Bordeaux sisters, whom he had been unable to meet with on the way to Orphen. Belgrieve had stopped by the Bordeaux estate after leaving Turnera, but winter had been near, and all three sisters were out visiting settlements to make sure they were all amply prepared. Only Ashcroft was left behind to apologize for their absence.

Angeline gave a great yawn, and she wasn’t the only one. Perhaps they had gotten a bit too excited at the farewell party the night before, because Anessa and Miriam both looked drowsy as well. As for Charlotte, Lucille’s incessant clinginess seemed to make this the least of her worries.

“*Sniff. Sniff.*”

“Hey, eep, that tickles... Yipe!”

“Out of the way, would you? Hey, you don’t listen, do you, puppy?”

Kasim extracted Lucille just as the girl’s nose was buried in Charlotte’s neck.

Blinking innocently, Lucille replied, “I mean, I want to sniff her forever. Little miss, won’t you ‘*shake it up baby*’ with me...?”

“No! Seriously, enough!” Charlotte puffed out her cheeks, her face red as she squirmed and fled to the lap of Byaku, who was sitting beside Kasim.

“Sadness...” Lucille dejectedly huffed.

“It’s your fault for having no sense of boundaries, fool,” Yakumo said with a sigh as she reined in her partner.

They really get along well, Belgrieve thought with a smile. Suddenly he felt a weight upon him. Angeline had fallen asleep and was now leaning against him, breathing softly.

"She did go a bit wild yesterday..." Belgrieve sighed. He shifted a bit to let her rest comfortably. Angeline let out a small groan as she settled.

"I take it you're her father," Yakumo observed. "You don't resemble each other much though."

"Ha ha, we're not blood related. I picked her up when she was still a baby."

"Hmmm, I see. Well, it's good you get along."

Charlotte raised her head. "Dad, give me some caramel."

"Yeah, give me a second..."

Yakumo stuffed some herbs into her pipe and looked at Charlotte.

"Did you happen to pick her up too?"

"Hmm... Well, something like that."

"You're quite a compassionate man, to take in children with no place to go."

"It's nothing that grand. I'm just a bit of a busybody."

"Still, what does it feel like to have a child that's not related to you? Not to mention, it must be hard for a man to look after a woman."

"I had my share of troubles. I've always been a bit awkward, you see. But, well, once I decided to raise her, I couldn't give up along the way. That's just how I am."

"What an earnest person." Yakumo had a rather inscrutable expression on her face—a tad troubled, a tad amazed—as she breathed out a stream of smoke.

Then, suddenly, there was the jangling of an instrument. A minstrel with free hands began playing his bouzouki. One of the roaming folk rested a fiddle on his shoulder, while another began playing an accordion. Someone began to tap against a suitcase like a drum. When the sound of a flute joined the medley, a woman began to sing in a small but clear voice.

So the caravan presses on.

Coiled by tailwind,

defying the headwind.

A bag on the back,

a lyre in hand.

As Ema Rosa sings a tune.

Dyed by moon's pale white and sunset's red.

The burning flame scorches the night,

and onward they dream of sights yet unseen.

La la la, la la la la...

It was an old wayfarers' song that Belgrieve had heard before. It had been over twenty years ago, when he was a novice adventurer. When the tavern was lively, someone would start to sing, and the whole establishment would burst into song.

Every passenger clapped to the beat and hummed along to half-remembered lyrics, and the wagon continued down the path like a small band. The song was followed by conversations that lacked any coherence. By noon, they arrived at a small village, and then another village by sunset. Perhaps because it was situated around a day away from Orphen by wagon, this village had the feel of a lodging town. It was quite a lively place with peddlers transacting at the side of the road. There were those who saw a business opportunity in heading north as soon as the snow melted and others who were headed south from Bordeaux. In any case, there were plenty of merchants, and plenty of adventurers hired to guard them.

The main street was lined with two-story buildings, and there were lanterns hanging from the eaves here and there, beckoning customers into inns, bars, and restaurants as well.

Though they would depart the next morning, it was too dangerous to leave their belongings on the wagon. Every passenger needed to unload as soon as they found a place to stay, and it was quite tiresome work.

Rummaging through his bags at the inn, Belgrieve sighed. "Good grief... I might have brought too much this time."

"It's because of the pot and the steamer, definitely." Kasim cackled.

Belgrieve scratched his head. "Well, what else could I do? I wanted them..."

"I never thought I'd find myself complaining about your spending habits. Hee hee."

"Get a move on, old-timers... Let's go eat." Byaku was losing his patience.

Belgrieve looked up at the boy. "Go ahead. We'll be right behind you."

"Hmph..." Byaku snorted and briskly went on his way.

Kasim chuckled. "Despite everything, he's mellowing out a bit. Still as cheeky as ever, though."

"Well, he's still a child... He might be shouldering more things than me,

but there's no need for him to shoulder it all alone.”

“But I’m surprised Ange didn’t want to come with us.”

The room was booked for Belgrieve, Kasim, and Byaku. The other room was for all the girls. Judging by how she acted when they rented a new place in Orphen, Kasim had been convinced that Angeline would insist on staying in the same room as Belgrieve. This came as a slight surprise.

“Right...” Belgrieve kneaded his beard. “Well, I’m sure she’s got a lot on her mind.”

“She’s at that age... Setting you aside, she might be just a tad embarrassed to have me and Byaku around.”

“I don’t know about that. Well, we can only imagine...”

“It feels like Ange wants to say something, though.”

“Huh? What?”

“I don’t know what it is, but she wants to tell you.”

“Hmm... What could it be...?”

Belgrieve cocked his head. He certainly had not overlooked the gloomy shadows that sometimes crept over her visage, but up to that point, whenever something came up, she would always tell him immediately. So Belgrieve had grown anxious, wondering if it was something she couldn’t tell him.

“Though I get the feeling there’s something you want to tell Ange too,” Kasim observed, donning his hat.

“How should I put it? Rather than tell her...”

“Good grief... What an awkward family we have here.” Kasim stroked his beard.

That was when Byaku burst into the room again, an angry scowl on his face. “How long are you going to take?”

“Ah, sorry.”

“We got a bit into our conversation.”

The two stood up and left the room.

○

Once dinner was over, Angeline sat on the room’s bed, staring absentmindedly into space. She had taken a half-baked nap for a half-baked hour, and now it felt like a haze had settled over her mind.

She brushed her fingers against the hair ornament again, the cold silver

pleasant to the touch. “What is it, I wonder...?”

The rest of her felt strangely hazy as well, as though her heart had lost its focus. She was of course happy to return to Turnera with Belgrieve. However, it was also a bit scary for some reason. Now that she was more conscious of the fact that she had been abandoned in those mountains, she had to wonder how she’d feel the next time she took in that scenery.

When she thought of these things, it was like she could not properly see Belgrieve anymore. She felt oddly unsettled when they were together. Angeline had accepted happiness as his daughter without a doubt in her mind, but having come so far in her life, the fact that she was merely an adopted child was beginning to weigh on her.

She sat around the table with Anessa and Miriam and glanced at Charlotte. That girl’s real parents were no longer around, and yet she adored Belgrieve as she would a father. But she knew her parents’ faces, and she knew their affection. Charlotte was a bit different from her, and Angeline had to wonder if she felt the same way. If she were in Charlotte’s shoes, would she be able to so sincerely look up to Belgrieve as her father? Or would she continue to hold her doubts that perhaps this was different than what a real father was?

They were the same in that neither was related by blood. She had never cared about blood relations before, yet for some reason she was starting to feel uneasy. Supposing that Belgrieve did marry and have a child of his own, she wondered if his affection for that child would be any different from his affection for her.

“What am I even thinking about...? It’s stupid...”

Angeline collapsed faceup on the bed. Beyond the sound of the three girls chatting over the table, she could hear the clamor outside their room, the sound of footsteps crossing the hall, and the distant yelling of inebriates.

Am I feeling lonely? she wondered. She had always been able to monopolize Belgrieve’s love, and perhaps she was jealous that he was now freely giving it to all sorts of other people.

She wanted a family. It was no lie to say she thought of Charlotte as a little sister, but it was impossible to deny the fact that something felt off when she saw the girl so dependent on Belgrieve and her father caring for her with a smile.

Despite going off on how she wanted a mother, a sister, a brother, she was

feeling envious now that the time had finally come around. *I'm more selfish than I realized.* Angeline was filled with a sense of self-loathing.

The bed lightly shook. Angeline sat up and found Charlotte sitting beside her. The girl's round, red eyes stared back.

"Sleepy already, sis?"

"Hmm... I'm just a little tired. I'm fine."

Angeline reached out and roughly mussed up Charlotte's hair. The girl cried out for joy and fell faceup. She yawned and blinked. She was tuckered out, unlike Angeline, who had slept a bit on the wagon ride.

Miriam turned to them. "Hey, you're acting a bit weird, Ange. I thought for sure you'd want to head to Mr. Bell's room."

"That's right. Are you feeling sick or something?"

"Even I have moments when I don't want to be indiscriminately pampered."

Seeing that Charlotte had nodded off, Angeline stood with a sigh and returned to the table.

Anessa stared long and hard at her before sliding her a cup of wine.

"An Ange who's not fawning over Belgrieve... The world's gone mad..."

"Is something bothering you? We're here to listen."

Angeline looked between the two of them, reading the concern that was evident on their faces. They were good friends, and Angeline was happy to have them. But she didn't know what to say—she was plagued by a vague anxiety and unease. It felt like her very core was shifting. She thought for a moment about how she could put this sensation into words.

"It feels funny."

"Hmm?"

"How so?"

Angeline took a mouthful of wine. "I was adopted... So my real parents must be out there."

"Well, yeah..."

"So you feel a bit distant from Mr. Bell now?"

"Not exactly... I just don't know anymore. What is a parent's affection, really?"

"Hmm..." Anessa folded her arms. "Well, we never had parents, to begin with."

"I see... That's right."

“But I do think it would be nice to have Mr. Bell as a father, you know. I’m envious of you, Ange. There, there.” Miriam reached out and gently rubbed Angeline’s cheek.

Angeline’s next words came out an incoherent mumble, so she grabbed Miriam’s hand and said, “But... Merry, Anne, if your real parents were out there, would you want to meet them?”

“Hmm, well, I’d be curious what sort of people they are, but... It wouldn’t really matter to me.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t know what to talk about if I did meet them.”

Sure enough, it wasn’t that Angeline had anything to say to her real parents if she did meet them. She didn’t want to ask about why she was abandoned; regardless of the reason, she knew it would come off as an excuse to her, and it would elicit nothing but anger from her. It wouldn’t be a productive line of questioning.

But...she felt strange. She was resentful for being abandoned, but she would never have met Belgrieve otherwise. In which case, she wondered if she should be thankful instead.

Angeline sighed and finished off what little wine remained in her cup.
“What should I do...?”

“Well, what do you want to do?” Anessa asked her as she topped her off once more.

“I don’t know.” Angeline looked towards Charlotte, snoring on the bed.

Miriam cocked her head. “Did Char do something?”

“I think of Char...like a little sister. But when my dad dotes on her, I feel a stinging sensation...and I hate that about myself. Not to mention...”

Isn’t dad hiding something from me? She swallowed what she was about to say. She felt that the moment those words escaped her lips, there would be no turning back from what they portended.

What was it like, the day he found me? Perhaps she could ask him directly. *But what if an unwelcome truth comes to light? What if needlessly prying into my past will destroy the happiness I have now?* Such thoughts frightened her.

Anessa leaned in and stared straight into her eyes. “Ange...have you come to hate Mr. Bell?”

“No! Wrong! That’s not it!” She inadvertently raised her voice, surprising even herself with her vehemence.

Anessa smiled softly and placed a hand on Angeline's head before she began to pat her somewhat violently. "Then you're fine. You're just a little confused."

"Right, right. Just go to sleep, and have Mr. Bell give you a hug tomorrow. Then you'll be right as rain." Miriam cackled as she poked Angeline's cheek.

"Hey, Ange. Me and Merry, we're on your side no matter what happens. Talk to us, okay?"

"We're friends, right?"

"Yeah... Thanks."

Angeline closed her eyes. Yes, perhaps she was just distracted. There was so much going on that she was a little out of it. There was no need to rush things. Once she returned to Turnera—when everything had calmed down—she could ask Belgrieve all that she wanted to know.

She nodded and touched the rim of the cup to her lips. Her heart felt a bit lighter.

Chapter 66: The Rivers Would Overflow

The rivers would overflow each year as the snow melted. However, a pale sheet of thick ice would remain near the banks, and on the colder days, it would preserve the frozen shape of the turbulent flow. But with spring soon approaching, much of the ice had already made its way out.

As the horses stopped to drink from the riverbank, the passengers got down from the wagon and stretched out their stiff bodies, chatting up a storm.

“I see! You must stop by if you’re ever in the area. It would be my honor to host the Black-Haired Valkyrie!”

“Hmm... I’ll consider it.”

The noble son laughed and walked away. His household was a poorer one, but they did have their own territory. Rumors of Angeline receiving a medal from Archduke Estogal had spread, and it seemed other nobles now had an eye on her. In fact, several people had reached out to her over the course of the journey. Many of them had ulterior motives and were just trying to use her, but Angeline was accustomed to it already and handled them without issue. Her innate unsociability proved useful in the strangest places.

Now that Angeline was alone, Yakumo took a seat beside her. “Famous people sure are busy.”

“Not that I want to be...”

“You think so? You need more initiative. If you’re an adventurer, isn’t it natural to think of how to earn more, or how to raise your reputation?”

“Not interested...” Angeline said with a sigh, hugging one of her knees. Yakumo chuckled and took a swig from her gourd flask. Farther down the road, they could see Charlotte running around and Lucille sluggishly trailing behind her.

Over the past few days, Yakumo and Lucille had grown quite close to the group. Yakumo was easygoing and playful, and everyone would lend an ear to her tales from the east. At first, they were troubled by Lucille’s peculiar behavior, but now they just laughed it off—though Charlotte wasn’t so forgiving of it.

Wiping her mouth with her sleeve, Yakumo let her gaze wander. “I’m amazed you climbed up to S-Rank with so little ambition... Want a drink?”

“Hmm... Thanks.”

She accepted the gourd and took in a mouthful. It was delicious chilled white wine. Angeline took in a deep breath before returning it to her.

“Ms. Yakumo, that person you’re looking for... Are they important to you?”

“Not exactly. It’s just a job.”

“And your job brought you all the way up north... You have it rough.”

“Heh heh, I do, don’t I? It’s a more involved job than I had anticipated. There’s nothing harder to deal with than the human heart.”

Angeline paused for a moment. “What do you mean?”

“Ange, you’re feeling lost over something as well.”

Angeline’s heart skipped a beat and she found herself instinctively looking away.

Scratching her head, Yakumo went on, “I’m not criticizing you. We all get lost time and again—that’s just life for you. It’s not a bad thing to submerge yourself in one of those moments.”

“Did you have a time like that?”

“Of course I did. I’m lost, even now.”

“About what...?”

“Heh heh, well that’s a secret. Every woman needs her fair share of those.” Yakumo giggled, holding her index finger up in front of her mouth.

The horses were reharnessed, and the driver gave a boarding call. The passengers, who had dispersed into small groups, began to return to the wagon.

Bordeaux was growing closer by the day—they would most likely arrive by evening the next day. Apart from one fiend encounter along the way, the party had made it this far without any particular hindrances. Even that fiend attack had proved inconsequential thanks to Angeline and Kasim.

An hour later, they had reached their stop for the night. These lodging towns were generally stationed a day’s wagon ride from one another. There were plenty of merchants hoping to do business as soon as the northern lands were accessible, so every rest stop was full of life.

Charlotte raced around the parked wagon.

“Let’s play, little missy...”

“No! Stop sniffing me, stupid!”

As Lucille closed in on her nose-first, Charlotte scampered away as fast as her short legs would take her and ducked behind Belgrieve.

“Looks like you two are getting along well.”

“We aren’t! Ah, she found me!” Charlotte raced off again, prompting Lucille to let out a disappointed sigh.

“She got away again...”

“Don’t bully her too much, Lucille. She’s a delicate girl.”

Well, it doesn’t look like Charlotte actually hates her though, Belgrieve mused. It seemed like the young girl was actually having fun running away and playing pretend.

“The people of the past used to say, ‘*all you need is love.*’ But it looks like love isn’t enough.”

“I can never quite tell what you’re on about.”

“That child has a good scent, Mr. Bell. An aroma you don’t come across often... It’s not like the overbearing stench of a noble’s perfume, nor is it a commoner’s quaint scent of dirt and sweat... It’s round, and soft, and wonderful.”

“You think so? Well, you must have a better nose than me. I can’t tell at all,” Belgrieve said as he set down his bags.

“The sadness strikes me...but it’s in the harshest times, the hardest trials that we sing. ‘*Oh baby, please don’t go,*’” Lucille sang, strumming her six-stringed guitar. Though her lyrics spoke of hardships, her voice was astonishingly indifferent, without a hint of sorrow in her melody. A sad song over a cheerful tune was a bit of a mismatch, but Belgrieve had to wonder if this somewhat-jumbled cheer came from the southern beast-men overcoming their dark history.

It was a pain to unload their belongings every time they reached an inn, but that was better than leaving them at risk of being snatched from the wagon. Belgrieve had mastered the process by now, and after skillfully unloading all his belongings from the wagon, he handed them off to his friends to carry to the room.

It felt like there was more of winter lingering in the air the closer they got to Bordeaux. The soft breeze regained its sharpness and the snow still painted the landscape in white splotches. Even so, this was nothing compared to how harsh a northern winter could be. The farmers were already out tending to

their fields, and fresh wheat sprouts were already poking their green faces through the soil. It was sights like these that reminded him he was approaching his home, and Belgrieve felt rather relieved. These country sights suited him far better than the city.

As he slung the last bag over his shoulder, Yakumo meandered over to him.

“Hey, Mr. Bell. Have you got everything?”

“Yeah, thanks for the help. This should be the last piece.”

“Hmm, you carry a lot for someone who’s not a peddler.”

“Yeah, that’s the country man in me showing... It must be nice to have so little to carry.”

“Traveling light is what being a vagrant is all about. Don’t worry about repaying my help—you scratch my back, and all.”

“Thanks anyway.” Belgrieve smiled as he shifted his bag. He started to walk, Yakumo and Lucille tagging along. They were staying in the same inn. “Now then, we should reach Bordeaux tomorrow. I hope you find who you’re looking for.”

Yakumo scratched her cheek. “Yes... I hope so...”

“Hmm...? What’s wrong?”

“Well...” Yakumo awkwardly chuckled. “It’s nothing.”

He parted from the two of them and entered his room to find Kasim and Byaku sitting at a table across from one another. Byaku remained frozen with shut eyes, though Kasim turned as he heard the tapping of Belgrieve’s peg leg.

“Oh, is that the last one?”

“Yeah. Is he meditating?”

“Pretty much. He’s become quite proficient. It might have to do with dropping all those unnecessary worries.”

Byaku didn’t so much as twitch even as they spoke. He seemed perfectly focused.

Belgrieve took a seat on the bed. “He’s improving, then?”

“More or less. Having a stable mind’s fairly important with this sort of thing.”

“So the kid’s finally settled down. About time.”

“Quit talking like I can’t hear you, old-timers.”

Belgrieve glanced over and saw that Byaku had cracked open just one eye

to glare at him.

“Just shut up and watch...”

“Yeah, yeah.”

“Sorry.”

“Tsk,” Byaku tутted and closed his eyes again.

Exchanging a look, Belgrieve and Kasim grinned silently at each other.

○

After having dinner at the restaurant adjoining the inn, they settled down in their separate rooms once more. It was still early evening and the weather outside was rather bleak, but there were plenty of drunkards in the halls, and they could hear cheerful voices from the windows.

To keep her hands occupied, Angeline braided Charlotte’s hair, then unraveled it and braided it again. Charlotte let her do as she pleased with a drowsy look on her face. Charlotte’s hair was silky and a wonder to touch. It carried a sweet scent to boot, and she vaguely understood why Lucille was so entranced with it—a dog beast-man would likely have a far sharper nose, after all.

Miriam was drifting off with her chin resting on the table. A full stomach must have made her sleepy, and Angeline felt rather drowsy herself.

That was when Anessa returned from her walk. She rubbed her cheeks, which had grown red from the brisk wind. “Already sleepy?” she asked.

“I’m getting there... Did something happen?”

“Nah, I just spotted a place offering steam baths on my walk. I was wondering if anyone wanted to go.” The place apparently arranged magic flimestones and laid dried herbs on top of them. The girls had taken sponge baths on their journey and hadn’t had the chance to properly wash over the past few days.

“I’ll go... Hey, Char. How does a steam bath sound?”

“Hmm...? Steam bath? Sure...”

Charlotte twisted around until she was facing Angeline, then clung to her. She was clearly half-asleep but was evidently coming along anyway. Miriam stood and gave her cheeks a good smack to rouse herself.

Though they called out to the men, they all declined. Belgrieve had some writing to do, Kasim hated baths, and Byaku bluntly replied, “Who the hell

would want to go with you?"

"He's at that age." Kasim cackled. "Doesn't want to be the only guy in a flock of pretty ladies."

"That ain't it."

"Anyways, give your body a good rest. Don't catch a cold going out into the night right after your bath. Once you're done, come back directly to your room."

"Yeah, got it..." Angeline nodded. "I'm going, then." She was in quite a peculiar state of mind, feeling simultaneously a bit lonely and slightly relieved.

Once she was outside, she found the headwind so cold and harsh that she had to squint her eyes. It wasn't snowing, but it felt as though fine bits of *something* were scraping against her face. Charlotte clung to Angeline's arms.

"Ah, that woke me right up."

"Yeah... Let's hurry."

The bath wasn't far. It was a wooden building, dug halfway into the cliff face behind it. Steam rose and escaped through the gaps in the wood panels, and the light from below—whether by flame or by shinestone—seemed to cast odd, three-dimensional shadows onto the vapor.

She paid the fee at the desk and walked in to find the place nearly empty. Perhaps they were already past peak business hours. It just meant that she could take her time. She removed her clothes and entered the bathing area.

The baths were segregated by sex, which was rare for such establishments in the countryside. The bathing area was built into a cave in the cliff, which helped with heat retention. The heat output could be changed by arranging the flamestones into different configurations, and a pipe dripped spring water onto these from above. There was a sizzling sound wherever the water made contact, and thus the steam would billow out. A refreshing fragrance wafted from the aromatic herbs placed over the stones.

Though there were lanterns hanging from the ceiling, it was hard for Angeline to make anything out through the thick steam, and she could just barely pick out a handful of humanoid silhouettes.

"Hey, where did everyone go...?" Miriam grumbled, lagging behind.

"We're over here," Anessa replied. "Watch your step."

They were to sit and wait on a wooden bench by the wall. It already

seemed far too hot when they had first entered, and even more so after waiting patiently a while. The flamestones seemed to have been set to quite a high temperature.

The steam was so thick, Angeline couldn't even make out the faces of whoever was sitting across from her. She blinked a few times and used her hand to bat away the droplets streaming down her brow.

It was then that the woman sitting across from her initiated conversation. "Hey, is that you, Ange?"

"Ms. Yakumo..." She waved her hand in front of her face to clear away some steam, barely managing to make out Yakumo and Lucille sitting beside her, the sight of whom caused Charlotte to yelp.

Lucille took in a whiff. "Oh, what luck... But I can't make out any smells in here..."

"Both of you came too?"

"Yeah, I thought I'd get some of the grime off," Yakumo said, wiping her hands against her bare body. Perhaps she looked thinner in clothing; her chest and hips stuck out where they should, but her build was tight and muscular otherwise. However, a closer inspection revealed many old scars. The most prominent one made it seem as though she had been sliced through from her shoulder to her chest, and another told of a stab straight through her gut.

Noticing Angeline staring, Yakumo chuckled. "I went through a bit on one of my old jobs. Sure, they left a bad mark, but they don't hurt anymore."

"What sort of job?"

"Well, I'm an adventurer. I took on a more powerful fiend than I could handle. It's what you'd call youthful indiscretion," she said, brushing aside her damp bangs.

"Ms. Yakumo," said Anessa, awed. "I knew you must be quite skilled..."

"Heh heh, I'll take that as a compliment. You all have such pretty bodies. To reach AAA- and S-Ranks without incurring a scar is proof of your skills and talents. You should take pride in that."

"Hmm..." Angeline closed her eyes thoughtfully. *There are all sorts of adventurers...*

Lucille stood and took a seat beside Miriam. "You're huge... What I wouldn't give for *those*, kitty."

"You think so? They're pretty hard on my shoulders."

"That's the weight of happiness... Can I touch them?"

“Not for free, you can’t.”

“What a lively bunch...” Yakumo sighed, wiping sweat from her brow.

“We’re reaching Bordeaux tomorrow... Time sure flies...” Anessa remarked.

“There’s still a ways to go, Anne... Turnera’s a long way off.”

“I get you, but the person Ms. Yakumo and Lucille are looking for should be in Bordeaux, right? We’ll be saying goodbye.”

“As the people of the past used to say, ‘*our way is on the road again,*’” Lucille chimed in.

“You shut up. Well, it’s nice to know that someone will miss us.”

“Who are you searching for, anyway?”

“Yeah, come to think of it, we never asked. If you tell us, we might be able to help out.”

“Hmm...” Yakumo quietly closed her eyes, and Lucille was hanging her head.

After a moment of silence, the dog girl said, “It might be time to pull back the curtain, Yak-girl.”

“What the hell is ‘Yak-girl’...? Well, I guess you’re right.” Yakumo roughly scratched at her scalp, sending droplets flying. “We’re looking for a Lucrecian noble. The daughter of a certain cardinal, apparently. We heard she was chased out of her country and went on a shady campaign through Rhodesia.”

Charlotte’s expression stiffened, and Angeline’s guard was up instantly.

“And?”

“You’ve heard that there was political upheaval in Lucrecia, I assume. The situation changed, and someone wants her to reclaim her rightful status. They asked us to bring her back,” Lucille answered.

Yakumo stared at Charlotte. “Daughter of Balmung... We know who you are. It was Sir Hrobert who issued the request.”

“That’s a lie... Uncle’s dead! I know it!”

Lucille shook her head. “He’s a stubborn old man... Word is, a body double died in his place. He hid underground the whole time.”

“That can’t be...”

“Who is Hrobert?”

“A distant relative of Sir Balmung. He was part of the anti-papal faction, so he had the Inquisition after him for a time.”

“Not that. I mean, what sort of person is he? Will he treat Char well?”

“Hmm...” Yakumo scratched her cheek awkwardly. “Honestly, I don’t know. He’s a typical Lucrecian noble, the sort that devotes all his time to politicking. I don’t think he’ll do anything *bad* to her, but...”

“You’re good people,” said Lucille. “If you were bad people, we’d beat you down and take her...”

“Right. She’s a former noble’s daughter, and a beautiful lass to boot. It would have made matters a lot easier if some shady group was using her. But you’re so virtuous, I honestly worry for your future. Frankly, we’re not sure if it’s right to take Char back to Lucrecia.”

“Then can you abandon your request?” Miriam asked.

Yakumo shook her head. “If you’re adventurers, you must understand. Abandoning a request once accepted will impact our credibility. We could say the target didn’t want to return, but that wouldn’t mean a thing to them. Additionally, Sir Hrobert is her blood relative. He is *family*. I don’t know if he is a *good* man, but I would not consider him the worst option.”

The words “blood relative” caused Angeline’s heart to race. In the next moment, she felt a weight upon her body as Charlotte slumped against her, red-faced. The blood was going to her head—she had been in the steam for too long, and all these sudden happenings may have played a part in overwhelming her.

Yakumo looked at her apologetically. “It’s business. We don’t want to force anyone, but if we end up at odds...”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. I’m sorry, Char needs to get out now.”

“I’m sorry... I’m not going to rush you. But I’d like to hear an answer in Bordeaux.”

“Good night...”

They departed with the matter left unresolved. Although the cold wind felt nice against their warm skin, they had no time to enjoy it. For their part, Anessa and Miriam had fallen into a pensive silence.

Angeline, carrying Charlotte on her back, was likewise lost in her thoughts. She wondered if the girl would be happier with one of her relatives, even if he was not actually her father. *What did Charlotte think about it? Would she be happier living as a noble rather than living in the dingy countryside?*

They didn't discuss a thing after returning to their room; their thoughts were not collected enough for them to speak. It would have been better if Yakumo had come at them with a blade, not taking no for an answer. In the face of *this* approach, their physical might meant little.

It seemed that Belgrieve and the others were already asleep, so the girls went to bed as well. As she lay there, Angeline's thoughts turned again to blood relations. She had none, and that had never hindered the days she spent with Belgrieve. *But what is a real family?* That, she didn't know. The thought that Belgrieve was concealing something about her birth arose unbidden in her mind, but she couldn't muster the resolve to ask him about it. Her doubts only continued to grow, and she was unable to sleep a wink before the skies began to brighten.

○

Around sunrise, when Belgrieve stepped out to perform his daily training routine, Angeline rushed at him and latched onto his back.

"Whoa there," Belgrieve said as he staggered a bit. He quickly braced his legs and regained his balance. "Good morning, Ange. What's wrong?"

"Hmm..." Angeline pushed her face into the back of his neck and took in a deep breath. Belgrieve could not help but crack a smile at the ticklish sensation.

"You're always my little girl, huh?"

"Training?"

"Yeah. Want to join me?"

"Okay..." Angeline agreed, still clinging to Belgrieve's back.

There were quite a few people around who planned to depart in the early morning. Some merchants' negotiations must have gone through, as he could see large parcels being swapped between wagons. The place was rather lively in spite of the glistening frost that still covered the ground.

He found an empty lot after a bit of walking; the others seemed to be avoiding it due to all the junk and garbage littering the ground. He could swing his sword here without bothering anyone.

After clambering down from his back, Angeline watched Belgrieve go through his sword motions without drawing her own blade. But after the first few swings, she found herself naturally following along. There seemed to be

something in his movements she was lacking—a sort of sharpness. She swung a few more times before Belgrieve noticed something was off and stopped, looking at her with concern.

“What’s wrong? You’re acting strange.”

“So, you know...”

“Yeah?”

Angeline fidgeted. She put her hands together, her gestures making it abundantly clear that she was searching for the right words.

“Dad... You’re not hiding anything from me, are you?”

“Hmm? Hiding...? Well, I don’t think so...”

“Do you know who my real parents are?”

Belgrieve frowned. “Hmm...”

Even as she stared intently at him, waiting for his answer, Angeline’s black eyes grew misty.

After a moment’s thought, Belgrieve sighed. “I’m sorry.”

“Huh?! Then...”

“I don’t know,” Belgrieve continued just as her face twisted in sorrow. “You were alone, in a basket... Don’t get me wrong, I checked around as best I could when I found you, but...I thought it wasn’t a good idea to loiter around the forest too long with a baby.”

“What...?”

“Hmm... Well, what I’m trying to say is, I’m sorry. I’ve thought again and again about how I’d let you meet them if I knew who they were, but...I could never really bring it up,” Belgrieve said, awkwardly scratching his head.

So Ange’s finally curious about who her real parents are, he thought. No matter what he did, he would only ever be her adoptive father. It was simply inevitable for her to search for her roots.

Belgrieve had spoken with Angeline about all sorts of things, but he rarely talked about her real parents. He had intentionally refrained from doing so. Bringing it up would have made him feel like Angeline was growing distant from him.

However, given that Angeline herself had raised the question, he felt it was his duty as a parent to answer her wishes and to confront what he had been running away from.

“Ange... If you want, um... We could search for your real—”

But before he could finish, Angeline jumped into his chest in tears. “You

don't have to!"

"Huh? But, Ange—"

"You don't have to! You're the only dad I need!"

Belgrieve gently patted her on the back. "Something must be bothering you."

"Yeah..."

Angeline awkwardly gave vent to her troubled thoughts, choosing her words as she bared her heart to him: about how Marguerite had first made her curious about her real parents, and then about her suspicions that Belgrieve was hiding something from her; about how she was envious of Charlotte and Byaku's relationship; and about how the concept of family was getting more and more muddled to her.

Belgrieve listened quietly, only chiming in when he had to. And once Angeline was finished, he stroked her hair. "I see... That must have been hard on you."

"I'm sorry..."

"You don't have to apologize. I'm sorry I never noticed."

"No, I just went off on my own..."

Stooping down a bit, Belgrieve looked her straight in the eyes. "Ange, you may be adopted, and we may not be related by blood. But you are without a doubt *my* girl and the most important thing in the world to me. Please don't forget that. Okay?"

"Yeah..."

"... You see, I was worried you were pushing yourself too hard. You're already eighteen, so I didn't want you to be overburdened by what I've told you."

"So that's why you asked if I wanted to meet them?"

"That's...right... Yeah, that's right."

"Hee hee... I don't just follow everything you tell me, you know!"

Angeline jumped onto him and, with her arms wrapped around his neck, limply dangled. "Dad! If there's something you want to say, just say it! You make me anxious when you act all unsure like that!"

"Ha ha, my bad... But that goes for you too."

"Hee hee..."

Once her feet were back on the ground, Angeline turned back to Belgrieve, looking a little more serious.

“Now, there’s something important I need to tell you.”

“Yes?”

Angeline told him what she had heard from Yakumo and Lucille the night before. Belgrieve frowned and folded his arms.

In the distance, they could hear chickens clucking and wagons clattering across the earth.

Chapter 67: After They Returned and Explained

After they returned and explained what had transpired, Kasim let out a tired laugh. “Well good grief, that’s hardly a dilemma at all. Just say no.”

Belgrieve nodded. “So you think so too.”

The girls quirked their heads in unison. “Why?” Angeline asked.

“Just think about it. First, there’s no proof that they’re telling the truth. There was political upheaval to be sure, but we don’t get any of the finer details this far up north.”

“Meaning they could be spinning a tale to string you along. Even if we wanted to confirm it ourselves, we can’t feasibly go all the way to Lucrecia to do so.”

“You think those two are lying?” Anessa asked.

Kasim shrugged. “Who knows? Is this Hrobert fellow really alive in the first place? If he’s a noble who regained his authority, then why is he relying on adventurers rather than sending out his own soldiers?”

“Right. There’s also the chance that someone pretending to be Hrobert sent out the request,” Belgrieve added. “Ms. Yakumo herself might have been deceived. If it’s a request from a noble, then it’s plausible that they never actually met their client in person.”

“In fact, with nobles, you don’t see their faces a majority of the time. It was like that a good number of times in my experience,” said Kasim. “A lot of folks don’t care about seeing their client as long as they’re paid in advance. And a noble’s not going to spare the time for every little thing.”

“Hmm... Ange, did Ms. Yakumo mention meeting Hrobert himself before?”

“No... Though Lucille *did* call him a stubborn old man... She might have met him.”

“Heh heh. Even if she met him, who’s to say he was real? It would be a different story if they knew him well before taking the request, but this is

fishy... Char, does Hrobert have a particularly distinctive face?"

Charlotte shook her head. "He has a normal face... His hair and beard were well-groomed, but he didn't stand out much, I don't think..."

"I see. Can you distinctly recall what he looked like?"

"No... Just faintly."

"Heh... If Char's memory is like this even after knowing him, then those two wouldn't remember him even if they spotted the real one a few times before. So how does it look, Bell? You think the Inquisition has a hand in this one, or is it that anti-papal faction?"

"If it's the Inquisition, this is a ploy to tear Char away from us. If it's an anti-papal noble besides Hrobert, they'll be trying to use her to rally their movement. But there's a possibility it's neither; there may be other factions vying for power."

"Heh heh heh. I don't know about the Inquisition or whatnot, but they can't lay a finger on her with me and Ange by her side. If it's a noble, she'll be a decorative figurehead used to maintain power. None of the factions look too appealing."

"But we don't have enough information to make that call... Going off my instinct, it doesn't feel like Ms. Yakumo is lying. She might be telling the truth too."

"At this stage, we should consider every possibility. It would be a mistake to commit to an ill-omened course out of panic."

"For now, let's talk with them too. We can start planning after that."

"Sounds about right. We won't get anywhere discussing it now."

"Does that sound good, everyone?"

The others simply nodded. Seeing Charlotte look terribly distressed, Belgrieve stood and placed a hand on her head. "It's all right, Char," he said. "You don't have to be scared. We're with you." Charlotte's expression softened a bit.

With a smile, Belgrieve lifted his gaze and said, "I'm sorry, everyone. Can you help me load my things onto the wagon?"

And leading Charlotte by the hand, he left the room with Kasim.

The girls left behind exchanged dazed looks.

"Wow... So that's what it's like to be an adult..."

"Yeah... They deduced that much from so little information..."

"I need to try harder...or dad will laugh at me..." Angeline said. Anessa

and Miriam nodded with wry smiles.

“It felt like we were struggling to keep up during all of that. We might have gotten lazy since we became high-ranking adventurers.”

“Yeah, it didn’t take them much thinking to realize something was missing... Ah, we’ve still got some growing up to do.”

Anessa and Miriam let out deep sighs, while Angeline pursed her lips. She was confident in her sword and her ability to read the state of a battle, but she would still often act emotionally when she was pressed to make a call outside of battle—even more so when she was troubled by personal matters. This time, it was partly due to how she had grown close enough to Yakumo and Lucille to take their words at face value.

We might hold high ranks, but we still have a lot to learn, Angeline thought. At the same time, she was happy to reaffirm her belief that her father was a man truly worthy of respect.

Byaku chuckled. “High-ranking adventurers”? Who do you think you’re kidding?”

“Shut up. You’re acting real stuck up for a guy who didn’t say a word the whole time.” Anessa sulkily prodded at Byaku.

○

When they knocked on the door, it immediately swung open. Yakumo stood there, ready to greet them. “I thought it was about time you showed up.”

“Heh heh, that speeds things up.”

Lucille sat meekly on the bed. The small room contained one table, one chair, and two beds. Charlotte anxiously looked up at Yakumo and gripped Belgrieve’s hand tightly.

“I’m sorry we don’t have any chairs.” Yakumo placed a hand on her mouth, her gaze wandering. “By the looks on your faces, I take it you’re declining our offer.”

“We heard the details from the girls. Do you think we would have accepted it with what little information you gave them?”

“Ha ha... No, I’d have doubted it too. Your daughter and her friends believed us without hesitation, but I’d expect no less than this of the Red Ogre and the Aether Buster.”

“Hmm. So you were testing them?”

“Heh heh... Well, if they were so quick to trust someone, then the girl would be far safer in our hands.” Yakumo smiled without a hint of remorse.

She's shrewd, Belgrieve observed. “In any case, we'll need some more details.”

“Just what I hoped you'd say.” Yakumo sat next to Lucille on the bed. Belgrieve took the chair, with Charlotte on his lap, while Kasim leaned against the wall.

“So how is it, really? Do you have any proof that your client is Hrobert?”

“That I do. He personally brought the request to us. Otherwise, I wouldn't have even considered taking the job.”

Belgrieve furrowed his brow. “And you're sure it was really him?”

“How distrustful you are. Though that is a natural suspicion.” Yakumo drew her pipe and stuck the stem in her mouth. “To start with, we thought this would be a simple job. Save the unfortunate little exiled princess from the scoundrels using her... Hence why we never really put that much thought into our client.”

“Then you didn't ask for details?”

“No. I had already heard credible rumors that the daughter of Sir Balmung was still alive. With the world being how it is, I never even considered that our sheltered noble lass was in the care of someone with absolutely no ulterior motives. You see, even if our Hrobert was a fake, it's not exactly any of our business what happens to a little girl we don't know after our job is done.” Yakumo breathed out a stream of smoke. “Honestly, I don't know whether to be impressed or annoyed with you people.”

That's a very adventurer-like way of thinking, thought Belgrieve.

Adventurers did not have the best relationship with nobles. Any meeting between the two groups would be for nothing more than business, and adventurers had little regard for the client's moral standing as long as they were paid. There was not an adventurer in the world who willingly desired to get dragged into the political affairs of the nobility.

“Can't you just say you couldn't find me...?” Charlotte timidly asked.

“We could if it was a normal request.”

“Oh really now,” Kasim mused, stroking his beard. “So it came through the back door.”

“You're aware. Then you should understand, yes? If it was a job officially

issued through the guild, then failure would only diminish our reputation—not that heavy a blow, so long as we changed our base of operations. However, there are *unofficial* jobs that come in through other means. In exchange for immense rewards we are not *allowed* to fail. It would be difficult to continue on as adventurers, and in the worst case, our lives could be forfeit.”

In short, these were either jobs that must be completed in secrecy or unlawful requests that the guild would not accept. This kind of shady work apparently had its own black-market network. It was a high-risk, high-reward kind of deal.

A troubled frown crossed Belgrieve’s face—he had little knowledge of that world. “So you don’t have a choice now that you’ve accepted the job...”

“Precisely. Well, if our client was fooling us or was purposely covering up crucial information, it might be a different story. But we have no proof of that at the moment; we can’t go all the way back to Lucrecia to confirm our uncertainties, and I wouldn’t want to take that risk otherwise. At the very least, we met Hrobert personally... He entrusted us with this.”

Yakumo produced something from her breast pocket and placed it on the table. It was a ring. Charlotte picked it up to inspect it and swallowed her breath.

“It bears uncle’s crest...”

“That’s right. Only the head of a Lucrecian noble’s household is permitted to possess one. After all, Sir Hrobert is a noble in his own right.”

Being a noble in Lucrecia also meant being a clergyman in Vienna’s service. Once one’s status rose to the point that they could manage a noble house, they were bestowed a special ring as proof of their faith.

“You could certainly claim the ring is fake, and that would be the end of the discussion. However, *I* consider this more than enough evidence to determine the authenticity of my client. What do you think?”

“Who’s to say? We don’t know much about Lucrecia. You could just be spinning a tall tale. Heh heh heh,” Kasim answered noncommittally.

“At present, your words are our only way of knowing what’s going on in Lucrecia. So we still can’t make a decision... This is not a matter we can take lightly,” Belgrieve concurred.

Yakumo’s shoulders dropped. “How cautious you are... Well, we didn’t think it would be easy to persuade you. Just know we have our own reasons

for not backing down, and while we might not be saints, I wouldn't call us scoundrels. Whatever your answer is, I would like for you to come to some kind of conclusion."

"Regardless, I don't want to risk putting Char in any danger. I'm not going to nod until I have a complete guarantee."

"Dad..." Charlotte gazed at him with eyes upturned in happiness.

That was when Lucille—who had stayed out of the discussion—chimed in. "Exalted Blade Percival."

Belgrieve and Kasim widened their eyes.

Lucille blinked. "Would you trade for some information?"

"Not just some gossip, I take it?"

"You said you didn't know last time I asked."

Lucille snorted. "Information is an adventurer's weapon... I won't reveal my hand just like that."

"No bluffing, now."

"His hair is the color of straw."

Belgrieve's brow twitched. "Percy is an adventurer the bards sing songs of. It wouldn't be strange for you to know that."

"His throat is a little bad, so he takes whiffs from his sachet from time to time to clear it. Chamomile, almea grass, false jujube...and a bit of ether oil."

"So he's still carrying it around..."

"Hey, you serious?" Kasim tilted his cap down towards his face.

The door suddenly opened, and Byaku poked his head in. "The carriage is leaving."

"We're not in any rush, Bell," Yakumo said as she stood. "We're hoping for a good reply."

"*You can't hurry love.*"

The two of them left the room. Charlotte sprung up and clung to Byaku, and though the boy frowned, he placed a reassuring hand on her head.

"What, is it over already?"

"No, not yet... Char?"

Charlotte looked back at Belgrieve before sprinting out of the room. Byaku chased after her with a dubious look on his face. Belgrieve sighed.

"We're terrible adults, we are," Kasim said, scratching his head.

"Kasim, even if they have info on Percy—"

"No need to tell me. We could never trade Char for that. She's got nothing

to do with our search. But they just had to play dirty. They know when to push forward and when to retreat. This is definitely too much for Ange.”

“So we’ve got to get a grip.” Belgrieve stood up. Regardless of what they were offering in return, he wasn’t going to give Charlotte to anyone, especially not with so many uncertainties. He needed Charlotte to know that too.

Kasim straightened his cap. “Still, who’d have thought he was still carrying that sachet around. Same old Percy...”

“I remember you and Satie threw it together for him... He was always good at looking after his things.”

“Heh heh... Well, for now, it looks like he’s still alive. That’s enough of a lead.”

“Yeah... Let’s go. They’re waiting for us.”

Charlotte was despondent as she sat silently on Angeline’s lap. Not knowing what to say to her, Angeline let her gaze wander restlessly. Anessa and Miriam were in the same boat, while Yakumo and the usually rowdy Lucille were dead silent. They couldn’t all sit together today, so there was some distance between them in the carriage.

Belgrieve had quite bluntly informed them that he had no intention of handing Charlotte over. And that was that—there was no way that Belgrieve’s resolve would waver, even for information on Percival.

“It’s all right...” Angeline hugged the girl tight.

Charlotte let out a muffled voice. “Sis...” she called.

“Don’t worry. You’re not going back to Lucrecia.”

“Yeah...” Yet Charlotte’s head remained down, clearly still anxious.

Anessa peered into her face with concern. “If something’s happening, don’t keep it to yourself. That will just be painful for you.”

“Yeah... Thanks, Anne.”

Charlotte snuck a glance at Belgrieve. He sat next to Kasim, discussing something.

“It’s okay,” Angeline reassured her, placing a hand on Charlotte’s head. “You can leave it to them.”

“Am I...a nuisance?” asked Charlotte. “Am I getting between them and Mr. Percy...? If I just go along with Yakumo, then they’ll get that information...”

“You can’t.” Angeline pinched her cheek. “Don’t think about it like that.

Doing that wouldn't make my dad happy in the slightest."

"But... But..." Charlotte said before bursting into tears, covering her face with her hands.

Angeline gently caressed the girl's hair. She understood where she was coming from—to ask such a question was proof of how fond Charlotte was of Belgrieve. For this very reason, Angeline would never allow Charlotte to be taken to Lucrecia if she didn't want to go. Angeline didn't know much about Lucrecia, but she knew it was beset by fierce power struggles, and that was enough to make her wary. A mere visit to Archduke Estogal's estate was enough to drain her own spirit; political strife that encompassed an entire nation would surely be worse.

She stole a glance at the other negotiating party. Yakumo was staring absentmindedly at the passing scenery, while Lucille chewed on what looked to be dried meat. She didn't hate them—they could have been good friends if they hadn't met under these circumstances. Though that fact made the situation more bitter, that didn't mean she would hand Charlotte over. Without realizing it, the arm she had wrapped around the girl tightened with greater exertion.

They were within sight of Bordeaux by sunset, but this was as far as the stagecoach would take them. In Bordeaux, they would verify the situation of the roads to Turnera before making arrangements for the next leg of the journey. They could very well end up stalled in Bordeaux for a while; it was purely a matter of speculation at this point.

They had considered heading for the Bordeaux estate, but the manor was a bit of a distance from town. It was still bright outside, but they had many bags, and it felt like it would be a pain to make the trek so encumbered. Furthermore, it was crucial for Charlotte and Byaku to meet the Bordeaux sisters, and they would need some time to prepare themselves.

"All sorts of things are overlapping," Angeline muttered to herself as she collected her luggage. However, this was not her burden to bear. She felt a little unsettled as she considered the weight upon Charlotte's tiny shoulders.

Belgrieve's sudden entrance intruded on her thoughts. "Is that the last one?"

"Yeah... Hey, dad?"

"What?"

"We're not giving her to Lucrecia, right? Char will go with us to Turnera,

right?"

"Yeah, don't worry." Belgrieve smiled and ruffled her hair. "Ange, you stay by her side. She's going through a lot, and she has to atone for her sins too. Leave everything else to me and Kasim."

"Okay... Got it!"

I just have to have faith in dad, Angeline concluded as she beat feet to the inn.

Chapter 68: The Smoke from Her Mouth

The smoke from her mouth lingered in the air, undulating, before gradually fading away. Yakumo stared at it as she tapped the ash from her pipe and rested an elbow on the table.

“Well, I’ll be...”

“We’re totally the bad guys here. The heels, baby.”

“Tsk. I didn’t think there existed people who are actually that good... Ahh, we should have never taken this job.”

“As the people of the past would say, ‘*the show must go on.*’”

“Shut it. Dammit, when was the last time I took a job that left such a bad taste in my mouth...?”

Yakumo irritably packed her pipe with herbs as Lucille flopped down sideways onto the bed.

“We had to resort to *that* again because Mr. Kasim didn’t trust us... It might have been a bad idea to test them.”

“Hmm... Oh, you mean that info Bell wanted. It would have been easier if they were the sort of people who would hand Char over for information... Good grief, there’s nothing harder to deal with than someone without any ulterior motives.”

Yakumo took in a lungful of smoke, coughing a bit as she blew it out. Lucille rolled over and stared at the ceiling.

These women had been in the adventurer trade for a long time. They were skilled enough to tackle jobs that came in through the back door and had surmounted enough battlefields to temper their courage. Yet now this experience reared its ugly head, bringing only uncertainty to their task.

Jobs from the back door generally involved scoundrels aiming for assistance in their misdeeds. For the two of them, their hearts would not have been swayed whether it be to save or kill their target. Even if their job would make waves in the power struggles among the nobility, and if blood was shed as a result, it was none of their business once the job was over. For some reason, though, they knew this one would leave a lingering bad taste.

If it were business as usual, they would take Charlotte to Lucrecia, receive their pay, and play dumb after that. It didn't matter who in Lucrecia was lusting for power, and it didn't matter if Charlotte was imprisoned as a figurehead.

However, the girl chased from her country who was supposed to have fallen prey to a heretical cult was now happily smiling, surrounded by trustworthy adults. It was plain as day that her life would be far worse in her homeland. They could not even justify it by saying they were saving her from villains.

"In fact, we'd be better off if Sir Hrobert was a villain," said Lucille.

"It's never that convenient. And let's not forget we're dealing with the former comrades of the Exalted Blade. We don't have many options. Not unless Char herself says she wants to go..."

"But they had a point. Do you think someone could be deceiving us? Say we do get Char there and Sir Hrobert turns out to be a scoundrel. Would you be able to live with yourself?"

Yakumo sighed. A part of her wished that Hrobert was a fake. However, Lucrecian rings were linked to the very lives of their owners and could not be passed down without a proper ceremony. If Hrobert was dead, the ring would cease to exist. Therefore, that ring was quite strong evidence to suggest he was the real deal.

"This is a job. We need to find a solution."

"I like Char. I want to '*shake it up*' with her."

"Getting too personally invested is a good way to die young."

"Life is very short. It's all part of *rock 'n' roll*."

"So what do you want to do then, ultimately?"

"I want to make sure." Lucille fumbled around her chest and pulled out a necklace. A pale blue crystal dangled from the cord.

Yakumo grimaced. "That communicator only goes one way. We receive orders. We have no way of contacting them—and we haven't gotten a single message since we headed north."

"I'll do my best."

"Quit it. What am I supposed to do if you keel over? You'll just exhaust yourself trying."

"Hmph." Lucille pouted, but she couldn't deny that it was impossible, and she tucked the necklace away again. Even so, she hadn't quite given up yet.

Her gaze swayed left and right as she thought. “What about getting Mr. Kasim’s help? If he and Merry are with us, we might be able to get a message through.”

“It’s pointless. Even if we do establish contact, that’s no guarantee that our client is telling the truth. And say he is telling the truth—what are we going to do if it was a genuine request? Then we’ll have no choice but to fight.”

“I...think we should carefully consider who we align ourselves with.”

“What good is allying with a gaggle of folks returning to the countryside? You want us to start farming too or something?”

“Urgh... Woof.” Lucille rolled over and buried her face in the pillow, her legs flutter kicking the air behind her.

Yakumo sighed, exhaling a stream of smoke. “I’m as irritated as you are. For now, let’s wait for their response.”

Outside the window, darkness was setting in over the lively streets of Bordeaux.



The night came and went, and after a brief stop at the adventurers’ guild, Belgrieve returned to the inn with the guild master, Elmore, in tow. He had requested for a carriage to take them to the Bordeaux estate.

Elmore rejoiced at their reunion and, once he learned about their circumstances, commiserated with Charlotte and Byaku. He considered the chaos to be Count Malta’s doing and did not harbor any particular ill will towards the children.

“I’m sorry for the sudden request, Elmore.”

“What are you talking about, Belgrieve? I could never turn down a request from you.”

Belgrieve opened the door to their room, drawing the attention of Angeline and the others to the two of them.

“Oh, Elmore.”

“It has been a while, everyone.” Elmore smiled, his demeanor as soft as ever. “I’ve been told of the situation. The incident was tragic, but it is no reason to thrust aside children who are trying to correct their mistakes. I shall put in a good word.”

“Thank you... Come on, say something.” Angeline gently patted Charlotte on the back.

Charlotte timidly walked forward. In an effort to avoid standing out, she had bundled up her distinctive hair under her hat. During the chaos in Bordeaux, she had gallantly marched out with Count Malta and driven away a fake demon of her own creation. Her fair features were conspicuous enough that anyone who had witnessed that feat might now be able to recognize her.

Charlotte stood there fidgeting, unable to raise her head, so Angeline gave her another soft push. “It’s all right,” she told her.

“Um... I’m...er...” Charlotte lowered her head. “I’m sorry...”

“You look a lot more at peace than the last time I saw you.” Elmore patted Charlotte’s head with a smile. The girl burst into tears.

Angeline’s expression softened in relief as she dragged Byaku out next.

“You have to apologize too.”

“Sorry.”

“Better than that.”

“Oh no, I don’t mind, Angeline... I remember having quite a bit of trouble with you,” Elmore said with a chuckle.

Awkwardly scratching his cheek, Byaku replied, “Well, sorry about that.”

“Ha ha, I’d like to get a good look at your magic one of these days. Now then, I’ve arranged for a carriage. Lady Helvetica should be at the manor, so should we head there right away?”

Charlotte nervously nodded. Belgrieve stroked his beard. He didn’t want to believe that Helvetica would mercilessly condemn the children, but she had her position as a feudal lord to uphold. Perhaps instead of her personal judgment, she would cast judgment as Countess Bordeaux. He wondered what they would do in that situation.

“It is what it is...”

He had done what he could. Now, it was up to Charlotte to determine whether or not her sincerity got through. Seeing Angeline was about to offer to accompany Charlotte, Belgrieve stopped her. “We’ll go in a different carriage. Let’s leave them to Elmore and Kasim’s care.”

“Why...?”

“Ange, we’ve both gotten famous around these parts. If we go with those kids, we’d be drawing all sorts of unnecessary attention.”

“I see. Point taken.”

Angeline and Belgrieve were both well known in Bordeaux thanks to Sasha's tall tales and their legitimate achievements during the last battle. Even the night before, adventurers had called out to them, which forced them to hastily send Charlotte and Byaku ahead to their room. Not everyone would be as understanding as Elmore; rumors surrounding the uproar were still a whisper on the wind, and there were surely those around who would recognize Charlotte and Byaku. There weren't so many albino girls around, after all. The truth of the matter aside, it would be impossible to rationally discuss what had happened when emotions took hold.

After confirming that the first carriage had departed, Belgrieve joined Angeline, Anessa, and Miriam in the next one. Everyone knew they were welcome guests to the manor, so while they did receive looks, they no suspicion fell upon them.

The others were waiting by the time they reached the front door. Ashcroft stood there with them, looking rather apprehensive.

"It has been a while, everyone... This is quite an assortment we have here."

"You'll have to excuse us, Ashcroft... Is Lady Helvetica able to see us?"

"She is, of course... I don't know the circumstances, but I take it these two are not a danger?"

"I assure you, they are not."

"Well, Elmore's with you, so I know it should be all right... But good grief, you are always full of surprises." Ashcroft pushed up his glasses as he glanced at Charlotte and Byaku. The soldiers on guard duty were exchanging confused looks and whispering amongst themselves. Charlotte awkwardly tottered over to Angeline.

"This way, then."

"I'll wait here for you. I'm no good with these sorts of places," said Kasim, leaning against one of the pillars at the entrance.

With palpable suspicion, Ashcroft whispered to Belgrieve, "Who is he?"

"He's an old friend of mine... I'm sorry, he's not really one to stand on ceremony."

"Hmm... Very well then."

Ashcroft led them inside. The scars of the fierce battle had been erased, and though the building was still somewhat rough around the edges, it had regained the appearance of a refined mansion. It was in these small details

that he caught glimpses of Helvetica's popularity and capabilities.

Angeline took hold of Charlotte's hand. "Are you scared?"

"I'm fine..." Charlotte took a deep breath and looked forward.

They were led into the study. At the back of the room, Helvetica sat behind an office desk, while Seren stood to her side, sorting through documents. Their surprise upon noticing their visitors gave way briefly to warmth before tensing up again as their eyes fell upon Charlotte and Byaku.

"Belgrieve, Angeline, welcome."

"Allow me to apologize for our unannounced visit, Lady Helvetica."

"I don't mind at all." Helvetica took a deep breath, then giggled. "You'll explain, won't you?"

"Of course. That's pretty much why we're here."

"Good grief." After heaving a troubled sigh, Helvetica graced them with a mischievous grin. "First you come when I'm not here, then you surprise me with unexpected guests. You're always toying with me."

"My apologies," Belgrieve said, scratching his head.

"Let's sit down, first. Seren... Seren?"

Seren, who had been staring straight at Charlotte, suddenly snapped to and shook her head. "Yes, right away." She issued orders to the servants on standby, who returned with enough chairs for everyone. It wasn't long before they had all settled in.

Though Helvetica's expression was peaceful, her eyes remained sharp, locked onto Charlotte.

"Now then, about that explanation."

Belgrieve nodded and told the tale, with occasional input from the others. He described Charlotte and Byaku's journey after their assault on the city, the upheaval in Lucrecia, the Inquisition, the attack in Orphen, their desire to atone, and their journey back to Bordeaux.

"What they've done will not go away. But they are still children. I believe that judging them too harshly and snatching their future away will only provide temporary relief. Could you find it in your heart to forgive them?"

"I share in their sentiment, Lady Helvetica. Not to mention it was Count Malta who devised that vile plan. It may be harsh to have these children shoulder his sins," Elmore added.

Charlotte shook as she bowed her head. "I'm... I'm... sorry... I'll do anything to earn your forgiveness." Though he held his tongue, Byaku too

mirrored her gesture.

Helvetica sighed. “‘Anything’ is a bit much, don’t you think? What can you do with those scrawny arms of yours? The estate and the town are mostly restored already, and we don’t need your assistance.”

“Ugh...” Charlotte groaned.

Unable to sit still any longer, Angeline jumped in with her own plea. “Please, Ms. Helvetica. Forgive Char and Byaku. I’m begging you.”

Following Angeline’s lead, Anessa and Miriam lowered their heads as well.

Belgrieve closed his eyes. “If there’s any way... Please.”

After a moment of silence, Helvetica cracked a smile. “Seriously, with all of Bordeaux’s benefactors bowing their heads like this... You’re making me look like the bad girl here.” She looked straight at Charlotte and said, “As Countess Bordeaux, I cannot forgive you so easily. That would mean making light of my own people, and it would be terribly irresponsible of me.”

Charlotte fearfully curled up.

Helvetica stood with a smile and placed a hand on her shoulder. “However, as simply Helvetica Bordeaux, if you continue to do more good than you did harm, I will forgive you.”

“Ah...ah...” Charlotte burst into tears.

The strength drained from Angeline’s body in her relief. “Thank you, Ms. Helvetica.”

“Heh heh, what else could I say? It’s a request from the saviors of House Bordeaux. With all of you together, I’m sure these kids will never stray down the wrong path.”

“But it would be best if they stayed out of town,” said Ashcroft. “People’s memories haven’t faded yet. It could cause a commotion.”

Helvetica nodded. “Right. We do not wish for any unnecessary turmoil. You will have to stay with us for the time being. Do you understand, Charlotte?”

“Yes...” Charlotte nodded fervently.

Helvetica turned to Seren, beaming. “What a delightful guest we have. Prepare a room for her, and treat her well.”

“Are you sure about that?”

“Seren...?”

Seren bit her lip before turning a glare on Charlotte and Byaku. “Perhaps

we should forgive them. But... But she desecrated father's remains."

"A-Ah, I... I..." Charlotte grew incoherent as tears began to well up again. Angeline stepped out to cover her.

"Seren, that was because Count Malta ordered her to..."

"I know that!" she shouted, causing everyone present to swallow their breath. Seren burst into tears, her cheeks red.



“I know my reasoning is childish too... But when I remember that sight... I just can’t...”

“Seren,” Helvetica declared, her voice clearer than ever. “I understand how you feel, but that is simply selfishness. You need to cool your head.”

Seren stood and, bowing hastily, sprinted out of the room. Charlotte reflexively made to give pursuit before Belgrieve grabbed her by the shoulder. He quietly shook his head. Charlotte cast down her tearful gaze and returned to her chair.

With a troubled chuckle, Helvetica turned to Belgrieve. “My apologies for showing you something so unsightly.”

“No, I understand how Lady Seren feels. I’m sorry for dredging up those terrible memories,” Belgrieve said with an apologetic nod.

Helvetica closed her eyes. “She’s a kindhearted girl, but she hasn’t put her feelings in order yet. She should calm down after a good night’s rest...”

Suddenly, Byaku stood up. He took Charlotte’s hand and pulled her to her feet as well.

“Huh? Byaku?”

Byaku turned to Belgrieve with his usual sullen face. “You’re really just going to ignore Seren, then?”

“We can’t have a rational conversation while she’s emotional. I’ll have a proper talk with her once we’ve all calmed down,” Belgrieve explained.

“So what, we’re begging forgiveness while running from the girl whose forgiveness we need most? When she’s the angriest at us... Isn’t that the time when we *need* to face her directly and apologize? That’s how you set things straight.”

“Hmm...” Belgrieve hadn’t been expecting that, and he found himself at a loss for words. He had been thinking of how to keep Charlotte and Byaku out of harm’s way, but the children seemed far more empathetic than he had expected. “Yeah... You’re right.”

“I know you’re thinking about us. But this is *our* problem. We need to settle the score on our own. It’s not cool to let you handle everything,” Byaku said, seeming to build up a head of steam.

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes. “What are you going to do?”

“Talk—about everything, starting from this girl’s upbringing. At the end of it all, we say sorry. That’s how you come to an understanding and ask for forgiveness, right? It’s got nothing to do with whether she’s ‘calmed down’

or not.”

“I’m going too,” Angeline said and stood.

Byaku frowned. “As I said, this is our—”

“You suck at talking, and Char might cry. I’m too worried to send you two alone. Let’s go, Char.”

Before Byaku could get a word in edgewise, Angeline led Charlotte out of the room. Though he clicked his tongue in exasperation, Byaku hurried after them.

“Is this all right, Lady Helvetica?”

“Yes.” She smiled. “With that, I think I shall forgive them, after all.”

“But your sister might be even more hurt in the end.”

“Perhaps. She’s both clever and strongly empathetic, but for that very reason, she doesn’t have many chances to confront people with her emotions laid bare... I’m glad Byaku and Charlotte are so strong. I think this will be a good opportunity for her.”

“All kids have to grow up someday. Perhaps I was too nosy for my own good,” Belgrieve admitted. He knew there were times when a parent’s concern could hinder a child’s growth. This wasn’t a chance for just Charlotte and Byaku to grow, but for Seren as well. Belgrieve felt ashamed to have tried to take that away from her.

In any case, there was no place left for him in this affair. His daughter would undoubtedly mediate things; the rest was up to the two children and Seren.

Helvetica chuckled. “I’m surprised though, to be honest. You came all the way here for those children?”

“Not entirely. We were on the way back to Turnera... How does the snow look?”

“Let’s see... The roads to Rodina were clear, so I think the path to Turnera should open up in a week.”

“I see... That’s good.”

“You can take it nice and slow until then. I’d love to hear what you’ve been up to.”

“With pleasure... But that does leave a bit of a problem. I’ll need Kasim for this one.”

“Oh, I’ll get him.” Anessa motioned for Belgrieve to stay seated and left the room.

Helvetica cocked her head curiously. “Did something happen?”

“The truth is, I’d like some information on Lucrecia. There was apparently a regime change around half a year ago.”

“Yes, I’ve heard. But why Lucrecia?”

“It has to do with Charlotte.”

Upon learning that Charlotte was the daughter of a Lucrecian cardinal, Helvetica put a hand to her mouth and furrowed her brow. “I see... I heard about the anti-papal faction’s purge. I didn’t think I’d find a link here... Ashe, do we have any news from Lucrecia?”

“We have some information on the upheaval from half a month ago. However, Lucrecia does not have much relation to Bordeaux... We won’t know how much information we have until we look into it.”

“Please do, then. We need to know how much influence the anti-papal faction holds. Especially the people around Balmung and Hrobert. Elmore, does the guild have any information?”

“I’ll do some digging. If you’ll excuse me.”

Ashe and Elmore left together, crossing paths with Anessa and Kasim at the doorway.

“Ha ha, this place isn’t nearly as cramped as I was expecting. Good on you. The archduke’s manor was so tidy, it was hard to feel at ease anywhere.”

“Who might this be?”

“This is Kasim, an old friend of mine. Kasim, this is Lady Helvetica, Countess of Bordeaux.”

“Oh my, and so young too. The name’s Kasim. Nice to meet you.”

“My name is Helvetica Bordeaux. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Kasim.” Helvetica pinched the hem of her skirt, executing a natural and elegant curtsey.

Kasim, for his part, awkwardly reached for his hat. “I’m not used to this sort of thing...”

“What are you talking about...? Anyways, I asked her to look into Lucrecia for now. We can plan our approach based on what we find out.”

“Hmm, that would be a huge help. But do you really get that much info this far north?”

“Heh heh,” Helvetica laughed, a bit proudly. “I’ve set up something of an intelligence network this past year. We’ve become a bit cautious after Count Malta’s scheming. With the guild’s cooperation, I think you’ll find us quite a

bit more accurate than your neighborhood information broker.”

“What a scary missy you are. You sure you should be telling us that?”

“Ah... Well... I’d appreciate it if you kept it a secret.”

“Helvetica...” Belgrieve let out a tired sigh, eliciting giggles from Anessa. Whether it was merely a slip up or if it showed the extent of her trust in them, Helvetica had offered up somewhat risky intel.

Her eyes wandered as she corrected her posture. “Ahem... For now, let’s hope we can find something on Lucrecia’s domestic affairs and the power relationships among the anti-papal faction.”

Kasim donned his hat again with a grin. “Nice. That would be great. But are you capable of all that?”

“Nobles have their own way of doing things. For now, please rest for a bit until the information comes in. I’ll brew some tea.”

“Thank you. Come to think of it, what happened to Sasha?” Belgrieve asked.

“Oh, she went to check up on Hazel. She should be back today or tomorrow.”

In any case, it seemed they would make some progress. Belgrieve had broached the topic of Lucrecia merely hoping he might be able to learn something from another noble, but he had gotten more than he had bargained for.

I should be thankful for that, he thought, reclining into his chair. *I wonder how things are going with Charlotte...*



Their knock on the door received a far calmer reply than Angeline expected. Angeline softly opened it and entered to find Seren sitting in a chair by the window. Her eyes were still red and glistening, but she mustered a slight smile at the sight of her guest.

“I’m sorry, Angeline... You shouldn’t have had to see that.”

“No, not at all. I can understand where you’re coming from.” Merely imagining what would have happened if Belgrieve had become an undead back then was enough to make Angeline misty-eyed. She never even considered chastising Seren for *that*.

Nevertheless, Angeline stood there fidgeting as she gathered her thoughts.

“Um... You really can’t forgive those two, no matter what...?” Angeline asked, finally finding her words.

Seren hung her head as she weighed her words. “I don’t know,” she concluded. “In my head, I’m sure I’m barking up the wrong tree by blaming them.”

“They’re here with me, just outside the door.”

Seren frowned. “I’m no good, am I... I have to keep my composure, but I just...”

“You know... Char’s mom and dad were killed too.”

Seren stared at Angeline, who returned her gaze unflinchingly.

“At first, I couldn’t forgive them either,” Angeline went on. “When I spotted them in Orphen, I considered cutting them down or handing them straight to the soldiers... But after hearing Char’s story, I knew she’d had it rough... I can’t understand how a person in the depths of despair thinks. I know that just being in pain doesn’t mean you’re allowed to get away with everything, but...I want you to hear her out before you decide if you’ll forgive her or not.” Angeline lowered her head. “Please, Seren.”

“Angeline...” Seren shut her eyes for a moment before finally nodding.

“All right. I shouldn’t have run away.”

“I’m sorry for making you relive those memories.”

“If I run away, my sister will be disappointed in me...and I would come to hate myself too.”

Angeline beckoned outside the door, inviting Charlotte and Byaku in.

“Pardon us,” Byaku said. “We wanted to come alone, originally.”

“No, I may have driven you off if Angeline weren’t here with you... I won’t shout at you this time.”

Seren straightened her glasses and looked at Charlotte. Charlotte timidly teetered forward and lowered her head.

“I’m sorry. I’ve done something terrible to you.”

“I don’t think I’m able to forgive you yet.”

“Of course...”

“So please, talk to me so I can forgive you. Why did you do that? What were you thinking, and what led you to come here again?” Seren asked, beckoning them to be seated. “I heard you lost your parents too. Please, you can take your time.”

Through her tears, Charlotte spoke clearly of her upbringing and her

travels. At times, Byaku would chime in with a missed detail, but it was mostly Charlotte doing the talking. She had fallen from a life of luxury and had been forced onto a miserable journey upon the death of her parents. For that reason, she became driven by hatred and vengeance, and in her clouded vision, she had come to resent the world.

But her failure in Bordeaux caused her to realize her mistakes and filled her heart with regrets. She had begun trying to atone in her own way, and regardless of what punishments awaited her, she yearned to come to Bordeaux to apologize...

As the story reached its conclusion, Seren's grim expression had softened somewhat. By contrast, Charlotte's face was now ruddy from all the tears she had shed.

"Back then, I hated everyone and everything, and I couldn't understand why I was the only one who could never be happy... That's why I did something so cruel. I'm sorry."

Seren smiled. "I despised you as well, and Count Malta too. It felt like the happiness I had enjoyed only the day before had been shattered in a single night... I had finally come to terms with my father's death just for it to be dragged up again."

Charlotte's tears trailed down her miserable face.

But Seren went on. "It's true that hatred clouds one's eyes. Even now, my thoughts are being narrowed by my hatred towards you. If I were in your shoes... Perhaps I too would irrationally hate those more fortunate than I. Perhaps I would have fallen to such acts of cruelty."

"But...but..."

"What you've done will never go away. But I think I have less reason to hate you. It was hard, wasn't it, Charlotte?"

"Seren..."

Charlotte clung to Seren in tears. Seren rubbed the girl's back with a smile, glancing over at Byaku.

"You did your best too, Byaku."

"Honestly, I won't complain if I'm put to death if that's what it will take for her to be forgiven."

"Enough of that," Angeline said, flicking Byaku on the forehead.

Seren giggled. "Sash is the one you should be apologizing to. That one's out of my hands."

“I guess.” Byaku awkwardly scratched his head.

Relieved, Angeline rushed up to Seren and placed a hand on her shoulder.
“Thank you, Seren.”

“I should be the one thanking you. It’s thanks to you that I could forgive them.”

In a sense, perhaps it was harder to forgive than to be forgiven. But both Charlotte and Seren had managed to overcome it. Angeline took a deep breath, relieved that the gap had been bridged. That was one matter resolved, but another remained. These children had worked so hard; now, she had to pitch in a bit too.

○

Yakumo paced in and out of her room, utterly vexed. She was used to waiting, but seeing as she had received no word come nightfall yesterday, she now found her mind wandering. *They didn’t abandon us and flee to Turnera, did they?* she wondered. *But that’s hard to imagine, given Belgrieve’s character.*

She found herself shaking her head. “Good grief, he must be quite the con man himself.”

Despite their short time in each other’s company, Yakumo found herself strangely trusting of Belgrieve. She had met all sorts of people until now, and few of them had ever managed to lower her guard so quickly. If that was all a ploy, he was quite the actor.

Lucille’s chair creaked as she rocked back and forth. “The people of the past used to say, ‘*haste makes waste*,’ or something along those lines.”

“You’re pretty ambiguous on that one... *Fwah...*” She let out a large yawn. In her restless state, she had spent the previous night in a harsh cycle of shallow sleep and awakening. She had considered waking up Lucille many times, who had been snoring peacefully beside her. She felt rather sleep-deprived, and perhaps that was why her thoughts were so jumbled now.

Yakumo slouched against the wall, lost in thought. *It’s getting complicated; now what?* Of course, she was apprehensive. Not only would it be quite hard to continue working as an adventurer for some time if she abandoned this job, but her life would also be put at risk. The backdoor network extended further than anyone could imagine, and it placed a lot of

weight on its reputation. After mediating such a job, they would need to punish failure. They were the sort of people who would blithely present Hrobert with her severed head in one hand and a list of brand-new adventurers in the other.

But that didn't mean Yakumo was considering taking Charlotte by force. She was confident in Lucille and in her own abilities, but they would be no match for two S-Rank adventurers. She wasn't even sure if they even stood a chance against just one of them. It would have been far easier if they were dealing with someone who could be moved by money or self-interest. However, her foes were motivated by purely good intentions, and they were far too skilled for their own good.

After traversing countless battlefields, Yakumo was strapped for options. She was between a rock and a hard place. The more she thought about it, the more she felt she was doomed. Could she manage to snatch Charlotte if she invested everything into a sneak attack? If she had Lucille cast a smoke screen and put every fiber of her being into running away...

"Yeah, not when they have a top-class swordsman and magician on their side."

That'll have to be a last resort, she thought, irritably stuffing dried herbs into her pipe and grimacing when she saw how little of it she had left. She had nothing to do here, but she couldn't just leave either. Thus, she twiddled her thumbs and smoked through her rapidly depleting stash.

"Do they sell tobacco in this town...?"

Just as she was about to light her pipe, the door to the room swung open. She stood on guard as Angeline stepped in.

"Cough, cough... Wh-What, it's just you... Don't scare me like that." Being startled like that had caused Yakumo to clumsily inhale the smoke, and now her eyes were teary as she coughed a bit.

"Any new developments...?" Lucille asked, hopping into the conversation.

"Yes. You're coming with me..."

Yakumo and Lucille exchanged a glance at Angeline's definitive tone.

"You're not taking no for an answer, are you?"

"I'm not."

Yakumo sighed. The girl before her eyes showed not the slightest opening in her stance, and though Yakumo considered using force for a brief moment, those thoughts quickly faded. S-Rank adventurers really were on another

level; even if she wanted to put up a resistance, the two of them would be no match for the renowned Black-Haired Valkyrie.

“Very well. We will follow.”

“Hmm...”

On Angeline’s urgings, they left the room. Though the possibility seemed remote, they both prayed that the Valkyrie wasn’t intending to bury them in secret.

Chapter 69: A Night Had Passed

A night had passed since their arrival at the Bordeaux estate, and information was slowly beginning to trickle in. Helvetica had undoubtedly developed an intelligence network to be proud of. Though receiving up-to-the-minute news was beyond their means, they were adept at amassing a considerable amount of intel on the state of Lucrecia within the last six months. Bordeaux was a large town with a significant number of Vienna worshippers. They had no direct connection to Lucrecia's internal conflict, but because that was essentially the headquarters of their religion, some information did reach them. Additionally, Elmore used a guild communication crystal to establish contact with the guild in Orphen. Lucrecia was a valuable trade partner as far as Orphen's merchants were concerned, and they kept apprised of how policies might change. Indeed, Orphen was apparently abundant in intel on which noble houses might prosper and which ones were doomed.

They spent the day putting it all together and forming theories, and around the time the sun began to set, Sasha returned from her inspection of Hazel. She burst into the room beaming in delight at the sight of Belgrieve and Angeline, not even sparing the time to remove her travel gear. The moment she noticed Byaku, she drew her blade, glee still evident on her face.

“We’ve met again under the guidance of Vienna! I won’t lose this time! Have at thee!”

“Sasha...”

“Hmm? What is it, Ange?”

“Have a duel if you want, but can it wait...?”

“You’re still inside, Sash,” said Seren.

Sasha’s cheeks turned a bit red as she looked around. “M-My apologies, I couldn’t help myself.”

“Sorry for everything...” Byaku said with a sigh. “You can smack me around all you like if that’s what it’ll take to be forgiven.”

“Oh, you must think I’m stupid, don’t you? There’s no point if it’s not a

serious match! You'll be getting a taste of the sword skills that got me promoted to AAA-Rank!"

"You were promoted?" Belgrieve sounded pleasantly surprised as he kneaded his beard. "Congratulations. And it looks like your wounds have healed up..."

"Whoa! Th-Thank you, Master! I guess I forgot to send a letter... But I still have a long way to go before I can stand shoulder to shoulder with you and Ange." Her cheeks turned even redder, and she ashamedly twiddled her thumbs.

Honestly, you've long since surpassed me, thought Belgrieve.

Kasim, on the other hand, looked rather amused. "Another rowdy lass we have here, I see."

"Hmm? This gentleman...is no ordinary gentleman."

"This man is Mr. Kasim—my dad's friend, and an S-Rank adventurer."

"My word! As expected of Master! You retired early, yet you have an S-Rank friend... Wait, Kasim? No, it can't be... Pardon me for asking, but would you happen to be the Aether Buster...?"

"Yeah, that's me," Kasim said, cackling. Sasha suddenly reached out and grabbed his hand, her eyes twinkling with admiration.

"To think I would meet you in my own home... I, Sasha Bordeaux, could not have asked for more!"

"Well, thanks for that. Still, I'm surprised you pinned me down from my name. Most people I've met only know me by my moniker."

It was quite common for the monikers of famous adventurers to spread faster and further than their real names. For this reason, most of them would go unrecognized from such an introduction.

Sasha puffed out her chest. "I've memorized the names and nicknames of just about every S-Rank adventurer out there!"

"You're quite the fanatic, missy," Kasim said with a chuckle.

Ashcroft wearily pushed up his glasses. "Lady Sasha," he said. "This discussion isn't getting anywhere, so could you keep quiet for a minute?"

"Discussion? What were you talking about? For that matter, what are these two doing here?" Sasha pointed to Charlotte and Byaku before cocking her head quizzically.

Though this was quite the derailment, going over everything from the start was not a bad idea if they wanted to organize their information. A summary

of the situation was received with an enthusiastic nod from Sasha.

“I see, you two had it rough... I commend you for coming back to give a proper display of contrition.”

“Er, I really am sorry for what I did back there...”

“Don’t worry about it—I lost because I was not skilled enough! Though I feel shame, I feel no resentment! Next time, I will be the one issuing the challenge, Byaku!”

“Calm down, Sash...” Seren let out a tired sigh at her sister’s warrior disposition.

Sasha patted Charlotte on the shoulder. “I’ll guide you to the graves of the soldiers who died. How about offering them a flower or two?”

“O-Of course... And if possible, I’d like to meet their families too.”

“That’s no good. For now, they’re all coming to turns in their own way. It would be quite troublesome if we needlessly stirred them up.”

“B-But...”

“If you want to atone for your sins, then shouldering the pain is part of the atonement, Charlotte. If you’re just apologizing to satisfy yourself, you’re better off not apologizing at all. Shoulder the weight of what you’ve done, and use your life for others.”

“All... All right.” Charlotte hung her head.

With a daring smile, Sasha ruffled up her hair. “Don’t make that face! The soldiers fought bravely and died in the line of duty! They completed their mission and protected my sisters! What greater honor could there be?”

Charlotte nodded. Though her eyes were a bit misty, it seemed that a kind of determination was forming within her.

Seren gently held the girl’s shoulders. Though they had once been enemies, perhaps laying their hearts bare helped her develop some fondness for Charlotte.

With a light chuckle, Belgrieve lifted a paper from the table. After consolidating their information, it seemed that Hrobert’s noble house was being treated as though it had fallen apart. Still, there were some reports that the man himself survived to take a clerical position. His status was not particularly high, but it was sufficiently so for him to take part in political scheming.

“In any case, we have confirmation that Sir Hrobert is alive.”

“I figured as much, given the ring and all.”

“But that’s precisely what makes it strange,” said Seren.

Kasim tugged at his beard. “Oh? And what’s so strange?” he asked.

“The ring is connected to the life of its owner. Sir Hrobert was supposed to have been executed. If he had a body double die in his place, then no one would believe it if his ring did not disappear back then.”

“How’s that sound, Char? I’m guessing they would have confiscated his ring to make sure.”

Charlotte thought for a moment and nodded. “Right... I’m sure they did. The moment he was deemed a heretic, they would have confiscated the ring that was supposed to be a gift from the goddess.”

“Hmm, and it’s a unique item bearing the house crest... They couldn’t set up a body double like that. You think no one noticed?”

“There could have been a secret deal,” said Anessa.

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes. “A deal... What sort of deal are you thinking about, Anne?”

“I’m getting this feeling that Sir Hrobert is a turncoat and joined the papal faction. Presumably, when he was deemed a heretic, he sold out a few anti-papals in exchange for his life. That’s why everyone feigned ignorance when someone else was executed in his place...”

“Ha ha, I see. Not a bad deduction. That does seem logical.” Kasim tugged at his beard.

“Or it could have been calculated from the start,” said Ashcroft. “Though originally anti-papal, Hrobert could have sold out the other revolutionaries to guarantee himself a high position in the papal faction. His entire execution could have been a farce.”

“You mean uncle betrayed my father and his comrades?”

Belgrieve closed his eyes. “I can’t deny the possibility... Though we have nothing to confirm it.”

“I see...”

As Charlotte cast down her eyes, Angeline hugged her from behind. “Don’t worry. We won’t send you anywhere with people like him.”

“Yeah... Thanks, sis.” Charlotte kept a firm grip on the arms wrapped around her.

“But now those revolutionaries are in power, right? You think they’d still be friends after he betrayed them?” Miriam asked, leaning back into her chair.

“He’s either got a silver tongue...”

“Or he managed to cover it up.”

“Lucrecia’s power structure is a bit convoluted. I’m sure they don’t make all their decisions based on whom someone supported.”

“Right. The anti-papal faction isn’t monolithic either. He wants Char to increase his own authority, right? After they took power, I’m sure they had a fair few divisions.”

“Right. Maybe they’re arguing over who should take center stage. I doubt Sir Hrobert has many cards to play in that regard.”

“He wanted to secure Char in secret, so he used the roundabout method of hiring an adventurer. Good grief.”

“In that case... Apart from Hrobert, there could be other parties aiming for her,” Angeline pointed out.

Belgrieve nodded. “I’d think so. Yakumo might be the least of our worries. We might run into folks who took requests from the other nobles.”

“It will be a scramble...”

“What a pain.”

“Honestly...”

“Hmm... Regardless of who comes, don’t we just have to cut them down?”

“That’s not what we’re talking about, Sash...”

“Now then, what to do, what to do...? Balmung’s daughter would lend quite a powerful boost to the anti-papal faction’s authority from the look of things. Everybody would want to get their hands on her, and they’ll do whatever they can to prevent the competition from getting her first.”

They were all tired, either stretching or slouching into their chairs. As she caressed Charlotte, Angeline suddenly lifted her face and opened her mouth.

“Hold on...”

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Ange?”

“Can’t we just have Char killed?”

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Led into the room by Angeline, Yakumo and Lucille seemed quite awkward, surrounded by the local VIPs.

“So have you reached a conclusion?” Yakumo asked.

“Kill me, baby?”

“I thought you guys could do the honor of killing Char.”

Their jaws dropped. “What are you on about...? Weren’t you supposed to protect her?” Yakumo asked.

“That is our intention,” Belgrieve cheerfully said.

Yakumo and Lucille exchanged confused looks until their attention was drawn by Kasim’s sudden cackling. “We thought you two could be some fine accomplices, heh heh heh.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yeah. Char?”

When Angeline called her, Charlotte emerged from the back room with a sack in hand. Both Yakumo and Lucille leveled wide-eyed stares at the girl.

“Hee hee, does it suit me...?” the girl asked bashfully. Her wild, lengthy hair had been cut cleanly at the shoulder in a neat yet cute fashion. Charlotte toddled forth and presented the bag.

“This is...” Yakumo stared at the alabaster hair contained within. Then, she roughly scratched at her own scalp and groaned. “I see... You thought up quite a heavy-handed way out.”

“Well, it seemed like the safest method.”

“We’ll need your cooperation. Are you willing to pitch in?”

“Do you think we can turn you down under these circumstances?”

Lucille sniffed in happiness and went over to hug Charlotte, taking the opportunity to bury her nose in the girl’s hair and steal a good whiff.

“You’re a lot cuter now, kitty...”

“Hey, stop it...” Charlotte blushed as she lurched back.

Yakumo folded her arms and leaned back into her chair, the sack still held in her grip. “You want us to take this back and say she’s dead. Well, you don’t find white hair like this often. But as things stand, it’s too risky for us. Say we do help you out. We’ll need to plan it out a bit more than that.”

“Of course. We’re glad to have you on board.”

“Good grief... You really throw off my pace.”

Angeline’s plan was essentially to put on a show. Even if they managed to do something about Yakumo and Lucille, that left open a possibility for a second or third party to succeed them, and perhaps they wouldn’t be as understanding. Proclaiming Charlotte’s death would prevent any further attempts to assassinate her or drag her back to Lucrecia.

“If it becomes a scramble for her, I thought it might come down to killing her so no one else could get her...”

Yakumo nodded. “That’s possible. But we did not receive that order. We were simply told to secure her safety and bring her back no matter what.”

“But if he wants to take the top spot in this power struggle, he’ll want to avoid handing her over to his competition. Her death is not the best outcome, but not the worst for him either.”

“You’re right. But unless we can convince Hrobert of that, the blame will fall on us. It will be a tad troublesome, so to speak. I want to help you, but we don’t want to take on any unnecessary risks either.”

“Hmm... I see. We wouldn’t want that for you either.”

“Seriously... How soft can you be...?” Yakumo wondered.

“Now what do we do? Should we say another cardinal’s compadres assassinated her?”

“If that convinces him... But Lucrecia is a long ways off. We’ll need to think of something that doesn’t sound too much like an excuse.”

Lucille poked at Belgrieve. “Can we use this?”

“Hmm?”

She produced a pendant hanging from her neck—a small crystal, refined into the shape of a sphere.

“A communicator?” Kasim mused. “You shoulda said so earlier.”

“It’s one-way... We can only receive messages.”

“But there’s a connection, right? When was your last contact?”

“That was around the time we left Estogal’s territory. We haven’t gotten anything since we headed north.”

“Hmm, it would be unnatural if we established contact from our side.”

“Perhaps. It takes quite a bit of mana to reach Lucrecia from the north, even more so with a one-way transceiver... I could do it, but... What do you think?” Kasim asked.

Belgrieve smiled wryly at the ease with which Kasim claimed to be able to pull it off. Frankly, even Miriam’s eyes were spinning, and she understood the mechanics better than he did.

“Does communicating depend on mana?” Angeline inquired.

“Pretty much. It’s not too hard to connect. It will function if you pour mana into it.”

“Then... What if we have Char make the link?”

“Ah,” Miriam exclaimed. “As I recall... Char has quite a bit of mana.”

“I see, if they say they secured Char and had her set it up to talk to Hrobert... Does that make sense, Mr. Kasim?” asked Anessa.

Kasim chuckled. “It works, it works. Those folks in Lucrecia should know about her mana capacity. Ange, you’re surprisingly sharp today.”

“I’m an S-Rank... Aren’t I amazing, dad?” Angeline asked, proudly puffing out her chest.

Belgrieve was, in fact, quite sincerely impressed. “Yeah... You’re really something. You surprised me there.”

“Hee hee...”

Now that their plan had been decided on, they discussed how they would lead the conversation with Hrobert.

It would just make things more complicated to say that she had already died, and in that case, it wouldn’t make sense for Charlotte to establish the connection. They also wanted to avoid proposing to kill her from their side. Giving off the impression that their mission to return her was proving to be a pain might have the opposite effect. They would need Hrobert himself to come to the conclusion that Charlotte’s continued existence was to his detriment.

The important part was Charlotte. Yakumo and Lucille were more accustomed to negotiation, but Charlotte would surely have a hard time.

Yet strangely, the girl was calm. “Say what you want about me, but I did go around preaching a message, you know. I have some confidence in my acting.”

She slapped her hands against her cheeks and straightened her back. Only moments before, she had given off the air of a child her age, yet it took only a moment before she was as stern as she was before she joined Angeline. Even her facial features seemed to change.

Resting the small orb in the palm of her hand, Charlotte closed her eyes.

Kill her—those were the words she needed to drag out of her uncle.

○

“—et, what now? Hey—trying—? Why did you reach out from that side?”

“Ah, sorry about that. But we never got a single word from you, so you’ll

have to excuse me for growing curious. It would be a waste of our efforts if our client lost his standing while we were gone.”

“You shouldn’t neglect your responsibilities...”

“Enough out of you two. Did you capture Charlotte yet? In the first place, how did you use a receiver to—”

“It’s me, uncle.”

“Oh! Is that you, Charlotte...? You’re alive and well!”

“‘Well’ is a bit much, now that you’ve *captured* me and all.”

“Hey, don’t be like that. I just misspoke...”

“Now do you understand our situation? As luck would have it, we managed to capture her, but she insists she does not want to return to Lucrecia, and I’ve caught sight of Minerva and Whitlock’s goons on the prowl. We’re not making much progress on the road back.”

“Those bastards... How did they pick up the trail...?”

“If you were able to notice, then, of course, they’d notice too. Not that we plan on handing her over.”

“Of course you won’t! Listen here, you get her to me no matter what it takes!”

“You make it sound so easy...”

“As the people of the past used to say, ‘*easier said than done.*’”

“You pipe down.”

“Silence, both of you. Why do you think I’m paying you so much?”

“I’m not going. Uncle, I refuse to return to Lucrecia.”

“What are you saying, Charlotte? Lucrecia is your motherland. I’ve made preparations to welcome you. Isn’t this a chance to reclaim the honor of House Bain—and of Balmung?”

“Hmph... How are you even still alive?”

“You heard from them, didn’t you? I set up a scapegoat... I made it out somehow or another.”

“I thought you’d be a fake. I was sure you’d been executed already.”

“What are you talking about? They have the ring, don’t they? That ring wouldn’t exist if I died.”

“Right, and that’s what’s strange about it. Uncle, why didn’t they take your ring when they executed you? It’s a sacred item bestowed through divine ritual. There’s no way they’d leave it with someone they deemed a heretic.”

He gave no reply.

“Oh? What’s wrong? Did I say something strange? Hey, uncle. You didn’t sell my father out, did you? You didn’t sell out your comrades to get a new lease on life, only to later brazenly try to use me to raise your reputation, did you?”

“You’re misunderstanding me, Charlotte. Listen...”

“What excuse are you going to give me? Will you say you were lucky? Or that you bribed the executioner? I don’t know how you gained your current status, but I doubt I’ll have to dig much to find out what you’ve done. If you forcefully drag me back to Lucrecia, I will come with a shovel in hand. You see, I don’t trust you in the slightest.”

“Shut her up.”

“You got it, boss.”

“Wh-What are you—mmf! Mmmmf!”

“What a troublesome girl. She must have inherited her shrewdness from her father.”

“So what do you want us to do? Should we bring her back like this?”

“We’re in Bordeaux now, by the way... ‘*There’s a long road ahead, baby.*’”

“She’s more trouble than she’s worth. Tsk... Enough. Kill her. By the sound of things, she’s not going to obey me anyways.”

“You want us to kill a child? What a sinful man you are.”

“Silence. And bring back proof of her death. I can find a use for her yet.”

“You want her head? Her finger? Nose or eye, it’s all good... Ah, but they’ll likely rot. She might smell a bit, but she’s all yours, baby.”

“I-I don’t need that! She’s albino or something, right? Her hair is enough proof!”

“Hmph... If you’re changing the job, you better throw in a bonus.”

“Fine, fine, just get to it already... What an unfortunate girl you are, Charlotte. You could have lived in peace if only you were a little less sharp...”

“Mmmf! Hrm! N-No! Stop it! No!”

“May you go forth with Vienna’s grace... You two, get back here, and fast.”



As the faint glow faded from the crystal, Yakumo slumped down to the floor.

“Phew... It’s been a long time since I held on for so long.”

“We did it! Success!” Miriam grabbed Anessa by the hand and jumped for joy.

Heaving a long, deep sigh, Charlotte rushed over to Angeline and embraced her with all her might. Angeline ruffled her hair up to a near-violent degree.

“You did it... You worked hard, Char.”

“Yeah!” As the tension broke, Charlotte burst into tears and clung to Angeline. The strained air filling the room dissipated as the girls surrounding Charlotte patted her.

“It worked out somehow or another.”

“Right, heh heh. It actually makes you anxious when it goes too well, but that’s a story for another day. Let’s just say Ange’s plan worked.”

“Yeah...”

She’s growing up, Belgrieve thought as he looked at Angeline.

Chapter 70: It Was a Southerly Wind

It was a southerly wind—warm, unlike the frigid gales from the north, but it brought hefty clouds with it that gradually darkened the sky and wet snow that had sprinkled down since the early morning.

In a room of the Bordeaux manor, Belgrieve and Kasim sat across from Yakumo.

“Ha, I can’t complain about the sake... Still, I didn’t expect Ange to be such a child. Halfway through, she wouldn’t get off of your back,” Yakumo said, stifling a laugh.

Belgrieve scratched his cheek. “She’s usually a good girl... She just can’t seem to let go of me.”

“Hm hmm, but you don’t seem too unhappy about that.”

“Well... I can’t seem to let go of her either, it seems.”

“What’s wrong with that? I like it when you and Ange get along.” Kasim chuckled.

Belgrieve scratched his head and turned to Yakumo. “So... Are you leaving immediately?”

“Yeah, that’s for the best. It looks like Sir Hrobert’s status isn’t stable yet. Seeing how he wrote Charlotte off so easily, I assume he’s putting on a careful balancing act. If he’s more concerned with removing uncertainty than gaining an advantage, it’s hard to say he has a stable foundation.”

“The general political situation in Lucrecia doesn’t seem stable either...”

“Indeed. I wouldn’t want to return only to find out he lost his authority a long time ago. If he’s going to disappear, it will sure as hell be after he has paid our contract.”

“You’re pretty honest. I don’t hate that,” said Kasim.

Yakumo took out her pipe with a grin, only to frown as she realized how little tobacco she had left. Still, she placed it in her mouth and blew out a stream of smoke.

“Now then... About the Exalted Blade.”

“Right.” Belgrieve nodded and straightened his posture.

After the play they put on for Hrobert, they ended up drinking to celebrate until the dead of the night. The girls were still asleep in another room.

Despite being a nondrinker, Byaku was forced to drink as well and now lay prostrate on the floor as if he was dead.

For their parts, Kasim was a strong drinker and Belgrieve had managed to pace himself. They made sure to stay awake to hear the tale of a woman who seemed to know about the Exalted Blade Percival.

Yakumo twirled her finger through the air. “Now, where should I begin?” she asked.

“Hm... For starters, Percy’s alive, right? Is he doing well?”

“He is. At the very least, he was when I parted with him. With that said, he doesn’t speak much, and he barely shows any expression, so I couldn’t tell you if he’s doing well or not.”

Kasim let out a lonesome sigh. “He still feels a sense of responsibility, eh...”

“What is your relationship with Percy?”

“It was just for a short while, but we fought on the same side. Not that we were in a party or anything; we simply shared the same battlefield.” Yakumo rubbed her fingertips together. “There is a mountain range between Tyldes and Dadan, the Nyndia Mountains. The cliffs are rugged and steep, and the rivers flow violently through the gorges. No normal people ever approach it. At the heart is a pit—have you ever heard of it?”

“No, never. Do you know it, Kasim?”

“I’ve heard rumors. As I recall, there’s a chasm leading to hell deep within an unexplored mountain range... I assumed it was a cock-and-bull story. Is that what you’re talking about?”

Yakumo nodded. “The very same, indeed. Those who know it call it the Earth Navel. Of course, it doesn’t actually lead to hell. It is simply a dip in the land that looks like a great hole from afar, but it does do an amazing job of amassing mana. Because of this reason, calamity-class fiends appear around it in great numbers... The danger level and the rarity of the materials you get there have made it into a trade secret.”

“That’s where Percy went?”

“Yes. The powerful fiends make for high-quality materials, and those with sharp ears and good sword arms gather from around the continent hoping to get rich quick. Lucille and I were among them. Needless pride will only get

you killed out there. Everyone who came would work together to defeat fiends and split the rewards. Among them, there was but a lone man who refused to associate with the others. A man who fought the fiends alone and lived. That was the Exalted Blade.”

“Don’t tell me Percy’s still looking for a way to fix Bell’s leg...?” Kasim muttered.

Yakumo’s eyes wandered in thought. “I’m not so sure. It seemed as if he had no interest in the materials. He simply defeated fiend after fiend. Whether they be AAA-Rank or S-Rank, he stood against them without hesitation and crushed them head-on. He never used any cheap tricks. He fought as though he wanted to be pushed into a corner. We were on the same side, yet I found him rather terrifying.”

“But that’s strange. Then it wouldn’t be strange for there to be rumors... The minstrels—or hell, anyone who likes gossip—would have latched right onto the tale of the Exalted Blade’s extraordinary battle in a secret land.”

Yakumo shook her head. “He never said a word about himself. The others who fought in the chasm did not know he was the Exalted Blade, nor did they know his name. There is also a tacit understanding not to spread word of the Earth Navel. It’s not a place for sightseeing.”

“Then why did you two know him?”

“Ha ha... Lucille stuck to him. You’ve seen how she can be if she’s interested in someone; she doesn’t care if they’re irritated by her. She kept prowling around him until he finally lost to her persistence and exposed his identity with a promise not to tell anyone else... I never thought we’d find someone who knew him here.”

Fate works in mysterious ways. Belgrieve groaned at the sudden realization that they would never have learned this information had they made enemies of Yakumo and Lucille.

“So when did you leave the chasm?”

“It was around a year ago. We went there, thinking it would be easier than backdoor jobs, but it wasn’t much different... At the very least, it was far easier to understand than this job ended up being. You just have to fight.”

“Do you think he’s still there?”

“Yeah. He’s the sort of guy who finds meaning in battle. I can’t think of anywhere else he’d belong, so I think he’s still there.”

“I see...” It was good to know Percival was still alive. But he was still

beating himself up, spending every waking moment fighting. Belgrieve wondered if it came from his sense of guilt or something else entirely. Whatever the case might be, it did not sound good.

“Ms. Yakumo... What are you going to do after you drop by Lucrecia?”

Yakumo scratched her neck. “Hmm... I think we might get back to work at the Earth Navel. With how much of a pain this job was, we’d best lay low for a while. It’s quite a convenient place to hide.”

“Heh heh, I see. So you’ll be waiting for the heat to die down.”

“Pretty much. No harm in being cautious, especially when we’re deceiving our client this time.”

“I’m sorry. We’ve sent you down a dangerous path.”

“It’s nothing; we fell for the goodness of your character. I’m glad we got out without a fight. I’ve already accepted it, and I can handle what’s to come.” Yakumo giggled, placing her hands in her pockets. “So, what message do you want me to pass to him?”

Kasim glanced at Belgrieve, evidently deferring to him. After closing his eyes and thinking for a moment, Belgrieve finally said, “Please don’t tell him anything. You don’t have to tell him about us.”

“Hmm? Are you sure?”

“You sure about that, Bell? You don’t have to say you’re in Turnera. Just tell him we’ll be headed his way...”

“He won’t come to see us if we tell him. If we say we’re going there, he might run away.”

“I see. Sure enough.”

Would a man who fought to assuage his guilt really want to meet the source of that guilt? Belgrieve didn’t know. It was hard to imagine what darkness had taken hold of Percival over the years. But that was precisely why he knew he had to meet him. He still remembered that cheerful boy from his memories.

Yakumo shrugged. “Awkward, the lot of you...”

“Ha ha... Sorry, again. In any case, we’ll be headed to the Earth Navel in the near future.”

“I see... Yes, then, I’ll be looking forward to seeing you again,” Yakumo said with a smile.

Charlotte, having been apprehended by Lucille, squealed as she was sniffed all over. She was prevented from running away by the arm Lucille

had wrapped around the girl's stomach from behind. She buried her nose in Charlotte's now shorter hair, taking in frantic breaths.

"Nice smell, kitty..."

"Ahh, stop it already... Eep!" It felt ticklish when Lucille's breath flowed through her locks and brushed against her skin, and Charlotte would wriggle and let out a troubled cry every time it happened. But she discerned no ill intent from Lucille; it was merely as though an excitable puppy had made her its plaything.

Angeline, who had been lying on her bed, rolled over to face them.
"You're not bored of that yet...?"

"Never bored...super happy...love and peace." Lucille's eyes narrowed in satisfaction, her drooping ears twitching back and forth as she finally loosened her grasp. Charlotte collapsed, limp and tired.

Angeline let out a light chuckle. Lucille's pestering had done wonders to keep Charlotte from thinking about all those unnecessary things, and perhaps that was what was best for her at the moment.

Gazing out the window, Anessa let out a sigh. "It's hopeless. Doesn't look like it's stopping today."

"Even when it's relatively warm," Miriam grumbled. "Ah, maybe it's because it's warm?" She sat in a chair, swaying absentmindedly to and fro.

Outside, a damp snow fell with no end in sight. After the previous night's stunt, they had made merry with the Bordeaux sisters. Angeline had gotten quite heated up at the feeling of liberation that came over her as all sorts of inhibitions were lifted from her shoulders until, before she knew it, she had been put to bed. She *did* remember that she had absolutely fawned all over Belgrieve thanks to the drink, and the memories brought a grin to her face. She rolled around before settling on her back, where she amused herself by tracing the ceiling's intricate patterns with her eyes.

According to Helvetica, they would most likely be able to set off for Turnera in the next few days. Road maintenance was underway, which meant transportation would become quite a bit more convenient for years to come. Thus, Angeline would be able to return home with far less trouble.

In any case, there was nothing to impede her on her way. Though quite a few things had happened, the fact that she was able to bring everyone to Turnera unharmed made her happier than anything.

"This is a relief... Just a little more to go," Charlotte muttered. Finally

freed from Lucille's grasp, she wormed her way onto Angeline's belly. "How could you abandon me like that, sis..."

"Sorry, sorry... You looked like you were having fun..."

"Th-That's...not true..."

Charlotte's cheeks turned red as she pressed her forehead against Angeline's stomach. Her short hair still felt as smooth as silk.

The door opened, admitting Yakumo. "Hey, it's time to go."

"You sure about that, Yak-girl? Today's one of those '*raindrops keep falling on my head*' kind of days."

"Silence. We don't have the time to take it easy."

"As the people of the past used to say, '*move slow and steady*'."

"Just start packing already."

One look at her face was enough to know that Yakumo had quite clearly run out of patience and had no intention of playing along.

Angeline slowly sat up, lifting Charlotte along with her. "Are you going...?"

"We are. Our job isn't over yet." Hoisting her spear and her bags over her shoulder, Yakumo rolled her head to work the cricks out of her neck. Lucille grabbed her instrument case and her backpack.

Miriam, resting her chin on the table, muttered, "It's strange, but...I'll miss you."

"My thoughts exactly... Heh heh, what a strange job this was."

"*Simple twist of fate*, baby."

"But I'm glad you're the ones who came for Char. I don't know what would have happened if it was someone who wasn't willing to talk..." said Anessa.

Angeline nodded. "If that's enough to convince them of Char's death, they won't send the Inquisition after her. We'll be able to visit Turnera without worrying about them... Thank you. And you too, Lucille."

"Let's take it slow and '*shake it up*' next time, 'kay, Ange?"

"Yeah, shake, shake."

"Baby."

"Looks like they've reached an understanding," Anessa said with a sigh.

When they headed out to see the two travelers off, Belgrieve was waiting for them. It had been left to him to arrange for their stagecoach.

"Let's meet again."

“I’ll be back.”

And through the damp snow, the wagon set off, scattering mud every which way. Angeline let out a great yawn, then shuddered.

Belgrieve took her hand. “Are you cold?” he asked.

“Just a little...”

“Yeah... We’re all pretty worn out. Let’s go back inside.”

○

While still in Bordeaux, the party had stocked up on salt and sugar, among other things, in preparation for their departure in just over a week. They had also been entrusted with a letter from Helvetica pertaining to the roads. The roadwork was being carried out from both Rodina and Turnera and would be completed when both teams met in the center. It would prove to be fine work for Turnera’s farmers in their off-season.

Now, with a borrowed wagon, they began the trek farther north.

Though the snow still remained, the cold had substantially relented, and green sprouts now peeked out from beneath the melting white expanse. The spring wheat had begun to grow in the fields around Bordeaux, and soon enough, Belgrieve’s mind had turned to how he would manage his farm in the spring.

Upon reaching Rodina, Belgrieve was relieved to see that trade with Turnera had already reopened. It was normal for trade to resume around this time of year, but there were some years when the cold lingered too fiercely for travelers to make the journey. Belgrieve himself had been a bit apprehensive, but it seemed it was to be a year like most others.

According to the calendar, there was only a week to go before the official beginning of spring. They were slightly behind schedule, but if all went well, it would only take a day to reach Turnera from Rodina.

“It looks like we’ll just barely make it in time for the spring festival...”
Belgrieve mused.

“Let’s buy some pork, dad. I’m sure they’ll love it.”

“Right... We won’t be able to help with the preparations, so that’s the least we can do.”

Famed for its pork, Rodina raised its pigs on the abundant acorns from the surrounding forest, which contributed to their famously fine flavor. This was

also the season during which raw, unpreserved meat would not rot. Thus, Belgrieve bought raw, salted, and smoked meats to gift to the village.

After spending a night in Rodina, they left early the next morning to travel farther north along the thawing roads. Lush green sprouts poked through the dark earthen speckles of soil amidst the lingering patches of snow. A chirping skylark took flight from the shadows of a cliff as they passed. For how cold the air was, the sky was clear and blue, and Belgrieve felt as though he would be sucked into it if he stared too long.

Kasim stretched out his arms. “Ha, it’s really peaceful out here. The air’s nice and crisp.”

“Isn’t it?” Miriam chimed in. “You think so too, Mr. Kasim?”

“Of course I do. I’ve got a nice, clear feeling in my chest—woohoo, there!”
The wagon had jolted as one of the wheels rolled over a rock.

A fine white tracery of snow spread out like veins over the blue mountains in the distance. Though there had been considerable melting already, the peaks were still crowned with ivory frost. The chill that still clung to the occasional breeze most likely came from these mountaintops.

Their early morning departure meant they were nearing Turnera by the time the sun had begun to set. The villagers were out treading wheat in the fields, tilling the soil, and planting potatoes. As they saw Belgrieve aboard the approaching wagon, they waved their arms and cried out, “Welcome back!”

The snow had been shoveled into mounds around the village, leaving most of the ground clear. They crossed the path to the tune of sheep and goats bleating from within their fences as they paced around while chickens scratched at the ground.

Kasim placed a hand on the wagon’s edge and rather gleefully took in the sights.

“So this is your homeland, Bell?”

“Yeah.”

The carriage rattled its way up to the house. The door had been left open; perhaps Graham was out, as he could not sense any presence within. It seemed as though nothing had changed. Perhaps that was to be expected, as he had only been away since before winter—but it felt as though he had been gone for far longer.

It was only after he had disembarked and unloaded his things from the

wagon that someone finally appeared.

“So you’re back, Bell...”

“Graham? Thanks for... Oh, wow.”

Belgrieve opened his mouth blankly. Graham had bundled up his long hair and tied it into a bun, with a handkerchief wrapped around his head as if to hide it. He wore an apron over work clothes, with one baby bound to his back with cloth, another held to his chest, and several more small children flocking to him.

“What are you doing?”

“Me...? Looking after the kids,” Graham answered with a quizzical tilt of his head.

“Let’s play, gramps,” the children called as they tugged on his apron.

Marguerite would be rolling on the ground laughing if she saw this, Belgrieve thought, scarcely containing his own laughter.

Angeline, who had popped her head out the door to see, blinked at the sight. “Who is this?”

“Right, I should introduce you. This is Graham, Marguerite’s granduncle. Graham, this is my daughter Angeline and her friends...”

Graham nodded, unable to offer any more of a greeting with the child in his arms. “I’m Graham... Please pardon my appearance. Bell has been quite good to me.”

“The Paladin...?”

“Th-The real one...? Wow... But he’s a bit... Hee hee...”

The girls were flustered upon meeting a hero straight from their fairy tales, but far from cutting an imposing figure, they found him dressed like a housewife with children clustered around him. Their surprise quickly gave way to giggling.

“You’ve changed quite a bit since I last saw you.”

“Do you mean my hair? They keep tugging on it, so...”

“Right...”

He had apparently bundled his hair because the children found it fun to tug on. *Come to think of it, I remember my hair being pulled out too,* Belgrieve thought with a wry smile.

Kasim stroked his beard. “Now ain’t that something...” he said over a sigh. “It’s been a long time since I met someone I can’t even imagine myself defeating...”

“You too, Mr. Kasim...? I feel the same way,” Angeline admitted.

“If I fought him ten times... I might have a slim chance maybe once.”

“Yeah... I’ve met people I couldn’t imagine losing to, but this is my first time seeing someone I can’t imagine *beating*.”

With a sidelong glance at the S-Rank adventurers who seemed to be speaking on a whole other level, Belgrieve began hoisting his bags and carrying them into the house when a sudden thought occurred to him, and he turned back to Graham.

“Where’s Mit?”

“He was running around on his own.”

“What? Hey now, isn’t that a bit...”

Then came the pattering of small footsteps as a child with androgynous features raced over to them, his black hair flowing behind him. Belgrieve’s eyes widened.



“Huh... Is that you, Mit?”

“Welcome back, dad.” Mit looked up at Belgrieve with his round, black eyes. He was somewhat taller, and his manner of speech had improved as well. Despite only looking five years old at most when Belgrieve had set off, he now looked to be around ten.

Unable to grasp the situation, Belgrieve looked to Graham, who shrugged. “He grew up...” the old elf said.

“In this...short amount of time?” *It’s only been one winter,* Belgrieve marveled.

Picking up on Belgrieve’s confusion, Mit cocked his head. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s... Nothing. Anyways, I’m home.”

“Dad... Dad! Is this the little brother you were talking about?!?”

“Yeah, that’s right... Mit, this is your big sister.”

“Big sister?”

“That’s right! I am the big sister!”

“I’m...Mit...sister.”

“H-How cute. Heh heh heh...”

Angeline’s eyes sparkled as she threw her arms around the boy. Though Mit seemed quite confused, he offered no resistance. Anessa, Miriam, and Charlotte surrounded him, pinching his cheeks and running their hands through his hair.

Byaku frowned. “That’s supposed to be a demon?” he whispered to Belgrieve.

“Yes, well... What’s going on with him, Graham?”

“Well, Mit isn’t human, strictly speaking... He isn’t male or female either. It seems he can change on a whim. I’m sure after interacting with all sorts of people and learning from them, his body matured.”

Belgrieve held his head. At this rate, it would only be a matter of time before the villagers figured out Mit wasn’t human.

That was when Kerry suddenly appeared. He had evidently taken right off from work, as his clothes were grimy with flecks of mud.

“Hey, welcome back, Bell! How did big city living treat you?”

“Kerry... Well, I managed to meet an old friend. Thanks for holding down the fort.”

“Oh, don’t worry about it! Anyways, don’t be a stranger! If Mit wasn’t

human, you could've just said so earlier.”

“Huh?!” Belgrieve stared blankly at Graham, who seemed completely unshaken by Kerry’s words. “Graham... You told everyone?”

“Indeed. We have no way of covering up this amount of growth, so they would know soon enough.”

“I get that, but...”

Kerry cackled. “Hey now, it’s a bit late for that. No one’s going to complain about you taking other races into your house at this point! Has anything you’ve done turned sour from the moment you came to Turnera? Everyone trusts you, no need to sneak around!”

“Ha... Ha ha... I see.”

“Nice village you’ve got here, Bell.” Kasim smugly grinned, patting Belgrieve on the shoulder. Byaku let out a tired sigh.

The villagers of Turnera regretted their once-harsh treatment of Belgrieve, and given the magnitude of his contributions to the village since then, they placed near-absolute trust in his actions. It now seemed idiotic that he had worried so much and kept Mit’s nature a secret, and Belgrieve suddenly felt exhausted. With all his unnecessary wariness, perhaps he was the one who didn’t trust the villagers.

“Kerry... I bought some pork when we were in Rodina. Why don’t you use it for the festival?”

“Oh, thanks! Is that your friend there? Looks like you’ve got more kids with you too.”

“Pretty much... I’ll tell you all about it, but let me rest a bit. I feel...exhausted.” Belgrieve awkwardly scratched his head. For now, all he wanted was a glass of lent-leaf tea.

○

Angeline walked down the slope, taking care not to step on the young shoots of grass, before stopping to rest against the trunk of a tree. The early morning sun stitched its way through the leafless branches to shine down on her. Snow remained where the shadows lingered, having become covered in craggy crystals of ice. The brown thicket had begun to reveal fresh green underneath its withered exterior.

It was the first day of the spring festival, and Angeline had slipped out of

the village—busy as it was with preparations—to take a solitary walk around the forest. In the week since she returned, she had spent her time at ease with her friends from the village, which reaffirmed in her heart that this was indeed her home.

“Thank you for abandoning me... No, I guess that sounds strange,” Angeline muttered.

She had come to the same spot where Belgrieve had found her as an infant. As soon as she had returned to Turnera, she had immediately asked Belgrieve to guide her there.

As Belgrieve told it, he had spent several days after he found her searching the general area to see if anyone had collapsed there, so he remembered the spot well. Ultimately, he had found not a soul, dead or alive. It now made sense to her that he had kept quiet about her parents, with so little information to go off of.

Angeline looked around. The gently sloping woods were comprised of a mix of deciduous and evergreen trees, as well as shrubs that were waist-high to her. It was in the shadow of one of these that she had been placed so long ago, wrapped in cloth and left in a basket woven from wisteria vines. She had been left there along with some knotted medicinal herbs—the thought of which made her feel like she could remember the scent.

Suddenly, all color vanished from her vision, casting the scenery around her in sepia tones. She thought she could just make out a figure beyond the blinding backlight.

“Urgh... Grr...” Angeline grasped her forehead with narrowed eyes. When she opened her eyes, her vision had returned to normal.

“It’s fine. That’s enough.”

She placed a hand on her barrette, feeling its metallic cold with her fingertips as she lifted her face.

There were cheery voices coming from the foot of the mountain. The sun gradually climbed in the sky and the village was already enveloped in a festive mood.

Angeline rushed out of the forest and returned home. Belgrieve and the other men had already left, leaving only the girls behind.

Miriam chuckled as she noticed Angeline. “You’re finally back.”

“I’m sorry... Were you waiting for me?”

“You could say that,” Miriam answered.

“Right.” Anessa nodded.

Charlotte stood up cheerfully. “It’s time to doll you up, sis!”

“Huh... Wh-What do you mean...?”

Miriam grinned as she picked up a dress—the very same one Angeline had received from Liselotte when she left the estate of Archduke Estogal. She had wanted Belgrieve to see her in it, but she grew bashful now that the time had come to actually put it on. “Why wear something like that when there’s no occasion to do so?” she would say, continuing to make excuses to herself.

Angeline blushed and fidgeted. “B-But... On second thought, it’s embarrassing. It’s like I’m the only one getting all eager...”

“What’s wrong with that? It’s a festival! I want to see it too!”

“That’s right, sis! You have such a pretty dress, so you have to wear it!”

“Now quit complaining and strip.”

“Eep!”

Angeline was indeed divested of her clothes and forced into her dress before having her hair done under the instruction of Charlotte, who was well versed in these sorts of occasions. Whether it be Estogal or Orphen or Turnera, it seemed that girls shared the same passion for fashion.

Eventually, she was done changing. Though she did not put on any makeup, her hair was combed neatly and then braided. Though she wore her usual shoes, they were still a good match for the dress.

Charlotte let out a longing sigh. “Beautiful... Very, very nice!”

“Cute... Oh, what I’d give,” Miriam said.

“Yeah, you look good,” Anessa added.

“Y-You think so?”

Angeline awkwardly rubbed her hands together. She was hardly accustomed to such frilly clothing, and somehow, the venue being Turnera fostered a strange sense of shame.

She could hear music from the square—the performances had already begun. But Angeline was still indecisive, and the other three had to drag her out to where the village youths were dancing nimbly to the joyful tunes. The villagers who had been drinking and laughing suddenly lost their words as they caught sight of Angeline. This made her even more self-conscious, and she found herself holding her reddened cheeks. She had never felt like this in Estogal.

Belgrieve sat in the back of the crowd, discussing something with the

village chief, Hoffman. Kasim and Graham sat nearby, the latter of whom was gingerly sipping his cider.

“Hey, Mr. Bell!” Miriam raised her voice and waved.

Angeline’s heart raced as she walked forward.

“Oh,” said Kasim. “So you took the dress with you? It’s a nice one, indeed.”

“Hee hee...” Her embarrassment was starting to make her feel light-headed as she timidly turned towards Belgrieve.

Belgrieve stared at her, his mouth half-open. He seemed confused. *Does the dress not suit me? Is he revolted?* Angeline’s lips curled into a nervous grimace.

It was then that tears suddenly began to roll down Belgrieve’s cheeks, and his tense expression fell to pieces. It was hard to say whether he was laughing or bawling, but his trembling expression was one of joy.

“Ange... You’ve really grown up, you have... It fits you like a glove... I’m so sorry I never bought any pretty clothing for you...” Belgrieve covered his eyes, his words smothered by his tears. Kasim and Hoffman both laughed and slapped him on the back.

As for Angeline, her embarrassment and shame quickly dissipated, and she rushed at Belgrieve with her heart bursting with joy.

“Let’s dance, dad!”

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

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

Angeline dragged him into the dance circle, and the villagers cheered. She took a sprightly step, her hand locked with his, and everyone and their uncle laughed at his desperate attempts to keep up with her.

There wasn’t a cloud to be seen in the spring sky; a single bird flew a circuit through the blue.

Extra: The Strolling Cat's Tail

It was on that day that the hefty clouds drifted away and the sunlight poured down on Orphen for the first time in a long while.

Water seeped out from under the base of the snow lining the streets, flowing downhill through the dips in the stone pavement. Anessa and Miriam avoided this runoff as they made their way through the street traffic. Miriam lightly placed a hand on the brim of her hat, her eyes narrowing in delight at the comforting warmth of the sun.

“Such nice weather.”

“That’s right, when’s the last time we’ve seen the sun?”

The sun was a valuable resource in the winter. Though the skies were nearly always cloudy during the winter months of the north, there were times when a blue sky would peek through. On those days, everyone would head outside to take in their fill of the sunlight. Furthermore, the winds were gentle, and the usually piercing cold winds had gone, replaced by a warm, caressing breeze.

And so, there were many more people on the roads than usual. The children ran around without their coats, and the elderly folk gathered to chat about all sorts of inconsequential things wherever the sunlight was brightest.

Anessa and Miriam had gone out like the others, walking around with light steps. It wasn’t that they had any particular destination in mind, though their ostensible purpose had been groceries. Having full baskets would have gotten in the way of their walking, so they had yet to actually buy anything.

Walking without any particular goal, they browsed the stalls around the shopping district and bought a deep-fried pastry to munch on along the way. It was as much of a day off as a day off could be, and quite a comfortable one at that. Soon, spring would be upon them, when the two of them intended to follow Angeline to Turnera. In that sense, they did not have too many free days left to roam the big city.

“I love how the sugar on this thing has that half-melted texture. Do you know what I mean?” Miriam said, licking off the sugar and oil sticking to her

fingertips.

Anessa nodded. “I think I get it—it’s pretty nice stuff. But now I’m a bit thirsty.”

Anessa crumpled up the paper the pastry had been wrapped with and tossed it into her empty shopping basket.

“We’ll buy groceries on the way back, so... What do you want to do now?”

“Let’s have some lunch. I’m starving!”

“Didn’t you just eat...? Well, whatever.” Anessa’s eyes shifted as she assessed how full her own stomach was, then checked the position of the sun in the sky. “It’s about time, anyways.”

Once that was settled, it was time to decide on the restaurant. The two followed the crowd, glancing at the names of the businesses lining both sides of the road.

“What do you want to eat?”

“I could go for some cake. The type with fresh cream on top!”

“I thought we were talking about lunch... Haven’t you gotten a bit fatter, Merry?”

“What?! I’m not fat! It’s just my winter coat!”

“Coat? Do you even have any body hair besides your tail?”

“Gah!” Miriam angrily prodded at Anessa, implicitly confirming that her friend had hit the nail on the head.

In southern Dadan, there were beast-men whose forms were more animalistic. It was easy to imagine those folks growing thick coats to last them the winter, but perhaps the beast blood had thinned farther north; most beast-men around these parts were like Miriam, only boasting animal ears and tails. Even beast-men such as these were few in number.

In any case, Miriam’s plumpness did not seem to have anything to do with fur. But supposing that was the case, Miriam was not the sort to give up on sweets and her mind soon turned to searching for a bakery full of them.

They walked aimlessly for a while longer, until Miriam’s eyes suddenly shot wide open. “Oh, a cat!”

A stray cat weaved its way between human legs, crossing from one alley to the next. It was a long-haired, black-and-white striped cat. Miriam was quickly running after it.

Anessa stared after her for a moment before calling out, “Hey, what about

lunch?”

“That can wait! Now it’s the kitty!”

What’s a cat doing chasing a cat? Anessa mused with a wry smile as she followed behind.

The alley that the cat had entered was dim, sandwiched between tall buildings. Snow packed the alley walls, and as the sun could not reach them, they would go through a cycle of melting and refreezing. *What are we doing here on such a sunny day?* Anessa wondered with a frown, but Miriam continued to wend her way further and further, paying no mind to such concerns.

The path subtly curved to the left before leading to a small stairway of only four steps. It was bright and sunny beyond that point, but after a momentary flutter of the cat’s tail over the short incline, the cuddly critter was nowhere to be seen.

Sluggishly chasing after Miriam, Anessa cleared the stairway in one leap to find Miriam restlessly searching around the sunny clearing.

“Huh? Where’d it go?”

“Must’ve given you the slip. You’re not going to catch a stray cat that easily.” Yet in spite of her cynicism, Anessa was soon looking around too. It was a small plaza surrounded by buildings with one leafless ash tree at the center. The snow had been methodically shoveled, revealing the brickwork beneath, illuminated by the sunlight pouring down from on high. She felt a tad excited to come across a secret hideaway like this.

“Oh, it’s a restaurant!” Miriam exclaimed.

One of the doors did indeed have a standing signboard next to it, displaying what was evidently a menu.

“They have crema Catalana! Hey, Anne, let’s eat here.”

Miriam gleefully tugged at Anessa’s sleeve. *It’s like the cat guided us here,* thought Anessa. But she didn’t mind leaving their day to fate and pushed open the old wooden door.

It was warm inside, with a fire burning in the hearth. Though the day had been warmer than usual, entering a truly warm place reminded them it was still winter after all.

“I never knew there was a restaurant around here,” Anessa muttered, looking around.

“Orphen’s a big place. Of course there’d be a few places we’ve never

been to.”

It was noon, and a surprising number of seats were filled; it seemed they’d be waiting a while to be seated.

Suddenly, they heard a familiar voice. “It’s just you two today?”

“Huh? Oh, Ms. Gil.”

The two glanced over to see Gilmenja sitting at one of the tables. There were several empty plates piled in front of her, as though she had eaten already, but a waiter soon came over to collect the dishes and wipe down the table.

“I just sat down myself. Would you like to join me?” Gilmenja offered, beckoning them closer. It was a table for two, but it could feasibly seat three with an extra chair. There didn’t seem to be much of an issue, so Anessa pulled an empty chair for herself.

“Thank goodness,” Miriam exclaimed. “I thought we’d be waiting a lot longer.”

“I’ll let you in on a little tip. Sex appeal works at this place. You just have to emphasize your chest a bit, then give these upturned eyes, and you’ll be seated right away... How do you think I got this spot?”

“Huh? Are... Are you serious?”

“Of course not, heh heh heh.”

Oh right, she’s that sort of person, Anessa recalled, hanging her head. Miriam, for her part, chuckled at the joke.

“Still, you’re not with Ange or Maggie? That’s rare.”

“Ange’s with Mr. Bell, and Maggie’s working.”

“We’re... Well, we’re taking the day off. Can’t do much without our leader.”

“I see. As expected of Ange, to choose her father over the whole adventuring gig, heh heh heh.”

The two girls echoed her laughter at this as they cracked open their menus.

The other day, they had investigated a variant fiend with Kasim, but ever since then, Angeline had become entranced by her life with Belgrieve, and they had not gotten any proper work done. As the highest grade of adventurers, S-Ranks earned a considerable sum of money from every job they took. Angeline rarely bought anything to begin with, and she still had all the money from the fiend outbreak from the year before. She could live rather

comfortably without having to busy herself—hence, her current indolence.

That essentially left the two of them high and dry, but that would be a rather harsh way of putting it. They were Angeline's party members, after all, and because they took on jobs alongside her, they were quite well off in their own right. There was nothing forcing them to take on jobs with Angeline out of commission either, and it felt rather dreary to take on work without her.

Gilmenja shut her menu. "Then how about I treat our little stragglers? Order whatever you want."

"Hooray! You're so indulgent!"

"I don't *indulge* as much as you, Merry, heh heh heh," Gilmenja said, rubbing Miriam's stomach.

"That's not what I meant!" Miriam retorted, her cheeks angrily puffed out.

Anessa had burst out in laughter at this. Once she finally caught her breath, she asked, "Are you sure? I feel a bit guilty asking you to pay."

"Don't worry about it. I'll send you the invoice later."

"Huh?"

"Kidding. I'm not *that* childish."

"What to get, what to get...?" Miriam scanned the menu without a care in the world. *Looks like I'm a bit too hardheaded to deal with Gilmenja*, Anessa thought. *Or maybe Merry is using me as a shield*.

A while after they had placed their order, their table was graced with a nicely browned gratin, a quiche, and grilled meat. Anessa poked a spoon into the gratin; it was hot enough to scorch her mouth, so she had to blow on it before taking a spoonful. The toasted cheese was perfectly seasoned and quite delicious.

"Hot, hot... Phew... It's my first time here, but this shop may be a hit."

"Right? Heh heh, we should thank the cat then. Let's bring Ange and Maggie here another day." Miriam nodded, chewing on the quiche that she had already blown on almost excessively.

Gilmenja swirled the wine in her glass. "It's nice to take a day off when the sun is out. It's good for the heart."

"Are you off too, Ms. Gil?"

"You could say I'm off, and you could also say I'm not."

"Meaning?"

"I'm observing people both for business and pleasure."

And with that, she downed the wine in her glass. Anessa and Miriam

exchanged a look, but quickly gave up and returned to their meal.

Their dishes were soon empty, and they finished off their meal with tea and treats. Miriam's Catalana consisted of soft custard cream sprinkled with sugar, which was melted and then scorched. Once the treat had hardened and chilled, it offered up a taste of caramel with its crisp mouth feel. Miriam did not even spare a glance at Anessa and Gilmenja enjoying their tea as she shoveled one spoonful after another into her mouth.

"Delicious! Ahh, we were right to stop by here."

"Your mouth... You've got cream on it."

"Mmm..." Miriam hastily wiped her mouth with her fingertip.

"It's nice to see you two getting along. You've always been together, haven't you?" Gilmenja asked with a grin as she poured Miriam a cup of tea.

"Yes, we're from the same orphanage... This all brings me back. Remember when we first got to A-Rank?"

"Yeah, we went to our first classy restaurant and got our first expensive sweets to celebrate."

"Right, right. You think *they're* doing well?"

Their gazes grew distant. The two of them had been part of a different party before they met Angeline. In fact, they had been together in several parties since they started out as adventurers, so this would have been the one they were in just before joining Angeline. When they and the other members rose to AAA-Rank, someone proposed they set their sights on bigger things. They decided to move on to the imperial capital, but Anessa and Miriam still felt an attachment to Orphen. And so, all the other members headed off to the capital of the Rhodesian Empire. They had not been in contact since, but surely, the party had taken in others to fill the gaps and were doing just fine without them.

From time to time, they wondered how life would have been if they had left with their party and moved to the imperial capital. But then, they would have never formed a party with Angeline and learned about Turnera either. It was a bit sad to think about.

Gilmenja chuckled as she saw the two girls immersed in their memories. "Aren't you a bit young to get nostalgic?"

"Y-You think so?"

"Don't you ever think back to the past, Ms. Gil? Like back when you were in a party with the guild master?"

“I don’t have any decent memories to think back to. Granted, it was nice and lively back when we were doing things all over Orphen.”

“Ah, that’s right. You came here from the capital, but you used to live in Orphen, right?”

“That’s right. I was actually born into a trading firm around Yobem, though.”

“You’re a merchant’s daughter? That’s surprising... But I can see it.”

“No, that was a lie. See what I mean? Heh heh heh.”

“What’s your problem?!?” Anessa pouted with red cheeks.

Miriam chuckled and reached for her cup. “What was it like back then? The old hag was active too, wasn’t she?”

“That’s right. Maria hadn’t been done in by the curse dragon yet, so she was amazing. A lot stronger than she is now. You might not believe it, but Dortos and Cheborg were also leagues more incredible than they are now too.”

“Wow!”

Come to think of it, all three of them were nearly in their seventies. There was no way they were in their prime anymore. There must have been a time when they were even stronger and more driven than now.

“There were a few other S-Ranks too, you see. The guild was booming with young and lively adventurers. There were loads of geniuses in my generation, like Bell’s friends.”

“Huh? You knew about Kasim and the others?”

“Yes, but not personally. They wouldn’t have known about me. Old Leo, he would mutter about being their rivals when no one was looking, but he was too weak-willed to ever call out to them. He’s always been hopeless,” Gilmenja said, bringing her cup to her mouth.

Belgrieve and Gilmenja were in roughly the same generation. She may very well have run into him somewhere before, but Belgrieve had turned in his license at E-Rank, and hardly anyone remembered the young man who set off for Turnera with a peg leg. The high- and low-rankers lived in different worlds, both then and now.

Even so, everyone started out at the bottom, the memories of their beginnings often carrying with them through life. When they listened to Belgrieve and Kasim reminisce over the past, Anessa found that their experiences of failure and trial and error would often overlap with her own,

and this felt a bit encouraging. Such eagerness and earnest effort were usually only ever seen among the lower ranks.

It was a risky job, but eventually even brushes with death could become mundane, and things that once made her heart stir now felt completely inconsequential. If an adventurer wanted to live long, they couldn't be flustered by every little thing, but it felt a bit dreary to think about that every now and again.

“Did you have your share of failures when you started out, Gil?”

“Sure I did. You can’t imagine all the things I went through before I reached the higher ranks. I’ve been in countless parties to boot.”

“Oh, I should have guessed. Then when did you join the guild master’s party?”

“I’ve been with Ed for a while... Leo and Yuri were together from the get-go, and in short, the four of us had to put up a united front for a certain job request. We worked well enough together, and that led to us forming a party.”

“Hmm, so that was the trigger.”

“Granted, it’s because all my other comrades besides Ed ended up dying on that one.”

“Huh... Oh, there you go again. I’m not going to be fooled this time.”

Gilmenja closed her eyes. “I understand why you wouldn’t believe me, given my usual conduct.”

“See what you did, Anne?”

“Huh? Oh, s-sorry, I was certain...”

“No, don’t worry about it. I was lying.”

“What’s your problem?!?” Anessa turned away, her face a bright red.

Miriam giggled. “Looks like you’re no match for her, Anne.”

“Shut up, stupid.”

Anessa prodded Miriam on the forehead, and Miriam stuck out her tongue.

Gilmenja stood with a grin. “I’m taking off, then. I’ll pay at the register; you two just take it easy, heh heh heh.” She left before they could say anything. Alone again, the two girls looked at each other and blinked.

“She’s quite something.”

“Yeah.”

As for what that “something” was, they didn’t say, but they both seemed

to be on the same wavelength. They gratefully enjoyed their tea for some time before leaving the shop. Thin clouds had begun to roll in, but the weather was still fine.

Miriam stretched her arms out wide. “Ahh, now that my stomach is full, I’m starting to feel drowsy.”

“Wanna go home and sleep, then?”

“No way, that’d be such a waste. We’ve got to stroll around when the weather’s this nice. Let’s map out the back alleys! I’m sure there are loads of places we don’t know about.”

And with that, Miriam was off. The back alleys of Orphen were certainly dangerous, but this meant little to an AAA-Rank adventurer. Anessa tagged along with a tired smile.

This area was relatively well maintained; the air was still, and Anessa could not sense the presence of any vagrants or ruffians. The stone-paved path continued, still lined with swept snow that had solidified in the shade along the way. The buildings on both sides were all over three stories tall, and occasionally, the two of them would pass under lines of laundry strung across the alley from one window to another. Anessa looked up at one of these clotheslines only for her eyes to meet with those of a cat curled up on a handrail.

Come to think of it, we used to meander around like this, the two of us, back when we left our previous party and hadn’t met Ange yet, Anessa remembered. Back then, she had never even dreamed she would be fighting alongside that reticent girl who was hailed as a genius. Though she and Miriam had reached AAA-Rank at their tender age, they were somewhat envious of Angeline, who had managed to go a step further—not that any of those feelings persisted at this point.

They continued down the twisting alley, up and down short flights of stairs, seemingly endlessly. It was like they were on an adventure, which was fun in and of itself.

“Whoa!” Miriam exclaimed, dashing ahead.

“What is it now?”

“Kitty!”

Another cat—an orange tabby—was loafing around where the sunlight was brightest. Either it was used to humans, or it had an affinity with beast-men, as it showed no signs of running as Miriam dashed straight at it. At

most, its ears twitched a smidgen. Its coat was glossy, so perhaps one of the nearby houses was feeding it.

Miriam stooped down and patted the cat on the head to no response.

“Ooh, that’s a nice fluffy winter coat you’ve got there.” Miriam was getting more and more daring, and soon enough, both of her hands were moving chaotically around the puffy feline.

“Why go out of your way to pet a cat’s fur when you’ve got your own?”

“It’s completely different. Just have a feel and see for yourself.”

“Hmm...” Anessa reached out and snatched away Miriam’s hat, eliciting a yelp, and stroked her head. Her fingers moved with a masterful touch. She recalled her time in the orphanage, back when she would sleep while holding this fluff on the coldest nights. “As soft as ever.”

“I’m talking about *this* one!”

Miriam lifted the cat up and thrust it at Anessa. Though the cat seemed somewhat displeased that its peace had been disturbed, it did not thrash or try to get away. Anessa chuckled and patted it—it did feel somewhat different from Miriam.

“I see. It’s not so similar after all.”

“Right? This one’s so much better to touch. Get a load of this luster,” Miriam said as she nuzzled the cat. Having finally had enough, the cat wound itself up, sprung out of Miriam’s arms, and sprinted away.

“Aw.”

“Unfortunate. But what were you expecting from a stray? Now then...”

Anessa looked around. The sun was beginning to move west. They had walked randomly, and she had no idea where they were. Though that wasn’t cause for much concern, she had to wonder what to do next. “What now, Merry?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“I mean, you’re the one who wanted to walk around.”

“I know, but... Oh!”

Following Miriam’s line of sight, Anessa locked eyes with another cat—a chubby calico, strutting with its bob tail swinging back and forth. Miriam’s eyes sparkled as she frantically waved her hand.

“Wow, what a chubby kitty!”

“You mean you?”

“No! Wait for me...” Miriam raced off again.

The calico turned to her with a start, then burst off with agility belying its fat build. And there went Miriam chasing after it, not listening to any of Anessa's attempts to call her back. *I'm getting dragged around by all sorts of cats today*, Anessa silently groused as she followed behind.

They cleared one winding alley after another, trampling the snow in the shade. Before they knew it, they had climbed several stone steps and arrived at the top of a hill. Orphen was a city built on a plain, but it still had its high and low points. There were spots where one could look down over the entire cityscape. Of course, it was the first time either Anessa or Miriam had come here.

"Wooow, I didn't know there was a place like this."

"What happened to the cat?"

"I lost it."

Good grief... Anessa shook her head before glancing at the city below.

It was growing late, and it was like Orphen was showing a completely different side than it had that morning. Perhaps it was the slightly reddish tint that had made its way into the light. The endless clear expanse of sky now seemed to carry a heavy weight to it, looming lazily over the city. It inspired a faint sense of drowsiness.

They had arrived at a sunny spot, with several streams of water passing underfoot. Anessa brushed the snow off of a nearby pile of wooden boxes and took a seat. She reached her arms out into a grand stretch.

"Ahh... I feel drained."

"We've come to a pretty high place, haven't we? I'm a bit tired too."

"Still, we were born and raised here, but it looks like Orphen's still full of new sights to see."

Anessa folded her hands behind her head and took in the view. Flags and trailing smoke from chimneys wavered in the breeze, and far below, all the people flowing down the main road looked so small from here.

Miriam got down beside her and muttered, "It's a bit strange when I think about how I was born here. You know?"

"You think so?"

"Yeah. I mean, that makes this our hometown, right? I can tell that Turnera's Ange's home, but... Orphen just doesn't give off that feeling for me. Not in the same way, at least."

"Hmm... Maybe."

A home, huh? Anessa thought. She was in Orphen more often than not, so she never did feel homesick, but it did feel a bit *off* to call this her hometown.

“Maybe because it’s not the countryside?” Miriam said with a yawn.
“Turnera gives off that nostalgic old-town feel.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right,” Anessa agreed. But both of them were city girls. They helped out in the orphanage kitchen and garden, but had no familiarity with how it was to live surrounded by forest and mountains and fields. *Then what’s that strange comfort and nostalgia I feel there?* she wondered with a tilt of her head.

“Hey, it might be because Mr. Bell’s there,” Miriam suggested with a mischievous chuckle.

“Huh? Really?” But even as she said that, she felt she couldn’t fully refute it. When they last parted in Bordeaux, he had told them to treat Turnera as if it was their own home, and perhaps that had been the start of it. Now that they were tagging along with Angeline’s return trip, it somehow felt like they were returning to an old family home.

But I’ve only been there once. Overly earnest as she was, Anessa tried to dissect why she felt such a strange sense of nostalgia about Turnera, to no avail. She got nowhere no matter how much she thought about it. After she had been mulling that over for some time, she suddenly felt a weight on her shoulder. She glanced over to see that Miriam had dozed off.

“You’re heavy.”

Anessa reached out and grabbed Miriam’s flank. It was soft, squishy, and nice to touch. Though Miriam let out a strange cry, she only shifted a bit and did not seem to rouse. *How easygoing can you be?* Anessa wondered exasperatedly, but let her sleep at ease. This wasn’t anything out of the ordinary for them.

Drowsiness was contagious, and it was not long before Anessa’s eyelids grew heavy under the nice, comforting sunlight.

Like that, the two lost to their creeping lethargy and closed their eyes. It was only when the winds changed and a cold gust tickled her nape that Miriam—half-asleep—fumbled around and held Anessa in her embrace, and Anessa sprung up in surprise. She nearly toppled over with Miriam grasping onto her.

The beast-man looked around with half-open eyes.

“What’s up? What’s up? Don’t surprise me like that.”

“That should be my line, stupid.”

The sun had traversed quite a distance without them knowing. The light was even redder now, spreading across the western sky. The clouds had grown thicker, and the sky would most likely be sealed away by them before the stars could shine through. There was a faint lingering whiteness to their breaths.

Miriam straightened her shifted hat.

“It’s getting cold; let’s go home.”

“Right... It’s like we came all the way out here for a nap.”

After stretching out their somewhat tense bodies, they started on their way back. The alleys showed quite a different face now that the shadows were cast over them. A speckled cat swiftly crossed the path with a calico hot on its tail.

“No more chasing.”

“I won’t,” Miriam said, somewhat miffed.

It had been bright only moments before, but the sun seemed to be making a rapid exit as the streets grew steadily darker. The skies were cloudy again, and the brisk wind nipping at their exposed ankles spurred them to pick up the pace and flee from it.

“Hey, Anne,” Miriam abruptly blurted out.

“Hmm?”

“As long as we’re adventurers, you know... Let’s stay in the same party.”

“What are you on about? That’s a given.”

They followed the back alley until they returned to the main road. There, the lanterns of shops hung from every street corner, and the people on the streets walked swiftly to get home before the snow began to fall again. The scenes that had looked so small and insignificant from up on the hill became filled with vivacity once they mingled with them.

Anessa reaffirmed her grip on her shopping basket. “It sure has gotten dark. Let’s buy something before we go home.”

“Let’s see, we need dinner and tomorrow morning’s breakfast, and... Ah.”

Once again, Anessa followed Miriam’s line of sight and spotted Angeline walking amidst the crowd. Upon noticing them, Angeline raised a hand and called out.

Miriam happily raced over to her. “Yoo-hoo, Ange! Shopping?”

“Yeah... What about you two?”

“We walked around the whole day, and now we’re picking up some groceries before heading home. Where are the others?”

“Dad went home. Char and Bucky are with Mr. Kasim.”

“Hey, Ange. We found a really nice restaurant today. I’ll take you there next time.”

“Hmm, sounds nice... Let’s go while everyone’s still in town.”

From across the street, the song of a street performer poured out of an alley. Scattered snowflakes had begun to delicately alight around them.

Angeline shifted her shopping basket. “Where’s Maggie?” she asked.

“Working again. But it’s already late, so she might be home.”

“How about you get her and head over to our place for dinner? Dad’s going to make stew.” Various ingredients poked out of Angeline’s basket.



Anessa and Miriam exchanged a look.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. The more the merrier. And the tastier too... We’re comrades, no need to hold back.”

The two chuckled as Angeline stuck out her chest, trying to make herself look more reliable. *Yeah, this is the way it should be*, Anessa thought.

“Got it. We’ll buy some stuff, then bring Maggie over.”

“Good, we’ll be waiting... Until then.” Angeline scampered off and disappeared into the crowd.

“Mr. Bell’s food!” Miriam beamed. “Let’s buy something nice to share with everyone!”

“Yeah. What to buy...? Maybe something from the stalls...”

“Ah, maybe we should get Maggie first?”

“Yeah, maybe. Well, there’s no use standing around. Let’s get going.”

They headed down the main road. A dry wind scattered a dusting of snow which glistened in the light of the lanterns hanging from the eaves.

Extra: Proper Present Protocol

After a boisterous family meeting, Maria left, then Byaku slipped out after her, looking strangely irritated, with Charlotte chasing after him. Kasim departed after both of them, unable to let them be, and that left Belgrieve alone to hold down the fort. He let his eyes take in the silent house and let out a deep breath.

“Oh... That’s right,” he recalled, and he took out the hair ornament he had purchased. It was a simple silver piece with a red gemstone.

Belgrieve folded his arms and pondered. *Now, how do I hand this over?*

Sure, he had bought it with the intention of giving it to Angeline, but now he grew strangely uneasy when it came to actually giving it to her. It seemed a bit cold to look her straight in the eye and say, “Here,” but it didn’t seem like it would be any better to make a big deal out of it and raise her expectations either. He feared that would cause her to be disappointed with how meager of a present it actually was. Furthermore, Belgrieve didn’t know the first thing about wrapping gifts.

Had Angeline been the same young girl from Turnera, he could have handed it over without a care, but she had spent her impressionable years in Orphen, and in a sense, she knew the city better than he did. Nevertheless, he had already bought the present, and now Belgrieve was left to fret over whether she would be happy about it or not.

She’s your daughter, what are you getting so feckless about? he scolded himself, and wondered why his innate cowardice had to emerge here of all places.

“Good grief, I’m a hopeless father...” he grumbled and hung his head.

All of this agonizing came right after he had just found a tentative resolution to Byaku’s problem, and in that light, perhaps this seemed completely inconsequential. But it was a huge issue to Belgrieve, who still treasured his daughter over all else. Everyone wanted their gift to be appreciated—even more so if it was for someone precious.

Of course, Angeline would probably accept anything Belgrieve gave her

with glee. Belgrieve himself would never disdain a gift from his daughter, but perhaps... Perhaps that was *precisely* why he agonized over whether this was really all right.

Suddenly, he found himself lost in reminiscing about when he taught Angeline how to use a blade. Then, he remembered the time when he thought she would be fine on her own and he had bought her first knife. She had jumped for joy, but she seemed happier just to be receiving a present from him rather than for the blade itself. After that, he had bought her a small adventuring pouch and a sword, among other things, and her delight each time she received one was such that it made him happy as well.

“But... Well, those were all *practical* items.”

Belgrieve placed a hand on his brow and sighed. All else aside, she was still a girl, and yet he could not remember buying her pretty clothing, or even any accessories at all. It was dreadful in itself that this was the first time he would do so. With that in mind, he grew terrified of handing over this hair piece. *Is it really all right for her first accessory from me to be something so plain?*

Indeed, Angeline had been summoned to the archduke’s estate, where she had been adorned in brilliant attire. Naturally, the hairpin Belgrieve bought would not hold a candle to anything the archduke might have offered.

After his solitary ruminations, his navel-gazing took off on strange tangents. *What am I doing at my age?* he thought, holding his head. His spiraling was interrupted when the door suddenly swung open.

“I’m back!” Angeline’s energetic voice heralded her own return.

Belgrieve perked up, his mouth opening and closing a few times before he mustered a response. “Welcome back, Ange. You’re early.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t much of a job... Oh, right, about that! I got to take some of the dragon meat home with me. For dinner, how about we... Hmm?”

Angeline’s eyes stopped on the hair piece that had been placed in front of Belgrieve.

“That’s...”

“Oh, well, this is...”

“Where’d you get that? Did someone give it to you?”

“No... I bought it, thinking I would give it to you, but...”

“Me?” Angeline blankly stared between the hair piece and Belgrieve.

“Y-Yeah... Sorry, I’m not good with these sorts of things. If you don’t like

it—”

Before Belgrieve could finish, Angeline pounced on him with the speed of a fleeing hare, her fiery eyes peering into Belgrieve's face.

“You're giving it to me?! A present?! Really?!”

“Uh... Yeah...” He picked it up, somewhat flustered, and handed it to her. After inspecting it front and back, she burst into a beaming smile.

“Hooray! Thanks, dad! I'm so happy! Hee hee... Tee hee hee!”

Then, she hugged Belgrieve and rubbed her head into his chest. Her reaction was no different from when she had received the knife and the adventuring tools.

I'm an idiot. Exhausted, Belgrieve gently patted Angeline's head.

Suddenly, she lifted her face and held up the hair piece.

“Where should I wear it? The front or the back?”

“Given the shape... I'd say it probably goes up front.”

“Put it on for me!”

“No, I don't really know about these things.”

Is this good? How about this? The parent and child debated the question until finally, it had ended up where it seemed best suited. As she looked into the mirror, Angeline's face melted into a goofy smile, and she was quickly bouncing around the room. There was joy radiating from every pore on her body, and Belgrieve felt happy just looking at her.

Now that he was seeing her like this, he felt it suited her well and knew he was stupid for fretting over it at all.

“Hee hee... Does it look good on me?”

“Yes, very. Thank goodness...”

I finally managed to give her a girlish present, he thought, relieved. He was already considering giving her a pretty dress next. In that moment, he never could have imagined that he would soon be bursting into tears at the sight of her wearing a dress for the first time.

Extra: Early Summer

Eight-year-old Angeline held up her basket as she rushed back and forth through the thicket. Rummaging through the deep emerald foliage, she would pick out only the brightest, freshest sprouts to throw into her basket. The skies were a piercing blue, bereft of any lingering hints of winter.

The lent plant was an evergreen bush that grew naturally around Turnera. It was sturdy and easy to graft, and thus was transplanted all around town and grown as hedges as well. From late spring to early summer—around when the wheat stalks began to grow—the fresh sprouts would emerge, and gathering these sprouts to make tea was one of Turnera's seasonal tasks.

Lent leaves were not the only ingredients that could be used for tea, but they were the easiest to harvest, and they had a neutral flavor that went down easily. Most houses would have their own special blend of herbs and flowers to spice up their lent tea.

Angeline's harvesting began at sunrise, and by the time the last drop of morning dew had dried up, her basket was filled to the brim. She looked at it with a satisfied nod before running back to the house. The early summer breeze helped cool her from all the running around she had done.

When she returned home, she found Belgrieve in the yard, tending to a fire with a pot of water hanging over it. There were several drying mats around him, each spread with the lent leaves they had collected over the past few days.

“Hey, dad.”

“Oh, Ange. Welcome back.”

Belgrieve looked into the basket Angeline brought in and stroked his beard.

“You got quite a lot of them. Impressive.”

“I know, right... Hee hee... I'll go wash them.”

She dashed to the side of the well, basket in hand. The freshly plucked leaves were liable to be covered in dirt and small bugs, so they had to be washed first. She placed the leaves into a small wooden bucket, which she

filled with water, and began stirring it up until the grime floated to the surface. Then she held her harvest down and tipped the bucket so only the water washed away.

Taking a glance at her work, Belgrieve used his hands to mix up the leaves that were already drying. This would allow them to dry faster.

“Ange, where’s your knife?”

“I have it.”

“Good to know.”

Placing the washed lent leaves back into her basket to finish drying, Angeline picked the leaves up one by one, and once she had a neat, sizable stack, she chopped them all together. She did this several times until her basketful of leaves had become a spongy mountain of mince.

“You’ve gotten quite good at handling that,” Belgrieve said, sounding somewhat impressed. He was happy to know that she was taking over these jobs bit by bit.

Angeline stuck out her chest. “Am I a good girl...?”

“Yeah, you’re a good girl. But you’ve got to keep your wits about you.”

“Goooot it.”

Unlike other herbs used for teas, it was not enough just to chop and dry the lent. The minced leaves needed to first be very briefly blanched in boiling water. Standing with an empty drying mat, Belgrieve headed over to the bubbling pot, where Angeline held a sieve in one hand.

“Are you ready, dad?”

“Go ahead.”

With all her might, Angeline tossed a handful of leaves from her basket into the pot. In no time at all, these once-stiff leaves floated to the top, soft and supple.

“We’re good. Hurry, hurry.”

Angeline scooped them up with her sieve and dumped them onto Belgrieve’s drying rack. A column of steam rose, and it was an interesting sight to behold as the sopping wet surface of each green bit swiftly lost its moisture.

“Hey now, you have to keep at it.”

“Got it.”

Snapping back from being transfixed by the drying leaves, Angeline threw in the next handful. After letting them float for a few seconds, she scooped

them and dumped them onto the mat. Then, once the mat was full, Belgrieve brought out another one. These circular mats woven from vines were made by Belgrieve to pass the time in winter. Drying was a fundamental way to store food, and so there were plenty of drying mats stored in the shed.

When the mats were filled, the leaves were spread out as best they could to minimize overlap and placed where they would receive plenty of sunlight.

Angeline let out a sigh of relief, looking at the water that had turned brown.

“Is it over...?”

“Yeah, good work.”

Belgrieve smiled and patted Angeline on the head. Angeline let out a satisfied chortle, the sieve still in her hands as she stepped in place almost like she was dancing.

“Are we doing it again tomorrow?”

“The mats are all full... Let’s wait until our first batches are finished drying.”

“Okay!”

They needed to be left out until they were bone-dry, or they would grow mold. The early summer sun and breeze would produce enough dried tea to last the whole year.

Angeline mixed up the drying leaves as Belgrieve brewed a cup of tea. It was green with just a hint of brown, faintly tart, and mildly sweet—a familiar flavor with a refreshing aftertaste.

The thought that the leaves she had plucked would be served at every dinner table to come filled her with delight.

Will I do the same job next year? Angeline wondered, yet suddenly she found herself in the grasp of her growing yearning for adventure. At eight years old, it was her desire to be with her father that won out, and she shook her head.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing...”

Angeline sipped at the tea to distract herself. A southerly wind was coming in, conveying clouds like torn cotton. It was a fine day for drying.

Afterword

I'm always complaining about all sorts of things (such as afterwords) and how I want them to be axed, but of course, I don't actually want to do away with them. In short, I have no confidence in my own writing, so I take the initiative by talking down to it and filling my readers with feelings of pity. You could call it a sort of humility, but that would actually be even more pathetic if that's all there was to it. I want to lay it out clearly before anyone reads too deeply into it.

Where I come from, there is a term called "feigned courtesy"—rudeness hidden under a thin veneer of cordiality. But even though lowering your head is simply the fastest way to avoid trouble in Japanese society, that doesn't mean it's right to keep deprecating oneself.

With that said, the author here really has no option but to abase himself before you fine readers who made it all the way to this pointless afterword. Thank you for putting up with me. In any case, when you read this, please treat it like you're reading an internet rant. What I'm trying to get across is that I am—at least partially—doing a bit of sorts, and that you should take it with a grain of salt. You'll just wear yourself out otherwise.

That aside, with all the talk about axing, I do recall a certain author's head being quite literally axed by a black-haired assassin, which was quite a shame. Luckily, I managed to stick it back on with a bit of glue, but now I'm suffering the consequences of my own actions, aren't I? How am I supposed to follow up from there? That's where the writer's block sets in.

This might be completely unrelated, but my local bookstore didn't actually stock any of these books, which I felt to be a bit of a slight. I posted, "I'm going to write a novel set in my hometown where the bookstore is destroyed" on social media. I haven't actually written that novel, nor do I intend to, but the other day I noticed that bookstore had closed its doors for good. The real bookstore went down before it could go down in my novel.

I'm not conceited enough to think it happened because I posted that, but I feel a bit guilty every time I drive past the storefront. Once again, I may be

suffering the consequences of my own actions. With that said, I'd like you to learn from my example. I wrote so many stupid things that they began to reflect on reality. Take that how you will.

Volume 5 is finally published, which is pretty nice. As usual, I'm not rehashing the contents of the book, as I'm wary of readers who read the afterword first. There aren't even any notable spoilers I could give here, but it's always good to go in blind. But this is still the afterword to the work, so I do have to make some references to it.

I've seen a few opinions that one of the characters that starts appearing in this volume does not fit into the world, but the one who knows most about the world is the author, and the author is saying it's okay. I would really appreciate it if you just rolled with it for now. In the first place, this story took a lot of influence from Western music—American music to be precise—so it only makes sense that a *shake-it-up-baby* character would appear eventually.

Putting that aside, Master toi8's wonderful illustrations have added so much more depth to the world. Just look at all that ambience leaking out of the cover. I'd love to buy a knife at that shop. In fact, aren't the illustrations enough?

To those of you who think that, there is a manga version by Urushibara-sensei, and by the time this volume is out (June 2019), the second volume of that should be published as well. It is also serialized in Comic Earth Star, and I think that is a fine way to absorb the content. It is very enjoyable as a manga, and it's far easier to digest than all these pain-in-the-neck paragraphs. Though I feel like that's not the right thing to say to all you readers who hung in for five volumes.

I'll be quite happy as an author if I manage to publish all the way to the last volume, and I won't have to leave the main characters or any of the side characters hanging. It all depends on your continued patronage.

How about we meet again in volume 6?

Mojikakiya, May 2019

Next time I want to
draw the puppy (Lucille)
for the end illustration

~~10.8~~

2019



Bonus Short Story

Ladies' Tea Party

Yuri leaned against the table with her head propped up in her hand and heaved a deep sigh. "Time sure flies..." she mused.

"That came out of nowhere," said Gilmenja, who was sitting across from her.

"I mean, it feels like only yesterday that Leo returned to Orphen."

"Yeah, back then, I thought it was hilarious how that idiot could be a guild master."

"He insisted it was a do-nothing post, and that he would be set for life..."

"You should have just been honest with yourself and followed him back then. It's your own fault for stubbornly staying at the imperial capital."

"Oh, shut up," she replied, as a waitress silently appeared to change out their teapot.

They were in a café in downtown Orphen. The snow had been pouring down from the early morning yet again, but the sky was still its brightest around midday. This somewhat sluggish early afternoon light crept its way through the window, while a calm, quiet air settled around the sparse clientele. From time to time, they could hear the clattering of ceramics punctuating hushed conversations that were too quiet for them to eavesdrop on.

Placing her cup on the table, Gilmenja said, "You've started to look so old and stressed ever since you came here. It's a waste of that cute face of yours, heh heh heh."

"Give me a break... You're lucky, you never seem to get older."

"That's not true."

"It is so. At the least, you haven't changed a bit in ten years. And here I am having to worry about my skin drooping."

"Your sex appeal is going up. You're just too tired to realize it."

"Of course I'm tired..." Yuri's shoulders sagged as she fiddled with the

cup in her hands.

It was her day off. After leaving the desk to Edgar, she had headed out with her trusted friend Gilmenja for a spot of tea. Yuri's job involved sitting down all day to manage adventurers and flip through paperwork, yet she was building up a completely different form of fatigue than when she worked up a sweat. It would be impossible to keep it up without some time to unwind. However, that did not seem to be the only source of Yuri's stress.

Gilmenja giggled and used her fork to scoop up some of the cream that remained on the cake tray.

"If you plan on dawdling after coming all the way here, then what was the point of leaving your job?"

"You've got it all backward. I'm dawdling *because* I've come all the way here," Yuri sulkily protested.

For once, Gilmenja showed a tired face. "You're an idiot. You know that?"

"I'm very well aware... *Sigh*, what to do..."

"Act your age for once. I'm getting irritated just watching you."

"Then what about you? How's *your* love life treating you?"

"Do I look like I have one? Heh heh heh."

"Hey, Gil... Have you ever thought of settling down somewhere?"

"I'm plenty settled already. I'm going home to my beloved darling every night."

"You don't have to put up a front with me."

"Good grief, each and every one of you... Why did you all have to grow up to be so serious?" Gilmenja shrugged and poured a refill from the new teapot. "You really need a change of pace. How about going along with Ange's strategy for a bit? You might be able to nab that quiet guy while you're at it."

"Don't be stupid, you can't even compare Mr. Bell to Leo. Leo would give up before it even became a match."

"You know him too well."

"And what about you? Mr. Bell's kind, and a hard worker. He's prime real estate."

"An interesting prospect, but the thought of having Ange call me 'mom' makes me sick."

"Hmm, so you're saying you'd go for it if Ange was out of the picture?"

Yuri smugly suggested.

However, Gilmenja was not one to falter at this, and she calmly brought her cup to her mouth. “Then let me ask you the same question. Would you go along with Ange if Leo was out of the picture?”

“Hey, that’s not fair... Hmm, I probably wouldn’t, I don’t think. True, he’s a good guy, but...”

“If you understand that, then don’t ask.”

“Well, there’s no guarantee it’s the same for you. We all have our own tastes.”

“That really rings different, coming from the gal who fell for *Leo* of all people.”

“Are you looking to get hit?”

“Oh no, your fist would break me, my dear.”

“Don’t think I didn’t notice you dancing around the subject. So in the end, how is it with you?”

“Same as you. It’s a real problem; say a prime real estate opportunity comes with a nosy little sister living in the back hut. I wouldn’t be able to flirt in peace.”

“Heh heh, so it really would be possible without Ange, then.”

“Who knows?”

“Hey now, quit beating around the bush.”

“What are you talking about? You’re the one who keeps beating around the bush. How about you be honest with Leo instead of me?”

“Th-That’s not what I... Ah, you’re as unpleasant as ever.”

“I wouldn’t say that.”

Gilmenja glanced at the height of the veiled sun outside the window and stood.

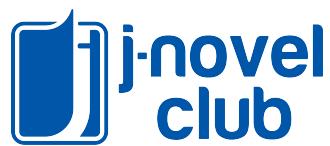
“Leaving so soon?” Yuri asked, narrowing her eyes.

“Yeah, I have to see my beloved darling.”

“There you go again. Sigh... Anyways, thanks.”

“Do your best, heh heh heh.” Gilmenja put on her coat and made her dashing retreat.

Yuri stared out the window and sighed. The snow came down, sprinkling the cityscape in an alabaster sheen. It didn’t look like it would stop anytime soon.



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My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer: Volume
5
by MOJIKAKIYA

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