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

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

- VOLUME 7 -

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[J-NOVEL CLUB]

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Returned an S-Rank Adventurer

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CHARACTERS



◆ Belgrieve ◆

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



◆ Angeline ◆

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



◆ Anessa ◆

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



◆ Miriam ◆

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



◆ Kasim ◆

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



◆ Marguerite ◆

Grandniece of Graham, and the only daughter of elven royalty. She may act rude, but she has a sincere nature.



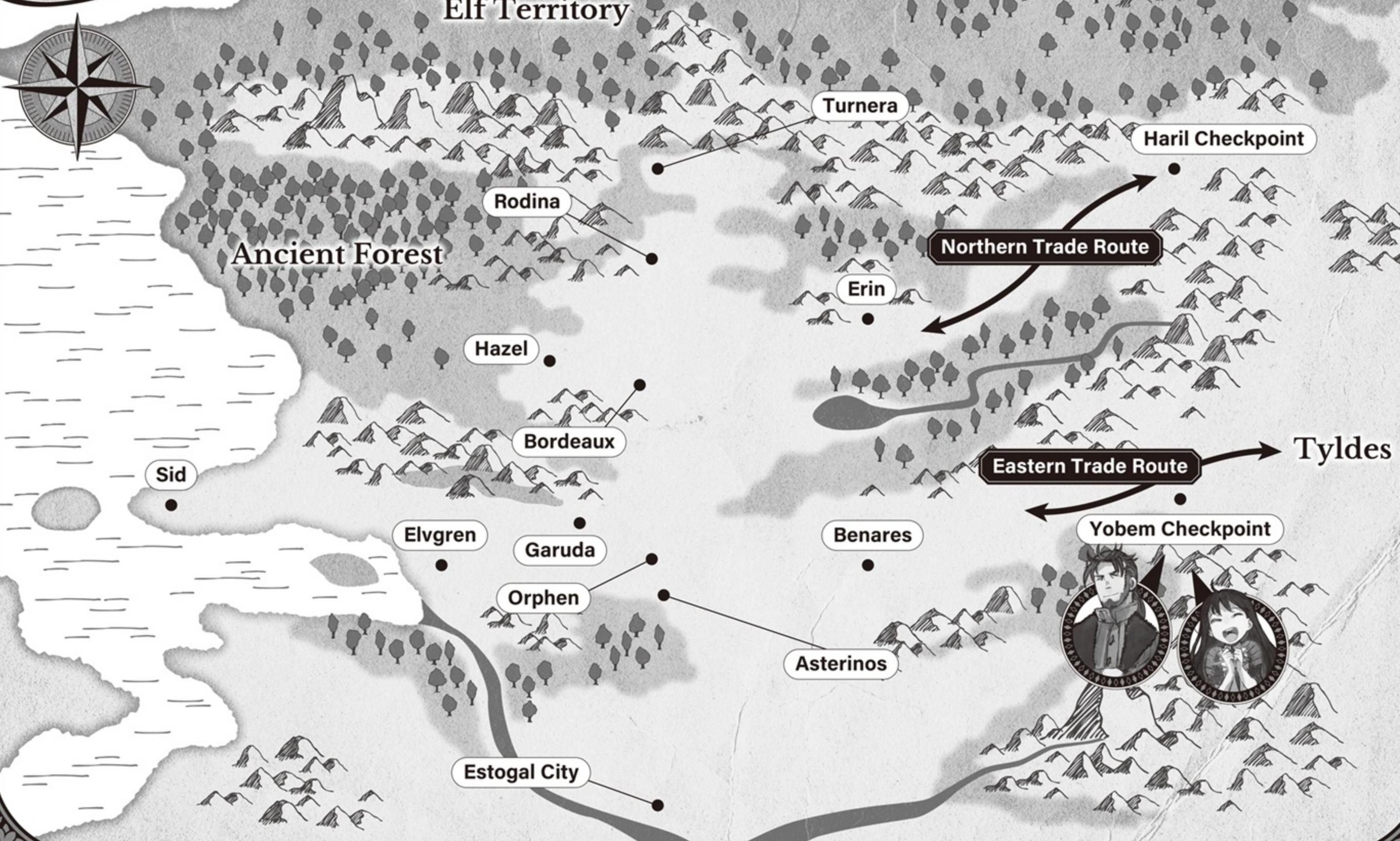
◆ Duncan ◆

A broadminded adventurer. With a girl waiting for him in Turnera, he set off on one last adventure.



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

WORLD MAP



STORY

Belgrieve's party resolved various problems as they made their way from Orphen to Turnera. Once they arrived, Angeline immediately took to her new younger brother Mit, and in tranquil Turnera, everyone passed their days in peace.

But in the midst of all this, an unsettling miasma filled the town, until they found themselves ambushed by a sudden attack from animated trees. This ancient forest, driven by a lingering malice, was drawn by a desire to consume the demonic energy contained within Mit.

The young boy and Graham were captured and dragged off into the forest, which was quickly transforming into a labyrinthian dungeon. Belgrieve and Angeline, hot on their trail, managed to release the souls trapped within the woods and warped by vile intent, saving their captive friends in the process.

“Sis... Come back soon.”

Mit saw them off as they set off on a new journey. Their destination this time: the Earth Navel, where they hope to find the Exalted Blade, Percival.



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

CHAPTER 84

HE LOOKS LIKE A LION

He looks like a lion—such was the impression of everyone who saw the man. He was tall with broad shoulders, and his sharp eyes and the deep creases chiseled around the bridge of his nose made it hard for anyone to approach him. His straw-colored hair, speckled with white, was untamed and overgrown, and—perhaps due to its propensity to curl—it seemed to billow even when there was no wind to carry it. It was almost like a lion's mane.

The man stooped down by the edge of a chasm. It was wide and deep; the mist within made it impossible to tell how far it went by the naked eye. The steps carved into the rock face descended along the rim, stretching ever downward. A tepid wind rose from within, causing the man's hair to sway. It was strangely damp and rancid—certainly not the sort of atmosphere to leisurely take in.

The shadows of other visitors dotted the rim of the pit. They all seemed curious about what was happening inside. Some were alone—like the man—but most came in groups of two or more.

Suddenly, there was a pricking deep within his chest and he nearly burst into a coughing fit. The man scowled and clutched his chest. He closed his eyes and steadied his breath.

“Cough...”

Grabbing the scented sachet dangling from his neck, he shoved it against his nose. The refreshing scent of several herbs was carried through ether-oil vapors, flowing through his nose and back down his throat. Now that his labored breathing had calmed, the man took a deep breath of air.

He looked at the sachet in his hand. It was an old, small, tattered sack made of faded cloth with frayed embroidery. The herbs and ether oil were not the same as when it had first been made. Whenever the smells faded and lost their effect, the man would switch out the ingredients. However, the recipe and the sachet remained unchanged.

He crushed it in his grip, raising his arm to cast it to the void—but it was as if someone had grabbed him by the wrist. His raised arm quivered until he finally resigned himself and put it back down.

“Dammit...” he muttered in disgust as he tucked away the sachet. *How many times is it now? It's like the past has come back to haunt me*, the man thought, clicking his tongue. Despite his many attempts to get rid of it, he never could. Even if he accidentally dropped it, someone would always find it and return it to him. He could not get rid of it; he could not run away. If he didn’t rely on it, he would frequently struggle just to breathe.

Someone once told him, “Fifty years is a long time to reflect on. Of course, you’ll find the good and the bad and many things in between.”

Perhaps that person had been right. But when he reflected on his own life, he could not shake the feeling that the bad far outweighed the good. It had happened when he was seventeen years old, and ever since that day, it was like his life had been drained of color.

He didn’t know what he was supposed to do. All he knew was that he would forevermore be tormented by guilt and anger with no outlet. The feelings would die down when he swung his sword, and so he continued to fight. Whenever he was left alone with his thoughts, his mind would take a turn for the worse, so he had to keep moving. Or else.

He heard the sound of light steps coming up behind him.

“How have you been?”

The man did not turn. He simply shook his head as the footsteps approached his side.

The girl wore a fur cap with what looked to be ear flaps hanging off the sides. On closer inspection, these were actually her doglike floppy ears.

“It’s that muggy time of year, baby...” she muttered in a singsong voice.

The man silently closed his eyes while her own bright-blue eyes were fixed on him, blinking curiously. “That cape must be suffocating,” she said.

“You’re as noisy as ever...” he finally replied.

He stood up, his old, weathered cape rustling against the clothing beneath it.

The girl looked up at him. "Where are you going?"

He ignored her and walked away.

Though the girl watched his shrinking back for a while, she eventually gave up and turned to the hole. As always, it was shrouded in a faint veil of swirling fog.

Soon, the man's spot had been taken; he was replaced by a black-haired woman wearing clothing from the east that overlapped with itself at the front. She was poised with a spear, a doubtful look on her face as she glanced over her shoulder at the man.

"He was in a worse mood than usual today"

"As the people of the past used to say, '*A woman's heart is as fickle as the autumn sky.*' Then, what is a man's heart?"

"Like I know. So how is it? Do you feel anything yet?"

The girl's dog ears flapped about as she shook her head.

The woman sighed. "Good grief... The anticipation is killing me."

"But it's better than that last job."

"I won't argue... I wonder how Mr. Bell and Ange are doing..."

The woman stuck the butt end of her spear into the ground and leaned against it like a cane.

○

From Orphen through Benares to the east, then through the eastern checkpoint Yobem, and finally to Tyldes—this was the Estogal dukedom's eastern trade route. The northern checkpoint Haril had the added utility of providing access to elven territory, but it would be sealed off by snow in the winter. Yobem, meanwhile, prospered in trade all year round. Alongside the southern route, which connected to the imperial capital, it was one of the greatest trade routes in the dukedom.

As goods circulated, so too would people. A fair few stagecoaches could ride side by side down the wide highway, and lines of merchants would cross east and west.

The checkpoint was stationed in a mountain range that divided Tylde and Estogal and was based around a sturdy fort that had once proven a great asset in an old war. The bulky buildings that served as screening stations took great inspiration from its design.

With so many people gathering around the checkpoint, it was only a matter of time before a city had sprung up around it. Both sides of the checkpoint were flanked by inns for travelers, and there were plenty of shops that dealt in goods for a long journey. Adventurers were also a common sight.

Since it was on the national border, the military had a notable presence, and being an important point of commerce, it was economically blessed. Although it technically fell under the rule of Estogal, the local lord wielded great authority. It had grown to the point where it acted as something of an independent city-state. Such was the city of Yobem, a key waypoint between nations.

Angeline tugged on Belgrieve's sleeve. "Dad, look. Those horses are huge..."

Several horses—all of them rather large and burly—had been tethered near the fence. Their hooves were properly maintained and looked like upturned bowls—naturally, without the slightest crack. Then, they were fitted with hefty, dazzling horseshoes, further contributing to their overbearing physique.

Belgrieve stroked his beard, impressed. They were all priceless horses who would do splendid work if given a plow.

"I guess that's Tyldean horses for you... We might be borrowing them along the way," he mischievously said, which caused Angeline to immediately freeze up. She was terrible at riding, and the mere thought of riding a horse that big made her shudder. Belgrieve cackled at the sight of this and patted Angeline's head.



"Just kidding. Maybe if it was just you and me, but we've got too many people. If we're riding anywhere, it will be on a wagon."

Angeline patted her chest in relief. Then, she suddenly turned to Belgrieve. "Um... If it were just the two of us, we would be on horses, then?"

"Who could say?" Belgrieve chuckled.

Angeline poutingly puffed out her cheeks.

They had parted ways with the blue-haired peddler in Orphen and made it to Yobem on an eastbound stagecoach. Having disembarked there, the party was waiting in line to complete the paperwork that would get them through the checkpoint.

The massive line meant a long wait ahead, and since there was no point in having everyone loiter around all day, the others had departed from Angeline and Belgrieve to explore the city. It was about time for them to return with some food.

Before they had gotten in line, Belgrieve had been fascinated by the various goods on display in the street stalls. These wares seemed to be a match for Orphen's markets in terms of sheer variety. The ironwork made with the dukedom's domestically mined ores was of very high quality and a cornerstone of their trade. Other goods that came from Tyldes included silk, cotton thread and cloth, fine clothing and rugs woven in Keatai, spices, and horses, among other things. There was also wheat, dried herbs, wool, and livestock that had been brought from Orphen.

The merchants who came from Tyldes and Keatai gave off a foreign flair with their unusual attire, and it was exciting just to watch them. Admittedly, he had seen those same merchants in Orphen before, but they still did wonders to rouse his traveler's spirit. Or perhaps they served as a powerful reminder that he was about to enter a foreign culture.

This would be Belgrieve's first time crossing a border. He scratched his head at the sudden realization that he was far too excited about this for someone his age. It was apparently to be a first for Angeline as well, so it seemed the whole family was enthused. Everything around them was moving busily, and Angeline would gleefully report every little thing she noticed to Belgrieve.

They had gotten a little closer to the checkpoint when Kasim returned with the others. "Hey, sorry to keep you waiting. It's so crowded everywhere, I could hardly buy

anything."

"And there's too much to choose from. It all looked divine."

"That's because you kept hunting for the sweets, Merry."

"What does it matter, huh? Sweet things are best when you're tired."

"How are you tired already?"

"Shut it, Maggie."

Marguerite cackled as Miriam prodded at her.

"Are you sure you want to come with us, Maggie?" Belgrieve asked, scratching his cheek. "It's not too late to turn back."

"Enough of that, Bell. How could you leave me out of such an interesting adventure?"

"Well, then..." *What am I going to tell Graham?* he wondered as he inspected the elf girl.

When they stopped by Orphen, the party had naturally dropped by the guild and church orphanage to catch up with their friends. Lionel and the other guild folks were delighted, if a bit disappointed that a powerful party of adventurers wasn't going to return just yet. Still, they wished them safety on their journey.

Marguerite, who had been recently promoted to D-Rank, insisted she would tag along. She was a girl who had originally left her home to see the world; no doubt she couldn't stand by when she heard of a journey to far-off southern lands.

Belgrieve had been against it at first, but he ultimately could not stop her. A mere forty years of wisdom was not enough to stifle a young warrior's blazing enthusiasm.

Their meal consisted of spiced meat and vegetables sandwiched between thin, round slices of bread along with a bottle of wine. The sweets Miriam settled on were bite-size balls of wheat flour, kneaded with milk fat and simmered with spices, not unlike balls of milk in a strong sauce that was evocative of honey. They were so fatty and sweet that Belgrieve had his fill after one bite, but the girls seemed to relish them. Belgrieve put a hand to his chest as he watched them.

"That's pretty strong... I'm going to get heartburn at this rate."

"Heh heh, you'd better get used to it soon, Bell. You might have other options here, but we'll get more of these flavors the farther south we go."

I see. So this is southern flavor, Belgrieve mused. Perhaps exotic tastes such as these were part of the joy of traveling, but this was a bit much for someone with little travel experience—not that complaining about it would get him anywhere.

He took a swig of wine and patted his full belly as he looked around.

Although there were quite a few faces that wouldn't feel out of place in the dukedom, there were also plenty of those with shallower creases and softer features that were more common in the east. Some wore peculiar clothing, and when he looked at them curiously, they would occasionally glare back. When the demon appeared near Orphen, the checkpoint's security had become rather strict, and Orphen's army was lending some troops here as well.

Tyldes was not a homogenous nation. It was a multiethnic country of many peoples crowded together. To be more precise, they had hardly any national consistency. Each tribe or group would occasionally send a representative to exchange opinions at a council, but there was no monarch who reigned over the entirety of its land. Instead, each group and tribe would have its own ruler, and there were many powerful houses that held sway of their own. Skirmishes and infighting were a frequent occurrence. Tyldes was considered a federation. Not long ago, one of the tribes deployed its cavalry to the checkpoint, causing quite a tense standoff. The tension was seemingly gone now.

There were many different peoples in Tyldes, but most were nomadic. They shepherded flocks of sheep and goats while wandering endlessly through the vast plains. Their horse-riding skills were astounding, and every tribe had its own renowned warriors. During the numerous battles between Rhodesia and Tyldes, the Tyldes horsemen had apparently managed to torment the Rhodesian army. Now that he had seen the gallant horses of Tyldes, Belgrieve could see why. He nodded to himself as the line shifted, inching him ever so slightly closer to the front.

"Still," Marguerite said, poking the sword on Belgrieve's back, "I never thought my granduncle would leave this thing with you..."

"I can't believe it myself... Maggie, are you able to wield her?"

"Nope. I'm better with slender blades, and we get along terribly." Marguerite gave the sword a light punch. The sword offered no reply.

She chuckled. "You usually snap at me. Trying to act cool now, huh?"

"She's acting differently, right? She's only quiet when Graham and dad are around..."

"You get me? She's a nasty little sword, she is. She let it get to her head when they started calling her a holy blade."

Both Marguerite and Angeline could apparently hear the sword's voice, though Belgrieve himself never had before. He could synergize with the sword, but it was always silent in his hands. *What's so different about us?* he wondered, his head tilted as he mulled it over. But navel-gazing wouldn't get him anywhere, so he stopped thinking about it and instead turned his thoughts to the future.

They were headed south—but that didn't mean that they would be blindly traveling in that general direction. There were roads that stretched across the vast grassy expanse of Tyldes, and stepping off those roads would almost certainly leave them completely lost. They were in unfamiliar lands, and this required an added level of caution.

Hoping to glean some information, Belgrieve initiated a conversation with a peddler who was also waiting in line. When Belgrieve asked him if they could head south along the mountain range once they were through the checkpoint, the peddler looked flabbergasted.

"That's a huge no-no, boss. Those mountains are jam-packed with bandits and fiends, and the roads aren't well kept. Sure, you won't run out of road, but only the reckless ones willingly follow those dangerous paths. I'd say your best bet is to head to Khalifa and join a caravan headed south from there."

Khalifa was a big city situated where the main eastbound path intersected with the main southbound path. It was a trade center, and many merchants considered it home. It was no exaggeration to call it the biggest city in the entirety of Tyldes.

I guess the safe route is best, Belgrieve thought, tousling his beard. He pretended not to see his adventurer comrades' faces light up at the words "dangerous" and "reckless." At least, he tried to ignore them, until Angeline tugged at his sleeve.

“Let’s go on an adventure... dad.”

“No, we can’t. Why go out of our way to take the dangerous road?”

“Hmph...”

“Hmm, well, I don’t see any danger with these party members.”

“There are no absolutes. Not with adventurers, Merry.”

“And you’re as stubborn as ever.” Kasim laughed.

Anessa shrugged. “Well, we’re just tagging along on Mr. Bell’s journey this time around. We should follow his directions.”

“There you go, pretending to be a good girl...”

“What?!”

“What’s an adventurer without a little adventure, Mr. Bell?”

Belgrieve shot Miriam a troubled look. “I’m not even an adventurer...”

“Huh...?”

Wait, really? The five members besides Belgrieve all exchanged looks. They followed his lead as if it were only natural and fought side by side with him as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Apparently, they had come under the impression that Belgrieve had made his comeback as an adventurer. However, Belgrieve did not have an adventurer’s plate. In reality, he was nothing more than a farmer.

“How are you supposed to be a farmer when you’ve got a holy sword and you’re fighting toe to toe with S-Rank adventurers?”

“That’s what I’d like to know...”

Belgrieve smiled wryly, placing a hand on the sword hanging over his back. The sword was silent. It was large, with a firm sense of substance, but so light that he could practically only feel the weight of its sheath. Yet, when he held the hilt, it swung with tremendous weight. It was quite a mystery.

Marguerite discontentedly stared at the sword. “There’s no danger when you’ve got that thing...”

“I don’t know if I’m using her properly yet.” From the time he borrowed the sword to the time of their departure, he had trained with Graham numerous times, but this sword was still a hurdle for him. Though he could swing it easily enough, he still couldn’t wield it as he could the blade that had been his partner for many long years.

“Hmph, Bell, you coward!” Marguerite pouted.

The line inched forward once more.

Angeline jumped onto Belgrieve’s back, even with the sword separating them. He hurriedly reached his hands around to support her.

“I want to go on an adventure with my dad!”

“This journey is already an adventure, as far as dad is concerned...” Belgrieve replied.

“Wrong! All wrong! I want to dive into a dungeon and cut my way through a precarious situation together!”

“Didn’t we just do that in Turnera?”

“That’s just not it! I mean, it has to be a bit more...”

“You don’t get it, Mr. Bell?” Anessa tiredly asked.

Belgrieve didn’t know how to react. It wasn’t that he was completely oblivious to where Angeline was coming from. However, his own adventurer aspirations—the ones he thought he had carried all this time—had faded to such a degree that even he was shocked to realize it. At this point, he had absolutely no intentions of returning to being an adventurer.

And yet, he still wondered why he had continued to train his body and sword even after retreating to Turnera. It was not because he wanted to succeed in adventuring. He had been enticed by Angeline, who continued to show talent, but it was mostly because he still felt a sense of competition with his old comrades. A part of him still wanted to stand shoulder to shoulder with them one day.

Now, he had reunited with Kasim, and he was on his way to see Percival. Whether he was an adventurer or not was irrelevant. He had a vague sense—an intuition—that he was standing where they were already, and he found he wasn't so fixated on being an adventurer after all. What he had longed for in his heart was not might—it was a bond with his comrades.

"That might be a bit unfair," he mumbled. *Am I just trying to distance myself from a position of responsibility?* His thoughts, and his gaze, wandered. How could he be like this, after teaching his daughter the true essence of an adventurer? If he was like this, how could he have possibly lectured her?

Still clinging to his back, Angeline reached up to ruffle Belgrieve's hair.

"It's not fair, dad!"

"Urgh..." She couldn't possibly have read his mind, but for a moment it felt like Belgrieve's heart had skipped a beat.

Angeline puffed out her cheeks and tugged on Belgrieve's earlobes. "I know this is your journey to meet Mr. Percy... But we're together, and I want to go on an adventure!"

"Hey... Ange, adventure isn't the only enjoyment there is to a journey, right? Seeing an unfamiliar land and meeting new people, that's all fun in and of itself too. There may be thrills if we go along the mountains, but we might lose the chance to see Khalifa."

"Ugh..."

Angeline buried her face in his shoulder, dissatisfied. Anessa and Miriam exchanged a resigned look and sighed. Marguerite fell into a sulky silence. Kasim alone had a meaningful smile on his face as he stroked his beard.

"Are you really sure about that, Bell?"

"Now look here, Kasim. It's not like we set out with the desire to go on an adventure."

"Not what I meant. Sure, we're off to see Percy, but he's at the Earth Navel, right? It's a hive of powerful fiends. You think your senses will snap back, just like that, if you go the whole way without danger? And if you're not used to that sword, then shouldn't you try it out some in real combat?"

“Hmm...”

Kasim cackled and pressed down his hat. “And we have old Graham’s request too. Going without fighting’s an impossible task.”

“I... guess you’re right.” If they wanted to obtain the materials Graham was looking for, then fighting high-ranking fiends was simply unavoidable. Avoiding battle up to that point did lower the risk, but he needed to maintain that sense he had found in his practice. Losing it would only make him more anxious.

Kasim folded his arms behind his head and grinned. “Hey, you could just watch us fight from behind if you want. That’s where you really shine. But you do need to protect yourself, at least...”

“All right already, I got it. It was my bad, so quit teasing me.”

Once Belgrieve threw in the towel, Angeline delightedly leaped from his back. She circled around and peered into his face.

“And?”

“I’ll consider going along the mountains. But not without a plan. We might be braving danger, but we’re not heading out to die. We must think of ways to keep ourselves as safe as possible. That is my condition.”

“Got it! Hee hee... Finally, an adventure with dad!”

Angeline nimbly stepped back and patted Anessa, Miriam, and Marguerite on the shoulder. They all happily giggled.

“Heh heh, you know what you’re doing, Mr. Kasim.”

“So even Mr. Bell can get cornered.”

“Hey, it was nothing special...”

Marguerite prodded Belgrieve. “It’s the perfect opportunity to train with that sword! Just give in!”

“Fine... I give.” Belgrieve’s smile had a hint of resignation. The line inched forward

again. The checkpoint was still a long way away.

CHAPTER 85

WHEN THE DOOR WAS PUSHED OPEN

When the door was pushed open, a summer breeze forced its way past the red-haired boy and flooded into the room. The descending afternoon sun filtered through the windows that had been left open, revealing all the particles of dust swept up in the airflow.

Sitting on the bed by the wall, the straw-haired boy looked up in surprise. "Hey."

"How are you feeling?"

"Not bad, but—*cough, hack!*"

The boy doubled over as he broke into a coughing fit. Scowling, he clutched his chest.

"Dammit... It's just my throat... That's the only thing that won't get better."

"It's because you inhaled it directly..."

The red-haired boy produced an apple from the basket he had brought with him. He began to peel the skin with masterful hands.

Their last dungeon crawl had ended when the flaxen-haired boy stepped on a trap and inhaled the poison mist that came from it. Luckily, his life was not in danger, but he had been bedridden for several days. While he was out of commission, the other three party members took care of smaller jobs, either as a group or individually, to make ends meet. The ginger-haired boy had just returned from an herb-gathering quest.

Biting down on an apple slice, the blond grumbled, "I can't stop here. This can't be it..."

"No use getting impatient. You should be thankful you're still alive."

"Of course, and I am... Are you heading out on another herb-gathering quest after this?"

“Pretty much.”

“What about the other two?”

“Couldn’t say. They both said they had something to buy, so they’re off today.”

The auburn-haired boy nonchalantly bit down on an apple. Meanwhile, his towheaded companion sullenly leaned against the wall to the side of the bed.

“Sorry... Starting tomorrow, I’ll get back to—*cough, wheeze!*”

“Don’t push yourself, I tell you. I’ll be too anxious to leave the vanguard to you before you’ve completely recovered.”

“If I recover, that is... This feels chronic to me...”

It was at that moment that the door opened again, and an elven girl and a brown-haired boy made their way inside.

“Howdy, how are you feeling?”

“Not bad, not bad. Can’t stop coughing, though...”

“Thought so. We got a bit of the poison in our eyes and throats, and that was enough to sting like hell. It’s no wonder you’re down for the count after ingesting so much of it,” the brown-haired boy observed, cackling.

“Shut it. What are you even here for?”

“For you. Who else?” the elf said, spreading the contents of her bag over the table. There were several varieties of herbs and fruits, as well as a bottle of ether oil.

The brown-haired boy grinned. “After looking all over the place, we finally have everything. You’d better be grateful.”

So the two of them got to work mincing the herbs and fruits, adding them to a large bowl. The ether oil was poured over the concoction.

“What are you going to do with that?” asked the red-haired boy, who was peeking over their shoulders curiously.

"You'll see," said the girl. She picked up the bowl and brought it to the bed. "Now take a whiff of this."

Despite the dubious look on his face, the blond brought his face closer and took a deep breath.

"It's... kinda refreshing. I guess."

"Isn't it? Did that prickling in your throat die down a bit?"

"It did. Ah, will this make me better?"

"I'm not so sure. It could just be symptomatic relief. As far as I can tell, the damage has been done."

"Seriously...?" The blond's shoulders slumped, his disappointment palpable.

The chestnut-haired boy and the elf exchanged looks.

"Now, now. It settles down when you inhale it. Just carry it around, and..."

"How am I supposed to walk around with a liquid? I have enough medicines to deal with already. How will I grab the right one when I need it?"

"Hmm?" The red-haired boy thought for a moment. He folded his arms and finally said, "So, in short, you're using ether oil to draw out the right components, right?"

"Yeah, that's right. As long as they've soaked long enough, you can take out the herbs."

"Ether oil... There's a coagulant for it, I believe. Can you harden it and carry it around? Put it in a sachet and hang it somewhere important. That way, you won't mix it up with anything else."

The dark-haired boy clapped his hands. "That's it! Great idea! So how's that? You can do it, right?"

The elf girl nodded. "Right... If we reduce the amount of coagulant, we could get it to vaporize. Hey, good thinking."

"Well..." The red-haired boy bashfully scratched his head at the compliment.

The flaxen-haired boy took another bite of his apple. "So if I have that, I can be back on my feet tomorrow, yeah? All right! I'll make up for all the time I missed out on!"

"It's good to be motivated, but don't get ahead of yourself again."

"We don't want to end up needing another medicine now, do we? Heh heh heh."

"I-I know!" the straw-haired boy mumbled and looked away, the elf girl giggling at the sight.

Their crossing had only taken them past a single stone wall, and yet the feeling of being in a foreign land was already palpable. In point of fact, the wall ran along the national border, and though the architecture hadn't changed much on this side of it, the facial features of those they passed trended more strongly towards Tyldes, and the scent of spices in the air had grown stronger as well. Though the architecture was generally the same, the decorations seemed subtly different from the imperial style. They were outwardly composed, but their hearts were fluttering so fiercely they didn't know what to do about it.

Angeline looked around, breathing it all in deeply. "It's even like... the air itself is different."

"Oh come on. You just left the checkpoint. It's not gonna be *that* different, right?"

"Do you really think so, Anne?" Miriam asked.

"Well... hmm...?" It seemed Anessa was also starting to feel the foreign atmosphere. She crossed her arms, grumbling to herself. For her part, Miriam seemed rather jolly, and Marguerite exuded joy from every inch of her body.

In any case, standing around giddily wouldn't get them anywhere. *I'll just cause frustration for dad like that*, she thought, puffing out her chest with a sense of adult responsibility. However, when she looked to her father, she saw his eyes were also eagerly darting around at the sights despite his calm exterior. As a matter of fact, Kasim was the only one who seemed truly unfazed.

Oh, so dad and I are exactly alike. The thought delighted Angeline.

"What now? Do we look for a caravan?" she asked, taking hold of his arm.

"Right... It might be quicker to go through the guild."

"Yep, and we should take on a guard request while we're at it. Safe travel and money—that's two birds with one stone," Kasim suggested, chuckling.

Indeed, their party boasted two S-Rank adventurers—not to discount Anessa and Miriam either, who were both AAA-Rank. And while Marguerite's rank was low, her actual combat abilities put her in the upper echelon of adventurers. Then there was Belgrieve too—that went without saying. Surely anyone would pay good money for this lineup.

Grinning, Angeline hugged Belgrieve's arm to her all the more tightly. "Then let's go to the guild, dad."

"Yeah. But it is a new town; we need to take care not to get lost..."

Belgrieve narrowed his eyes, looked around until he found a guidepost, and leisurely made his way for it. The road was wide to allow for carriages to come and go, and it was lined with shops of all sizes along both sides that were teeming with activity. There were even peddlers who, as soon as they cleared the checkpoint, spread their wares out and opened up shop on the spot.

Down the main road—which was shrouded in a constant dust cloud from all the traffic—and then along a side street, they found the guild. It was a large, two-story building of stone and wood, and its door never rested shut even for a moment. There were several adventurer-looking sorts loitering around outside because the building was apparently too crowded to enter. And it was terribly boisterous within—just as lively as the guild in Orphen, though there were more people adorned in the fashion of Tyldes. Angeline acknowledged that her eyes may simply have been drawn to them more as a consequence of traveling in a foreign land.

"Now what to do...? For starters, we should head to the desk and talk with the guild staff..." Belgrieve suggested, stroking his beard.

"It'll be a lot quicker to send Ange and Kasim," said Anessa.

Belgrieve nodded. "Right. They might be keener on listening to S-Rank adventurers. Can you handle it?"

"Leave it to me!" It was a joy to be relied upon by her father. Angeline grinned as she dragged a rather amused Kasim through the crowds. Just like in Orphen, there was a counter reserved only for high-ranking adventurers, and it was relatively empty when compared to the other one. Smaller guilds would group all adventurers together at one counter, but the more adventurers a guild housed, the more counters they required. This was natural for a city as large as Yobem.

It was not long before they were standing before a smiling receptionist. "Hello. What can I do for you today?"

"We're searching for anyone headed south along the mountains," Angeline said, passing her gold adventurer plate across the table.

At first, the receptionist was taken aback. "S-Rank... Are you looking for an escort request, then?"

"You got it. We're headed that way regardless, so we'll work for peanuts," said Kasim. Seeing yet another S-Rank plate left the receptionist agape.

"Two S-Ranks... U-Understood. I'll see what I can do. Please fill out your information here."

Angeline began to fill out the parchment paper the woman had furnished. The first name she wrote rocked the receptionist with yet another surprise.

"Angeline... The Black-Haired Valkyrie who received a medal directly from Archduke Estogal?"

"Something like that."

So they know about that, even all the way out here, Angeline thought, scratching her head. The receptionist looked back and forth between the paper and Angeline, her cheeks flushed with excitement.

"Wow, you're a demon-slaying hero! I hope we have a caravan for you..."

Competition would be intense if a high-ranking adventurer was willing to take a job for cheap. In this situation, the guild's role would be to make sure it didn't devolve into chaos. In some cases, they would directly negotiate with a potential client and keep the matter under wraps. Regardless of the circumstances, they were always trying to

arrange requests in a way that took the adventurers into consideration.

Of course, this was a special perk of achieving a high adventurer rank. Lower-ranked adventurers hardly got to choose their own work, and they were the ones competing for every available job listing. It was an adventurer's competency that allowed the guild to create new jobs for them on demand.

The receptionist flipped through a file folder, her brow furrowed. "Um, how long are you planning to stay in Yobem?"

"We don't have any concrete plans. If we find anyone headed south, we intend to go with them... We are all strangers to Tyldes, you see."

"Understandable... Then it won't be a round trip... Hmm... Along the mountains, and just one way..."

"We're not in any rush," Kasim insisted. "Take your time searching. How about we drop by again tomorrow?"

"Oh, um, of course! Thank you, that's a huge load off my mind." Relieved, the receptionist smiled at Kasim as he tucked his plate away.

"All right, let's get back then, Ange. We've come all the way to Yobem—what's the harm in spending a day wandering around and taking in the sights?"

"You're right," Angeline agreed, nodding.

The sun was still high in the sky, so they could have fun strolling around once they decided where they would be staying. She couldn't buy anything too bulky, but a few snacks should work out fine.

She returned to the lobby with Kasim to find it rather boisterous. After weaving through the crowd, she was greeted by a rampaging Marguerite, with Bell desperately restraining her. At her feet were several male adventurers groaning in pain.

"You like that? Now, who's next? Who else wants a piece of me?!"

"Give it a rest, Maggie! Settle down!"

"Shut it! Let go, Bell! You don't get to look down on me just because I'm an elf!"

Though she was flailing her arms around in her exasperation, she suddenly stopped as if a rope had been pulled around her. Her eyes flitted around in bewilderment.

"Wh-What?"

"What do you think you're doing, you headstrong hooligan?" Kasim asked, heaving a sigh. He had apparently rendered her immobile through magic. Belgrieve, finally able to release her, let out a long breath. Marguerite was howling, "I'll remember this, Kasim!" all the while.

"What happened?" Angeline asked, frowning.

Anessa broke off from the peanut gallery to explain. "They were picking a fight, and she took them up on it."

"Right, right. Happens all the time." Miriam giggled.

Marguerite's fine elven features had caught the crowd's attention. At first, the men had approached her trying to hit on her, but this soon turned to insults and ridicule after she refused to give them the time of day. This sent Marguerite into a fiery rage, and she hammered them down in the blink of an eye.

Both Anessa and Miriam had experienced something similar when they were first starting out, and they understood Marguerite's sentiment. Thus the two of them stood by in silence, but Belgrieve had desperately tried to put an end to it. By the end of it, he was the only one exhaling a weary sigh.

"I won't tell you not to be angry. But can't you try to resolve things a bit more peacefully...?"

"Can it, Bell! How's an adventurer supposed to do business if you let people belittle you?!" Now that she couldn't move, she was putting all her energy into bellowing. The fallen men were quickly carried away by their apparent comrades. The gathered crowd simply watched with intrigue.

Kasim stooped down and smacked the top of her head with the palm of his hand. "I get it. You're hot-blooded. Lovely. But we're supposed to stay in Yobem until they find a request for us. I figured we'd be able to take it easy, but now you're making us stand out in a bad way. Keep it up and I'll go tattling to old Graham."

"Huh?! That's got to be against the rules!" Marguerite inched towards him like a worm.

Angeline giggled. "As lively as ever... Should we search for an inn, then?"

"Good grief... They didn't have a request?"

"Well, there'd be chaos if they started advertising two S-Ranks ready to work at bargain rates. They'll do some searching on their end and get back to us."

Seeing Kasim's knowing smile, Belgrieve shrugged. "If you put it that way... Very well. There are a few things I want to buy, so let's start with finding an inn."

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The party left the guild and walked down the crowded street, coming across numerous inns. But the dense foot traffic only made it harder to choose one; they popped into a few inns and asked around, but all were booked solid.

Marguerite was released once they were a good distance from the guild. She groaned as she rolled her numb wrists and ankles. "Dammit... You should have just let me beat them to a pulp."

"I'm telling you, learn to know the right time and place. Doing it in the guild gives off a bad impression. At least drag them into the back alley first."

"Um, Kasim, is that really the issue...?" Belgrieve asked, his shoulders slumping. For their part, Angeline and her friends merely laughed at the display.

Adventurers lived for battle, so they were invariably quick to throw hands. But that didn't mean they should go about causing trouble wherever they went either. As a former adventurer, Belgrieve could sympathize to an extent, but his naturally calm disposition and all the time he spent farming had certainly blunted any excess fighting spirit he might otherwise have been driven by. It was quite difficult to act as a stopper for the rowdiness of someone who was stronger than him.

He looked around, still searching for a suitable inn, but the ones along the main road were all crowded and didn't look like they would have any vacancies. It was trade season and business was booming. As he shifted his bags into a more comfortable position over his shoulder, he could hear his pans clanging against one another.

"It's inconvenient if it's too far from the guild..." Anessa said, heaving a sigh. "But I guess all the nearby ones are filled up."

"Right... We might find something if we head down a side street, but we're liable to get lost since we don't know the area."

The big city also attracted the poor. Just like Orphen, Yobem had a slum that was far removed from the cheerful main streets. Those back alleys would have their share of dangerous folks as well. He could already feel the incessant eyes of those who would take advantage of any opportunity they happened to see.

As an elf, Marguerite drew a bit of attention; their out-of-place demeanor and the size of their bags also made it clear that they were outsiders, and therefore, easy pickings. After all, anybody would have an ego on their own turf. Belgrieve wasn't particularly worried for his own safety though—he was more concerned for anyone who tried anything funny against his party.

Setting his bags down by the roadside, he rolled his shoulders. The stiffness in his body unraveled with a fine cracking sound. "What to do, what to do...?"

"Should I have asked the guild for help...?" Angeline asked.

"Hmm, not a bad idea. Let's head back, then," Belgrieve suggested.

"I'll go pop in for a bit. Just wait around here," said Kasim. He had disappeared into the crowd before anyone had time to ask questions.

"Well... he's the most well traveled of us, so let's leave it to him." Belgrieve sat down and exhaled a long breath. He scratched his head, wondering if Kasim had taken charge out of consideration of Belgrieve's fatigue. He still wanted to shop, but he couldn't let his guard down for a second.

All sorts of people passed in front of him: a merchant pulling a cart, an armed adventurer party, a group of day laborers, some street children, a farmer who had come to sell his crops... It was a little amazing to think that so many varied people lived different lives here.

"Are you tired, dad?" Angeline asked as she sat down beside him, anxiously peering into his face.

Belgrieve smiled. "I'm just not used to it. To think I'd be traveling to a foreign country at my age." He produced his water canteen from his luggage. Though he had built stamina in his farming days, the fatigue of travel and the fatigue of fieldwork seemed completely different. Just handling the procurement of stagecoaches and a place to stay had already rendered him exhausted. Supposing they did happen to find a route along the mountains—then camping would probably become necessary as well. Surely, this would be even more tiring. He wasn't about to start complaining, but he wasn't young enough to manage with willpower alone. He felt rather conflicted as he took a swig of water.

Angeline disconsolately tugged at his sleeve. "Don't sound so defeated, dad..."

"She's right, Bell. If you're already like that, I'm worried about what's to come," said Marguerite as she poked his shoulder from the opposite side.

Belgrieve gave a troubled laugh. "Sorry, sorry... But I'm not as young as all of you. Take it easy on me."

"Kasim seems perfectly fine..."

"He's done his share of traveling. I settled in one place for a long time..."

"But, Mr. Bell, back then, you were exploring the dungeon just as well as the rest of us. Right, Anne?" Merry asked.

"You're not wrong. But come to think of it, Mr. Bell, you said you were an active adventurer for around two years, right? There are a few things I have to wonder about, given your experience. That is, I don't get how you can act so well under pressure or where that confidence is coming from... What was your adventuring time like?"

"Well, let's see..."

Belgrieve folded his arms. He thought back to his adventuring days. Most of his memories were of Percival, Kasim, and Satie, but he had gone through a lot before he had joined them as well. There were a few major turning points in his life that predated them.

"To be honest, when I just started out... I almost died in a dungeon."

"Is this a story you've never told me?" Angeline's eyes widened as she embraced

Belgrieve's arm.

"No, I've told you bits and pieces. Remember that story about how I had to fend for myself in the dungeon alone?"

"Oh! Yeah, bits and pieces, maybe."

"I don't think I ever told you the details..."

"I want to hear it!"

"Me too!"

Marguerite, with eyes sparkling, also grabbed onto Belgrieve's shoulder. *I guess there's time to kill*, he reasoned. But as he was piecing the story together in his head, Kasim returned.

"Hiya."

"That was fast. Did they direct you to an inn?"

"They did. It went so smoothly, we should have just done that from the start. Here's our entry ticket."

Kasim waved around a sheet of paper. *The guild probably accommodated him because of his S-Rank status*, Belgrieve thought with a tinge of self-deprecation. When he was around all these amazing people, he couldn't help but delude himself that he was someone amazing as well. *I need to remedy this...*

Belgrieve stood up, taking hold of his bags. "Then that's our first stop. I'll tell the story when it's time to sleep."

"Yay!" Angeline excitedly hopped to her feet.

It wasn't a fun memory. He had only just left Turnera, still a mere young brat who didn't know his right from his left. Then, he was suddenly thrust into the realities of being an adventurer. It was an event that hammered home just how harsh his life would be. But it was also part of a long string of happenings that had led him to where he was today.

Kasim took the lead, and the party followed behind him. Belgrieve reminisced over bygone days as they walked, which made him feel like the young adventurer he had once been was stirring in the deepest depths of his being.

CHAPTER 86

THE SOUND OF HIS OWN BREATH WAS DETESTABLY LOUD

The sound of his own breath was detestably loud. The red-haired boy peeked ahead from the cover of a dense thicket, his back pressed roughly against a tree. The wind was warm and damp as he fretfully wiped the sweat from his brow. His heart was hammering away like an alarm bell. Each time he heard the snap of a twig, he would stifle his breath and reach for his sword.

There was something just beyond the darkness. For a while now, he had felt the prickling of mana against his skin. Saliva pooled in his mouth, but he was too fearful to swallow it, worried that even the faint gulping sound would give him away.

Eventually, the presence faded, and the prickling grew fainter. The boy let his body relax a bit but maintained his nervous tension as he slowly backed away. He shuffled his feet, taking care not to step on any dry branches or to make any sound at all.

When he was a good distance from whatever *that* had been, he finally caught his breath. It was like he was expelling all that unpleasant anxiety from his chest. Little by little, his heart's rhythm steadied and his mood began to lighten.

"What to do, what to do...?" Time and again, he had felt his spirit reaching its limit. But he couldn't give up—not here.

Has it been five days already? He could see the sun moving, but he was so tense he had lost his sense of time regardless. Still, his stomach would always be there to remind him. The boy took a few roasted beans from his bag and shoved them into his mouth, taking ample time to grind them down between his teeth. This was followed by a sliver of dried meat, which was also slowly chewed to mush. He licked a pinch of salt and took a sparing sip of water, which he swished around his mouth to rinse before swallowing.

He jostled his canteen. Although he had just filled it at a spring he had found yesterday, it was already half-empty. But there was little he could do about that—he could drink,

or he could die.

I want to eat a cooked meal... But a quick shake of his head drove such thoughts away. Thinking about that would only make him hungrier.

It was supposed to be an E-Rank dungeon. Yet it hid a cruel teleportation trap.

Dungeons were constructed when mana gathered and pooled until a spatial distortion formed that warped the terrain. They usually didn't look large from the outside, but it wasn't rare for them to be as vast as cities within. Common sense was a foreign concept within the dungeon. The mana that formed them could make all sorts of things possible. As the mana was "thinner" in low-ranking dungeons, their layout didn't tend to be too outrageous. It went without saying that the higher-ranked ones would contain stronger fiends, but worse than that, their convoluted interiors and the vileness of their traps were a whole other matter. And, even in a low-rank dungeon, changes in the flow of mana could create irregular patches. The red-haired boy had fallen victim to one of these.

Judging from the fiends on the prowl, he had been sent to what was at least an A-Rank dungeon. An E-Rank novice would be dead meat the moment he dropped his guard.

He hadn't come to the dungeon alone. He had been in a party of five. However, as was common among young adventurers, they were all prone to powering through things rather than thinking about them. Because of this, the boy's words of caution fell on deaf ears. He was a bit of a pushover; to the point that he had already become something of a punching bag within the party.

"I'm not going to cry over spilled milk, but..."

There had been a treasure chest left at a dead end. These unnatural events did happen in dungeons from time to time. Some said that mana would react to human desire and materialize them. Others believed the mana was merely returning the belongings of the adventurers of yore, whose adventures had come to an abrupt end. The truth of the matter was still a mystery.

As soon as his party members gleefully opened the box, a magic circle was deployed beneath their feet, and before he knew it, he was somewhere else entirely. He had previously been in a cave, and now he was surrounded by trees. Evidently, his comrades had been sent elsewhere as they were nowhere to be seen.

I told them it was suspicious, the boy thought, his anger welling up again. However, losing his cool would only put him in greater danger. *You're gonna die if you do that,* he reminded himself, slapping his hands against his cheeks to regain his focus.

Regardless, escaping the dungeon was his top priority. He needed to go about this systematically. If he impatiently rushed ahead, he risked running into a powerful fiend, or losing his way, or running out of food or water.

Ironically, being the group's pack mule had been his saving grace, and he had no issues with his food supplies. But even those were beginning to dwindle. The party hadn't initially planned on a long outing. He tried stretching out his supplies, eating only enough to keep his hunger in check, but there wasn't long to go. Since he was in a forest, foraging was possible, but he didn't expect too much to come of it. The situation was getting more dire, and this was having an effect on his mental state.

If the guy with all the bags is like this, the others must be... He sighed. Especially *those* guys, who all acted without thinking—they would either challenge a fiend beyond them or be too scared to move. He didn't have a good impression of the party, but he'd known them for a bit, and it didn't feel good to imagine them killed.

The red-haired boy slung his bags over his back and slowly began walking.

He was accustomed to the woods. He hailed from a small village near a forest, and though he never ventured too far in, he had gathered herbs and mushrooms before, and at times, he would even hunt. He knew how to conceal himself, and he knew what to be most cautious of as he walked.

Cautiously avoiding encounters with any fiends, he prioritized his own safety as he pressed on. He scanned the ground for footprints and paid attention to the markings on the trunks of trees. The areas with fresh footprints and new scratches were best avoided; at times, he would even take long detours to get around them.

Along the way, he would clamber up trees to gain his bearings. He was making progress, but perhaps because of the distortions in space, the grassy plains beyond the forest seemed to be somewhere else whenever he checked.

There was a chirping sound. The boy's body stiffened as his hand shot to his sword. Then, he heard a loud rustling noise as something nearby took flight and disappeared. *A bird, perhaps.*

The area was gradually growing darker. Giving up on proceeding any farther, the boy found a suitable tree and began climbing. Apart from using them for directions, he would also sleep in them at night. That allowed him to avoid quite a few types of fiends.

At the treetop, he ate beans, both roasted and dried, and washed them down with water. There was only one more mouthful left in his canteen. *Let's hope I can find someplace to fill up*, he thought as a frown crossed his face. If it really came down to it, he would have to stave off his thirst by sucking on giant dogwood branches, which retained some water.

Soon, the sun had set and the forest was shrouded in suffocating pitch darkness. There were no stars and no moon above, with only the occasional faint flicker of mysterious green light from below. In the murky depths around him, fiends or wild beasts or whatever other unidentified life-forms that might be out there would roar and bray.

The boy would occasionally wave away the flies loudly buzzing around his face as he slowly dozed off. His wariness had given way to exhaustion and slumber. And once sleep had begun to take him, he was enveloped by a mysterious feeling. It was as though even the darkness that surrounded him was warmly welcoming him into its midst.

As his mind lingered in the vague space between waking and drifting, he thought he heard a rustling sound. Suddenly, he was filled with an ominous sensation and could feel the goosebumps rising on his skin. He could not have picked a better moment to get up, as something sticky now dangled where he had been reclining moments before.

He drew his blade, all drowsiness now long gone. Eight glowing red eyes stared straight back at him.

Belgrieve paused to take a sip of tea. Angeline was leaning in, her cheeks flushed with excitement. "And then? And then?!"

"A spider, huh? You defeated it, right?" Marguerite balled both her fists and smacked them against the table to urge him on. Belgrieve's eyes wandered in thought.

"Defeated it...? Not exactly. I knew I had to get away, so I fled."

"Huh? You're no fun."

"But I'm surprised you managed that," Anessa said. "You're at a huge disadvantage, running into a spider-type monster in a tree."

Belgrieve nodded. "I thought it was hopeless. For starters, I threw all my supplies down and desperately thought about how I'd get myself down too. Luckily, my eyes had adjusted to the dark, and I could make out the branches. I dodged the threads, clambering down bit by bit... In the end, I used my last flare to stun it and jumped. My legs were numb as I grabbed my bags and ran... That's what you'd call a hasty retreat."

"When fighting something stronger than you, focus on running and securing an escape route. Use the element of surprise to stun the enemy..." Angeline recited.

"Ha ha ha, you remember well, Ange."

Belgrieve smiled to see that Angeline still recalled what he'd taught her when she was a small child. Her triumphant grin answered his own.

"Then that experience must have stuck with you," Miriam said, as she poured hot water into the teapot.

"Yeah... It really was life and death, back then, and maybe that helped to sharpen my senses. I don't know if I *really* got any use out of those kinds of experiences after that, but they certainly made me more of a coward," Belgrieve mused with a chuckle.

Kasim folded his hands behind his head. "What are you talking about?" he said, sounding displeased. "Your vigilance got us out of trouble more often than not. Don't be so dismissive about it."

"He's right. I think it's amazing that you didn't try to fight the spider after you'd stunned it. That would be my natural instinct... I only learned how important it is to know when to run after I reached the higher ranks," Anessa added, taking a sip of her tea. "Far too many young adventurers have lost their lives in recklessly challenging foes beyond their abilities."

Belgrieve bashfully stroked his beard. "Ha ha, I'm glad you took it that way..."

The candle flickered, having burned quite low by then. Belgrieve had nothing against staying up late, but he was worn out and drowsy. "Let's leave it at that for today. It's time to go to bed," he said, stretching.

"Hmm..." Angeline murmured before letting out a great yawn as though she only just noticed her own tiredness. Marguerite looked like she still wanted more, but she knew they had many nights yet to go. She stood without a complaint.

"Night, dad."

"Good night."

"Heh heh heh, will widdle Ange be awight not sleeping next to daddy?" Kasim asked mockingly.

"Oh, quit it, Kasim." Angeline puffed out her cheeks and left in a huff. The girls giggled as they each said their own "good night" and followed her out.

Belgrieve sighed and poured more tea into his empty cup.

"Does it feel lonely to see your little girl go, Bell?" Kasim amusedly asked.

"What are you talking about? Frankly, she's only just stopped sleeping in my bed, and she still clings to me just as much as before."

"I guess that's true."

Lately, Angeline had stopped wanting to sleep in the same bed as Belgrieve. Perhaps Kasim's teasing had gotten to her. She wasn't bothered so much by the teasing about her closeness to Belgrieve. However, it was a little embarrassing to be treated like a small child in front of her father, whom she so greatly admired.

For his part, Belgrieve wasn't sure if this was growth—in fact, he didn't know what to call it at all. As much as she fawned over him, he had been anxious about whether she could live on her own, but now that she had proven that she could, he couldn't help but feel empty.

How selfish of me, Belgrieve chided himself as he drank another mouthful of tea and relaxed into his chair. Evidently, parents need to adjust just as much as their children—perhaps more so, even.

Kasim yawned. "I wonder what Percy's doing now."

"Who knows? According to Yakumo, he's been defeating fiends, day in, day out..."

"Has he now...?" Kasim mused, wiping away the drowsy tears in the corners of his eyes. "But I'm sure he'll be happy to see you. You've been on his mind for a long time now." He folded his arms.

"I hope so..."

Nevertheless, Belgrieve couldn't help but feel anxious. Time could heal wounds, but it could worsen them too. Though Kasim was optimistic about the situation, Belgrieve was a little fearful—but not meeting Percival wasn't an option.

"After Percy, we'll have to find Satie," Kasim declared.

"Do you think it'll be that easy?"

"Could be. Surprisingly. I mean, you found *me* so quickly, and we're already off to see Percy. I've got a feeling Satie won't be too far off."

"I see... I guess that's true."

According to Kasim, magic was the ability to use mana to interfere with the outer world, a tool for granting one's desires. Mana flowed along the same stream as the human consciousness and brought about special phenomenons accordingly. Perhaps it could attract serendipitous happenings as well.

Are we proceeding along the flow of reunions? Belgrieve wondered with downcast eyes. "If I wish for it, we will meet... Is that it?"

"Now you're getting it! I grew disillusioned, myself... But believing is important." Kasim chuckled as he tied up his hair to sleep. "Still, I can't wait. Meeting Percy is one thing, but I'm looking forward to the journey too. Percy might fly into an envious rage when we tell him about it."

"I'm not so sure about that..." Belgrieve wouldn't deny that he was scared about meeting Percival, but his desire to do so was greater. *What sort of face will he make when we find him?* He smiled, then downed the rest of his tea. The candle flame flickered, and the shadows danced across their faces.

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"Here it comes!" a voice shouted from the edge of the pit. All of the adventurers who

had been hunched over jumped to attention and readied their weapons.

A burst of air erupted forth from the deepest depths, heralding the emergence of a long, slender creature rocketing into the sky. It was a silver dragon; its long, serpentine body glistened with metallic scales. A horselike mane fluttered from its head and down its back, and sharp fangs jutted from its large, gaping mouth. The dragon's body twisted as it soared through the sunset sky, its roar a declaration of lordship over the adventurers gazing up at it from below.

The archers and magicians fired in unison. They were all high-ranking adventurers with the strength to match. But with another turn of its body, the dragon swatted all the projectiles down. The adventurers had all mobilized now.

The dragon roared again. The sound was like a shock wave, leaving the adventurers feeling physically stricken. Its serpentine body waved in the air with the suppleness of a whip before it swooped down like an unleashed bolt. As expected of a gathering of the elite, they did not falter under the dragon's assault. Indeed, some only saw an opportunity coming; the swordsmen and other close-range fighters were eager to go at it. But the dragon's sturdy mana-imbued scales could not be harmed through conventional means.

“Outta the way!”

A man wielding a massive battle-axe leaped forth with his weapon swung overhead, smacking the dragon's torso. The dragon cried out in rage, swinging its tail like a whip. Most of the adventurers managed to guard or dodge, but a few were knocked off their feet. Luckily, none sustained fatal wounds. The adventurers immediately regained their footing and readied their weapons.

“This isn't gonna be easy...”

“Same old, same old! Just keep chipping away!”

But the dragon, wary of being ganged up on, burst into the sky once more. Its flight capabilities made it more troublesome to deal with than giants and earth dragons. Nevertheless, every adventurer present had seen their share of battles. They were not going to lose, but everyone foresaw a prolonged battle.

At that moment, someone began to cough near the back of their ranks. The man with the lionlike bearing emerged from the crowd. His brow was furrowed in displeasure

as he tucked away his sachet and put his hand on the hilt of his sword.

The adventurers murmured among themselves at the sight of him. "Th-That's..."

The man glanced around before turning his attention to the silver dragon in the sky. The beast returned his gaze, focusing upon him. It clearly recognized him as a different threat from any of the other adventurers.

"You... won't be able to kill me." The man drew his sword disinterestedly. His weapon was a single-edged longsword; its steel was emblazoned with several waves layered over one another.

Sensing the man's disdain, the dragon angrily roared, the intimidating sound forcefully rippling over his skin. For a moment, it looked like the man had shrunk back, but then he rushed forth as fast as an arrow. With one final step—so heavy that it cratered the earth beneath his foot—he flew at the dragon, his hefty mantle billowing behind him. His eyes never once strayed from the dragon, nor did the beast break its gaze with his.

The serpent and the man roared simultaneously. The man's sword clove upwards...

For a moment, it was like all sound had vanished before everything below the dragon's head appeared to have been erased. The fiend's torso was so hefty, it would take four adults linking arms to embrace it. It was far thicker than the man's blade was long, but its head had been parted from its neck nonetheless. Just like that, the corpse was on a collision course for the ground.

With his mantle trailing behind him, the man landed on his feet. He walked up to the corpse and, with a swing of his sword, shaved off a bit of meat. Then he was off on his way. One of the adventurers who'd been watching timidly stepped forth.

"H-Hey, can we take the rest, like usual...?"

The man gave an irritable nod. The adventurers immediately flocked around the dragon's corpse.

"Scales! Give me scales! The ones near the head are the best!"

"Anyone else want the liver? Otherwise, I'm taking it!"

“The fangs are where it’s at! The longest ones are mine!”

“Settle down, people! Hey, where’s my field-dressing knife?”

With one last glance back at the clamoring crowd, the man walked away from the gorge, leaving behind many adventurers who were enthralled by the rare materials before them. A few of them, conflicted, watched his departure, but one girl with dog ears followed him instead. She caught up to him and tugged at his sleeve.

“Mister, mister.”

He glared at her, far more intimidating than the dragon. But the girl did not falter—her wide, round eyes stared back into his.

“I’ll cook up some dragon steak, baby.”

“Don’t bother.”

“You always burn it. It’s a waste.”

“*Tch...*” The vexed man clicked his tongue before shoving the meat at the girl, causing her to stagger from its weight. The bloody cutlet’s drippings stained her clothing.

“Baby!”

He ignored her and walked off. He would kill fiends, but he showed no interest in their harvestable materials. At most, he would cleave away some meat to sustain himself, but even that was treated carelessly—he would perfunctorily sprinkle it with some salt and toss it over a fire if left to his own whims. It was only after the dog-eared girl and her spear-toting partner began to involve themselves in his affairs that he would occasionally get a decent meal.

He thought back to the past—back to a time when he was still a young adventurer, fighting shoulder to shoulder with comrades he trusted. He remembered how they would engage in stupid, silly banter as soon as they finished a request. Oftentimes, he would relish in the food made by the boy with red hair. Back then, every day had been so radiant; every day, his heart would dance.

The man clenched his fist. Those were supposed to be warm memories, yet his expression was bitter. He hurriedly grabbed his sachet as a discomfort in the depths

of his chest nearly sent him into another coughing fit. "How annoying..." the man muttered, walking away with plodding, angered steps.

The girl, reeling back from the sudden weight of the meat, was supported from behind by a woman with black hair. "What do you think you're doing?"

"We're having a feast tonight."

"Good grief. One scale is enough. Just get some materials, would you?"

"I'm fine. I'm sure that old mister is lonely."

The black-haired woman sighed. "Do you want to live with him or something? We can't tell him about Mr. Bell."

"That's why I'll stay by him until then. Stand by."

"Like we could ever replace *him*. He'll just see you as a pest."

"He'd send me flying if he *really* hated me."

"Hmm... Well, perhaps..."

The tail sticking out from the dog-eared girl's clothes was wagging. "Mr. Bell is coming... I know he is. Until then, I'm going to distract him and make sure he doesn't torment himself."

"Well... Do whatever you want. I'm too scared to try it." The black-haired woman sighed, drawing out her pipe and sticking it between her teeth. The smaller girl teetered after the man with meat in hand.

CHAPTER 87

THERE WAS A WAGON LEFT IN THE YARD

There was a wagon left in the yard behind the inn. Its cargo of old barrels was draped in dew-speckled spiderwebs which glistened like jewels in the early morning light.

Treading the misty ground, Belgrieve held out a weapon—the sword that Graham had entrusted to him. He could feel the sword's assuring weight when he held it steady, but it moved as weightlessly as a bird's feather when it cleaved through the air.

After several simple practice swings, he began adding legwork to practice his form. Belgrieve did not have much experience wielding a sword this large. In the worst case, he risked injuring himself. He needed to grow accustomed to wielding it.

He swung again and again, making sure he didn't furrow the ground. He began with two hands, then one, and even occasionally practiced an underhand grip. The blade would come to a complete stop whenever he willed it; it would easily move left and right, up and down, and then freeze in place.

By now, his prosthetic leg was no longer a hindrance to him. In fact, he felt as though regaining the other foot would only make his movements more awkward at this point. It was like his body was lighter when he held the sword. Graham had used it for many years, and the high density of elvish mana stored within it could have been imbuing him with strength.

But unlike Angeline, he had yet to hear the sword's voice. Belgrieve stopped for a breather, staring closely at the morning sun reflected off the blade. According to Angeline and Marguerite, she was like a prim and proper lady, but he didn't really understand what they meant.

"Do you want to talk to me?" he asked. But the sword gave no answer. Sighing, he returned it to its sheath before drawing the sword that had been his partner for many years from his hip. It glistened as if it had been waiting for this moment. Perhaps it was only his imagination, but it seemed a little jealous as well. "Don't worry, I'll use you too."

Kasim cackled from his perch atop the broken-down wagon off to the side, observing Belgrieve's practice. "Not half bad. But still a bit awkward compared to the one in your hands now."

Belgrieve inspected the blade, front to back. He swung sharply with one hand, passing the blade skillfully around his fingertips as it made a circuit all around him before it returned to its scabbard. Unlike when he wielded Graham's sword, he didn't feel any lighter. But this was a sword he had fought with for over twenty years; it was the most comfortable to wield. Ultimately, the power he felt with the greatsword in his hands was but a borrowed power. He was frightened at the prospect of coming to rely too much on it. He needed to find a happy medium.

"Where're the girls?" he asked Kasim.

"Who knows? Probably still asleep. Probably had a girls' night after they returned to the room."

I could picture that. Belgrieve chuckled. *Ah, to be young and lively.*

It had been a day and a half since they'd left Yobem, and they were now in the town of Mansa. It was south of Yobem, and one of the relay towns along the route to Khalifa. The guild had tried finding any requests that would take them along the mountains, but no one dared head in that direction. The only requests in the mountains were for the plunder of materials from the dungeons there. That would necessitate returning to Yobem afterwards, so those jobs were out of the question. In Mansa, perhaps, they might have better luck finding a caravan hoping to shorten its journey.

They had left Yobem with a letter of introduction and arrived in Mansa the previous night. As the sun had already set by the time they arrived, they made plans to drop by Mansa's guild the next day.

Belgrieve had drawn Graham's greatsword again, hoping to give it another test run, when Angeline and the others arrived. She still looked sleepy, her hair crumpled and tangled.

"I slept a lot... Morning, dad."

"Yeah, morning. Did you all sleep well?"

"Well as well can be. This inn has nice mattresses. Could hardly drag me out,"

Marguerite answered, stretching out her arms.

Despite being a cheap inn, the mattresses had certainly been soft. Belgrieve could understand the temptation to sleep in.

Miriam yawned as she wiped the drowsy tears from her eyes. "What are you up so early for, Mr. Bell?"

"In my case, it's just a habit. My eyes always open before sunrise. Maybe that's just the years getting to me, ha ha ha."

"Hey, by that logic, that makes me old too," Kasim protested.

"Once your toes inch across that forty-year mark, you're no spring chicken any longer. At a certain point you begin to act your age," Belgrieve admonished.

"You just up and mellowed too fast. At this rate, you'll be an old grampa by fifty."

"Mr. Bell already seems like a mountain hermit," Anessa said with a chuckle.

Belgrieve scratched his head. "You mean those guys that cast away their worldly desires? That's not what I'm going for here..."

"An unranked master swordsman... The Red Ogre of the Frontier... Super cool," Angeline muttered, entranced with the images those words conjured.

"I like the sound of that!" Marguerite cackled. "Let's make him the talk of Tyldes!"

"Q-Quit it! Seriously!"

The party laughed at seeing Belgrieve in such a panicked state.

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After breakfast, they set out, hoping to avoid the guild's most crowded hours. Their aim was to arrive just before noon. Mansa was not as lively as Yobem, but it was a stopover point for travelers, and they saw a fair few people passing through. There was a dungeon nearby, and there were quite a few adventurers to be seen walking the streets. Merchants who dealt in the materials from the dungeon also stopped by frequently.

On entering the guild—a building with a stone foundation and earthen walls—they could see motes of dust gently floating in the light streaming from the windows. The morning quests had already been claimed, so there weren't many people around.

Angeline glanced around and spotted the exclusive desk for high-ranking adventurers at the back of the lobby. There was no line, so she headed over with Kasim, where they were greeted by the smile of a receptionist with a florid complexion—she was, perhaps, from one of the nomadic tribes.

"Welcome. What can I do for you today?"

"We have a letter of introduction... We want to go south, and we're hoping to join a caravan or peddler headed in that direction."

The receptionist's gaze bounced between the letter, Angeline's S-Rank plate, and Angeline herself, her eyes blinking a few times as she processed what was before her.

"Oh, I-I see... Understood. I'll look into it. Could you wait here for a bit?"

"Yeah. We're not in a hurry. Take your time..."

They turned away and joined up with the rest of the party, setting up in an empty corner of the lobby. The dusty air was somewhat dry, partly from the cigarette smoke that lingered in the air. The walls and floor of the building were earthen, though colorful tiled mosaics interspersed the structure, sprucing up the place. The atmosphere was completely different from Orphen's guild, with its stone-paved floors and white walls.

Marguerite wore a hood over her head to avoid undue attention. But as she sat there quietly, she didn't seem the least bit peaceful herself.

"Tsk, why do I gotta sneak around like this?" she whined. "If anyone picks a fight, I'd just have to send them flying."

"Don't resort to violence to solve every problem..." Belgrieve said. He wearily shut his eyes and tugged at his beard.

Angeline, on the other hand, was giggling. *Right, I remember teaching those high-handed adventurers a lesson back when I first started out*, she reminisced.

With adventurers, one's combat strength trumped all else. Once the difference in

power was clearly established, all other would-be challengers tended to back off, not wanting to embarrass themselves. Of course, at times, this would engender grudges and eventually result in *more* fights. Thus, it was important to deliver just the right amount of punishment. It was never good to overdo things.

"They picked on us when Anne and I were starting out too," Miriam remarked, her head propped up by one hand.

"Yeah, they did. I guess they look down on kids. And women..."

"What did you two do about it? Did you beat them up?"

"Pretty much. I'm not good at fisticuffs, so I'd pin their clothes to the wall with arrows or shoot the cups out of their hands."

"I gave them the tingles with weak lightning."

Anessa and Miriam laughed while Marguerite gleefully waved her hand about. "Did you hear that? Showing your strength is the best way to do it!" she declared.

"We didn't come here to fight... Nothing good will come of heading to a foreign land and ruining the reputation of the guild there. Do you plan to do that in every single town we go to?"

"Grrr... Well, maybe..."

Suddenly, it occurred to Angeline to wonder how things had gone for Belgrieve back in his day. She peered into his face. "What about you, dad? Did people pick fights with you?"

"Hmm? Well, of course they did. I didn't take them up on it, though."

"A shame. I wanted to hear about your heroism," Miriam grumbled.

Marguerite tutted, "Tsk, you're no fun. You and granduncle, you're too meek."

"Well, myself aside, when Graham was young..."

"Huh? What's that about old Graham?"

"Well, um... I'd imagine Graham was probably similar to Maggie when he was younger."

"Grampa and Maggie...?" Angeline's eyes widened as she looked at Marguerite.

Maybe—just maybe—once this tomboy princess grows up, she'll settle into a nice and calm personality... Angeline tried to picture that for herself, only to fail miserably. Marguerite would always be Marguerite, no matter how much time passed. Nor could she imagine Graham as a hot-blooded hooligan.

"I can't picture it at all... A calm Maggie is impossible."

"There's no way I'd wither away like granduncle! Don't be stupid!"

"You think so?" Belgrieve laughed.

It was then that the receptionist jogged up to them. "Sorry to keep you waiting. Um, the guild master wants to see you. Could we have a moment of your time?"

"Hmm? Sure. Should we all go together...?"

"Well, um... no. The room is small, so just the two S-Ranks..." the receptionist explained, and with a look at the rest of the party, she bowed apologetically. But there weren't any objections forthcoming, nor did any of them seem to take offense. Thus, Angeline and Kasim were led farther into the guild.

Through the window in the hall, they could see out to the yard where various materials brought in by adventurers were being picked over. Merchants would eventually drop by to buy the goods in bulk, not unlike a small marketplace. There was a cacophony of all sorts of voices calling out all around, so loud and jumbled that it was impossible to tell what any individual person was saying.

They passed in front of an armory and then a reference room before arriving at the guild master's office in the back. The walls just outside were tiled, and the aged wooden door was decorated with iron ornamentation. Once they were through the door, they found themselves in a rather narrow room indeed, only exacerbated by the bookshelves. There was no table to greet guests; chairs had to be dragged up in front of the office desk near the back.

Across that desk sat a slender, middle-aged woman with tanned, ocher skin—presumably the guild master. Her long, braided hair was a shade of violet that was

nearly black, over which she wore a cloth hat. Her cheek was tattooed with a peculiar symbol, and an eye patch covered her right eye.

She carried the dignified air of a seasoned fighter; she had said nothing, but Angeline was already impressed. *This is how a guild master should be...*

The woman smiled at Angeline and Kasim. "Welcome to the Mansa guild, Madam Black-Haired Valkyrie. I am Mansa's guild master, Sierra. It is a pleasure."

"The pleasure is all mine... I am Angeline."



"Heh heh, I heard the rumors, but you really are young. What I'd give for your talent," Sierra said, chuckling.

Angeline suddenly felt a bit uneasy. "Um, this guy here is Mr. Kasim," she said, glancing at Kasim who had a rather stiff smile on his face.

"S-Sierra...? What are you doing here?"

"I should be asking *you* that, Kasim." Sierra smiled at Kasim unflinchingly, but her eyes were sharp and seemed rather angry.

Angeline looked back and forth between the two of them. "You know each other?"

"Well, somewhat," Kasim muttered, his eyes wandering.

Sierra leaped over her desk and landed before Kasim, looming over him before hoisting him up by the lapels, her face still pasted with a cheerful smile even as a throbbing vein became visible on her brow. "I thought I knew how self-centered you could be, but what gave you the right to skip out on a job and just disappear like that? The next thing I hear, you're retiring as an adventurer! Do you even understand the troubles you put us through? And did you really think you could disguise yourself by growing a *beard*?"

"Hey, hey, hey! Hold on, hold on! I'm sorry, okay? I was desperate back then, believe me!"

"That's no excuse, fool. And *then* you go and blithely get reinstated... I'm going to give you a good smack, and *then* we can start *talking* from there."

"Have mercy! A smack from you would kill me!"

"Yes, that's the intention. Do you have any complaints?"

"Hey! Ange! Save me!"

Angeline, who had been watching them in a daze, snapped out of it and grabbed Sierra by the arm.

"Ms. Sierra, please. He is my comrade, for what it's worth..."

"Hmph... Looks like you found yourself a new lease on life, Kasim."

"Cut me some slack... How many years has it been already?" Kasim patted down his clothing with a troubled smile on his face.

Angeline prodded him. "What's your relationship?" she asked.

Awkwardly scratching his head, Kasim explained, "Well, you know... We used to be in the same party. That was, uh... when I was at the imperial capital, I believe."

"Yes, it's been over ten years. We hunted down the Hollow Lord together..."

The hunt of the Hollow Lord was the achievement that had earned Kasim his promotion to S-Rank. *So they're comrades from back then*, Angeline thought, looking at Sierra more appraisingly.

Sierra was at the age where wrinkles were only starting to appear. Her tattooed arms, unconcealed by any sleeves, were rather muscular. The power exuding from her seemed no different from that of a young warrior. Never mind "middle-aged"—she appeared to be in the prime of her life.

"After you suddenly disappeared, it was hell to fill the gap you left behind. We ended up having to cancel the job we were on... Then Carter rose to power, and the party fell apart."

"I apologized, didn't I? And anyways, you of all people shoulda known how much Carter and everyone else hated me. I was going to leave sooner or later anyhow, believe me."

"Oh, quit your yapping. I'm not complaining that you *left*—I'm complaining about all the trouble you made for me on the way out. But since you brought it up—what was with your attitude back then? You didn't cooperate one bit with the other members; in fact, I'm pretty much the only one you even had a proper conversation with. You own some of the blame for how things were. There's a right and wrong way to leave, fool. Oh, just remembering it is making me irritated."

She then casually thrust her fist into Kasim's side, eliciting a yelp from the man. "You never learned to control that monstrous strength of yours!" he complained.

"Shut it."

“Ow! Seriously! Stop!”

Kasim usually acted detached from everything, so the strange sight of him pleading was amusing enough that Angeline burst into laughter at the sight.

After prodding Kasim until she was satisfied, Sierra loudly sighed and dragged two chairs from the corner of the room for Kasim and a still-laughing Angeline. A short time later, the receptionist returned with tea before bowing and promptly going on her way. The tea had a completely different aroma than the floral teas served in Orphen. It was quite a treat indeed, but Kasim did not so much as sip at his drink, merely slumping back into his chair looking completely drained.

“I should’ve just waited in the lobby...”

“You get what you deserve, fool.”

“Heh heh... I’m glad you two get along.”

“I wouldn’t say that...”

Sierra looked at Kasim doubtfully. “Kasim, you’ve changed. You don’t feel as pathetic anymore.”

“Hmm? You think so?”

“Yeah. When we used to joke around, you were always so cynical and bitter beneath it all... You actually seem to be enjoying yourself now.”

Kasim adjusted his hat and reached for the tea. “You see, my friend—I managed to meet up with him again.”

“Hmm... The one from Orphen?”

“Yep. Heh heh heh, I was sure he went off and died, but he was still kicking. This girl’s his daughter, in fact,” Kasim said, patting Angeline on the shoulder.

“Oh? Fate works in mysterious ways...” Sierra mused, a somewhat sad smile gracing her lips as she sipped at her own tea. She straightened her posture and placed her hands on her desk.

"Let's move on. So, you're taking your friend's daughter and heading south? What are you up to now?"

"Yes, well that's the thing. Remember how I told you I had three old friends? I met up with one of them, and we figured out where the next one was. We're heading to see him."

"I see..."

It bothered Angeline how unimpressed Sierra sounded, but she felt it would be rude to pursue the matter. In any case, she explained that they were headed for the Nyndia Mountains to facilitate this reunion and that they planned to travel along that route to keep their skills sharp.

"There are currently no caravans looking to hire you. No one heads south from Mansa—the danger far outweighs the meager returns. Most caravans are trying to get to Khalifa."

Angeline frowned. *That's about what we expected...* Even Yobem, which was larger than Mansa, didn't have any merchants foolhardy enough to head south.

Additionally, a look at the map showed that they would have to go a considerable distance along the mountains to run into anything resembling a large town. By comparison, taking a detour to Khalifa was safer and more profitable as the route included more major trade centers.

I guess we won't be having that adventure. Angeline leaned back into her chair, feeling dejected.

A grin crossed Sierra's face. "Though there *is* a different sort of job available."

"A different one?"

"Yeah." Sierra leaned in, her elbows pressed against the desk. "Not guarding, though. You'll be transporting."

Apparently, there was a request to deliver documents and packages to the guild of a southern city. It was fine to go through Khalifa to get there, but that would still be quite the detour. If someone could head directly south, it would cut down the time by a good amount. Although the guild wasn't in a rush to receive this shipment, there was no

harm in getting there early either.

"Usually, someone with the guild would handle this... But Mansa's a small place. We don't have too many people around. I thought I'd head out personally, but Kasim's someone I can trust. The same goes for you, Angeline."

"Are you sure...? We might run off with your shipment."

"Surely, an adventurer great enough to receive a medal from Archduke Estogal would not do something like that. I suspect that it would be riskier for you to sully the reputation you've earned."

Angeline silently drank her tea for a bit. Finally, she looked at Sierra and nodded.
"Understood. That should be easy enough... Leave it to us."

"Ha ha, how reliable. I guess there's no need to worry with two S-Ranks on the case."

"Ah, great. That's a load off my chest. Thanks, Sierra."

"Hmph, I didn't do it for you. I did it for Angeline."

"Heh heh heh, no need to be embarrassed. You've always been a good kid." Kasim chuckled, seemingly regaining his good spirits.

Sierra shook her head. "Good grief. You never thought twice about my behavior towards you, did you?"

"Hmm? What's that?"

"It's nothing. So what's your formation? It's not just you two, is it?"

"Of course not. We have Ange's party members, her father—meaning my old friend—and one elf girl."

Sierra's brow twitched. "I see... So *he*'s here."

"Well yeah, we're going to meet our other comrade. I should introduce him to you too."

"Hmm..." Sierra murmured. Her eyes shut as she stroked her chin.

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The spiced milk tea was very sweet, though it hardly seemed like tea at all. There was a shop adjacent to the lobby that sold various kinds of food and drink, and so they bought sweets and tea as they waited for Angeline and Kasim to return.

“Hmm... I need to convince myself this is just how it’s supposed to taste...” Belgrieve found himself grimacing at this pairing of sugary sweets with sweet teas. The girls seemed to relish in it, not the least bit put off.

Marguerite blinked, seeing that Belgrieve’s hand had stopped. “Hey, don’t be a stranger, Bell. If you don’t want it, I’ll take it.”

“Sure, go ahead. Still, I’m surprised you can all eat so much of it.”

“Eat well if you want to stay healthy and happy. Right, Merry?”

“Right, right. You should eat if you want to grow big and strong, Mr. Bell.”

The girls were giggling while Belgrieve scratched his head when Angeline returned.
“Dad...”

“Oh, Ange. How was it? Any progress?”

“Yeah... This is the guild master, Ms. Sierra. And this is my father, Belgrieve...”

The tawny-skinned woman bowed as Angeline introduced her. “It is a pleasure to meet you. My name is Sierra.”

“I feel honored. To think that the guild master would personally come out to see us. I am Belgrieve.” Belgrieve stood and returned her bow. Meanwhile, Sierra’s right eye looked him up and down, and she put a hand to her chin in thought.

“Hmm... I see. So you are Kasim’s old friend.”

“Oh?” Belgrieve cocked his head. The way she put it made it sound like she knew Kasim.

“She’s an old party member of mine from back when I was at the capital. We fought side by side for five years or so,” Kasim explained, chuckling.

"My word... It's strange how these things work." Belgrieve smiled, stroking his beard. Sierra, for her part, only rubbed her hair, eyes closed.

Anessa, Miriam, and Marguerite all greeted her in turn before it came time for Sierra to explain the job. They were going to transport guild documents and supplies. *I can understand leaving it to an old friend like Kasim, but the rest of us are outsiders. Is that really all right?* Belgrieve wondered.

"I understand the situation... But are you sure you can entrust us with that?"

"That is the somewhat troublesome part, Sir Belgrieve. I know Kasim well; Angeline is an S-Rank of great renown, and her party members are trustworthy. However—and I know this might come off as rude—I must be more cautious when dealing with the D-Rank elf girl. And then there's you, someone who is not even an adventurer."

"Hmm... Well, that stands to reason," Belgrieve acknowledged, nodding understandingly.

Kasim, by contrast, seemed livid. "What are you talking about? He's my friend. You can't trust him?" he demanded, stepping forward.

"This isn't a matter of trust, it's a matter of propriety. I cannot have anyone thinking that the guild hired a complete amateur of unknown origin."

"Don't be such a stickler. The guild master's authority should be enough to handle that."

"Possibly... However, the mountain path is truly dangerous. High-ranking fiends have been confirmed to inhabit the gorges along the way. Without proof of his rank, it would be irresponsible to send him there without a second thought," Sierra explained, glaring at Kasim's discontented expression, before turning to Belgrieve. "That might not be what you wanted to hear... I hope you understand."

"No, you're only showing due concern. I'm aware we're being unreasonable, so please don't worry about it."

"With that said, we would also be quite thankful if these goods could reach their destination quickly. I really do want your party to take the job," Sierra explained, turning to Angeline.

Angeline grimaced. "Are you telling us to leave dad and Maggie behind?"

"Well, that would be ideal..."

"You've got to be joking. That's never going to happen."

"Are you the one who will decide that? Or perhaps..." Sierra looked to Belgrieve with prying eyes. She didn't seem apologetic. It was more like she was trying to provoke some response from him.

This guild master has been strangely prickly since she laid eyes upon us. Is there something about us she doesn't like? Belgrieve wondered. Her words did make sense—it was only natural for her to have misgivings about sending a low-ranking adventurer and someone who wasn't even an adventurer on a dangerous path, especially when she had only just met him. It was unreasonable to expect her to trust him just like that.

Of course, once the job was accepted, it was up to the discretion of the adventurers who took it. At that point, they could hire a nonadventurer to guide them or carry bags if they desired. If Angeline had already taken the job, it was up to her if she wanted to bring Belgrieve and Marguerite.

The problem was that she hadn't yet. And the guild, knowing what they did, was now hesitant to even offer the job to her.

Now then, what to do? Belgrieve thought. But his musings were cut short when Marguerite stepped up.

"In short, lady. You're tryin' 'ta say I'm weak."

"H-Hey, Maggie."

"Stay outta this, Bell. Listen, lady, I'm only *lowering* myself to D-Rank. And Bell here? It's not his ability that's preventing him from becoming an adventurer. It's a whim."

"What are you trying to say?" Sierra's mouth twisted into a smile, though the expression didn't reach her eyes.

Marguerite scoffed. "I'm saying we're gonna fight, you and me. You can't complain if I'm stronger than you, right?"

"Looks like someone's underestimating me... Not that I dislike this kind of thing. You have a point: I can certainly accommodate you as an exception if I can personally

measure your abilities.”

“Heh heh, I like it when you keep it nice and simple. All right, the game is on. Get ready, Bell.”

“Huh?”

“What are you spacing out for? At this rate, we’ll either get stuck here, or we’ll get stuck taking the long, boring way. Let’s beat this old lady down and head south.”

Belgrieve, frowning, bopped Marguerite on the head. The girl cried out, holding her head and glaring at him with teary eyes.

“What are you doing...?”

“You’re being quite rude. It’s fine to be passionate, but treat her with respect.” Belgrieve turned to Sierra. “Are you all right with this?”

“Hmm? Is that concern I’m hearing? You don’t think you’ll lose to the likes of me, do you?”

“I never said that. I just thought there might be problems down the line if things were resolved so crudely.”

“It’s... not your place to worry about that.”

“Now look here, Sierra,” Kasim tried to interject, but was ignored—Sierra had already turned and quickly walked off. For some reason, she seemed to be angry. Marguerite chased after her in high spirits, and after exchanging glances, Angeline, Anessa, and Miriam followed behind.

There was a somewhat sad air to Kasim as he looked at Belgrieve. “I’m kinda... sorry about all this. She’s a good kid, under all that.”

“I get it. She’s serious about her professional duties, and I’m sure she’s got something in mind. I’m thankful that she’s letting us off with just a bout.”

“Yeah...” Kasim heaved a great sigh. *“Sigh... Sierra, you little...”* Then, with his hat on straight, he briskly walked ahead.

Just from her bearing, Belgrieve could tell that Sierra was a formidable foe. And knowing she was Kasim's old comrade made it easy to surmise her strength. Belgrieve wondered if he could fight well enough to impress her.

"Looks like my adventure has already begun." Belgrieve cracked a wry smile as he adjusted the sword on his back.

CHAPTER 88

THERE WAS A SMALL TRAINING AREA

There was a small training area behind the guild building. It was more of an empty lot than anything else, though a few archery targets and practice posts did speak to its purpose.

In order to rein in Marguerite's bursting enthusiasm, Belgrieve opted to fight first. He'd scolded Marguerite and told her she had to cool her head first, which she reluctantly conceded. With that said, Marguerite's face was now stern as she watched the match to ascertain the strength of her upcoming foe.

Though it seems Sierra wants to fight me more than her. That realization spurred him to hold Marguerite back a little forcefully. There was no backing out now—after all, the true essence of this match didn't seem to have anything to do with assessing abilities.

Angeline, looking somewhat peeved, tugged on Belgrieve's sleeve. "Hey, dad."

"What is it, Ange?"

"I know it's strange for me to say... But won't this be resolved if we just don't take the request? We didn't promise to take it, and I understand what Ms. Sierra is saying, but... this is a bit forced. By her logic, I wouldn't be allowed to hire a guide if I needed one for the job," Angeline reasoned.

Belgrieve chuckled and patted Angeline on the head. "Yes, you're precisely right."

"Then why...? Ah, do you feel like going on an adventure now, dad?"

"That's not it either. It's for Kasim."

"For Kasim...?"

Angeline directed an inquisitive glance over her shoulder at Kasim, who stood a short distance away. He looked a little sullen and his eyes were wandering; it was as though

he didn't know quite what to do.

Belgrieve adjusted the swords at his hip and back and removed the pouches of tools from his belt.

"It's Kasim we're talking about. When he was partied up with Sierra, I'm sure he didn't think about her at all. He was still held back by thoughts of me, Percy, and Satie."

"You... think so...?" Angeline looked at him quizzically as she took his tool bags.

"That's the sort of guy he is. Once he's fixated on one thing, he doesn't see anything else... But it's not like that old party of ours was his *entire* past. He's lived for more than forty years; he's got his own scores he needs to settle. We can't just pretend that isn't so."

"I... don't get it."

"Ha ha, I see. Well, he was desperate back then. Maybe I shouldn't blame him... But I do feel a bit sorry for Madam Sierra. Your old man isn't heartless enough to turn down *this* request."

"What does that have to do with this battle...? Dad, I thought you'd try to talk it out to start with."

"There are some things that are easier to say when you're fired up. Don't worry. We're not out to kill one another," Belgrieve said with a shrug.

Although Angeline didn't quite understand, she realized that Belgrieve was not fighting unwillingly, and so her expression relaxed. Surely, Sierra was no fool—otherwise, she would not have been entrusted with the position of guild master. She must have understood how unreasonable she was being.

However, she was flustered by the appearance of Kasim and the reemergence of her past. That was how Belgrieve saw it—she had nowhere to put her emotions, so they had turned to irrational anger directed at him. Undoubtedly, Kasim was special to her in some way.

It's all so... ordinary, Belgrieve mused, chuckling. There were times when one understood something rationally but could not stop acting on emotion. He had experienced it himself, all too often, and stifling his feelings was so terribly painful—

just like when he tried to cover the pain of losing his leg with a smile. And that had eventually caused him to do something he could never undo.

Had I shared my true feelings back then, instead of trying to keep up appearances, how different would my life be? If I had shared my anger and helplessness with my comrades...? Belgrieve sighed and shook his head.

He wasn't conceited enough to think he was helping her; but just as Kasim had past accounts to settle, so too did Sierra. And because of his sympathy, he couldn't just push her away. If he had protested about how unreasonable this was and ignored her for his own convenience, he knew she would end up suffering. At the very least, he could let her cut loose a bit. That was no trouble to him.

Not to say he didn't have his own motives—he was curious to see how his own strength compared to a fighter of her caliber. Even if he had no interest in becoming an adventurer again, he didn't intend to give up on the sword either. Despite all the rationalizations he could plaster over it, his heart still danced at the thought of a bout with someone strong. *In the end, I'm doing it for myself*, he acknowledged with a self-deprecating laugh.

Sierra stood, seemingly calm. But her pursed lips were quivering. She was angry, but that anger was also directed at herself, and as a result, she looked a bit helpless.

"Is this... what you'd call a 'woman's heart'?" Kasim mused.

I'll have to give Kasim a talking to later. Belgrieve frowned and tugged at his beard.

"Are you ready?" Sierra asked, tapping the toes of her boots against the ground.

"Ready when you are." Belgrieve took a stance with the greatsword still sheathed. He had only to take its hilt in hand, and suddenly, his body felt lighter, his sight was clearer, and he could follow his opponent's movements with clarity.

By contrast, Sierra was empty-handed. She had a dagger dangling at her hip but did not seem intent on using it. Given the tattoos on her arms—which seemed like magic sigils—he wondered if she fought similarly to Cheborg.

For a while, both Belgrieve and Sierra stood motionlessly, gauging how the other would approach. Their glares pierced one another, not letting the slightest motion slip by. A hot summer breeze blew past them, caressing their perspiring skin.

A bead of sweat dripped down Belgrieve's brow, then into his eye. He blinked—and Sierra kicked off.

"Hyah!" she cried out, taking a deep step into a powerful straight punch.

Belgrieve reacted immediately. He took the blow with the broadside of the greatsword, but though he succeeded, the impact was immense. The shock wave numbed his hands and passed through him all the way to the tips of his toes.

Still, his strength was channeled into the sword, pushing her fist back and forcing Sierra to retreat a step.

Belgrieve was off before she could recover, swinging at her from a low stance. Sierra leaped again, this time flying through the air like an acrobat. Jumping was a poor move though, and planting his feet firmly, Belgrieve unleashed a slash at the now-airborne Sierra.

That's a hit—or so he thought. Surprisingly, Sierra was able to angle her feet so as to use the swinging greatsword as a foothold midair to pounce behind him. She landed before he had finished the slash, her fists at the ready. She stepped in. The sigils on her arms glistened, and she thrust her arms out with the force of an unleashed bolt.

At that moment, Sierra was sure she had him, but her eyes widened in shock. Belgrieve had immediately taken up the sword from his waist to guard his back. He not only managed to divert the force of the blow with it, but he also used the momentum to pivot on his peg leg until he was facing her again.

Seeing Belgrieve with a greatsword in one hand and a longsword in the other, Sierra's expression shifted to somewhere between tired and impressed as she put some distance between them. "You can wield that large sword with one hand?"

"I'm still inexperienced with it..." He held Graham's sword in his right hand and his trusty blade in his left as he stared back at her. Perhaps because he was holding the greatsword, his own sword felt lighter than usual.

Sierra breathed in deeply and readied her fists. This time, they approached at nearly the same instant. Sword and fist collided in a shock wave that blasted sand all around them. Sierra freely weaved around him with frightening dexterity, unleashing attacks left and right, but Belgrieve blocked, evaded, and countered each blow with a firm, heavy stance. Though she lacked Cheborg's strength, she was much faster. Still, she

was not so threatening in that regard when compared to Angeline. Nevertheless, she had seen her share of battle, and he couldn't deliver a decisive blow.

Since Sierra's left eye was covered, he tried several times to attack from her blind spot, but she was well aware of her own weakness. More often than not, she had lured him there, and he found himself narrowly avoiding her blows instead.

Perhaps because of her wavering emotions, Sierra's movements were a little inelegant. His blades met her fists many times, to no avail—but she couldn't seem to take him down either.

Still, Belgrieve's foe was attacking far more than he was, and Belgrieve's two swords had been forced into defensive work. Before he knew it, he was only swinging the familiar sword he had come to know and love. *It must have become a habit for me. We can't be having that*, he thought.

The moment he became conscious of this, he felt his motions had become strangely disjointed. He was fine when he was only swinging the greatsword, but wielding it along with the blade he was accustomed to would end up with him unconsciously using that one more, which completely defeated the purpose of a two-sword fighting style. *Should I drop the longsword and focus on the greatsword?*

Sierra was not naive enough to leave him to his thoughts. Her sharp fist rocketed forth in that moment of opportunity.

Belgrieve hurriedly moved to block it with the broadside of the greatsword, but Sierra angled her fist so as to wrench the blade straight out of his hand. Belgrieve was dragged with the force; his stance crumbled. The greatsword nearly slipped out of his grasp. He hastily grabbed for the hilt, and only the scabbard came off, clattering to the floor.

Before his stance recovered, the next shot captured his left shoulder. He immediately focused his mana to counteract the blow, but the raw force was incredible. He inadvertently dropped the sword in his left hand.

It came nearly automatically to him. Almost the very same moment he took the blow, he took a sweep with his right hand's sword to counter. Its sharp, white blade was headed towards Sierra, who had lowered her guard for her punch.

No, that's no good—I'll cut her! Belgrieve mustered the strength of his arms to slow his

attack. The greatsword obeyed his will, coming to a complete and sudden stop just before it reached her.

At the same time, he felt a slight impact on his jaw. Sierra's fist had barely grazed him, but the impact rocked him all the way to his brain. His vision was wavering; he saw the panicked look on her face, and then he saw nothing.

When Belgrieve opened his eyes, he was greeted by the sight of a wooden ceiling in a room illuminated by the dim light of a dangling lamp. He lay there blinking for a moment before sitting up. Nearby, he could see an open window farther down the room. It was that time of day when the dusk was gradually setting in, and the alley he could see seemed to have a light purple veil cast over it.

He touched his chin—he'd only been grazed, so there was no lingering pain. It had been his left shoulder that had taken a proper blow, but he found it did not particularly ache when he moved it about either. Evidently, he had succeeded in using his mana to spread out the force of the impact—though it was for that very reason that his hand suffered more of the force than it usually would have, causing him to drop his sword.

I'm far from mastering that technique... His musings were interrupted by the surprise of a sudden, soft embrace. Angeline was hugging him, looking up at him with adoring eyes.

"Are you okay, dad? Does your shoulder... hurt?"

"Oh, Ange... I'm fine." He patted her head with a smile before taking another good look around. It seemed he was in the room at the inn they'd booked. Anessa and Miriam sat side by side, while Marguerite and Kasim were nowhere to be seen. His eyes landed on Sierra, who was sitting beside Angeline.

Sierra stood and bowed her head apologetically. "I'm sorry. I truly am... Your injuries are all my..."

"No, it's nothing serious. Still, my word, you are quite skilled. It looks like I still have a long way to go."

Belgrieve chuckled, but Sierra looked to be on the verge of tears. "What are you saying...? That was completely my loss. I couldn't control my own strength—all while you were holding back against me. If you hadn't stopped your sword there... I'm supposed to be a guild master. How could I let my feelings get the better of me... and

how could I possibly apologize...?"

She seemed abjectly ashamed of her own behavior. Her shoulders were scrunched in an effort to make herself look smaller. All the anger that had overtaken her leading up to their match was now extinguished—she had completely cooled her head. Thus, she had never ended up fighting Marguerite, who was supposed to be next in line. Instead, she had stayed by Belgrieve's side this whole time out of concern.

"I see... Good grief, I've been out for a while, then."

Even so, he had to wonder who carried him to the inn. Belgrieve was tall and well-built, so he would be rather unwieldy to carry around.

"Ms. Sierra brought you here," Anessa answered, turning to indicate the woman.

"You're so big, but she had no trouble at all. She's a powerful lady," Miriam chimed in, giggling.

"It was no trouble at all. I'm the one who rashly picked that fight, so please don't worry about it..." Sierra pleaded as she held her face in her hands.

Belgrieve rolled his shoulders with a wry smile. He could feel his body loosening up with each cracking noise. The match had been before noon, so he had been out for a while. Then there was the fatigue of his travels to consider as well, so perhaps this was just the rest he needed.

"Where are Kasim and Maggie?"

"You weren't getting up, so they went shopping," said Angeline.

Scratching his head, Belgrieve asked Sierra, "Did you get the chance to talk to him?"

Sierra shook her head. Once her anger had subsided, she was overcome with the shame of her own short temper, and by then, speaking to Kasim was the least of her worries. For his part, Kasim hadn't reached out to her or anything either.

Belgrieve sighed. "What to do with him...?"

"Hey, hey, is it like that, Ms. Sierra? Do you have a thing for Kasim or something?" Miriam prodded Sierra with a grin.

"That... might be it," Sierra awkwardly mumbled. "Though I hate to admit it."

"Oh... A maiden in love... I see." Angeline nodded, looking somewhat amused. Anessa reached out and flicked her on the head.

"Ha ha, it's not that serious, Angeline. I just... don't know when to give up," Sierra said, scratching her head. "I'd heard about Belgrieve, Percival, and Satie from him far too many times. He always sounded so cynical and sick of it all, yet he would be strangely happy when he told those stories. It was like his current party didn't matter at all... I'd find myself irritated about this quite often."

"He's always been so..."

"No, I understand how Kasim feels. He was terribly sad despite being so strong. I wanted to do something for him... But I couldn't be your replacement. He left our party, just like that, and quit being an adventurer altogether... I thought I'd given up then. I never expected to meet him again. Nor to see him with you, and to see him so detestably happy..."

Sierra gave a sorrowful smile. "I thought I'd made my decision. But, Belgrieve, when you were standing before my eyes, I kept thinking hateful things, wondering why I wasn't good enough. Kasim's joy only made it worse... By the time I realized it, I was so spiteful I surprised even myself... I really am sorry." She lowered her head as if to conceal her tears.

Belgrieve smiled and placed a hand on her shoulder. "No need to worry about it, Sierra. Thank you for being honest with me. And I'm sure Kasim feels thankful as well."

"Is that really so...? But, he's never even looked my..." She cut herself off to wipe away her tears.

Kasim had certainly gone through his own share of pain. And yet, there were others who had been tormented by the recklessness that came from his anguish. It was a bit dreary to think about.

Belgrieve sighed and turned his eyes to the window. The darkness had now covered the street and had even crept inside, only barely kept at bay by the lamplight.

At that moment, the door was swung open by Marguerite. She came in, both her hands fully laden with groceries.

"Sorry for keeping you waiting. Oh, Bell's up? Well, that's perfect. I bought some wine while I was at it."

"It was dark before we knew it. You okay, Bell? Sierra's fists sure do pack a punch, huh?" Kasim said as he came in after her.

Angeline, Anessa, and Miriam immediately stared at him with reproach.

"Blockhead."

"Good for nothing."

"Stupid."

"Huh? What's this, what's this?" Kasim surveyed the room in a panic.

Belgrieve tiredly shut his eyes. "This is the one time I'm not on your side, Kasim."

"Wait, what? What were you talking about while I wasn't around?"

"And wait, the mood sure is gloomy. What're you crying for, ma'am?"

"Maggie, don't call her that. She is a maiden..."

"Huh? What the hell?! Well, whatever, I'm starving. Let's throw together some dinner." Without breaking her usual stride, Marguerite began lining the table with her grocery haul. There were all sorts of foodstuffs she had evidently purchased from the street stalls, some of them still steaming.

Though it felt like their conversation had been interrupted, they were hungry nonetheless. Belgrieve adjusted himself on the bed so that he could sit up with his legs hanging from the side.

After joining Marguerite in setting out his purchases, Kasim picked out one of the parcels. "Here."

"Huh... For me?" Sierra looked at him blankly as he awkwardly pushed it into her hands. The gaps in the paper wrapping revealed some sort of baked sweet with a sugary scent.

“You used to like these, didn’t you?”

“Yeah... Pinichet cake...” It was a pastry made with various dried fruits and spices mixed into a soft sheep’s milk dough and baked in a pastry mold.

Marguerite, sneaking a glance at the exchange, pointed at Kasim. “Oh, that thing? Kasim, that jerk—he looked all over the city for it. That’s why it took so long to get back.”

Kasim twisted his beard. “And when I finally found one, it’s barely got any of that dried fig you liked.”

“What...?” Angeline blinked. “So you *were* being considerate of Ms. Sierra...?”

“Kasim...”

“Yeah... Well, you know...” Kasim awkwardly turned towards Sierra. “See, when I’m focused on one thing, I can’t see *anything* else, so... Uh, sorry. I thought we’d resolved everything between us already...”

“D-Don’t be. I’m the one who kept dragging it out. So...”

Belgrieve smiled at the sight of the two of them struggling to work out what to say to each other. “I could go for some cider... if you’ve got any.”

“Ah, we’ve got some right here.”

“Huh, you do? No... Not that—I mean, that’s not enough. We have Maggie with us.”

“Wait, you’re letting me drink my fill today?”

“Well, um... Kasim, could you go buy some?”

“You want me to go out again?”

“Please help him out, Sierra. I’m sure he needs someone to show him the way.”

“I... I don’t mind...”

“But hear me out, Bell.”

"Oh, just shut it already! Quit whining and get going!" Belgrieve yelled at him, uncharacteristically. Bewildered, Kasim left with Sierra, who also seemed confused. Once they were gone, Belgrieve's shoulders slumped down, exhausted, and he heaved a great sigh. "What a troublesome guy..."

The girls, who had been stifling their laughter, finally burst out cackling.

"Heh heh heh heh, that was a bit forceful, dad... But good job."

"Tee hee hee, you're awkward at the strangest times, Mr. Bell."

"Take it easy on me. I'm not used to playing this part..."

"But the result wasn't terrible. Let's hope they can properly talk it out"

There was still one person who didn't seem to understand the situation. "What's all this? What happened?" Marguerite asked, pouting. "Don't just keep me out of the loop."

"It's an adult love story... You're too young to understand, Maggie."

"Try me, you little... Wait, love story?! You coulda just said so! Give me the scoop!"

The girls were all the more boisterous now that Marguerite was in the mix. For his part, Belgrieve reached for a bottle of wine and began to snack on some of the breads and meats.

Kasim said he wanted to regain the past he had left behind, and Belgrieve, Percival, and Satie were all a part of that. These were matters he needed to settle, but the past *was* the past, nothing more—once it was all over, perhaps Sierra would bear the role of pushing Kasim towards the future.

Then what about me? Belgrieve wondered.

"Well... I've got enough people already." It wasn't a bad feeling to have another generation to look after, his daughter included. He had close friends as well. His situation differed from Kasim, who had suffered in isolation. Once he had resolved his past, Belgrieve would simply return to his original day-to-day life back in Turnera, where he also had Charlotte, Byaku, Graham, and Mit too.

"The future, huh..." Unlike the old men headed off for the past, these girls all had

futures filled with possibilities. He was watching them animatedly discussing Kasim and Sierra when he began to frown.

"Instead of gossiping about other people, how about you all find someone nice for yourselves?"

His muttered words faded into the dark, unheard by anyone else.

○

Dusk had come and gone, and now the town of Mansa was enveloped in the full darkness of night. Stars twinkled in the sky as a brisk chill descended over the world. Every shop along the street had lit the lanterns hanging from their eaves, and the faces of passersby were cast in deep shadows.

Kasim, with a bottle of cider dangling from his hand, walked there with Sierra. They had achieved their objective, but it didn't feel right to head straight back after that.

Avoiding the more crowded roads, Sierra scratched at her cheek with her fingertip.

"Do you think he was trying to be considerate?"

"Could be. Bell's pretty awkward sometimes," Kasim said with a laugh.

Sierra's expression softened, as though following his lead. "He's a fine person, Mr. Belgrieve. Perhaps I can understand why you took to him."

"I know, right?" Kasim said gleefully, resting the bottle over his shoulder. "He's always been like that. Everyone besides him—me included—we were all pretty self-centered, doing whatever we wanted. We only managed to work together because Bell was around. Some people change with age, sure, but Bell stayed the same. He's a good guy, he is."

As Kasim spiritedly prattled on, Sierra's smile started to seem a little lonesome. "I knew it... You always look like you're having so much fun when you're telling stories about those three."

"Hmm? Yeah... Well, pretty much." Kasim awkwardly scratched his head.

Sierra seemed to recognize that she'd maybe crossed a line, and her head snapped

towards him. "Ah, no, sorry. I didn't say that out of spite."

"No, no, I'm sorry too. I can be inconsiderate, I know."

"You don't have to spell it out. I can tell."

"Hey, now."

Sierra giggled. She let out a long exhalation and stared at the sky.

"I hate how small I am," she said. "When I took on the job of guild master, I thought I'd gotten high and mighty enough to stand shoulder to shoulder with you... But how pathetic am I? Going mad with envy at my age? I only ever thought about myself, I guess. Even when Mr. Belgrieve was trying to be considerate from beginning to end."

"Hmm..." Kasim's eyes wandered.

Sierra sighed. "I wouldn't have blamed him no matter how much he berated me after that. Whether he smacked or scolded me, I intended to resign myself to my fate... I just can't be Mr. Belgrieve's replacement. I mean, there aren't many people out there who can calmly tolerate such insolence. Honestly, it's enough for me to be envious of you."

"You have it wrong, Sierra." Kasim stopped. He looked directly at her, a serious look on his face—at least, as serious as he ever got. "I've never thought of you as Bell's replacement. Sierra is Sierra. You're not anyone else."

"Agh..." Her cheeks turned slightly red as she averted her eyes. "Y-You're not sounding like yourself, Kasim."

"Yeah... And now I'm feeling embarrassed that I said it."

But they couldn't just stop in the middle of the street. They walked again, a somewhat awkward mood between them. For some reason, they had picked up the pace a bit.

It wasn't long before they were standing in front of the inn. There, they stopped and looked at one another. Sierra's eyes began to wander as she didn't know what to do.

"Um..." she said. "I'll be going then."

"Hmm..." Kasim thought for a moment before he snatched up her hand.

Her eyes darted. “Wh-What are you doing?”

“Well, see. I got the feeling they’d get mad at us if I just let you leave—Bell, for one, but especially the girls.”

“You think so...? Then what do we do?”

“Let’s walk for a bit more... Right, forget about Bell for now. Let’s talk about something else. Like what happened to me, and to you. There are things I’d like to say and things I’d like to hear. Lotsa things.”

“Yeah... Got it,” Sierra mumbled, nodding bashfully.

Kasim’s bearded face softened as he led Sierra by the hand farther down the bustling road.

CHAPTER 89

OUTSIDE THE CITY OF ORPHEN

Outside the city of Orphen, the early summer sun's light poured down incessantly and reflected off the lush, short grass. It made a squelching sound as thick-soled boots stomped upon it, revealing the bare soil below.

The red-haired boy had managed to evade one strike but had immediately taken the brunt of another blow on his shoulder.

"Why are you trying to approach there?" said the flaxen-haired boy as he tiredly tapped his wooden sword against the other boy's shoulder. "It's not like you'll somehow win as long as you stay in the thick of it. You... You're good at assessing the situation. Don't throw that away to close in—you're wasting your forte. You won't beat me by imitating me."

"Grr..."

"You ought to stick to what you're used to," the elven girl said with a chuckle. She had watched from her perch on a nearby stone.

The red-haired boy scratched his head. "Hmm... But, you know..."

"Was staying on the back lines the thing that got you kicked out of those other parties?"

The red-haired boy felt like his heart had stopped. Seeing his opponent's eyes begin to dart around, the blond boy grinned. "Listen here. I'll just say it, I don't think you'll ever be a better swordsman than me or her. That's not what I'm looking for out of you. It's something else."

"That kinda... stings when you just say it outright."

"I'm not calling you weak. Don't be so impatient. Look, I'm having a hard time putting it into words, but you have your own role to fill. Just leave the offense to me. Okay?"

"He's right. I don't know about *him*, but I'm a genius. Just leave it to me, hee hee."

The elf's giggling caused the blond to frown. "What was that? You picking a fight?"

"Uh-huh, then how about we put an end to our long series of draws!" The elf girl twirled her wooden sword around as she stood.

"Finally ready to lose? Good! I'll give you just what you asked for!"

"I'll return those words, and then some!"

With a sidelong glance at the quarreling pair, the red-haired boy retreated a safe distance with a sigh.

Division of labor... So far, it was mainly up to the red-haired boy to monitor the battlefield and search for enemies. He was also the one who would take care of the preparations for each adventure and do various other miscellaneous tasks. He was good at it, to be sure. Not to mention, the flaxen-haired boy, the elf girl, and the brown-haired boy were strangely sloppy when it came to those things. And so, he had come to understand these things as his duty.

When it came to the sword, he knew he was no match for the other two—not in terms of technique nor of effort or talent. He looked up to the straw-haired boy's courageous all-out offense, and he was entranced by the elf girl's flowing, dance-like movements.

Still, he had some self-respect as a swordsman. He knew it was a mistake to compete with them in swordsmanship, but he at least wanted the strength to stand on the same battlefield as them. In any case, he was no good as he was now. *What sword is right for me?* he wondered, closing his eyes.

A swordsman fought at the vanguard to protect the back line. Their position was the one that faced down fiends most frequently. However, that was not what the blond wanted of him.

Certainly, the party already had three swordsmen, including himself. There was little point in having everyone on the front line. If he was out there with those two, he would only slow them down. Back home, the red-haired boy could be proud of his skills, but the world was a vast place.

In the midst of the tempestuous clashing of wooden blades, he approached the brown-

haired boy, who was mirthfully watching the duel from farther away.

"Hiya. Looks like those two are the same as ever."

"Hey, what do you think? What sword should I be swinging?"

"You're asking me? Um..." The brown-haired boy folded his arms with a conflicted look on his face. He was a genius as well, but more significantly, he was a magician. Perhaps asking him about swordsmanship was misguided. The red-haired boy scratched his head. But before he could say anything else, the brown-haired boy suddenly clapped his hands—apparently, he had come to some kind of epiphany.

"A shield."

"Huh?"

"You know, those two like pushing forward, and if I had to pick sides, I'm more geared towards offense. Honestly, we have more than enough damage dealers."

"So, a shield? You want me to be the shield?"

"I'm not telling you to head out front and take attacks, but you're better at defending than attacking. As a matter of fact, you're the one watching our backs when we've got our eyes focused on what's out front... The rest of us, we tend to forget our surroundings when we get carried away. I know we need to fix that." The brown-haired boy cackled.

Perhaps he was right. A swordsman who focused on defense—even attempting this would have him booed out of other parties. But in this party, this was what everyone insisted he do.

"Good grief..."

He had spent many days and nights practicing offensive bladework, hoping to compete with the blond. It had been a hellish struggle; it had felt like he'd been wearing clothes that were completely the wrong size, and it seemed it had all been for nothing.

And now, even if he called it a "defensive sword," he didn't specifically know what that would entail. All the trial and error he'd conducted after coming to the big city only made him even more confused.

"I guess I'll need to do even more testing..."

"Ah, another draw," the brown-haired boy exclaimed.

Both swords had made contact at exactly the same moment. The elf girl held her head. The straw-haired boy held his flank. Both were quivering on their knees.

The red-haired boy produced a salve from his bag that he knew would work well on bumps and bruises.

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The blades of grass would catch the light, glistening white each time the winds caused them to sway. It was like waves of light were flowing and fading along the plains at regular intervals. Angeline gazed out at this view and stretched.

All that love gossip had been fun, and that had led into heated girls' talk once they had some alcohol in their systems. There had been some friction, but once all was said and done, they managed to accept the request from the guild; thus, they had parted ways with Sierra and left Mansa, and they now traveled south along the road.

It seemed they had earned Sierra's complete trust; half of their reward was paid in advance, and the remainder would be issued at their destination guild. Furthermore, they received a detailed map, food, water, and all the other necessities for the trip, and a two-horse wagon was lent to them free of charge. Transporting guild documents was an important job, and there were two S-Rank adventurers handling it, but these didn't seem to be the only reasons they were being treated so favorably.

Sitting across from Angeline, Kasim gazed absentmindedly at the sky. He looked a tad relieved. In the end, he and Sierra had wandered aimlessly late into the night, talking about all sorts of things. Once everything was resolved, they promised to meet again.

"A maiden is a maiden, no matter how old she is," Angeline chortled as she nestled up to Belgrieve. "Right, dad?"

"Hmm? Oh, yeah..."

He seemed to have something on his mind. He only gave a half reply and patted her on the head. His other hand was keeping a hold of the map.

According to Sierra, they would come across a few deserted settlements along the way but no towns. Some pioneers had set out to claim the land, once upon a time. But there were no valuable ores to be found and no fiends rare enough for adventurers to go out of their way. It was far from any large cities that would help trade prosper, and it was inconvenient for travel. Ultimately, there was nothing to keep them there. The people simply packed their bags and left.

In any case, this meant very few people used these trails. Perhaps nomads would pass through, but they did not routinely follow the same routes, so the roads did not serve a purpose for them.

I see. Unlike all the wide highways we've used so far, it's hard to say this one has been maintained at all. There were many bumps and dips, and the wagon was rattling more often than not. Belgrieve looked somewhat uncomfortable as he would frequently adjust his posture. It was understandable why so few merchants would head south.

But it wasn't as if no one used the route at all. Although covered in weeds, there were still wagon wheel tracks that seemed to span the entire length. The tracks veered slightly to the west. They were set towards a towering blue mountain range that seemed to melt into the sky. The summits were topped off with white snowcaps. The blue mountain face made the white snow stand out even more.

Angeline peeked at the map. The plains would continue for a while longer, but eventually, the terrain would become rockier, and it would be like a wasteland by the time they reached the mountains. There would be gorges that were home to bandits and fiends alike. Unfortunately, the fact the path was rarely used meant there was little information to go off of. Perhaps there was something Sierra wasn't aware of, and so she had cautioned them to stay on high alert.

It was entralling to venture into the unknown—all the more so for the danger it entailed. And yet, Angeline felt a strange sense of security despite this. Surely it was because Belgrieve was with her. She didn't know if he felt the same excitement, but she could barely contain herself, knowing she would be experiencing the same thrills as her beloved father.

Leaning out of the wagon, Miriam narrowed her eyes and stared at the mountains. An air current was carrying clouds over the tall peaks. "The dukedom is right across those mountains, right?"

"That's right. It's just one mountain ridge, but the climate's quite different on that side," Anessa answered. She was holding the reins.

Orphen, given its northern location, was a dry place. But it snowed in the winter, and it rained other times. The heavy damp clouds seemed to get caught on the mountain range, however. In Tyldes, the rains were scarcer and the air even more arid than Orphen—though perhaps the early summer was only so refreshing because of the aridity.

It reminds me of Turnera, Angeline thought. Turnera enjoyed plenty of snow, but it hardly rained. The summers were cool and refreshing.

I wonder if Charlotte and Byaku are tending to the field out back. Perhaps Turnera is too cold compared to southern Lucrecia. Is Mit playing well with the others? Perhaps Graham has taken him and the other children to see the forest.

Marguerite never seemed to tire of the passing scenery. She leaned out slightly, staring into the distance. "Something's there," she said.

"Hmm?"

Before Angeline could lift her head, Marguerite had jumped off the wagon and raced off as though she was weaving through the grass. She plucked out what looked like a pole shrouded in foliage and returned.

"It's a sword... Uh, is it a sword?"

"Wow, it's all rusty."

It was a weapon with a long handle. The handle was iron, and the parts of the blade that had been stabbed into the ground had rusted away. The blade was too long for it to be a spear, and the handle too long for it to be a sword. It was a weapon that seemed foreign to all of them.

Marguerite tried to find a comfortable way to hold it as she looked around.

"It's all buried in grass, but there's quite a lot of rusted armor and weapons around here."

"Hmm... Do you think this is an old battlefield?" Angeline asked and looked at

Belgrieve.

Belgrieve nodded. “Probably. That weapon is designed to be easier to wield on horseback.”

I see. A weapon with nice range would be more advantageous on a horse.

Marguerite stood, wound it back, and threw it. The weapon she’d just picked up flew far away and stuck itself back into the ground.

“Still, there’s absolutely nothing,” said Marguerite. “A fiend or two’d really liven up the place.”

“It’s not like we’re in a dungeon. Are there any fiends that would attack in broad daylight?” Kasim wondered, yawning. He tipped his hat over his face and hunkered down to sleep.

The plains continued on and on, but they could probably reach the base of the mountains by sunset. However, while the path did run along the mountain range, this did not mean it would always be right up against the mountains. This would only happen once they were farther south.

It took half a month for Angeline to reach Estogal. They would be going even farther than that, so there was plenty of time left. This was to be expected from anyone who couldn’t teleport or fly.

But that was the joy of the journey—at least, as far as Angeline saw it. If they went too fast, they wouldn’t be able to enjoy the scenery like this, and they couldn’t chat at ease.

At times, they took breaks for the horses to drink and graze. The golden sun in the western sky grew and even seemed to become more massive until it began its descent beyond the mountains. The blinding sight caused Angeline to blink. Suddenly, a strong wind blew over her. The swaying blades of grass sawed up against one another with a fierce rustling sound.

When she looked to the side, she saw Belgrieve’s eyes were shut and his arms were folded. He wasn’t asleep yet, but he was close to drifting off. Angeline crawled on her hands and knees over to Marguerite.

“Do you see anything...?”

"Nothing but grass. A few big rocks now and then and some old weapons occasionally."

The plains softly undulated in the breeze, rising into hills in some places. *If a bandit cavalry came charging from up there, I might not be able to handle them alone*, thought Angeline. She didn't think she would *lose*, but feared the wagon would be busted in the process.

Still, she had Kasim and Miriam, and most importantly, Belgrieve would notice the ambush before anyone else. *There's nothing to worry about*, she concluded with a nod.

Marguerite looked at her dubiously and asked, "What are you thinking?"

"If any bandits are going to attack, their best shot would be from over there."

"Ha ha, I see... But with the backlighting now, they could try that direction," Marguerite said, pointing in the same direction the wagon was headed. It was certainly bright out, and the bandits would have the advantage if they charged with the sun to their backs.

"Anne, you see anyone in the direction we're headed?"

"Nope, not a hint of anyone," Anessa said, looking over her shoulder. She was wearing Miriam's hat to block some of the light.

"Can you give me something to drink?"

"Cider?"

"Nah, nonalcoholic if possible."

"Hmm... Are you good with mint water?"

"Yeah, thanks."

"If there is an attack, right? They'd start off by sending their arrows flying from way off. Probably," Miriam said, fishing through her bag.

Angeline nodded. "Then, while we're panicking, they'll charge down at us from a high point... I think."

"If they don't have many archers, they'll aim for the driver first. Anne, you'd better look

out."

"I'll know immediately if something's flying at me..."

"So we start with arrow countermeasures, right? What should we do? I'm confident I can smack down any arrows coming at me, but I can't block them for all of us."

"Maggie, have you ever taken a guard job before...?"

"Hmm... I guess when I left Turnera with Bell—does that count? Not since coming to Orphen, though. They don't have any guard jobs for low ranks who work solo. Ain't that right? Yuri told me to wait until I joined a party."

Come to think of it, high-ranking adventurers could sometimes be given guard jobs even if they worked alone. Lower-ranking ones could not offer the same level of safety or confidence, Angeline reasoned.

"Large caravans usually hire someone specifically to deal with arrows, so you discuss with them first... In most cases, you set up boards on the side of the wagon."

"Hmm, yes... I think I've seen that before." Marguerite folded her arms and nodded as she recalled the wagon of the blue-haired female peddler.

Anessa steadfastly gazed at the road ahead. "Come to think of it, you should be able to take caravan guard jobs on your own. They don't just hire a single party; they gather loads of different adventurers."

"That so? I thought it was hopeless, so I never checked... You ever taken one on your own, Anne?"

"No, before Merry and I teamed up with Ange, we were in a party with our friends from the orphanage. Never had any problems taking guard jobs. Right, Merry?"

"Right, right. Back then, we couldn't go too far. But it was fun visiting the places around Orphen."

"How about you, Ange?"

"I rose through the ranks quickly. I never had to worry about it."

"Tsk. Just you watch. I'll be S-Rank in no time."

"It's important for you to coordinate with your client, by the way... It might be unsuited for somebody as self-serving as Maggie."

"What was that? Like you're any better, you unsociable brat."

Angeline and Maggie jokingly poked at one another.

"Now, now, no fighting. Have some sweets and make up." Miriam produced a sugar-sprinkled cookie with a smile.

Eventually, the sun had completely disappeared beyond the mountains, and shadows were cast across the wagon's path. The wind was cold against the skin, and Angeline once more donned the coat she had earlier taken off. The sky above was still deep blue and radiant; it was only dark where they now were, which felt somewhat absurd.

The wagon jolted as it rolled over a rock. Kasim jumped up, perhaps after taking a knock to the head.

"Gah!" he cried out. "Yawn... Oh, it's dark already. Was I out for long?"

"Are you okay, Kasim...? Can you still sleep at night?"

"Don't worry about it. I'll just take lookout duty if I can't," Kasim said as he stretched out his neck and shoulders.

The sun sank farther. Around the time the mountains burned a blazing red, the party arrived at a small ghost town. They parked the carriage in the shadows of a crumbling stone building and tethered the horses to an overgrown tree. The crumbling well had dried up and caved in, but there was a small brook nearby.

By the time they had gathered enough firewood, the ridgeline was purple, and the skies above were indigo. Only the lower halves of the thin strands of clouds were dyed red by the unseen sunset. The stars were beginning to make themselves known. The wind had been cool earlier in the day, but now it was bone-chilling. However, the old stone walls did wonders to ward it off.

Marguerite hummed a tune as she fabricated their dinner. Though this elf princess talked and acted tough, she surpassed Angeline when it came to cuisine. It was a bit

irritating. It wasn't that Angeline couldn't cook, but she decided she would practice more once she was back in Orphen.

Belgrieve set out a small box with a handle. "I'm leaving my seasoning out, Maggie. Don't use too much."

"I get it. Just leave it to me."

He watched her open the box and go over the small bottles inside. Then Belgrieve turned with his mantle trailing behind him. Angeline stood and followed after.

"Where are you going, dad...?"

"I thought I'd patrol the area... There's no telling what could be lurking around."

"I'll go too..."

"You want to? Then you need to dress warmer."

The moon hadn't risen just yet, but Belgrieve's eyes had grown accustomed to the dark, and he could walk with little difficulty. He moved even more cautiously than usual. There were rocks of all sizes hiding in the grass; his left leg could adapt to them, but he would fall over if his right peg leg came down at a strange angle.

There were several abandoned houses where the roofs had collapsed. In one of them lay a chipped and battered statue to the Goddess Vienna, exposed to all the elements. Surely there had been tilled fields at some point, but there weren't even any traces remaining.

According to Belgrieve, the village had been first settled by the empire. Tyldes's nomads didn't usually build houses with foundations, instead traveling the countryside with large tents. Farther east, in the lands of Keatai, structures were built from stone, dirt, and wood. By comparison, the transient lives of the people around these parts meant they did not make permanent structures.

"You're knowledgeable, dad."

"I just read it in a book once. It should still be back home, as I recall. You should read it next time you visit."

"I didn't know we had a book like that."

"I bought it from a peddler while you were in Orphen."

As she walked, Angeline noted the ruined weapons that littered the ground, even here. She wondered if the village had been abandoned because of the war.

"There are lots of weapons..."

"Yeah... From a long time ago." Belgrive looked around, stroking his beard. "No traces of fiends. I don't see any signs that ruffians have set up base here either... Now, let's get back."

"Yeah, I'm hungry," Angeline agreed, taking hold of Belgrive's hand.

Dinner was ready when they returned. They ate a warm stew of dried meat and beans with hard bread. By the time the pot and tableware had been cleaned up, a crescent moon had risen high in the sky, casting a pale-blue light over the open plains.

They watched the fire, their backs leaned against the wall. Each time the flame flickered, the shadows behind them would dance above them. It was somewhat unsettling, and Angeline would find herself looking back time and again.

After inspecting their supplies, Anessa stood up with her bow and quiver of arrows. Miriam likewise had taken hold of her staff.

"We're going off for a bit, Mr. Bell."

"Hmm? Did something happen?"

"We're going to procure some food. A few bunnies will do nicely," Miriam said, waving her staff around.

Although Sierra had issued them provisions, it wasn't wise to rely solely on them. If they could procure food on site, there was nothing lost in doing so.

Angeline stood as well. "I'll help..."

"You will? That's great. Then let's start with a snare..."

"Anything I can help with?" Marguerite looked at Anessa, her eyes brimming with expectations.

Anessa awkwardly scratched her cheek. "An arrow's the best for taking them out, but... You've got good eyes, right?"

"Yeah! Even at night!"

"Then help me chase them."

"Yay! I'll do it! Leave it to me!"

Leaving Bell and Kasim behind, the girls headed out into the plains. The wind was still blowing but had calmed to the degree that it only rustled their hair. Despite the bright moon, the lack of color made everything look artificial.

"Why now? We'd see better during the day."

"That works for birds, but rabbits are active at night. They don't come out otherwise. It seems that's especially true for the rabbits around here."

In fact, ever since they started heading south, they hadn't seen a single rabbit during the day. Anessa had sensed something rabbitlike after they started camping and had decided to go hunting.

"Oh, I see..." Marguerite folded her arms, impressed. "I saw rabbits during the day in Turnera's forests. Always wondered why."

"That's probably 'cause of the poor visibility in the forest. Makes it hard for their natural enemies to spot them. Out here, you can see far and wide, so they need to be stealthy."

"Didn't dad tell you to observe and learn?"

"Grr..." Marguerite pouted. Anessa and Miriam looked at each other and giggled.

Keeping her body low, Angeline set a few snares in the shadows of rocks and in uneven places on the ground, baiting them with a few dried beans each. She would check back on these in the morning. From time to time, she could hear something slipping through the grass, causing it to rustle loudly even in the breeze.

Downwind, she saw Anessa with her bow at the ready, and upwind, Marguerite loudly ran, making a great din on purpose. With a crackle of underbrush, a rabbit burst from the tall grass. Miriam quickly shot a glowing ball of magic nearby, which burst like a flare. The rabbit froze up in a daze.

That was when Anessa unleashed the arrow.

“All right.”

“Bull’s-eye!”

Angeline ran to collect the rabbit. Its empty eyes reflected only the moonlight.

“Are we hunting more...?”

“Yeah, we won’t need to worry about meat for a while,” said Anessa. She was about to add, “We can save our salted and dried meats for when we need them,” but her train of thought was interrupted. “Maggie, what’s wrong?” she asked with an inquisitive expression.

Marguerite was hunched over, covering her face with her hands. “My eyes...”

“Hey, I told you to watch out for the flash.”

Apparently, she had stared straight at Miriam’s flare and been dazzled. Angeline burst into laughter.

“I knew it... You’ve still got a long way to go, Maggie.”

“Agh, dammit...” Marguerite groaned, but there wasn’t much she could do when she could hardly see. Angeline smiled as she took her hand and helped her to her feet.

“Don’t worry, you’ll be better soon.”

“Urgh.”

Behind them, there was another flash of light, and with a swishing sound, another rabbit was shot dead.

Once the blinding lights had subsided, the plains were once more illuminated in the

glow of the crescent moon.

CHAPTER 90

THE AIR WAS TEPID, DESPITE THE FALLING RAIN

The air was tepid, despite the falling rain, and coiled uncomfortably around the skin. The sky loomed with dense clouds that seemed to descend into thick fog on the earth below, and visibility was terrible. Though they could tell there were people all around, the fog was too thick to see any of them. There were nothing but faceless presences with the weight of opaque nothingness pressing down upon them.

The sound of weapons being swung and magic bursting could be heard all around; metal struck against metal as screams and shouts resounded through the air. Danger was afoot—taking advantage of the fog, several fiends had evidently crawled their way out of the pit.

The woman, with her black hair bundled into a ponytail, thrust her spear through a peculiarly scaly bipedal fiend. She kicked her impaled foe aside before taking stock of the situation, annoyance etched into her features.

“Tsk, it’s not even time for the big one yet... Seems it will be quite serious this time.”

The woman readied her spear again, thrusting it out at another dark silhouette in the fog. “Hey!” she called out. “Are you done yet?”

“A little more,” answered the dog-eared girl behind her. The girl stood holding a six-stringed instrument, her eyes closed. At times, her ears would shake this way and that until she heard a soft sound on the wind. Suddenly, she reached with her right hand and plucked at one of the strings. “Baby.”

As the string thrummed, the fog seemed to resonate along with it. She played another, then another, and each time the fog quavered as the sounds bounced far and wide. All the noises of battle that had been so pronounced moments before had been replaced with the screams of fiends.

The black-haired woman rested her spear against her shoulder and caught her breath.

"Spreading your mana across the fog and playing an evil-warding sound, huh? You never cease to amaze me."

"I wanted to rock some more..."

"You fool. If you went at it seriously, you'd do *me* in along with the fiends."

"Now I have the blues..."

The presence of fiends grew fainter as the dog-eared girl strummed her six strings. Her music could dull the movements of her foes, affording the other adventurers the opportunity to swiftly dispatch them.

Leaning on her spear as a staff, the woman sighed. "How long has it been...? Even if Mr. Bell plans on coming, we have no idea when that will be."

"Where's mister?"

"Who knows? When I have to fight the creatures from the depths in *this* fog, I have no time to worry about someone else."

"Hmm..."

It seemed like the battle was over, so the dog-eared girl's hands came to a stop. She could hear the voices of adventurers chatting around them, but the fog prevented her from making any of them out.

Rolling her shoulders, the black-haired woman picked up her spear. "Good grief, I thought I could take it easy, but it looks like this year's big wave will be serious business. Let's pray we have a strong roster when the time comes."

"Ange will be here..."

"What?"

"It's just instinct... But I'm often right. When it rains, it pours."

"Well... Whatever. We can definitely count on them in a fight, anyways."

"You're only thinking about yourself. Ange and her friends aren't coming here for *us*,

baby.”

“I know that. But what’s wrong with thinking about how to survive? We’re in for a bigger wave than ever before. Are you telling me not to be anxious?”

“*Don’t think twice.*”

“What?”

“*It’s all right.*”

Shifting her hold on the instrument, the dog-eared girl raced off into the fog. Left behind, the black-haired woman stood stock-still for a moment. Then, the fog cleared up somewhat, and she could faintly make out several humans all walking in the same direction.

There was a slight commotion brewing, so the woman headed for it with a curious look on her face. The ground was strewn with heaping piles of fiend corpses—and some human bodies as well. Their wounds had come from a blade, not by fang or claw. It had to be the handiwork of a human.

“What happened? Infighting?” she asked a nearby adventurer.

The man shook his head. “It was the Iron Lion. He always takes care of the tough fiends, and it looks like some folks didn’t take too kindly to that. They tried to take advantage of the situation to ambush him.”

The man used the toe of his boot to flip one of the corpses over. Peering into the dead man’s face, he continued, “He was always grumbling about how it wasn’t fair. Done in by his own pride, I’d say.”

“And the hunter became the hunted, eh? A miserable way to go...”

The black-haired woman leaned against her spear with a sigh. Once again, she was reminded that those well-meaning adventurers from rural Turnera were the exception, not the norm.

“The frog in the well knows not the ocean. They wouldn’t have had much longer anyways if they got too conceited in their own strength. It may be for the best—we won’t survive the big wave if we have these guys tripping us up over petty jealousy.”

"I'll agree with you there. It's nice to have the idiots weeded out. Of course, this guy here was an S-Rank. His buddy there was AAA. They weren't weak by any means... The Lion's just an enigma. He's reliable, but he's kinda off-putting."

"Right..."

The raven-haired woman narrowed her eyes and looked around. The rain picked up and several trails of water passed by her feet. Beyond the fog, she could see the back of a blond man.

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The wagon raced at an incredible speed. Its wheels would rattle every time they hit an uneven place on the path, jolting the entire vehicle. They were slowly being encircled by a group on horseback as they gave chase.

"I'd expect no less from Tyldes horsemen," Kasim said with a merry laugh. "Persistent pests, aren't they?"

"This is no time for jokes," Belgrieve admonished. He couldn't stand up if the wagon shook too much, and his body was clumsily bent over as he held onto the side. With one false leg, it was harder for him to keep his balance.

The arrows fired by these mounted bandits would be sliced out of the air by Angeline or Marguerite. The wooden boards they had erected to block them had already been riddled with holes.

With the party's skill level, the arrows posed little threat. But all the shaking had made Miriam sick, and she was clinging to Belgrieve with a pale face. Kasim was stuck knocking down stray arrows, though he seemed to be enjoying the situation. Given that Anessa, their best long-range fighter, was the one holding the reins, the battle seemed to be one-sidedly in favor of the bandits.

Belgrieve lifted his face and looked ahead. "Just a little more."

"Whoa, that's really something. There are even more of them coming from behind."

Marguerite's words caused Belgrieve to turn back and see the comrades of the horsemen encroaching upon them like a wave. Angeline threw an empty bottle, which struck the head of the nearest rider, causing him to tumble off his horse. However, this

was like a drop in a bucket. It seemed meaningless.

Scratching her head, Angeline said, "Is it because we killed the first few...?"

"Tyldes's bandit riders are known to hold a grudge. They won't give up until they're dead or we are."

"Then can't we just kill them?" Marguerite blithely asked as she swatted another arrow out of the air.

"No, this is completely different from fighting fiends," Belgrieve said drily. "Humans can be scary, Maggie."

"Hmm? Well, whatever. I'll admit cutting down this many humans would put me in a bad mood."

That was the moment when several of the horsemen riding behind them exchanged looks and shouted incomprehensibly. One of them raised a hand. Suddenly, all the riders raised their bows in sync and fired all at once. The arrows came down as densely as rain.

Belgrieve, bracing his left leg, stood up and drew the greatsword from his back. "Grab onto something!"

And with a spirited battle cry, he swung the roaring blade with all his might. A massive shock wave erupted from him, scattering the flying arrows to the dirt in broken bits. The horsemen discontentedly grunted but continued their pursuit undeterred.

Taking a deep breath, Belgrieve tucked the sword away and stooped down again. Angeline latched onto his back. "Amazing... You're amazing, dad!"

"W-Wait, Ange, now's not the time."

"Heh heh heh, you've gotten quite used to wielding that thing. Not bad, Bell."

"Why is everyone so carefree...?"

"We're cutting through! Shut up if you don't want to bite your tongue!" Anessa screamed as she whipped the reins. The horses sped up. As expected of Tyldean horses, they were remarkably swift and hadn't yet reached their limits.

The wagon—which had been racing along the plains—had at some point reached the base of the mountains, plunging into the bottom of a ravine sandwiched by steep cliffs. Belgrieve looked back, then turned to Kasim. “Good to go!” Belgrieve called out.

“You got it.” Kasim waved his hands. A bolt of magic flew out, impacting the tops of the cliffs on both sides. With a tremor, crumbling rock and dirt fell upon the horsemen riding directly below.

The path was sealed now. Though perhaps one could climb on foot, the cliffs could not be navigated with horses. Their party had narrowly escaped danger but had cut off their own escape route. Moreover, they were still trapped with several bandits, who had fallen into confusion upon being separated from the rest of their forces.

“What do we do about them?”

“Just leave them. Let’s break away while we can. Their forte is ambushing on the plains, after all,” Belgrieve observed as sweat dripped from his brow.

As the carriage slightly relaxed its pace, the shaking became a little more manageable, and so Belgrieve could finally be at ease. He patted Miriam on the back, as she was still looking green. “Merry, are you okay?”

“Urgh... I feel sick...”

“What a wimp,” Marguerite teased.

Miriam puffed out her cheeks. “I am a delicate lady!”

“I... feel sick too.” Angeline clung to Belgrieve while exhibiting her terrible acting prowess.

With a sigh, Belgrieve placed a hand on her head. “You’re completely fine.”

“I mean, it’s not fair...”

“You stick to him all the time whether you’re sick or not!” Miriam protested. She clasped her hands over her mouth to contain her nausea.

Kasim nervously jumped up and leaned against the wagon’s edge. “Hey now, it’ll be messy if you throw up here.”

"How about we take a break once we've gotten a safe distance? The horses need some rest," said Belgrieve as he glanced back at the cliffs above. Their pursuers had given up, it seemed, and for their part, their horses' smooth coats looked to be drenched in sweat.

More than half a month had gone by since they left Mansa. Perhaps because summer was nearing its zenith—or because they were headed for warmer summer climes—each day seemed hotter than the last.

Along the way, they had traded at a makeshift nomadic settlement, fought off swarming fiends, and crossed an abandoned settlement that had turned into a dungeon. After many such happenings, they had finally left the plains. This conflict with the bandits had marked the end of their time there, and now they could finally find some reprieve in the mountains. If all went well, they would reach the southern city of Istafar.

This had been the first time Belgrieve had gone on such a long journey without any villages or towns to spend the night in, or even so much as a bed. Perhaps if he were younger it would have been fine, but life on the road exacted a harsh toll on his forty-year-old body, which had grown accustomed to country living for so long. He may not have been hoofing it on his own two feet, but the rocky ride in the wagon sapped him nonetheless.

And we haven't even started yet, he thought with a self-deprecating smile. They hadn't reached their first waypoint yet, and he was already so worn out. *How terrible will it be by the time we reach the Earth Navel?*

Anessa looked over her shoulder. "What do you think, Mr. Bell?" she asked. "How far should we go?"

"Let's find somewhere that's a bit more open. There's no guarantee we won't find mountain bandits around these parts. I wouldn't want to be ambushed when the terrain is against us."

"Right. Then let's slow down a bit first. Give me a shout if you see any place that fits the bill," Anessa said and faced forward again.

Miriam, who was dead tired, slouched against the wagon's edge. Marguerite fished through their bags for a tonic to resuscitate her; Kasim, for his part, simply closed his

eyes as though he was asleep.

Angeline nestled up to Belgrieve. "We'll have to pull out the arrows," she said.

"Right, these are a bit painful to look at," Belgrieve replied, looking at the wooden boards that had become pincushions. He was somewhat impressed that those bandits could fire their arrows so accurately while on horseback, and he knew he wouldn't have come out in one piece if he had been alone. It was understandable why no one wanted to take the southern route. Belgrieve had been on his toes ever since Sierra had warned him of the dangers, and he would have been too rattled to act otherwise.

A while later, they reached a slight hollow in the rocks, where the cliffs acted as a roof of sorts. There was seemingly a mountain stream nearby, as they could hear the sound of running water.

The sun was still high, but the chase had been wearisome, and they decided to rest early. Their water bucket had become deadweight as they fled, so they had dumped out its contents. It was a spot of good fortune that they could replenish it so soon.

With energy to spare, Marguerite and Angeline headed off to find the stream with wooden pails in hand, while Anessa left with her bow and arrows in search of wild game. Miriam was still completely down for the count.

Kasim came to Belgrieve carrying a bundle of withered branches. "I got some firewood."

"Oh, thanks."

Belgrieve had been moving aside some of the larger stones in the area, smoothing out the ground and preparing a place to sleep. He put some of the rocks together to set up a simple stove and lit a fire. Once Angeline and Marguerite returned, their pails of water went straight into the pot, simmering along with some preserved minced meat, dried grains, and beans.

"Dad... Is there anything I can help with?" Angeline asked, fidgeting behind him.

"No, I'm all right over here. Can you pull the arrows out of the wagon?"

"Yeah!" Angeline made an enthusiastic dash for the wagon, where the horses were guzzling down water.

Eventually, Anessa returned with a goat about the size of a dog.

"I caught a goat, for what it's worth. Looks like the ones here are small, though."

"That works out well enough... Oh, you already bled it."

"It was next to the river, anyways. But I thought you'd be better at skinning it..."

"I wouldn't say that... Well, it'll be faster if we both worked on it. Let's do it together."

"R-Right, heh heh..." Anessa grinned.

That was when Angeline appeared without a sound. "Me too."

"Wah!"

"Are you already done?"

"I am. And it's no fair..."

"Good grief, I'm not trying to *take* him or anything," Anessa said, letting out a tired sigh.

Belgrieve took out a hunting knife with a wry smile. Though he was quite adept at skinning the goat, Anessa wasn't far behind, and neither was Angeline. It wasn't long at all before the goat's lumpy, red meat was exposed. Given the season, it did not have much fat on it, but this was more than enough to add some pizzazz to the meal.

By the time the meat was giving off a delicious scent, the sun had fallen, and the lantern and bonfire painted the rocky cliffs with their bodies' shadows.

"Once we reach Istafar, Nyndia shouldn't be far," Kasim said, spooning out some of the grain and bean porridge.

Belgrieve nodded. "Right. The problem is, we don't know the exact location of the Earth Navel."

The Nyndia mountain range straddled the lands of Tyldes and Dadan, but it stretched into numerous countries from northeast to southwest. Istafar was in Tyldes territory, and following the mountains to the southwest would take them to the empire of

Dadan. If they headed west before they got there, though, they would instead find themselves in Lucrecia or Rhodesia.

Although it was supposed to be close to the mountain range, they had no idea where the Earth Navel really was. It didn't appear on Sierra's map either. Perhaps the location really was only passed around by word of mouth among a handful of skilled adventurers.

"Hey, I'm sure we'll find someone who knows as long as we get to Istafar," Marguerite reasoned, swallowing down a chunk of grilled goat meat.

"Probably," Angeline agreed. "We'll start by asking around the guild." She stuck a spoon into her porridge, but before she could dig in, she had a sudden realization and looked back up from her meal. "Dad... Do we have cheese?"

"Yeah, we do." Belgrieve handed her a lump of cheese he'd bartered for with some passing nomads. Shaving some off with a knife into the porridge instilled it with some much-needed richness.

"Your cooking is as good as ever, Bell," said Kasim. "I'm not so bad myself, but your food just puts me at ease."

"It was a long journey, but... we were never troubled for food," Anessa added.

"Right. We'll have to thank Ms. Sierra," said Belgrieve.

"There's that," said Kasim. "But you also did a pretty good job of managing our supplies."

"Not at all. It's because everyone went out to hunt and forage..."

"But when it came to allocation and water usage—that was all you, Mr. Bell," Anessa declared. "You're quite handy, come to think of it."

"Uh-huh, isn't he...? As expected of my dad."

Hearing everyone praise him made Belgrieve feel uncomfortable and agitated. "What's the point of praising me over every little thing? What are you trying to accomplish?"

Angeline looked at him blankly. "I mean, you really *are* amazing..."

"Now see here, Ange—"

"Now, now. It's not like anyone's insulting you. How about you just accept it?" Anessa pleaded with him.

Marguerite had to get a dig in: "I just like how bothered he looks when you compliment him."

"Good grief..." Belgrieve let out a resigned sigh as he added wood to the fire. *They should learn the meaning of "damning with faint praise,"* he thought. When they carried on like that, it just felt like they were teasing him. Marguerite, at least, made her intentions clear on that front.

"Mmm... Something smells good..."

There was a rustling behind him. Miriam, who had been asleep all this time, finally roused. Her naturally disheveled hair was an even greater mess than usual.

Anessa picked out a bowl and served her some porridge. "I thought you'd be out until morning. Will you still be able to sleep at night if you get up now?"

"Maybe not, but I feel refreshed. Maybe I'll stay up on the lookout tonight." Miriam smiled as she took the bowl.

Once dinner was over, there was nothing going on that warranted staying up late. Most of them bundled up in their blankets and lay down. Having regained enough vigor from her nap, Miriam sat by the fire across from Kasim, who had also slept during the day. Anessa and Marguerite lay beside one another, while Angeline leaned drowsily against Belgrieve as he got another good look at the map.

"It seems it's generally a direct path..."

"We're going to have to traverse some old roads. Let's hope they're in good enough shape for the wagon."

"There are fiends as well, apparently. The map doesn't give any warnings about bandits, though."

Resting her chin on her knees, Miriam cocked her head to one side. "How old are those warnings, anyways?"

"I don't see any dates, but... I heard this was the latest information."

Of course, just because it was written down did not mean it was correct. A large company of bandits might work around a central base of operations, but there were others that simply roamed freely. And if, for some reason, a new pool of mana formed somewhere, fiends would often congregate nearby.

Kasim yawned. "No use in getting our panties in a bunch at this point. Maybe we should wait to think about what to do until we reach Istafar. The sights, the sounds, the food—it'll all be different from Orphen and Yobem. Doesn't that excite you?"

"That's important, I agree. But if you're too preoccupied with such things, you could end up stumbling when you least expect it."

"Heh heh, then I'll count on you to look out for us. You're the best man for the job."

That was my intention from the start, Belgrieve thought. Chuckling, he returned his eyes to the map.

Kasim snapped a small branch and tossed it into the fire. "All right, let's think about what we'll do in Istafar, Merry. It's a big place. We'll need to prepare a few things before we head to the Navel, and we should do some shopping too."

"Yay, I can't wait! What kinds of food do they have there? I hope they have some tasty sweets."

Kasim and Miriam happily chatted over all sorts of things. Though Belgrieve's eyes remained on the map, before he knew it, he was lending an ear to their conversation.

Istafar was a major city in the south of Tyldes. Its size rivaled their central metropolis of Khalifa. Once upon a time, it had apparently been the capital of its own nation until it fell to the mounted raiders of Warlord Yh'benado, said to be the strongest warrior in Tyldes's history. Though the city's old walls had been partially destroyed, some of them still remained standing to this day. Naturally, they had since been reinforced, and Istafar could once again operate as a fortified city. It boasted military and economic might great enough to stand on its own, and it apparently operated similarly to an independent city-state like Yobem.

Though few knew about their actual origin, rare materials from the Earth Navel would often end up in the city. Thus, the city was known for the quality of its enchanted

accessories and tools. They went for a hefty price, however, so they hardly served to attract the common adventurer. Still, high-quality materials drew skilled craftsmen and magicians hoping to study them, thus providing a new stimulus for Istafar's trade and economy.

The tepid midday air turned frigid at the fall of night. The summer sun was strong in the daylight hours, but once it set, the weather was cold enough to make one shiver.

Angeline shifted, leaning more heavily into Belgrieve. Belgrieve gazed upward into the darkness beyond the crags, which seemed to be an empty void—but this only made it feel all the more suffocating.

○

There was a clattering as the gathered firewood was set down to one side. The boy with flaxen hair patted his hands together to knock off the dust. "That should last us 'til morning."

"Yeah, long as we don't burn too much at once." The red-haired boy took out some tinder, and the fire was swiftly lit.

It was already dark. The hefty clouds overhead blocked out their view of the moon and stars even through the glimpses of sky they could see through the trees. The air was strangely heavy and sticky, but it didn't seem like it would rain. It was simply the surrounding darkness that seemed to weigh down upon them.

The four had come to a forest; their job was to gather various herbs, among other materials. Thanks to the elf girl, they were never lost among the trees—they had already gathered a good amount and planned to return after camping out for the night.

The more the darkness enveloped them, the more they felt like clinging to the small, unsteady flame of the bonfire. Once dinner was over, they huddled together around it, the flickering tongues of flame in their midst lapping at the darkness.

"Does the night ever make you anxious?" the elf girl asked, hugging her knees.

As he cleaned up the cookware, the red-haired boy nodded. "Well, yeah."

"I was just thinking. Where does that fear come from, exactly?"

"What is this, elf philosophy or something?" the blond asked. He had an inquisitive look on his face as he snapped a thin branch, the fire before him crackling as if to echo him.

"Not exactly." The elf girl shook her head. "I just thought it was strange to be scared of the dark."

"You think so? I mean, you don't know what's where, and it feels like you're all alone in the world," the brown-haired boy explained.

The red-haired boy looked back at his own dancing shadow stretching far behind him. Beyond that was a thick grove, and farther still from there was only pure darkness. Imagining all the things that could be peeking at them from the darkness was certainly frightening.

But the elf girl still shook her head. "That's not being scared of the dark, that's being scared of what the dark *brings*. That's not what I'm talking about. I meant this sort of fear of... *the dark itself*. It's strange, isn't it? I mean, we all came from our mothers' bellies, and there's sure as hell no light in there."

"I don't think any of us even know true darkness, though..." the blond mused.

"What do you mean?" The brown-haired boy cocked his head curiously.

His friend folded his arms in thought before explaining himself. "I mean, if you close your eyes, all you're seeing is the back of your eyelids. I reckon only someone who's completely blind knows true darkness. No, maybe *not seeing anything* isn't all there is to darkness either..."

"Really... Huh. Maybe?" The elf girl hugged her knees and closed her eyes. The red-haired boy gazed off into the night, deep in thought. Perhaps the blond was right. *Then what even is true darkness? Does it really go beyond what our eyes can see?* he wondered.

The elf girl sighed. "What is it, really? At night, my thoughts go off in all sorts of strange directions."

"You certainly can be... oddly thoughtful."

"Hmph, something wrong with that? Did you think I was a blockhead or something?"

The elf girl prodded at the blond boy's shoulder.

He merely chuckled and ruffled up her hair. "Don't be so touchy. Let's save the fretting for when we're back in town. For now, let's rest up for tomorrow. And even if it's dark, you've got us with you—no need to be anxious."

"Ah ha ha! You're not wrong... Hey, how long are you going to pat my head for?"

"Well... It's softer than I thought. Crazy soft, actually. So this is elven hair..."

"Huh? Really? Can I feel it too?"

"Hey! My hair is not a toy!"

The elf girl discontentedly twisted away as the two boys roughly patted her hair. She looked at the red-haired boy, the only one who had silently kept out of it.

"Do you want to... touch it too?"

"Huh? No, I... don't really..."

A pair of grins broke out. "He's trying to play it cool," the dark- and light-haired boys echoed in unison.

"What?!"

At the sight of the red-haired boy's discomposure, the elf's cheeks flushed, her lips still poutingly pursed—or perhaps it only looked that way to him in the dim light of the flame. She leaned forward, practically thrusting her mane at him.

"Here... You can touch it if you want."

"Uh..." His eyes wandered. Her silver hair glistened in the firelight. It seemed as though his anxiety for the night had been driven off somewhere far away.

CHAPTER 91

A HIGH, STURDY WALL

A high, sturdy wall enveloped the entire city—the very same wall that once protected an ancient capital. However, weathered parts had been replaced, and others had been entirely rebuilt. The color of the bricks in the renovated sections clearly distinguished them from the old.

Angeline had noticed while passing through the gate, but the wall really was shockingly thick. *No wonder the warlord who took Istafar was called the strongest in history*, Angeline mused as she reflected on the ancient history.

After crossing the ravine, they had finally made it to Istafar. Although a subspecies of dragon had settled down near the exit to the ravine, a mere offshoot was no match for Angeline's party, and they made it through without coming to any significant harm.

Beyond the mountains lay an expanse that was more wasteland than plains. The sun beat down even more fiercely there, and the scarcer grass meant a harsher heat emanated from the ground. A parched wind continuously howled, dragging clouds of dust in its passing that left an irritable feeling in Angeline's throat. Surely this was the same wind as she had felt in the north—and yet, it was completely different from how it had felt there. Perhaps because of this, even a leisurely wagon ride was wearing her out. But this proved inconsequential—her heart still danced at her first visit to the city known as Istafar.

The city was brimming with activity. People of all walks of life came and went, conversing in accents she had never heard before, and thanks to the climate, more people seemed to have darker skin. The music of the street performers resembled that of the roaming folk back home, but something seemed... different, in a way that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

Marguerite looked around excitedly. "Amazing! It's completely different from Orphen! Whoa, whoa! Ah! He's got cloth wrapped around his head! What's that?! Ah ha ha ha! Those clothes are ridiculous!"

"Now, now, don't let your inner yokel run wild. It's embarrassing us," Kasim jokingly

said, poking at her head.

Angeline giggled. She was quite excited herself, but having Marguerite around to be the rowdy one allowed her to maintain a level head by contrast. Nevertheless, such an unfamiliar townscape was truly invigorating.

Her surroundings were dusty. Even when the sky was clear, it was strangely hazy and everything in the distance seemed to blur. Still, this hazy scenery was populated with buildings with rooftops shaped like chestnuts, or mushrooms before they spread their caps. They were decorated magnificently with tiles of all colors. *Are they round so thieves can't climb on them?* Angeline wondered as she looked around.

Soon, the wagon came to a stop—they had seemingly arrived at the guild.

“Now then,” Belgrieve said, taking to his feet, “let’s finish up Sierra’s business first.”

“Yeah...”

The man was looking a little relieved, though the long journey had left him with a weary complexion. Belgrieve had not shown any weakness along the way, but he had lived in one place for a long time—he had likely pushed himself hard to keep up with everyone else. As it was, he was already handling their supplies, routing, and searching for enemies, practically managing the whole trip. *I guess it's different from us. We're only putting our all into battle. Surely, he must be mentally exhausted.* Angeline tugged on Belgrieve’s sleeve.

“Hmm? What’s wrong, Ange?”

“Take it easy today, dad... You did well.”

“Ha ha, thanks.” Belgrieve smiled and patted her on the head.

The guild’s construction was different as well. Unlike Orphen—which was built rather simply, all things considered—this one was fashionably ornamented and gave off a somewhat mysterious feeling. Nevertheless, it still revealed itself to be a gathering place for ruffians when they entered. *They’re the same no matter where you go,* Angeline observed. She felt both relieved and jaded at this fact. More than anything, though, she felt at home.

Marguerite wore a hood, looking none too amused. Istafar was a key point for trade

with the east, so outsiders were a common sight here. She did not receive any particularly strange looks, in any case.

There was no use in sending everyone, so Angeline had the others wait in the lobby as she took Sierra's delivery and letter to the desk. Even the counter for high-rankers was crowded.

Standing beside her, Kasim twisted his beard and looked around. "Hmm, there's a lot of them... I didn't think there would be that many profitable jobs around these parts."

"Isn't it because it's a big city...? Or maybe the Earth Navel has something to do with it..."

"Well, so be it. Whether there are loads of high-ranking adventurers or not, that has nothing to do with us."

They grabbed the attention of a passing staff member, who looked Angeline up and down. "What is it? If it's about work, you should go through the proper channels..."

"We have a delivery... from Mansa."

The staff member read through the letter Angeline handed her. She looked at Angeline's S-Rank adventurer plate, then back at her, and swallowed her breath.

"Y-You followed the mountains down from Mansa... There should have been a medjool dragon in the gorge..."

Kasim tilted his head. "That cockeyed subspecies? We defeated it. Were we not supposed to?"

"You did?! Ah, no, that should be possible for an S-Rank... It's not a bad thing, but—wait, it *is* bad! Hey! Take down that request to slay the medjool dragon!" The staff member shouted towards the desk, causing the adventurers waiting there to glance her way.

The receptionist stared back, confused. "Take it down? Wasn't it a high priority...?"

"No, looks like *they* killed it already. We haven't confirmed it yet, so we have to change it from a hunt to a survey... The pay for that changes quite a bit, so take it down until we process that."

“But an AAA-Rank party just went off to deal with it.”

“Agh! Ah, what do I do now...?”

Angeline scratched her cheek. “I’m kinda... sorry.”

“No, no, don’t worry... Ahem. Uh, for starters, how about you meet with our guild master?”

“Okay.”

The staff lady led Angeline and Kasim to the guild master’s room on the third floor of Istafar’s large, multistory building.

After the wooden door opened to them, the first things to catch Angeline’s eye were the strangely shaped devices on the wall. The shelves were overflowing with documents, though Angeline supposed that was no different from any other guild master’s office. Unlike in Orphen, however, the excess had not gathered into piles on the desk and floor. The place was properly cleaned, and felt far more spacious for it—it certainly did not give off the air of a guild master cornered by his work. *Did Istafar decide to do things like the central guild, then?*

A young man with light-blue hair stood by the window, gazing out with an absentminded look on his face.

“What nice weather... It’s hot...”

“Guild Master!”

“Huh? What is it? Oh, deputy... What’s wrong?”

The guild master turned towards them with a rather weak smile. He was quite young—still in his twenties, perhaps. But still, he managed such a large guild. Angeline was a bit impressed. She was also only now realizing that they had been led there by the deputy guild master.

The deputy positioned herself slightly to one side. “These are the S-Rank adventurers Angeline and Kasim. They have come with a delivery from the Mansa guild.”

“I’m Angeline,” Angeline said, lowering her head. “Sierra told us to give this to you...”

"Thank you so much for that... I am the guild master of Istafar, Oliver."

Oliver greeted them with a warm smile. He was tall but thin and wore a loose-fitting robe. His appearance suggested he was a magician. The man's complexion was so pale that he looked sickly.

The deputy hurried off to settle the matter of the dragon. Meanwhile, Oliver directed them to a set of chairs and seated himself across from them. He read through the letter, examined the box, and nodded. Angeline could not tell if it was glass or crystal, but it contained some transparent material refined into a spherical shape. The item took on prismatic hues that shifted depending on the angle of the light.

"This is certainly the crystal ball I lent her. Thank you. I didn't expect to get it back so quickly."

"That's the model 208, right?" Kasim said, stroking his beard. "The Toto Clam? Did you lend it to her to set up a barrier? It's rare to see guilds accommodating one another like this."

Oliver narrowed his eyes. "You saw through it at a glance... As expected of the Aether Buster."

"Huh? You know him, Mr. Oliver?" Angeline asked.

Oliver smiled. "I'm something of a magician myself. I'm not going to forget a former archmage. His innovative parallel spell sequence system helped me out quite a bit."

"What an honor, heh heh heh," Kasim chuckled. He reached for the cup of tea that had been set out before him.

Oliver folded his hands in front of his mouth and looked at his two S-Rank visitors. "It's been two years now. There was an outbreak of fiends that stemmed from a demon around Orphen in the Dukedom of Estogal. Right, Madam Angeline?"

"Yeah." Angeline nodded. There was no way she could forget that—that incident had prevented her from going home several times.

Oliver snickered. "You must have had it hard. But your efforts finally paid off, it seems. As expected of the Black-Haired Valkyrie."

“Not really... It’s because everyone worked together.”

“I can’t pretend it’s none of my business. We have established effective coordination between guilds precisely to deal with such problems as they arise. Of course, those guilds that feel Central’s breath down their neck still play dumb... But Mansa has cooperated ever since Sierra became guild master. I lent her this crystal ball as an antifiend countermeasure.”

“Ha ha, I see. So you learned a good lesson from Orphen.”

“Precisely. You might not like it if I put it like this, but Orphen served as a good data point—an impetus to improve. Although it will be difficult to go completely independent from the central guild as Orphen did...”

Angeline sipped at her tea. Oliver was very analytical, or rather... very magician-like. However, this was far better than if he had simply sat around twiddling his thumbs.

“I’ve gone through Sierra’s documents as well. Let me pay you the rest of the fee now. Our guild will take charge of the wagon, and it will be returned to Mansa when another request comes around. Is that all right with you?”

“Yeah, thanks—er, thank you very much.”

Oliver’s expression relaxed as relief came over him. He placed a hand on his chest and cleared his throat. He seemed to be in a bit of pain. “My apologies... My body was never very strong.”

“No, don’t push yourself...”

“Thank you... Now then.” After a sip of hot tea, Oliver looked at them. “I’ve heard you’re headed for the Earth Navel...”

Angeline nodded, leaning forward. “Do you know anything? We’ve heard it’s in the Nyndia mountains, but we don’t know the specific location...”

“Hmm... Well, it shouldn’t be a problem for you two... But it’s still dangerous. Even S-Ranks aren’t guaranteed safety in the Earth Navel.”

“We are aware of that...”

Oliver thought things over for a moment with his eyes closed. Finally, he raised his head. He took one of the peculiar devices off his wall and handed it to Angeline.

“Understood. I’ll lend this to you.”

“What is it?”

The pyramid-shaped object, small enough to fit in the palm of Angeline’s hand, was made of magic-imbued crystal that was fastened to a fine silver chain which spanned from her elbow to her fingertips. The pyramid emanated a faint purple light.

Oliver lifted up the chain, letting the crystal dangle, and allowed his mana to flow into it. Suddenly, the pyramid—which had previously been facing downwards—stood, with its tip pointed rigidly in a single direction. Its direction remained unchanging even when the chain shook and swayed.

“This crystal was harvested at the Earth Navel.”

Once Oliver dispelled the mana, the pyramid hung limply once more. He handed it to Angeline, who held it up and inspected it closely.

“It points to the Earth Navel...?”

“That’s right. The ores in the Nyndia Mountains render compasses useless. The region is too dangerous to send surveyors, and we do not have any proper maps. However, as long as you have that crystal, you will know the direction.”

“And if we can’t get there on our own with it... we’re not qualified to enter...”

“Ha ha, that’s part of it. Once you get there, you’ll be faced with fiends a great deal stronger than the ones in the mountains. That was a good warm-up, wouldn’t you say?”

“Heh heh heh, how interesting. But the crystal’s not free, is it?”

Oliver narrowed his eyes. “If possible, there are a few materials I’d like you to get for me... Of course, I’ll buy them at full price if you bring them back.”

“Why not? Making it a request keeps things nice and simple.”

It wouldn't be fun to be indebted to the guild. Arranging his support as a request would avoid any trouble down the line. In any case, they had gone on this journey to meet Percival, but Angeline did have the desire to pit herself against strong fiends.

This will make for a fine excuse, she thought with a mischievous smile. She picked up her cup—but while she couldn't remember when she had finished it, it had been empty for a while now.

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"Hot... Way too hot... And dry, and painful... My throat..." Marguerite flapped her hooded cloak, evidently trying to draw a breeze through it.

Anessa handed her a glass of juice. "After you were in such high spirits..."

"I mean, it never got this hot back where I'm from... Dammit, now that I've settled down, it feels like the heat's gotten even worse."

Marguerite finished off the juice in one swig before collapsing into her chair in exhaustion.

She had been so excited and merry when they had first arrived in Istafar, but after she'd settled in and gotten to experience the climate, she was done in by the heat and dryness.

"Bell... Can I take off the hood?"

"Only if you promise you won't fight even if someone picks on you."

"Urgh..." Marguerite looked at him reproachfully before giving up.

If she's aware that she can't control herself, I guess she's grown a bit, Belgrieve thought with a smile. He did pity her, but elves would be even more of a rarity in the south. Odd looks were one thing, but he wanted to avoid any needless chaos—which would be practically inevitable if she were approached by any of the wrong sort. If they ended up making a mess, they had no acquaintances and no one to vouch for them in these foreign lands, leaving them at a clear disadvantage; it was all over the moment they got branded as criminals.

Am I being cowardly? Belgrieve wondered, uncomfortably scratching his cheek. But he

would hate more than anything if his own negligence caused the girls to be subjected to danger. In a sense, humans were far scarier to deal with than fiends.

Like Marguerite, Miriam seemed out of sorts. She was weak to the heat as well. Her mouth was half-open, her eyes blinking slowly as she stared at the ceiling.

“Are you okay, Merry? Want something to drink?”

“Watah... Hawt...”

Belgrieve handed her a canteen. Miriam savored it as she gulped it down, but she was soon back in her chair, groaning once more. “A guild this big should have some cooling magic...”

“Right... But then they might get more people who don’t have any business being around,” said Anessa.

Miriam pouted and sulkily pulled her hat down over her face.

The temperature before they entered the gorge was completely different from when they made it out the other side. They were taken aback, naturally, but figured it would just take some getting used to. Belgrieve had many years of experience warding off the cold in the north, but he hadn’t the slightest idea how to deal with the heat.

He had taken off his cloak, removed his beloved fur waistcoat, and rolled up his tunic’s sleeves to his elbows. And still, it was hot. Some adventurers around them wore heavy armor with full-face helmets, a sight he struggled to believe was real.

Just as he was considering getting another drink from the shop, Angeline returned. Her business had been concluded successfully.

“Well done. We can leave now, I take it. Shall we find an inn?”

“Yeah—well, the guild master recommended an inn to us.”

“Oh, that’s a huge help.”

“Phew... It sure is hot. And this crowd isn’t helping.”

“Yeah, let’s just get going already. Merry and Maggie are at their limits,” Belgrieve said,

picking up his cloak and waistcoat.

All of a sudden, members of the guild staff were racing around. They shut the windows by the door, but threw open the windows on the sides of the building. *What's this?* Belgrieve wondered. Then, in the next instant, a breeze blew through one set of windows and out the other. It wasn't the oppressive heat they had come to expect, but rather a cool, refreshing breeze that caressed his sweaty skin and made him feel like a new man.

"Oh... That's amazing. But how...?"

"It's the mountain wind. The cool, high-elevation air is coming down from the mountain range on that side. It happens in Turnera now and then, right?" a nearby voice explained.

"Hmm, I see. From the mountains, huh... Huh?!"

The familiar voice caused Belgrieve to turn on the spot to see a man with a bearded face and battle-axe standing there with a smile.

"Duncan!" Belgrieve exclaimed, bursting into a delighted smile of his own.

"Ha ha ha! Bell! To think we would reunite here!"

The traveling warrior, Duncan, let out a hearty laugh as he took Belgrieve by the hand. Marguerite, who had been limply slumped over, perked up in surprise. "What? Duncan?! Ah! It's really you!"

"It's been too long, Maggie! But seeing you so down—that's just not like you!"

"Oh shut it! What brings you all the way out here? You look well!" Marguerite, filled with glee, was on her feet and poking him in the shoulder.

Angeline, Kasim, Anessa, and Miriam watched them blankly. "Uh, what...? Do you know him, dad? He's not... Mr. Percy, is he?"

"Oh, right. Let me introduce you. This is Duncan—I think I told you about him before, but he came to Turnera around the same time as Graham and Maggie and lived with us for a while. Duncan, this is my daughter Angeline and her comrades Anessa and Miriam. And this is my friend Kasim."

"Oh, you're the fabled Black-Haired Valkyrie! My name is Duncan. It is an honor to meet you. And Sir Bell! You finally reunited with your old friend! What a joyous occasion!"

"Thanks," Belgrieve answered bashfully.

"Still, what could have brought you to these southern lands?"

"Well, to be honest—"

"Mr. Duncan!" Someone teetered over from behind Dungan. He was a man who looked to be slightly over thirty years old, with unkempt curly brown hair. He wore thick glasses that resembled the bottoms of glass bottles, a hooded robe, and a light shirt and trousers beneath it. In other words, he was dressed like a magician.

After catching his breath, the man wiped his brow. "Don't just go off on your own..."

"How rude of me," Duncan said, scratching his head.

The man with thick glasses took in the party inquisitively. "Do you know them?"

"Yes, this man is Sir Belgrieve—he looked after me while I was in the northern outskirts. Belgrieve, this is Sir Ishmael. He is a considerably skilled magician who has been working with me for a while now."

"Oh, I see... I'm Belgrieve."

"Charmed. I'm Ishmael."

Duncan chuckled. "That aside, Bell, is that not Sir Graham's sword on your back?"

"I figured you'd notice. I borrowed it for this journey, and it's already saved my neck a fair few times."

"You've mastered it then? You never cease to amaze me."

"No, I would hardly call myself a master."

Kasim folded his hands behind his head with a thin smile. "It's getting a bit lively," he said. "In any case, should we change venues? It's hot, and I'm starving."



"Hmm, sounds about right... We have a lot to catch up on, Duncan. How about we share a meal?"

"Just what I wanted. Is that all right with you, Ishmael?"

"Whatever," Ishmael answered ambiguously and nodded. He was on guard, perhaps not fully grasping the situation.

Once again, a chill wind passed through the open windows.

CHAPTER 92

SWIRLING DUST CLOUDS DOTTED THE STREET

Swirling dust clouds dotted the street as seen from the terrace overlooking it. Although the terrace was only separated from the outside world by a thin handrail, it had evidently been worked on by some incredibly skilled magician. Cooling magic kept it at a splendidly refreshing temperature, though the intense heat beyond it would be felt the moment a hand reached past the railing. It seemed they were wrapped in a membrane of sorts.

Marguerite, who had completely regained the skip in her step, gleefully scanned the menu. “Crazy stuff here! I can’t tell what a single thing is from looking at these names! Can’t wait to see what they bring out.”

“Hmm... It doesn’t do us any favors that this is a restaurant—the stalls at least let us see the food before we buy it.”

“Maybe Kasim knows?”

“Don’t look at me. It’s been a while since I came here, and I don’t remember much.”

“Mr. Duncan, how long have you been in Istafar? Do you have any recommendations...?”

“It’s been just over two weeks... I’ve been getting my food at the stalls and the inn this whole time.”

“Just ask for the daily special... That should do it,” Ishmael suggested. Whether he was shy or simply a man of few words, he gave off a somewhat gloomy impression. It was a bit of a mystery why he would be working alongside someone as hearty as Duncan.

Regardless, they placed their arbitrary orders. Their drinks were brought out first, and they exchanged toasts with them.

“Where did you two meet?”

“Oh, I got to know him in Istafar just last week. There was a joint hunt I took part in to

procure some travel funds. This and that happened, and we figured out we shared the same destination. We've been together since."

"Where are you going? And... what's this shared destination?" Angeline asked.

Duncan leaned in. "I'm saying it only because I trust you guys... Truth be told, there's a place called the Earth Navel..."

"Huh?!" Angeline shot forward. "You're here for the Earth Navel?"

Duncan blinked, taken aback. "Don't tell me you're headed there too!"

"Yes, we heard that an old friend of ours was last seen there... Ha ha! I never thought we would find you along the way"

"This must be what they call divine providence. How reassuring..."

"Two S-Ranks... The big wave is coming soon. Reassuring indeed," Ishmael chortled.

With a cock of her head, Anessa asked, "Big wave?"

"Oh, you don't know about it? Right, this is your first time at the Earth Navel..."

"How about you, Mr. Duncan?"

"No, this is also my first time going there. I'd heard rumors, but I kept putting it off. I thought I would finally finish off this last journey of mine."

"Last...?"

"There is someone waiting for me in Turnera," Duncan said with a bashful laugh. Belgrieve smiled, but Angeline had a peculiar look on her face.

"Mr. Duncan... That's what people call a death flag, apparently."

"Wh-What's that supposed to mean?"

"It was in a book I read the other day..."

"You're always reading the oddest books." Kasim chuckled as he finished off the

contents of his cup. “So, what’s the big wave?”

“Yes, well, the Earth Navel is where tremendous amounts of mana tend to collect...”

According to Ishmael, the big wave happened once the mana pooling in the chasm exceeded a certain threshold. Fiends would flood from its depths—more powerful and plentiful than usual. The mana fluctuation depended on lunar phases and the movement of the stars. Divination and regular measurements could predict the coming of the big wave with great accuracy.

“And to make a long story short, it will happen next full moon. Then, it will be around a year until the next one.”

“Hmm... There are people who come all the way here specifically for it, then?”

“Powerful fiends mean high-quality materials... I thought that was precisely what you came for.”

“No, we’re here to meet someone... What about you, Ishmael?”

“There is a reagent I need for my research.”

Angeline giggled. *Looks like all magicians are the same*, she thought. “Have you been there before...?”

“Yes, once. During the big wave two years ago.”

“So how is it, really? How would you describe the danger level?”

Belgrieve’s question got Ishmael thinking. He stroked his chin, a strained look on his face. “I couldn’t say... The fiends that appear can vary. However, the adventurers there are all incredibly skilled, so as long as you prioritize your own safety, it should not be too difficult to survive.”

With that said, those who contributed most to the battle would gain the greatest rights to the monster materials. This was a tacit understanding. As there was a material he wanted, Ishmael would not be able to dawdle in the back.

“The last time I was there, I spotted Esteban the Crimson Wizard, One-Armed Braveblade Vardelsen, and Clifford the Blue Fang. The number of acclaimed

adventurers tends to rise when the big wave is afoot. I don't know who'll be there this time..."

"Why, they're all warriors renowned across the lands. It will be difficult to outperform them for the rights to the materials you want," Duncan observed, meekly folding his arms and nodding.

"What was that material Graham wanted us to get again...?" Angeline asked as she reached for a pitcher.

"A mana crystal. Not just any crystal, though; he needs the crystal from inside a transparent fiend called an á bao a qu."

"That is... quite the difficult request," Ishmael exclaimed exasperatedly before laughing it off ambiguously.

Pulling at his beard, Kasim asked, "Is it really? I heard the name before, but I don't know a thing about it."

"I believe it was designated as S-Rank," said Anessa.

Ishmael nodded. "It is a fiend that is invisible while it is alive. Only in death does it reveal itself. The á bao a qu does not go out of its way to attack humans either. It is designated S-Rank because the dungeons it inhabits are all incredibly difficult. Additionally, once it does decide to fight, it can be frightfully strong."

"Are there any at the Earth Navel?" asked Miriam.

Ishmael folded his arms at that one. "There are... Apparently. But they don't emerge from the depths. I've heard you have to climb down and venture all the way to their den. I've never seen the real thing myself, so I don't know the specifics."

"Hmm..."

This will be quite the adventure then, Belgrieve anxiously thought. However, Angeline and the others seemed overjoyed by the prospect.

"I'm itching to fight it... I can't wait."

"An invisible fiend? Heh heh, sounds interesting."

“Is it completely invisible? Or can you still faintly tell where it is...?”

“Do you think magic will work? We rarely get to fight S-Rank fiends.”

“Oh, that’s right. We have Oliver’s request too.”

“Oliver?”

“The guild master here... He helped us out a bit.”

The girls began to cheerfully discuss fiend countermeasures among other things. *These high-ranking adventurers really do live in another world,* Belgrieve mused as he twisted his beard.

Kasim prodded him, grinning. “No time to lose your nerve, Bell.”

“You’re... right.”

What was the point of any of this if I start to get cold feet? He scratched his head. Ultimately, he could only do what he could—being anxious about it would not help.

They didn’t just talk about the Earth Navel. The conversation flourished over the incident in Turnera and Duncan’s journey until finally, the food arrived at their table. Belgrieve and his party had gotten acquainted with their own camping cuisine for a while now. The smell alone let them know this was something else entirely. The main course was fried river fish over long, slender grains of rice tossed with bits of crab, drizzled with a peculiar sauce that was both spicy and sweet. The side dish was made from a strangely soft fruit that the waiter claimed came from a cactus. The soup was spicy and salty with ample spices thrown in. The tastes were so foreign Belgrieve couldn’t quite tell if it was tasty or not, but he didn’t hate it. The other members, on the contrary, seemed to relish in the strong flavors.

Friendly chatter continued a while after the meal. They left around sunset, parting with Duncan and Ishmael, and headed for their inn. The glaring sun concealed itself in the shade of the western mountains; though the air was still warm and stiff, it felt as though the night was nipping at their backs.

Less than two weeks remained until the full moon; Duncan and Ishmael would set off to arrive before it. Although the wave was not Belgrieve’s goal, it would be safer to travel together. Consequently, the plan became to set off with Duncan.

After settling in his room away from the girls, Belgrieve inspected his belongings. He was traveling quite a bit lighter since he had returned a few borrowed travel tools to the guild along with the wagon. Although this made the choice easier, his selection would still be important—it would be better to pack lightly, seeing as they were traveling on foot. Too little, though, and they could come up short in a pinch. Perhaps one of his selections would prove necessary as he fought in the Earth Navel. His destination was not a town or settlement, and he had no idea whether he would be able to stock up when they got there. *Ishmael's the only one who's been there. He probably knows best*, Belgrieve thought.

"I'll have to spend tomorrow preparing."

"What do you think we'll need? The kid said the monsters are more powerful than usual during the wave. But we don't know what the 'usual' is, quite frankly."

"Pretty much. And if they're that strong, I don't know if cheap tricks will work or not... In any case, our first priority is to get there in one piece."

"We should be fine on that one. We have that crystal we borrowed from the guild master here."

"Yeah, I think we're fine too, but... don't let your guard down. It could spell your death."

"I get it already. Heh heh heh, harsh as ever," Kasim said with a slightly sad laugh. "I'm... a bit scared, though. I know it's not like me."

"About meeting Percy, you mean?"

"Yeah, I mean... The scales are starting to tip—now that we're this close, my fear is starting to outweigh all the anticipation I had coming here. Even I was at rock bottom, before all this. From what Yakumo said, that guy's got to be in a pretty bad state. You think I can do anything for him...?"

Belgrieve smiled and patted Kasim on the shoulder. "Don't let it get to you. Percy is Percy. He won't become someone else."

"You're... right. Heh heh... I'll try to have fun with it." Kasim rolled until he was supine on his bed.

After a chuckle, Belgrieve turned back to his things and began checking each item one

by one. He wanted to finish up so he could have a good night's rest, but he was beset by a sudden throbbing phantom pain in his leg.

○

"Hey, what sort of guy was Percival, anyways?" Marguerite asked as they walked the meandering mountain slope. Steep boulders towered all over the place, and the landscape was adorned with small pockets of green grass.

Belgrieve gave her question some thought as he carefully looked for footholds and slowed down to answer. "Cheery and full of confidence. He had the talent to back it up too. As a swordsman, I knew I'd never be his equal."

Kasim stroked his beard. "Yeah, Percy and Satie were strong. Though he could be careless when you least expected it."

"For example...?" Angeline looked back from the head of the party.

"Let's see," Belgrieve said. "We went out to get materials, but once he beat the fiend, he was so satisfied with his accomplishment that he completely forgot about the material part and tried to go home."

"Oh right, that happened! I had to wonder what was going through his head."

"Uh, you were on his side back then. In fact, all three of you were in such a hurry to leave, I thought I was the crazy one."

"Huh? No way. You sure?" Kasim furrowed his brow.

Duncan, the rear guard, laughed heartily. "Those two had the temperament of big shots, even back then! Both the Exalted Blade and the Aether Buster!"

"Dad is even more amazing, for keeping them all together," Angeline said with a snort.

"Putting that aside..." Belgrieve said with an awkward smile, "we went through our share of close calls."

"Heh heh, he must've been like Maggie, then."

"Merry, you little!"

"Eep!" Miriam squealed as Marguerite pinched her cheek.

With a sigh, Anessa shifted her hold on her bow. "What are you people doing...? Footing's terrible here. Pick a better place to mess around."

They had rested for one day, prepared for another, and set out from Istafar the day after that. People did come to collect ores and mountain herbs in the shallower parts of the mountains, so those regions were well maintained. The farther they went, however, the more their surroundings exuded the feeling of untamed wilderness. The footing was gradually getting worse.

At first, though imperfect, there had been a path of sorts. That slowly turned into an animal trail. By this point, the trail was so ambiguous they could barely make it out through squinted eyes. The crystal Angeline held ahead of them continued pointing in the same direction, so they were certainly going in the right direction. But it was never so easy in these regions beyond the dominion of man.

Soon, they were walking on rugged rocks that crumbled beneath their feet. With his peg leg, Belgrieve was having a needlessly difficult time walking. He naturally proceeded more slowly as he took care to maintain his balance. Although he picked up an appropriate stick to use as a cane, he was still far slower than the active adventurers.

Angeline would frequently look back at him with concern in her eyes. "Dad... Are you okay...?"

"Yeah, sorry. Don't worry about me."

"We still have a long way ahead of us. How about we rest for a bit?" Ishmael suggested.

The party had grown a tad weary after much walking and approved his plan without complaint. They all found somewhere to sit and take out canteens or rations.

Holding out the guiding crystal pyramid, Angeline narrowed her eyes, focusing on the direction it pointed. "It gets steeper... We might have to climb over that," she said, indicating the precipitous climb ahead.

Marguerite capped her canteen and stood. "All right, I'll go have a look," she said and lightly raced off. First, she circled around the right of the slope, detouring around some large boulders before returning to the center. She then tried the opposite direction,

disappearing down a descending path.

It's at times like these that the peg leg really gets to me... Belgrieve sighed. It wasn't an issue when he walked normally, and it did not get in the way when he fought with a sword. However, these poor roads were a different story.

When she finally returned, Marguerite shook her head. "It's no good. That slope's our best bet. The other paths are too risky."

"I see... Thanks, Maggie."

There seemed to be no way around it, so he would just have to bear with it. There did seem to be footholds, luckily enough. He would be fine as long as he went at it methodically. Belgrieve's eyes wandered as he mulled over the challenge ahead. He took a cloth from his bags to wrap the tip of his prosthetic and fastened it with string so it wouldn't come off. This would both cushion the prosthetic and give it some grip.

"Let's get going, then."

"I'll lend you a hand if it gets dangerous, Bell."

"Ha ha... Thanks, Duncan."

The party slowly began the climb up the slope. Belgrieve was carrying heavy bags and needed to make doubly sure of each step, and by contrast, the others seemed to scamper up like it was nothing. A rope was thrown down from above.

He looked up, wondering if they wanted him to grab it to climb, and Angeline shouted back, "We'll haul your bags up first!"

"Oh, so that's it."

Belgrieve hitched his main bag to the rope. The pots and pans of various sizes hanging from the outside clattered as the first parcel made its way up. It took several repetitions of this to lighten his load. Then, he could grab the rope himself for support.

"Do you think you can make it, dad?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I'm a bit slow, but just give me a minute."

It was quite a bit easier to move now that he had a hold of the rope. Duncan and the others were helping him as well, and once he finally made it to the top, he was greeted by a chill breeze. The sun had begun to set in all the commotion. They hadn't covered much ground, though they did have one steep slope out of the way.

With all the preparations needed for camp, they gave up on going any farther. Anessa and Marguerite went off searching for food while the others built a fire and patrolled the area.

Belgrieve looked around as he put together a makeshift stone stove. They had reached the top of a plateau. The other side was a gentle decline, leading to another incline a little farther down.

His eyes were drawn to a conspicuously large rock. It was one among the many other large stones that decorated the desolate, mountainous region. Not that the place was completely devoid of life—here and there, he saw low evergreen trees and shrubs. There were withered branches and stumps, and they would not be troubled for firewood. The wind was pleasant against his sweat-soaked skin.

Adjusting his glasses, Ishmael muttered, “Now then... The fiends will be more active at night. We need a lookout.”

“Right. We'll set up a rotation so everyone can get some rest...”

According to Ishmael, the fiends of the Nyndia mountains were influenced by the mana of the Earth Navel. Thus, the strong variants were more common than they were in other regions.

“But how doesn't it form a dungeon when there's so much mana about?” Belgrieve asked, throwing dried beans into the pot.

“I couldn't say... Perhaps this is already a vast dungeon. There are plenty of people who set out for the Earth Navel, but there is still no definitive route to get there. There aren't even any roads.”

I see. Perhaps he has a point. If the mountains themselves are a dungeon, and the terrain is liable to change on a dime, it would be impossible to build roads or even to draw a map. If so many skilled adventurers frequent the place, it's unnatural that no safe routes have been developed.

"Then are we taking a different route than you did the last time you went there?" asked Miriam.

Ishmael nodded. "That's right. The path I used was overgrown, like a dense forest. I think it's a different path, but there's a chance it shifted into the one we're using now."

"I see... Whichever it is, we need to stay on our toes."

By the time the beans were soft, the blinding, setting sun had disappeared, and an abrupt gloom had taken its place. Anessa and Marguerite returned from their hunt empty-handed, both with peculiar looks on their faces.

"You couldn't find anything?" Angeline asked curiously.

"Yeah... Thing is, I don't sense any life around these parts. Forget fiends, I didn't see any wild animals or birds either."

"It's strange, right? I thought we'd at least find some rock pigeons or wild goats," Marguerite added, wearily folding her hands behind her head.

"Now that's strange," said Kasim. "We might be on someone's turf."

"I haven't sensed any large enough mana sources for that," Ishmael replied.

And Angeline nodded. "That makes it even stranger."

Powerful fiends often attracted weaker ones, who served beneath them. However, there were others that formed their own turf and did not allow any others to get near it. A fiend of this caliber, though, would give off signs of its strength. Angeline, alongside most other skilled adventurers, would be able to pick up on it.

"But hey, no use fussing over it. If anything comes, we send it packing. Ain't that good enough?"

"That's pretty optimistic, Maggie. But you've got a point. We can't sleep right if we're thinking too hard about it," said Miriam.

"Heh heh heh," Kasim chuckled. "Maybe you're right. Let's start with a meal at least, I'm starving."

"Ah, I wanted fresh meat..." Marguerite sighed.

Duncan opened his bag with a wry smile. "Well, it happens sometimes. I stocked up on dried meat, so you'll have to put up with it tonight."

The last bit of sunlight vanished as hard-baked bread was dipped in the bean-and-dried-meat soup. As Belgrieve sipped at a strong herbal tea and looked up, he saw the stars spread out all across a clear sky. Perhaps because they had climbed quite high, there looked to be more stars than he had seen during his nights in Istafar.

Belgrieve, who had taken the first lookout shift, huddled up as the temperature rapidly dropped and shoved another piece of wood into the fire. It had been so hot while the sun was up, but during the night, it was so cold he could see his own breath. His life in Turnera had prepared him for the cold; this difference in temperature, however, put his body in a rather shocked state.

Angeline, who had chosen the same shift, nestled up to him. "It's colder than I thought it'd be..." she said.

"Right..."

The light of the stars seemed to fade—and before he knew it, the moon had risen. It wasn't quite half-full yet, but it had grown quite a bit. It lit the rocky mountain surface in pale blue.

The pot hanging over the fire began to bubble over. "Want some more tea, dad...?"

"Yeah, thanks."

A strong tea distracted him from the cold and the drowsiness. The steam that rose when he put the cup to his lips looked so dreamlike as it caught the moonlight.

But it really is strange, Belgrieve thought. It was too quiet. There had been no beasts during the day, and he couldn't feel the slightest presence of any nocturnal beings.

The greatsword on his back let out a slight growl. Belgrieve looked around suspiciously, his eyes narrowing on a single point. "Hmm?"

"What's wrong, dad?"

"That shadow... is strange."

It looked as though something big was slowly moving. He hadn't noticed it up to that point, but he could feel a faint tremor as well.

Angeline shot up, her hand on her hilt. "Wake up! We have company!"

Their other comrades, snoring around the fire, sprang up with their weapons. Their foe seemed to realize its cover was blown, as its once-hidden presence suddenly permeated all around them. Its arrival was heralded by the dull sound of stone grinding against stone. A giant arm swung through the pale light as a roar like an earthquake filled the night.

"Oh, that's a giga rockgolem," Kasim said as he donned his hat. "So that was the large rock I saw earlier... To think it could even disguise its mana to perfectly mimic a boulder."

"Hmm, we're surrounded," added Duncan.

A platoon of smaller foes encircled the party. They were smaller than the giga rockgolem but shaped similarly and made of stone all the same.

Anessa laughed tiredly. "That explains the lack of anything else... But they don't leak any mana, and they don't give off any presence... Are they really golems?"

"Mutants, I'd say," replied Miriam. "*Sigh*, you really can't let your guard down around these parts."

"That's just how special the Nyndia mountains are... Burst." Ishmael's magic signaled the start of the battle. His mana formed a spiraling blast that shattered the closest golem.

Kasim whistled at the display. "Not bad."

"It's an honor to hear that from the Aether Buster... I will take on the small fries. Please handle the big one." Ishmael snapped his fingers. The next instant, a hefty book manifested from what was once empty space. It emitted a faint light as it floated, its pages flipping at a tremendous pace.

Miriam's eyes opened wide. "That's Grimoire Summoning! Amazing!"

"You can be impressed later, Merry. Let's start cleaning up too."

"I'll take the vanguard!" Marguerite slid towards a group of golems, slicing through several in one fell swoop. At her skill level, her blade could cut through their stone bodies like butter.

Anessa swiftly nocked several arrows before loosing them simultaneously. The arrows exploded the moment they made contact, scattering several golems into lifeless stone.

They were skilled fighters to be sure, and they defeated foe after foe with little difficulty. However, the golems continued to close in with such numbers they had to wonder if every stone on the mountain had become a golem.

Meanwhile, Ange evaded the crushing fist of the giga rockgolem, hopping onto its arm and dashing up to its shoulder. She took a horizontal swipe with her blade—but her sword, which could tear through even steel, could only just scratch it. "It's hard...!"

Did I underestimate it and subconsciously hold back? she wondered, scowling. The holes in the side that faced her made it feel like it was staring straight at her. Shuddering, Angeline jumped down, dodging its stone fist on the way, which it had swung at her like a hammer.

Kasim, who had observed her failed attempt, patted Belgrieve on the shoulder. "What now? Want me to use grand magic? That big one's too hard for Ange to cut. It's got a bit of mana coating it too, which means it'll be quicker with magic anyways."

"How long will it take?"

"Hmm... Twenty seconds. Could change the landscape a good bit though."

"How long for you to contain it to just that fiend?"

"A minute." Kasim pointed a finger towards the giga rockgolem. His mana swirled around him, causing his hair to billow out.

Belgrieve drew the greatsword. "Ange! Keep its attention! Duncan, take care of its left leg!"

"Leave it to me!"

Belgrieve bounded off, slicing through a golem blocking the way as he approached the giant's right leg. Angeline was using footholds around its body to leap about as though she was flying through the air. This did wonders to keep its focus on her.

Although his prosthetic leg's balance had bothered him so much when walking, he didn't even have to think about it in battle. *Is stress increasing the synergy with my leg?* he wondered, then decided that was a question for later.

Belgrieve drew his sword back, swiping at the giga rockgolem's right leg with a rending cry. The sword roared out, bisecting the rock as though it was nothing. Then Duncan swung his battle-axe with all his might. Though he didn't manage to sever the limb, the tremendous impact knocked the giant off-balance. It soon began to tilt.

Angeline, who had swiftly put some distance between her and the foe, stared agape. Duncan had also quickly retreated, but Belgrieve remained near the fiend's right leg as the massive golem toppled over him from above.

"Dad!"

The moment she cried out, a mass of compressed mana burst forth, bathing their world in intense light. She was forced to shut her eyes, and by the time she could open them again, the giga rockgolem was gone. It had completely vanished, leaving only the slight tip of its foot.

Kasim lowered his outstretched arm and caught his breath.

"Just in time... But that got my heart racing a bit, good grief."

"Dad!"

"Oh, Ange... Looks like we managed somehow or another."

"Seriously... You had me on edge! I thought you'd be crushed!"

"Sorry, sorry. But I had to stay still so it didn't suspect we had something else planned. And I knew Kasim would finish the job."

Belgrieve scanned the area. The number of golems had diminished. Evidently, they had simply been unable to make out their numbers in the darkness, and those that remained weren't numerous enough to pose a threat. *Will any of them run now that*

their boss has been taken out?

"All that's left is to clean house," said Kasim. He came up to Belgrieve, chuckling. "But, Bell, you need to at least pretend you're going to run. Otherwise, you'll terrify poor little Ange."

"I wasn't scared," she insisted.

"Really? You're still tearing up, you know."

"No way!" Angeline frantically rubbed at her eyes.

Belgrieve let the greatsword settle back in its sheath. He could leave the rest to his comrades. He caught his breath and rubbed Angeline's back as she latched onto him.

It wasn't long before the horde was gone and silence had returned. Marguerite had a dreadfully bored look on her face as she twirled her sword in front of her. "Tsk, I wanted to take out the big one."

"There's no way you could have cut it when I could not..."

"Say what? And wait, *you* couldn't cut it, Ange? Ha ha, lame!"

Angeline glowered at her. "I just held back, thinking it was only as hard as a normal golem... I could have cut it if I was serious."

"Hmm? Then that means I could have cut it too."

"Now, now, don't fight. Rest up proper, or you won't be able to move tomorrow," Belgrieve chided, shutting the both of them up.

Golem fragments were removed from the campsite and the fire was lit again. Belgrieve and Angeline were back on night shift, and it wasn't long before the others were soundly asleep once more. Despite the battle, they were able to sleep without getting particularly worked up—they had all been through their share of such experiences.

Angeline yawned. "Dad... You really trust Kasim."

"Hmm? Yeah. It wasn't for long, but we entrusted our lives to one another." *Of course, we weren't very strong back then,* Belgrieve mused with a chuckle.

Angeline puffed out her cheeks and leaned against him. "You trust me too, don't you...?"

"Of course."

"Hee hee." Angeline happily pressed her forehead into his shoulder.

However, when he looked at Angeline, the fact that she was his daughter was first and foremost in his eyes. He understood she was a skilled adventurer, but he could never shake off the feeling she was someone he had to protect. *Even though she's far stronger than me...*

It had only been their first day in the mountains. He felt he had undergone a baptism by fire. He wondered how many more battles they would have to fight before reaching the Earth Navel and what fiends awaited them there. Even after he woke Kasim up for the next shift, Belgrieve found he couldn't sleep for a while. There was too much going on in his head.

The moon shone a pale blue at its zenith.

○

Bonfires blazed all around, and though the dusk had descended from on high, the cumulative light of the nearly full moon, bonfires, lanterns, and shinestones brightly illuminated the chasm. Adventurers would gather like this at night, ready for fiends no matter when they crawled their way out.

The shadows of adventurers wandered hither and thither, some stooping to huddle around the bonfires. There were quite a few of them out and about, and the air was astir with their chatter, so much so that it would have been impossible to eavesdrop on any individual conversation.

A man sat in the darkness of a large cliff. The shadows on his face danced with every flickering of the flames, creating the illusion of constantly shifting expressions, but the truth of the matter was that he had maintained the same dour look the entire time. His white-speckled flaxen mane curled and spiked out with no rhyme or reason. With his back to the cliff, the man closed his eyes but did not sleep. He exuded strength with every fiber of his being, giving the impression he might instantly take to his feet and swing his sword at a moment's notice.

Across the fire, a girl with dog ears sliced meat into bite-size pieces before skewering the chunks onto wooden brochettes, which were then sprinkled with salt and spices. She hummed a tune under her breath all the while.

“Oh, big mama... It’s so tasty...”

With a loud snap, a spark danced through the air. One of the man’s eyes cracked open. He grimaced and clutched his chest. Breaking into a light cough, he reached into his breast pocket and pulled out his sachet. He pressed it to his mouth and breathed in the ether-oil vapors. The dissolved herbs within it seeped through his nose, his throat, and all the way to his chest. His breathing became much calmer.

“Want some?” A short distance away, a woman with black hair offered him a gourd full of wine, which she dangled from the tip of her spear. The man silently took it, gulped down a mouthful, and tossed it back to her. Chuckling, the woman took a sip as well. “As grouchy as ever, I see.”

“How long do you plan to haunt me?”

“You’ll have to ask *her* that.”

The man turned to the dog-eared girl holding the skewers over the fire. She nonchalantly stared back at him. “I’ll stick around until you’re all better, mister. Right beside you.”

“That’s none of your business...” he curtly said, pressing his back even harder against the stone cliff face. It seemed like he was in a terrible mood—not that the woman or the girl had ever caught him in a *good* mood. It was a bit too late to worry about that.

The girl held out a skewer she had grilled to a tune. “One serving, coming up, baby.”

“No need. I already ate,” he said with his eyes firmly shut. Although it didn’t stand out in the dark, the remains of burnt meat littered the ground around the flame.

The dog-eared girl pouted. “Between a meal burned to a crisp and well-cooked meat, which do you prefer?”

“Who cares, as long as it fills you up?”

“As the people of the past once said: ‘*It is a disservice not to eat a meal set out before*

you.”

“That’s not what that means, fool,” the black-haired woman tiredly said. She breathed smoke from her mouth.

With no takers, the dog-eared girl bit down on the meat herself. “Delish... You really don’t want it? The taste’s straight from my homeland, baby.”

The man remained silent. It seemed he wasn’t going to indulge her any longer. Thus, the dog-eared girl chewed the meat disinterestedly and washed it down with some wine. “Mister, have you been eating those nasty meals this whole time?”

His eyes opened ever so slightly. He recalled the days of endless battle he spent after parting with his comrades of old. Food was not meant to be enjoyed; it existed only to keep his body moving. It didn’t matter—no matter what he ate, it tasted like nothing. Alcohol merely allowed him to abandon his body to his drunkenness—he had never savored its flavor either. And he knew that this was just right for him.

It’s pure pretentiousness. The thought had crossed his mind time and again, but he didn’t know what he was supposed to do. “I... can’t distinguish one flavor from another.”

“I see.” She took out another skewer and offered it to the black-haired woman. The woman tapped the ash from her pipe before accepting it. She took a bite, chewed, and swallowed.

“Yes. Not half bad. Are you sure you don’t want it?”

The man gave no reply. He closed his eyes again and draped his cloak over his body. He was poised for a sleepless night.

Once the meat was gone, the dog-eared girl tossed the skewer into the fire. “You’re lonely, aren’t you?” she muttered, hugging her knees.

The man suddenly sat up. He reached his hand straight through the burning fire, grabbing her by the neck.

“Oof...” She looked at him in pain, but he glared back at her sharply.

“Don’t talk like you know me.”

“Enough.”

He glanced to the side. The woman’s spear was pointed at his neck.

“Your strength will kill her. That, I cannot overlook.”

“Tsk.” The man released her. He stood and—with his cloak trailing behind him—disappeared into the darkness. Once freed, the dog-eared girl burst into a coughing fit, struggling to steady her breath. The black-haired woman walked over and rubbed her on the back.

“There you go again... Why must you waste your efforts?”

“Because I got life.”

“Hmm?”

“As the people of the past once said: *‘It’s a blessing just to live another day.’* But mister finds only pain in living. I only went through pain for a moment. Between us, who is really hurting?”

The woman let out a fed up sigh. The girl yawned, looking as though nothing had happened at all, and straightened her fur cap.

CHAPTER 93

THE MARCH THROUGH THE MOUNTAIN

CONTINUED

The march through the mountain continued for just over a week. In addition to the abandoned paths, the desolate nature of the land made securing water a struggle. However, they occasionally managed to find a spring or river, and when they couldn't, they'd simply economize their supply, moistening their throats by chewing on tree roots.

The mana wafting through the air gradually grew thicker. Likewise, their surroundings were starting to seem blatantly wrong. Even the vegetation seemed completely different. It felt as though something was watching them all the while, yet whenever they looked for their supposed observer, they would only find small, blooming violet flowers.

"There! It's circling behind us!" Angeline roared as she swung her sword at her foe. However, the fiend immediately stopped and jumped back, rendering her swing useless. It let out a peculiar roar, almost like it was sneering at her. The fiend was a manticore—a lion with bright red fur and a scorpion-like tail. Several of Anessa's arrows were already sticking out of its body, yet the fiend hadn't lost the slightest bit of momentum.

Miriam, vexed at all of her magic being dodged, swung her staff. "They're slippery devils!"

"I'll be... One of them is trouble enough. Why must we deal with *three* of them?" Ishmael lamented. The tome floating beside him glowed faintly.

The manticore that had tried attacking from behind was driven off by Marguerite's sword. These fiends were intelligent; they did not attack blindly, overconfident in their own abilities. Instead, they steadfastly maintained their distance as they waited for the party to wear itself out.

Gritting her teeth, Angeline took a stance with her sword. "Can you do something,

Kasim...?"

"Now, now... What to do? If I try grand magic, I get the feeling they'll just dodge it. We won't lose, but this is going to take a while."

"We'll have to take them out individually," Belgrieve declared. "So far, they've given us trouble because every attack has been coordinated. They may be fast, but we have a good chance of dispatching them one by one."

Anessa said, "But if we try targeting one, it backs off, and then all three of them attack together."

"That's precisely it. Divide and conquer—we launch a targeted attack on all three of them simultaneously, so they don't have the chance to regroup. Ange, you hold back the one with arrows stuck into it. Kasim and Maggie, go for the one-eyed one. The rest of us will take care of the last one. Let's go."

Before anyone could voice an opinion, Belgrieve had bounded off with the greatsword in his grasp. Duncan followed, then Anessa, Miriam, and Ishmael prepared to support them. Marguerite launched at another manticore as fast as the wind while Kasim began to gather his mana.

Angeline's lips curled as she faced the last one.

The manticores seemed a tad taken aback—the humans who had been on the defensive suddenly took a completely different approach. They were completely cut off from one another, unable to coordinate.

Certainly, it would have been difficult to deal with two of them at once, but she didn't have the slightest doubt in her victory once she was fighting one-on-one. She wouldn't give it the chance to flee either. An intimidating aura burst from Angeline as she readied her blade.

"You've had your fun at my expense!"

Bewildered by the changing tide of the battle, the howling manticore pounced with its claws gleaming. The beast had lost all rationality in the face of Angeline's fighting spirit.

Angeline took in a deep breath and lithely lurched forward. It took just two swings—

the first severed the beast's falling claws, and the second parted its head from its neck. "You're no trouble when you're alone."

She glanced over to see the other two had been dealt with. If the others had failed, then spreading out their forces would have put them in a risky situation. Luckily, they had taken the enemy by surprise, and the party members were all skilled combatants. The battle had only been difficult because the three beasts had encircled them—the moment one manticore was targeted, it would immediately slip away to launch a coordinated counterattack with the others.

With this evidence of how reliable Belgrieve could be, seeing through the situation in an instant, Angeline cracked a smile. "Heh heh..."

She looked for him and found him sitting on the ground with his sword sheathed. Miriam was hopping up and down beside him.

"We did it! We did it! Hey, Mr. Bell, should we strip off the pelts?"

"Hmm... Right. It should make for a fine prize, but..."

He looked to be in a bit of pain as he closed his eyes and massaged his temple. His complexion was slightly pale. Angeline's heart nearly stopped as she raced over to him.

"Dad? Are you all right? Are you injured...?"

"No... I'm fine. Just a little tired," Belgrieve said, weakly smiling at her.

With a frown, Duncan pressed his hand against Belgrieve's forehead. "Why, Sir Bell... You have a fever."

"Hmm... So that's why I feel so unsteady..."

Angeline reached for his forehead in shock. It was certainly hot, and on closer inspection, his eyes were a bit unfocused as well.

"Hey now..." Kasim said, scratching his head. "Don't push yourself, Bell."

"I wasn't trying to, but... I have no excuse."

Marguerite sighed. "You need to look after yourself better, Bell. Now what? Should we rest for the day?"

"No, we'd be better off just setting up camp at the Earth Navel," said Ishmael. "Considering the density of the mana here, we should arrive in half a day. It's more dangerous to spend the night here."

Belgrieve nodded, standing with the walking stick in one hand. "I can still walk. Let's move on. We don't want to face another battle like that."

Angeline grabbed his arm. "Use my shoulder..."

But Belgrieve softly pushed her away. "No... Ange, you take the lead. You're the one with the best sense for fiends."

"But..." *Will I be able to calmly scan the surroundings for enemies when I'm so uneasy?* Angeline fidgeted.

Belgrieve smiled wryly, ruffling up her hair. "Don't make that face. Once we get there and I can rest, I'll be back in form again in no time. And remember what I taught you? An adventurer must always keep her cool."

She mulled that over for a moment. "Yeah!" she exclaimed, somehow managing a smile before taking out the crystal and assuming her place as their vanguard again. It didn't seem they would have the time to harvest the manticore hides.

The poor footing forced them to move slowly, but they pressed on regardless. After so long, they finally spotted other humans—several of them atop the next rise, dressed like adventurers. They seemed to be headed in the same direction.

Could it be? Angeline wondered. Once she had reached where the other group had been standing before, she gazed into the distance and spotted a clearly man-made structure—a fortress—sandwiched between the sheer cliffs of a ravine.

Ishmael heaved a relieved sigh. "There it is..."

"Yes, it looks like a fortress to me..."

"It was made in a bygone era. Beyond it, you'll find the Earth Navel."

Their feet were suddenly a lot lighter with their destination in sight. At the top of the ridge, they found what looked to be an actual path. Although rather than having been intentionally constructed, it was more that it had naturally formed as so many people came and went. The path stretched towards the fortress, and they could see the backs of those adventurers farther down it.

Marguerite folded her arms behind her head, apparently vexed. "What? If there was a path, we shoulda just gone *that* way."

"No, that path only exists near the fortress. Look." Ishmael pointed in the opposite direction. Although the path did continue for a while, it was as if it had been rubbed out of existence at some point. Then, there was nothing but desolate wastes beyond.

"It happens no matter where you enter the mountain, apparently. It starts out all right, but it gradually gets more convoluted, and it's difficult to take the same route twice. But no matter what route you take, you will always end up here... It's quite the mystery."

Angeline looked ahead again. For the time being, getting there took priority. Belgrieve's complexion had gotten even worse; however, while he had to borrow Duncan's shoulder to walk now, he hadn't yet collapsed.

It was only as they approached that they came to appreciate just how massive the fortress was. The stone that formed it was not uniform; rather, it was a jumble of all shapes and sizes, yet the gaps between the rocks were so fine it would be impossible to stick even a single sheet of paper through them.

Angeline's eyes widened the second she took her first step through the gates. The slopes on both sides of the road were lined with stone buildings. There, she saw what looked to be peddlers mingling with countless adventurers. The peddlers carried massive bags, setting up simple stalls of wood and cloth to sell all manner of things. Some were even laughing and sharing drinks.

Seeing the blank looks on everybody's faces, Ishmael chuckled. "Are you surprised? The chasm itself is a little farther on. This is where the sharp-eared merchants gather, aiming to buy the materials of high-ranking fiends. They came together with adventurers they hired to guard them."

"It *is* surprising. I was expecting something a bit more... brutish."

"Perhaps around the Navel. However, there are lots of people who set up shops catering to adventurers here... In any case, let's secure a place to rest. We need to lay Mr. Belgrieve down."

Angeline snapped to reality and looked at Belgrieve. Her father stood firm, but his eyes were downcast and his breathing was shallow.

A little ways in was a stone building a touch larger than the others. Its sturdy exterior was made of the same natural rock as the fortress, with each stone immaculately fitted together. However, a portion was far rougher. Perhaps it had collapsed there, and someone had tried putting it back together.

There might have been a nation here, once upon a time... A kingdom buried in the shadows of history. Did they fall to the fiends? Angeline wondered.

The large building seemed to be where the adventurers slept. Cloth dividers were set up across its wide-open hall. Bonfires burned, and everyone looked after their own space. Additionally, there was a path through it—or at least, a tacit understanding that no one built their living space to block the way.

Although it was already quite crowded there, they managed to find a spot by one of the thick pillars supporting the ceiling. They cleaned the floor and set up rope and cloth to section themselves off. Though they didn't have enough to completely surround the site, it was still possible to fashion some low dividers.

Finally able to lie down, Belgrieve fell into a relieved slumber. Angeline placed a hand on his brow—his fever hadn't gone down yet and even seemed to burn hotter now.

"How about I brew up a concoction?" Kasim suggested, fishing through his bag. "We need to wipe his sweat and... Oh, dammit, not enough. There were loads of shops, so let's hope one of them sells some lepe leaves."

Anessa held up a leather bag. "I'll go search for some. And I'll bring back some water while I'm at it."

"Ah, I'm going too. I want to get a feel for the place."

"Then me too. Maggie's definitely going to get herself lost."

"Did you need to include the last part, stupid? Ange, you're... staying here, right?"

"Yeah. I'll stick by dad's side."

Anessa led the other two girls off. For a while, Angeline held Belgrieve's hand, but she eventually stood and left the partition. She headed for the wall, gazing out the window that looked to have been bored through the stone face. A slight wind caressed her cheek, rustling her hair as it passed into the building. Perhaps owing to the elevation, it wasn't as hot here as it had been in Istafar. The wind was brisk—comforting, even.

There were plenty of people traveling on the road below. She wondered if each and every one of them was a skilled adventurer.

It was noisy and boisterous here, almost like a town, or even a city. *Are there so many adventurers because the big wave is coming?* Angeline had never seen so many strong warriors assembled in one spot, not even during the demon hunt in Orphen.

"Lively place, don't you think?" She was startled by a voice from nearby. A boy around her age—if not a little younger—was standing beside her, similarly staring down from the window. His long hair was tied back behind his head. His features were somewhat androgynous, and though his hair looked black at first glance, it revealed a dark ultramarine when the light hit it. Over his simple undershirt, he wore a Keatai-style robe. He seemed to be from the east.

I can't believe I didn't notice him at that distance, Angeline thought, taken aback. He was undoubtedly a master of his craft.

The boy smiled at her and held out a hand. "I'm Touya. Pleasure to meet you."

"Yes... Likewise." Angeline accepted his handshake, though she was still bewildered.

This got a bemused laugh from Touya. "You don't have to be so rattled. It might not be for long, but we'll be fighting together."

"Hmm?"

"Uh... You did come for the big wave, right?"

"Oh... Yeah." For a moment Angeline wondered what he was on about before she remembered. *Come to think of it, this place is supposed to be dangerous if adventurers don't work together.* She acknowledged him with a slight nod.

“A pleasure...”

“What’s your name?”

“Hmm...? Oh, me? Angeline...”

Her unsociable attitude prompted Touya to shrug. “Did I do something to make you hate me? Sorry.”

“No... That’s just how I am...” Angeline scratched her head. She wasn’t wary of him, but she couldn’t quite grasp what to say to someone she was meeting for the first time—especially when Belgrieve’s condition weighed so heavily on her mind.

Touya fidgeted, grasping for some way to continue the conversation before finally landing on a topic. “I’m actually looking for someone... Have you seen an elf?”

“Elf...?” *Does he mean Maggie?* she wondered, tilting her head.

“What’s wrong, Touya?” A woman emerged from the shadows, and Angeline was taken aback the moment she saw her. There stood an elf with silky, silver hair and ears as pointed as bamboo leaves. Like Touya, she wore clothes from the east. Her hair looked like the other elves she had met, but it was cut short, and though it looked soft, it did seem to have a tendency to curl.

“Satie...?” Angeline muttered, almost unconsciously.

The elf looked back curiously. “Satie? Who?”

“Ah... Sorry.”

Someone else, then. Angeline’s shoulders dropped. It didn’t seem it would be that easy.

Touya scratched his cheek. “What’s wrong? You tell me, Maureen. I couldn’t find you here, so I’ve been looking out this window for ages.”

“You’re the one who disappeared... Who’s this lovely lady?”

“Oh, her name’s Angeline.”

“A pleasure...” Angeline said once more, nodding.



"I'm Maureen," Maureen replied with a smile. "A pleasure to meet you. I'm sorry for all the trouble Touya must have caused you."

"I didn't cause any trouble... Right?"

"Yeah..." Angeline agreed, her eyes wandering.

Maureen sighed in exasperation. "So you *did* cause trouble. Now let's get going, I'm starving."

"Didn't you just eat...? Well, whatever. See you later, Ms. Angeline."

"Right..."

The two of them departed, and Angeline felt rather relieved at that. Although they didn't seem to be bad people, she just couldn't keep up with them. She felt a bit ashamed of her own social ineptitude, which Kasim had teased her over often. *I'm glad he wasn't around*, she thought as she turned to go back. When she got there, she found a fire burning in a simple earthen stove. Belgrieve was peacefully asleep.

"Has dad calmed down a bit...?"

"Yeah, Bell had a few medicines with him. There was a salve that helps you breathe easier, so I rubbed it on him. Now, we await the water."

"Still, that was a surprise. I thought Mr. Belgrieve would be sturdier than that," Ishmael opined.

"Nay." Duncan shook his head. He was polishing his battle-axe. "Sir Bell may possess wonderful insight and battle prowess, but he has lived in Turnera a long time. He may be robust, but if you are not well traveled, then the ever-changing environment will place a burden on your body. I believe that is the cause."

"I see... That makes sense. Come to think of it, he's not an adventurer, is he...?"

"Good grief. Let's not forget we were relying on him the whole time," Kasim said as he leaned back, propping himself up with his hands. "But this *is* a mess. He's in no state to see Percy."

"Yeah..." Angeline sat by the fire, hanging her head. It wouldn't be easy to locate

someone with so many people around. Once the big wave started, perhaps rekindling an old friendship would be the least of their worries.

However, there didn't seem to be any need to hurry. It seemed that Percival remained in the Earth Navel regardless. He would not go off somewhere when the wave was over. In fact, it wasn't a bad idea to wait for the wave to end and for the crowds to leave. They could take their time setting up a meeting.

That's right—are Yakumo and Lucille here too? I'd love to see them... Angeline hugged her knees.

With his axe maintenance finished, Duncan lifted his head. "Did you find out anything, Ange?"

"Hmm... There are a lot of people. And they're all strong... The people I talked to were strong too. Oh, there was an elf." Seeing Kasim's reaction to that word, she added, "Not Satie, though..."

Kasim pulled down his cap with a dry laugh. "Heh heh heh, it's not going to be that convenient... But that's rare. Well, we have Maggie with us too."

"Still, with so many strong people around, we should be able to gather information. What did you talk about, Ange?"

"Um..." *Oh right, we just barely introduced ourselves,* she realized. Kasim would tease her again if she was like this.

"I'm... going to find something to eat." Angeline stood up to leave, trying to play off her discomfort, but Kasim's chuckling followed her all the way out. Although she was worried about her father, sulking next to him wouldn't accomplish much. She decided it would be a better use of her time to find something nutritious to feed him.

Angeline left the lodgings and walked towards the gate, passing by all sorts of people. *If I could just conveniently meet up with Anne and the others,* she wished. But that was a pipe dream in such a crowd. She crossed paths with adventurers wearing various forms of attire—perhaps having gathered from all over the continent—as she proceeded through the lines of stalls. As the sun was setting, the stalls began lighting the lanterns hung on their eaves. With such sights, it was hard to believe there was a den of powerful fiends so close by.

Many of the stalls sold medical supplies and food, while others specialized in trading materials. There were bars and, surprisingly, even women dressed seductively to lure in men. It truly was a town—perhaps there were even people who made their permanent homes here. It amazed her just how indomitable the mercantile spirit could be.

With her attention drawn to one thing after another, she found herself accidentally bumping into someone. The impact was accompanied by a faintly herbal scent.

Angeline frantically turned to the person. “I’m sorry,” she was about to say—but she swallowed her breath instead.

The man before her had the bearing of a lion, wearing a cloak over a simple set of armor. Angeline got goosebumps just standing in front of him. *I never thought I’d be outclassed like this*, she thought.

The man looked at her with sharp eyes before leaving wordlessly. She took a deep breath, finally freed from the feeling of being grabbed by the throat.

“It’s been a while since I met someone like that.”

There weren’t many people in the world Angeline knew she simply couldn’t defeat—Belgrieve and Graham, for instance. From what she could see of the majority of adventurers here, she knew they were strong, but she felt she could hold her own against them. And yet, that man alone was something else entirely.

“It’s... all right. He’s not my enemy... And he’s not as strong as dad.” She took several deep breaths to drive off her anxiety, only to feel a tugging on her sleeve. She looked down to see the wide eyes of a girl with drooping dog ears.

“Do you remember me?”

“Ah! Lucille!” Angeline was so overjoyed that she grabbed Lucille’s hand without thinking. It felt like her fears had been driven away.

“Been a while, baby. You still shaking, Ange?” Lucille replied, her ears flapping.

“Yeah. Have you been well...?”

“You know it... Alone?”

“No. I’m here with dad and Kasim and everyone else.”

“Good. What about Char?”

“Char... did not come.”

“Oh, what sad rock ‘n’ roll... But it is dangerous here.”

“Not exactly what I imagined, though.”

“It’s a matter of life and death here. That’s why everyone’s out to enjoy themselves while they can.”

I see, so this liveliness comes from the ever-looming threat of death, Angeline realized. She could understand it somewhat—there was no telling when an adventurer would die. It wasn’t rare for someone she had just exchanged a drink with one day to end up as a corpse the next. Thus, adventurers lived life to the fullest when they got the chance. It was understandable why there were so many shops serving food and drink, then. Those that earned well spent well in turn, and with so many high-ranking adventurers gathered, there were great riches to be made. But that was precisely why it all felt so strange.

“I’m surprised they managed to get so much stuff all the way out here... What do they do about the food?”

“As the people of the past would say: *‘If they have no bread, let them eat fiends.’*”

“Huh?”

“The food at the stalls is fiend meat. There are several plant-type fiends, so there are plenty of vegetables to be had too. And the adventurers are more than happy to sell the meat. It’s two birds, one stone. I feel sorry for the birds.”

This place is strangely self-sufficient, Angeline thought with a resigned chuckle. Perhaps there were some oddball adventurers who would personally go out hunting fiends so they could cook the meat.

“Where’s Ms. Yakumo...?”

“Lost. A lost lamb with nowhere to go...”

"I see..." For a moment, Angeline wondered if Lucille was the lost one, though she didn't say it aloud.

Suddenly, Lucille peered into Angeline's face. "Do you want to meet Mr. Exalted Blade?"

Angeline swallowed her breath. *Right. It was Yakumo and Lucille who had told us to come here in the first place.* There was no way the two of them did not know Percival.

"I do... But it's more my father than me... And dad is a bit..."

"What happened?"

Their conversation was interrupted by a great chorus of booing. Angeline turned, surprised, to see a commotion brewing farther off in the direction of the pit at the heart of the Earth Navel.

Lucille's nose perked up. "It smells like... fish."

A while later, the raw stench struck Angeline as well. One of the adventurers came racing from the direction of the Navel, shouting, "It's here, it's here! A big one! Coming this way!"

It seemed some sort of fiend had emerged. The look in the eye of everyone who had been drinking along the street took a turn. They immediately stood with their weapons.

Lucille looked at Angeline and asked, "Do you want to see?"

"Hmm..."

If the fiend was coming their way, the large building they had settled in would be in danger—and her father was in no state to fight. *I have to protect him.*

So Angeline nodded and dashed towards the beast, Lucille nimbly tagging along. They sprinted past others headed in the same direction, nimbly slipping through the gaps in the buildings until they arrived at an open space.

"Urgh..." Angeline immediately held her breath.

A crowd of adventurers was staring up at the fiend, all of them with weapons at the

ready. A massive fish floated in the purple, dusky sky. Its body was flat and long, and instead of dorsal or ventral fins, it boasted large fins on both sides of its body like bird wings. It calmly swam through the open sky.

Even viewed from afar, its body was visibly covered in fine scales, each of which measured at about waist height on an average human. Several whiskers grew around its mouth, each swaying as though it was drifting through the water.

Bahamut—despite being a fish, this S-Rank fiend boasted the name of a dragon.



CHAPTER 94

BELGRIEVE'S EYES WIDENED

Belgrieve's eyes widened as he awoke with labored breaths. Evidently, his fever had not receded. His hazy vision revealed to him a ceiling of stone. He didn't know where he was, but after a moment's thought, he recalled the party arriving at the Earth Navel.

All of a sudden, he was struck by phantom pain. Belgrieve snapped up in shock, the damp cloth on his brow sliding off as he did so. His right leg, long since gone, let off a burning pain. The pain had only returned for a brief instant over the past few years. Now, it was back again, and stronger than ever. He unconsciously clutched at his wooden prosthetic.

"Grr... rah..." he groaned in pain. His fever distorted his vision. It was like his head was in a vise, and a peculiar grating sound resounded in the depths of his ears.

"Sir Bell!" Duncan cried out as he hurriedly rushed over and began to rub Belgrieve's back. He had, apparently, been looking out the window. "How are you holding up?"

"I'm... fine. Sorry for all the trouble."

He wiped away his cold sweat with the fallen cloth and took a deep breath. Once the phantom pains were gone, they left no signs they had ever been there at all. Perhaps it was only natural, as they came from a body part that no longer existed. Still, he had to crane his neck and confirm—indeed, his leg was still gone.

The building was deserted, and there were hardly any adventurers loitering around. Outside the window was a far rowdier story. A fishy smell lingered in the air, and the mood was a bit strange.

"What's happening...?"

"A fiend appeared. I've only heard rumors of it before, but it is apparently a bahamut."

"Bahamut..." Even Belgrieve, who had retired early, had heard the name before. *This is no time to rest*, he thought as he tried to stand, but he found he couldn't put any

strength into his legs. He had to give up, clicking his tongue at his own inadequacy.

“What about the others?”

“The fiend appeared quite close to here, so they went out to fight it. I was assigned to keep the fort... Sir Bell, how are you feeling? You looked like you were in pain.”

Belgrieve let out a feeble laugh. “I’m fine. Just had a bad dream... Did Ange go too?”

“Ange left to get food and has not returned since... There is a chance she headed off to battle.”

“I see...”

Feeling a headache setting in, Belgrieve lay down once more. He recalled the pages of the fiend encyclopedia he had once been so desperate to memorize. The bahamut was an S-Rank fiend, so powerful that the battle outside still raged on, even with so many high-ranking adventurers gathered. He probably didn’t have to worry about Angeline, but he couldn’t settle down. Not that there would be any point in trying to assist her, given his condition.

Then, he heard the sound of feet racing across the stone floor.

“Whoa, it’s empty here! Ah, Duncan!”

“I’m glad to see you three are okay.”

“The market’s just fine, and it looks like this place is too.”

“Huh? Where’s Kasim?” Anessa asked, looking around.

Duncan placed his axe on the floor, his posture relaxing. “Kasim and Ishmael went to join the fight. I was tasked with looking after Bell.”

“Mr. Bell, how are you—oh, you don’t have to get up.” Anessa held Belgrieve back as he hastened to sit up. She washed and wrung out a hand towel for him.

“Sorry,” Belgrieve said with a sigh. “I don’t think I can move yet...”

“Take better care of yourself, huh? I’m heading out. An S-Rank fiend sounds like fun,”

Marguerite said.

"What should we do, Anne?"

"Hmm..." Anessa's eyes wandered.

"Can the two of you look after Maggie for me?" suggested Belgrieve. "It could get dangerous..."

"Ah, there you go again!" Marguerite exclaimed, puffing out her cheeks. Anessa and Miriam giggled.

"Understood. Let's go, then."

"Yeah, we might even find Ange there. We should meet up with her."

"Nice knowing I won't be bored here, but this could get exhausting..."

The three dashed off. The noise once again diminished to a distant clamor. Belgrieve set his head down and closed his eyes. He felt pathetic, unable to move when he needed to. But his body demanded rest, and he could do nothing about it. Eventually, drowsiness overcame him; the battle in the distance faded into a sort of rhythm, lulling him to sleep.

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Glistening water droplets sprinkled down from the bahamut, and the next instant someone was screaming, "Not good! Dodge!"

Angeline instantly lurched sideways, swinging her sword with tremendous force at an incoming droplet. Yet her arms demanded more strength—the transparent droplet, the size of a clenched fist, was harder than steel. Seeing as even Angeline could not slice through, it must have contained a considerable amount of mana. The air echoed with the groans of those who took the attack head-on.

Barely managing to parry it, Angeline glanced back.

"Are you okay, Lucille?"

"Don't worry."

Lucille evaded with the nimbleness of a beastman. Though there was always something a little strange about her, she was still a powerful adventurer. Angeline patted her chest in relief before glaring up at the bahamut in the sky. Despite the many arrows and magic blasts it had been struck by, the massive flying fish continued swimming calmly through the open air.

It seemed to be protected by a barrier of sorts, one that no half-baked attack could reach. Its airborne nature put it beyond the arm of any swordsman, relegating them to defending the magicians and archers from the droplets.

"That's unfair, flying around like that..." Angeline grumbled as she readied her sword again.

Though slow, the bahamut was most certainly approaching that stone lodging building. Belgrieve's face crossed her mind. *Is he still out cold?*

"I'll protect you, dad." The situation was bleak, yet she found herself smiling.

"Its barrier is thick!" someone shouted. "Everyone, concentrate your fire! On my count!"

Then, that same voice began chanting. Angeline recognized the voice as that of Touya, the youth from before, who was pointing the tip of his sword at the bahamut. His voice carried well, instantly uniting the disparate actions of many adventurers.

He's a natural leader, she mused. *But is he using a sword as a magician?* While she occupied herself with those ruminations, the magicians around her began preparing grand magic in tandem, and the archers and other ranged fighters readied their weapons, awaiting the call to fire. They were veterans, the lot of them, and could immediately act when given directions out of nowhere.

The bahamut, still being peppered with attacks, opened its mouth and roared. It seemed to reverberate from the very depths of the earth—an ear-piercing sound that sent shivers down Angeline's spine and made it seem like the world was shaking around her.

Archers who couldn't bear it covered their ears; concentrated mana was disrupted, and spells were forcefully canceled. It seemed the beast's roar had the ability to disperse mana. The magicians frowned and gritted their teeth.

“Dammit...”

“Don’t panic! We still have a chance! Its barrier will not hold forever! Everyone aim at the same point!”

Touya swung his sword to rouse the adventurers, completely undeterred. Dodging through another rain of droplets, the adventurers crossed beneath the bahamut.

Angeline braced her legs and glared—and then, she felt a tap on her shoulder. She turned to find Kasim.

“C’mon, now, that’s no foe for a swordsman. Still, we’re really unlucky, for that thing to be our opponent the moment we get here. At least give me time to decoct some medicine. Good grief.”

“Kasim...”

“Yeah, yeah, just stand down. Hmm? Oh, it’s the puppy. You were here?”

“Long time no see, baby... What’s the plan?”

“Who knows? Maybe Bell could come up with something, but... Well, it’s probably got a hefty mana coating, so that kid over there’s likely right. We should concentrate fire on one point.”

“But its roar disrupts mana if you try chanting grand magic,” another voice chimed in. “Even without that, these droplets don’t give us the leisure to prepare anything powerful.”

Angeline turned to find Anessa, with Miriam and Marguerite in tow.

Miriam raced over. “It’s Lucille! Long time no see!”

“Howdy, kitty cat, and Anne too.”

“Ha ha, you look well. Where’s Yakumo...?”

“Who’s she?” Marguerite chimed in. “Never seen her in my life. How about you intro— whoa there!” A droplet impacted the ground at Marguerite’s feet. Once it struck the ground, it splashed and dispersed like ordinary water, as though its erstwhile

hardness in the air had been a mere deception.

Kasim held his cap, chuckling. "You all sound pretty carefree about all this. Well, let's talk later. For now, we have to do something about that..."

Kasim cut himself off as he took note of the swarm of monsters that had sprouted from the bahamut's back. They appeared to be some kind of smaller fish (albeit still the size of an adult human). The fins that a fish would normally use to swim in water now served to propel them through the sky, and rows of sharp teeth jutted from their gaping maws. These flying fish orbited the bahamut like satellites, swooping down at the adventurers at irregular intervals. This unexpected assault on top of the droplets had the adventurers agitated, but they quickly regrouped and prepared to intercept the new attack. Unfortunately, the bahamut was now the least of their worries.

Angeline sliced through a fish that had come at her with bared fangs, and it wasn't long before another one was headed her way. "There's way too—ouch!" A small droplet struck her thigh. *I can't let myself get distracted.*

Apparently, Anessa couldn't find the time to take aim, and Miriam's magic would be interrupted before she could concentrate her mana. Marguerite, for her part, could fight just fine, but she lacked any means of attacking the bahamut.

It was only a matter of time before the bahamut reached the building. The thought of their base being destroyed before the big wave even began was unbearable to the adventurers, and they tried all they could to stop it in its tracks. Yet they saw little success.

The situation's only getting worse... Angeline pursed her lips before turning to Kasim. "Can you fire off some grand magic...?"

"I can, but if you want me to regulate it enough to prevent collateral damage... I'll need a minute. And I'll have to start again if that thing roars..." Kasim suddenly turned away with a puzzled look on his face as Angeline felt a chill run down her spine. There was a bizarre pressure weighing down on her.

The crowd of adventurers naturally parted without any prompting, and sauntering down the open path they formed was the leonine man—the very man she had run into only moments before. Yet the intimidating air he had given off before was incomparable to the awe he now inspired. It was as though no mere man, but rather an

uncontrollable monster, was in their midst. Anessa, Miriam, and Marguerite stood frozen, staring at him.

The man passed them without sparing a glance, approaching the bahamut.

Kasim's hands fell limply to his sides. In his daze, he muttered, "Percy...?"

"Huh? Huh?" Angeline looked at the man's back in dismay. His straw-colored hair billowed like a lion's mane.

Lucille tugged on her sleeve. "That is Mr. Exalted Blade," she said, pointing at him.

"No way... Him?!" Her heart was hammering away in her chest. *That monster is an old friend of dad?*

Percival drew the sword at his hip. He braced his legs, then leaped with so much force, it was a wonder the ground did not shatter beneath him. He flew like an arrow, using the head of one of the smaller fish as a foothold to fly even higher. Even more assailed him after that, but each was only a stepping stone as the man practically dashed through the sky at his foe. His single-edged longsword forcefully stabbed into the belly of the formidable, floating fiend.

The bahamut roared—not a magic-erasing roar but a cry of pain. The adventurers were taken aback.

"He... he pierced straight through the bahamut's barrier!"

"What a guy... That barrier should have torn him to shreds at that range..."

Percival nonchalantly touched down. There were wounds on his cheek and brow, but they were all minuscule. His cape, perhaps made of special material or coated with mana, was not damaged in the slightest. Using a finger to wipe away a trail of blood on his cheek, Percival readied his sword again.

"Ha ha... ha ha ha! Hey, Percy!" Kasim shouted.

Percival's shoulders twitched and he just barely turned towards the magician.
"Who...?"

"What, did you forget me already? What a heartless bastard!"

Percival looked Kasim up and down for a while until his eyes widened. “Kasim...?”

“Heh heh, been a while, right? I’d love to sit down and talk, but we should start by getting that thing out of the way!” Kasim raised his arm at the bahamut, his swirling mana blasting back his long hair.

With a look of bewilderment, Percival pulled out his sachet and pressed it against his face. He then renewed his grip on his sword and turned back to the fiend.

Although Angeline had felt the tension in the air for that moment, it seemed both men had bigger worries. She likewise clenched her sword and took a step forward, lining up beside Percival.

Percival perceived her with a curious, sidelong glance. Though she had noticed his attention, she pretended not to see and kept her sights on the bahamut. The fiend was clearly flustered—perhaps its strength meant it had never experienced such pain before. It didn’t even consider roaring as it slowly thrashed about. Its droplets had seemingly lost their mana as well, as they gently splashed against Angeline’s skin.

“Focus on one point...” suggested Angeline.

“Cough... Kasim! Smash it!” Percival barked. Kasim’s magic shot out from behind him in a slender, sharp beam, striking exactly where Percival had wounded it before. The bahamut writhed in pain.

Percival leaped again, and not wanting to fall behind, Angeline bounded soon after him. She kicked the heads and backs of fish flying at her and was airborne before she knew it. She held her sword in two hands, drawing it back with the tip pointed at the bahamut.

From a certain point, she felt resistance as though she had dived into water. Sharp, dense mana stabbed into her from every direction, scuffing her clothes and skin.

So this is what’s blocking the magic and the arrows, she realized, eyes narrowed contemplatively. Perhaps because the beast had taken damage, its defenses were no longer enough to repel her.

“Hraaaah!” she cried out as she thrust. Her blade was slickly sucked into the wound that had spread thanks to Kasim’s magic. Channeling her mana through the tip, she pieced far deeper than her blade’s length, slicing through the flesh and piercing its

internal organs. With a sideways glance, she confirmed that Percival's sword had skewered the bahamut as well.

The sound of flowing water cut off an ear-piercing roar as the bahamut's body lurched. Hanging upside down, Angeline kicked herself away, forcefully tearing her sword out in the process and landing on the ground below. She could hear a chorus of cheers emerge from the crowd, but she wasn't so convinced it was all over. "Not yet..."

Although the bahamut was unsteady, it flapped its large fins to steady itself. There was a fiery rage blazing in its eyes as it opened its enormous mouth, from which there now trickled a stream of blood. She could feel the surrounding mana condensing.

"Crap! It's preparing grand magic! Get ready to defend!" Touya shouted.

The magicians snapped to and began deploying their magic. The mana amassing in the bahamut's mouth began to emit a blinding light.

That was when Percival took another giant leap and ascended a trail of fish once more, immediately reaching the same altitude as the bahamut, and delivered a kick to its chin. The amassing mana burst as its mouth snapped shut, tearing its jaw to shreds.

Even the veteran adventurers were left in wide-eyed astonishment.

"Hey now... You've got to be kidding me."

"You've got to be crazy to close in on it at that moment..."

Suddenly, there was a voice from above. "It's dangerous. Please back away." Looking up, Angeline saw the elf Maureen floating. Her silver hair was billowing around her in the flow of her mana.

"Let power flow by heaven's guide. White to black. Black to white. With shape to sing of the birth of stars."

She lowered her outstretched hands. At first, there was a slow wind from above, but in the next moment, a massive ball of flames crashed straight into the bahamut's back.

"Starfall... Amazing..." Miriam murmured, tightly grasping the brim of her hat.

After taking a direct strike from that massive fireball, the bahamut thrashed about in

its death throes, then began its descent.

Looking around at the stunned crowd, Angeline shouted, "It's falling! Run!"

The adventurers snapped to their senses and, tucking away their weapons, put as much distance as they could between themselves and where the beast would make landfall.

Blood poured from the bahamut's gaping maw. Its fins spasmed with its final struggle before it smashed into the ground on its side. The resultant tremor was great enough that Angeline felt momentarily weightless. The massive thud was followed by a moment of silence. Then, the silence was pierced by cheering.

Relieved, Angeline caught her breath and wiped the blood from her cheek. Miriam raced over and embraced her.

"That was incredible, Ange! Color me surprised!"

"Hey, Merry... You'll get blood on you..."

Angeline looked away, scouting the crowd for Percival. She found him standing, not so far away. His sword was sheathed, and he seemed strangely restless, clenching and unclenching his fists. Kasim walked over to him and said something—Angeline couldn't quite hear, but they were talking about something. Kasim seemed happy enough, but Percival was more perplexed than anything else. This was their long-awaited reunion and yet he didn't show even a hint of a smile.

Angeline opened her mouth before wordlessly closing it again, feeling anxious for what was ahead.

CHAPTER 95

IT WAS ROWDY OUTSIDE

It was rowdy outside as the bahamut's corpse was dismembered. When it came to S-Rank fiends, every scrap was valuable, from the bones to the flesh, sinews, fangs, scales, hide, and blood. Even a drop of fat was a priceless commodity.

Those who contributed most to the hunt would earn the greatest rights to the materials. That was the tacit rule of the Earth Navel, but after tasking her party members with the dissection, Angeline promptly made off. She was far more worried about Belgrieve than the bahamut materials.

Percival had only increased her anxieties. When she ran into him on the streets, and during that battle, Angeline found her impression of him to be somewhere between fear and awe. It certainly hadn't been a positive impression. Perhaps her concern for Belgrieve was merely a pretense; in any case, she wanted to nestle up to her reliable father to do away with these anxieties.

She could hear her feet clacking against the stone floor with each step. Once she passed through the cloth partition, she saw Belgrieve was still lying where he had been. Duncan was sitting beside him.

As Angeline approached, he softly raised a finger to his lips. "He's sleeping well... Although he looks pale."

"Thank you... Duncan."

Angeline sat down beside Belgrieve. Her father's sleeping face looked a bit haggard. When she held his hand, she found it was clammy with sweat. "Dad..."

"We found Percival"—she contained those words before they could exit her lips. She found herself fearful of this reunion that Belgrieve had desired so much. She even wondered if it was all right that they never met at all. But she felt that was not her place to weigh in, and in the end, she could not say a thing.

Taking a deep breath, Angeline turned to Duncan. "Is it bad...?"

"I can't say it's *good*. I doubt his life is in any danger... But I am no doctor," Duncan said, apologetically scratching his head. Angeline closed her eyes, shook her head, and heaved a deep breath.

She could hear an increased sound of steps resounding—people were already returning to the building. But in spite of the boisterous clamor, she could clearly distinguish a certain set of footsteps approaching. The cloth curtain was swept aside, and when she looked up, she saw Percival being led in by Kasim.

"Huh, Bell... Is he asleep?"

"Yeah..." Angeline timidly looked up at Percival. His messy mane of hair, the deep furrowed brow that made him look angry, his sharp, piercing glare: the traces of that once-cheerful boy from Belgrieve's stories—at least as far as Angeline could tell—were completely gone.

Percival's lips were tightly pursed as he took in Belgrieve's bedridden form. His eyes filled with more sorrow than delight.

Giving him an inscrutable look, Kasim let out a slight laugh. "See? Definitely Bell, right? A bit older than you remember him, but... Well, *we're* not much better off."

"Yeah..."

Percival grasped his chest with a terribly pained expression on his face. Then, his eyes shifted to Angeline, and she felt her heart stop.

"I see... So you're Bell's daughter."

"Ah... well..." She couldn't manage any words, so she simply nodded in reply.

The moment was interrupted when Belgrieve groaned and shifted in his sleep. His prosthetic right foot let out a dry tap as it struck the floor. Percival seemed ready to say something, but he fell silent at the sight of that wooden peg leg.

Kasim kneaded his beard, a conflicted look on his face, and glanced at Angeline. "Ange, Duncan—sorry, but could you leave for a minute?"

"Yeah..." Angeline hesitated for a second before nodding and standing up. She began to take her leave, but stopped. "Um... Mr. Percy?" Percival stared back at her silently.

"I'm sorry... It's nothing." She ducked through the partition in a hurry.

The sun had already set outside the window, but the bahamut was still being processed. The crowd was still buzzing, with a flood of people coming and going from the carcass. It would be a waste to even count the number of lanterns, candles, and shinstone lights dotting the darkness down below. The gargantuan bahamut was kept illuminated with magic as it was gradually taken apart, piece by piece.

Duncan patted Angeline on the shoulder. "Hey, you don't have to be so worried. Bell will get better with a bit of rest. And you found the friend he was looking for, did you not?"

"Uh-huh..." Angeline nodded. *Yes, but...* She kept silent.

There wasn't the slightest sound beyond that cloth partition. She didn't mean to eavesdrop, but she still found herself straining to hear when she was interrupted by somebody's hurried approach.

"Hey, hey, hey! I finally found you!" It was Touya coming her way, looking quite out of breath. His cheeks were red, but he looked to be in high spirits. "You were incredible! You're Ms. Angeline, right? You really surprised me back there! Honest!"

"Yes, well..."

He grasped Angeline's hand and swung it around excitedly. Confused as she was, Angeline responded just enough that she wouldn't come off as rude. Not seeming concerned in the slightest, Touya smiled.

"This is my first time at the Earth Navel, but... that was more than I had ever dreamed of! Yes, I was confident in my skill, but it looks like I have a long way to go... Was that eminent fellow a member of your party?"

Angeline's heart skipped a beat as she took a slight glance at the cloth partition. It was still quiet. However, perhaps there were some faint voices she couldn't make out.

"A friend of yours, Ange?" Duncan asked, curiously stroking his beard.

"No, not exactly..."

"Hmm? Oh, is he your comrade? It is a pleasure. My name is Touya."

"How polite. I am Duncan."

Seeing the two so nonchalantly acknowledging one another, Angeline felt some of the tension drain from her body and slouched against the wall. Looking outside the window, she saw the bahamut was slightly smaller than it had been moments before. As expected of expert adventurers, they were masters of field dressing their kills as well. She had left it all to Anessa and the rest of her party, but now she was wondering if they were having a hard time fitting in.

They must get loads of materials off of a fiend that big. However, it would be impossible to carry all of it, and each individual part was also huge in its own right. This was not a location that could be reached by wagon, so selecting the right materials was probably a huge deal. *How do the adventurers here carry the materials they get?*

There were lively voices approaching—it was Marguerite and Maureen sharing a laugh as they walked side by side.

"Aha ha ha ha! No, back then, see—the story was put on hold thanks to my sudden visit, and you were quite sulky, Marguerite. I got quite the scolding for that."

"You sure about that? I don't remember a thing."

"Still, to think that shorty would grow so big. Time sure flies."

"Not that I remember any of it! But I guess granduncle never changes. Oh, Ange—what are you doing out here? How's Bell looking?"

"And Touya's with you. You just disappeared out of nowhere. Ah, want some skewered bahamut? It's quite delicious."

Angeline blinked, looking between the two of them.

Taken aback, Touya muttered, "An elf... It's the first time I've seen an elf besides Maureen..."

"Do you know her, Maggie...?"

"Kinda—well, she says she stopped by my granduncle's place when I was still a brat. I forgot all about it, but I'm surprised you remember me."

"I mean, you're Graham's grandniece, right? And you're the princess of the western forest, so of course I'd remember. Well, I'm sure Graham gets his share of visitors, so he might not remember every one of them."

The two elves giggled. In these southern climes, so far removed from the northern elven lands, it seemed their shared heritage was sufficient to close the distance between them.

There's Marguerite and Maureen, and Lucille and I... If only all reunions could be so cheerful, she thought somewhat morosely. In any case, Percival was already here, standing before Belgrieve—there was nothing left for her to do.

And dad will be fine. He'll definitely be fine. Angeline tried to convince herself of this. Looking up from her navel-gazing, she had a sudden realization. "Where's Anne and Merry?"

"They were talking with the others. Something about how there were too many materials, and they wanted someone to buy them."

That was probably for the best. They hadn't come to the Earth Navel to make a killing.

Stuffing her cheeks with skewered meat, Maureen stared at Angeline curiously. "Ms. Angeline, was it? You look a tad down in the dumps for somebody who was one of the key players in that fight."

"Ah, well, I mean..." Angeline chewed over her words.

Marguerite, pouting, prodded at her shoulder. "What's with you? You're throwing off my rhythm here."

"Sorry... What about Lucille?"

"The dog beastman? Someone who looked like her comrade came and dragged her off. Do you know them? Introduce me someday."

"Hmm... Yeah, I should. We'll probably see them again, anyways..."

It was somewhat reassuring, seeing Marguerite acting no different than usual. But surely she had also seen Percival from up close. Angeline had seen Marguerite freeze up, unable to do a thing. *What impression did she get from him, then?*

Angeline felt a bit irritable until she heard someone coughing beyond the partition.

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Kasim and Percival sat beside Belgrieve as he slept.

“Where have you been all this time?”

“Oh, I’ve been all over. Spent the most time in the imperial capital, I’d reckon... Have you been here for a long time?”

“I haven’t been counting. But it has felt like an eternity.”

“I see... It’s been painful, right?”

“My pain is insignificant.” Percival grimaced as he placed a hand to his mouth and coughed. “Cough... But, why now...?”

“A lot of coincidences happened to pile up. But thanks to that, we found out about this place.”

“Is that the only reason you came here?”

“The biggest reason, at least. Although there are a few materials we need as well.”

“Cough... hack...” Percival fell into another coughing fit. He took a deep breath and fell silent.

Kasim rambled on, feeling slightly irritable. “Hey, Percy. You might not have forgiven yourself, but Bell’s already forgiven you. No need to stick it out alone.”

“Forgiveness, is it...?” Percival said with a strangely self-deprecating smile on his face.
“What good will that do anyone?”

“Percy?”

“What materials did you need?”

“Hmm...? Oh, if I’m remembering right, we need the mana crystal of an á bao a qu...”

"Understood." And with that, Percival stood.

"H-Hey, Percy—"

But before Kasim could say anything more, Belgrieve groaned and cracked open one eye. Percival froze, a startled look on his face. He gingerly raised the hem of his cape and used it to cover his mouth while Kasim pulled down his hat.

"Bell, how do you feel?"

"Kasim... It's strangely cold... Isn't this a bit much...?" Belgrieve tried to get up, but his body would not listen to him, and he could barely stir.

With a ghastly look on his face, Percival reached down and placed a hand on Belgrieve's brow. Belgrieve looked at him, surprised.

"You're...?"

"Just go to sleep."

After he had stopped Belgrieve's attempts to rouse himself, he roughly marched through the partition and was quickly on his way.

Belgrieve blinked and looked at Kasim blankly. "I felt something... a bit nostalgic from him..."

"Heh heh... You couldn't tell? Well, you've both gotten older."

"What...? Hey, don't tell me..."

"I'm gonna go chase him. Just what's going through that stupid head of his...?" Kasim stood and crossed the threshold, where he found Angeline and the others staring at him.

"Kasim..."

"Ange, look after Bell for me. He doesn't look too good," Kasim said as he raced off in what he guessed was the right direction.

Angeline rushed to Belgrieve's side. "Dad!"

“Mmm... Oh, Ange.” Although he tried to stand, it seemed he couldn’t muster the strength in his legs, so he gave in and settled for sitting upright. Angeline timidly stooped down and placed a hand on his head.

“Your fever is high. You have to sleep...”

“How shameful...” Belgrieve lay faceup once more and shut his eyes. “Ange... That man who was with Kasim...”

Though the mere thought of him unsettled Angeline again, this was nothing to hide.
“Yeah... That was Mr. Percy...”

“I knew it.” Belgrieve gave a deep sigh, but his expression was somewhat relieved.
“Good grief, going around with that scowl on his face... What to do with him...?”

“Dad...”

“Um, would you like some elixir?”

There was a voice from behind. Angeline turned with a start, coming face-to-face with Maureen, who was holding the skewered bahamut in her mouth.

“Who are you?” Belgrieve asked.

“I’m Maureen—a pleasure to meet you. The big wave is coming, and it will be hard to face it like that.”

Belgrieve considered her words and smiled. “My apologies... May I take you up on that offer?”

“Of course. We’ll be fighting together, after all. Right, Touya?”

“Yeah. Still, you don’t often see a father-daughter adventurer party...” Touya mused, sounding rather impressed. Then, he swallowed his breath as he noticed the greatsword leaning against the nearest pillar.

“What... what is that *masterpiece*?”

“Um, elixir, elixir... Where did I put it?” Maureen muttered as she busily rummaged through her backpack.

The ruckus outside the building grew even louder. It seemed another fiend had emerged from the depths. Marguerite walked over to the window. "Another one, Ange. What do you want to do?"

"I'm staying with dad."

"All right, you do that. I'm going to have a shot at it."

"I'll go with you this time. I'm worried for Ishmael," Duncan declared before hoisting his axe over his shoulder and racing off with Marguerite.

"What about us, Maureen?" Touya said, his eyes wandering. "Everyone left."

"Give me a second. Hmm... That's strange."

Maureen produced all sorts of items, but the elixir simply would not come out of the bag. Was she a reliable person or not? Despite the situation, Angeline could not help but crack a smile. Although Belgrieve was lying peacefully, he suddenly spoke up.

"Ange."

"What is it, dad?"

"What did you think about Percy?"

Frankly, Angeline could only describe him as scary, and Marguerite had said as much too. It was as though that redoubted man would cleave straight through her if she so much as dared to approach him.

Seeing Angeline struggle to find the right words, Belgrieve gave a wry smile. That was enough to tell him everything. "He's a cheerful, energetic guy, deep down..."

"Do you want to see him...?"

"Yeah. That's why I came here. I need to get better soon... I'm sorry for being such a useless father." Belgrieve's smile softened as he patted Angeline on the shoulder. He shut his eyes, and before long, his breathing steadied and he drifted back off to sleep.

Angeline kept holding her father's hand, only standing up once he had drifted off. She turned to Touya and Maureen, the latter of whom was still fishing through her bag. "I

know this might be a strange request, but can you look after my father? Please?"

"Hmm, well why not. But elixirs... I thought I still had loads of them..."

"Where are you going, Ms. Angeline?"

"I'm going to bring dad's friend back."

She slipped past the two of them and went off on her way.

○

It was like all sound had disappeared. He tried to wring noise out of his throat, but no matter how much he wanted to scream, his voice failed him. Moreover, it felt like his right leg was on fire. It wasn't anything as trivial as mere pain. It was as though his foot were being crushed in a blazing-hot vice.

Just when he thought his wavy, distorted surroundings were straightening out, the cry from his own throat finally reached his ears.

"AaaAaaaaAAAA—!!!"

The pain came from around his knee. He clasped it with both hands and felt a tepid liquid staining his hands. It was detestably sticky, with a sensation as though it was clinging to his skin. The damp end of his trousers stuck fast to his leg. It was hellishly hot, yet somehow also piercingly cold. His breathing grew ragged.

"Huh? Ah... Wh-What just...?" The elf girl fell to her knees in a daze.

"Your... Y-Your leg..." the brown-haired boy stuttered, voice quavering.

"Agh... ah... hah." The screaming stopped once his throat had dried itself out. The red-haired boy breathed shallowly, as though his chest was congested.

He fell faceup. They had been in a cave moments before, but he could see a cloud-filled sky above. The sunlight was feeble; the shadows were thin. There was no ceiling, which meant they were out of the dungeon—his escape scroll had made it in time. Everyone had worked up a sweat, but his back was cold. Only his right leg remained burning hot.

"Is everyone... safe...?" The boy's eyes shifted to take in his surroundings: a boy with brown hair, on the verge of tears; the terribly pale face of an elven maiden; a boy with flaxen hair, still sitting there with a blank-eyed stare. Everyone had made it. The red-haired boy grimaced as he put a hand to his chest. "Thank the heavens..."

"W-We might be... But, but..."

"Hey... what... what happened... to my... leg...?"

"Ah... ah..." The brown-haired boy was at a loss for words.

As though suddenly realizing the situation, the elf girl rushed to his side. "We need to stop the bleeding!" she cried out.

She took out a fine rope, wrapping it tightly around the base of the boy's thigh. *Oh, that must be where I got hurt.* The boy with red hair was strangely calm as his eyes took in the elf girl's tears.

"You're losing heat!"

"Yeah... I'm cold... That's strange..."

"Urgh... So much blood... No, this can't... Please, don't die..." Tears spilled from the elf girl's eyes as she desperately tried to press down on the wound with her hands. But the blood wouldn't stop seeping.

"I'll be fine... Just lend me... a shoulder..." He tried to stand to reassure her. But he couldn't put any strength in his feet. *How peculiar. That's not how it should be. Oh, that's right. My right leg is injured—right? I wonder how long it'll take to get better. I guess I'll be causing some trouble for them until then.*

A voice called to him. The blond-haired boy staggered over to him.

"Why...? Why...?"

"I'm glad... you're safe."

The boy flinched. "Why!?" He opened his mouth to say something else, but he was suddenly stricken with a painful coughing fit, and he had to clutch at his chest. He fell to his knees coughing.

“Cough! Grr... Cough, hack! Goddammit, why now... Damn it all! Stop, dammit... Cough, hack... Why won’t it stop?! Cough, hack!”

The boy snatched up his sachet and shoved it against his mouth. Usually, the effects would come immediately, but it wasn’t so this time. He smacked his fist against his chest several times in irritation. There wasn’t anything funny about it, but the red-haired boy found himself smiling anyways.

Gradually, his eyelids grew heavier. His senses faded, and only the heat in his right leg remained.

○

By the time Kasim caught up to Percival, the battle had already begun around the abyss. Percival proceeded, unhesitant, weaving his way through the adventurers.

A large crab with a coarse, bumpy carapace approached on thick, sharp legs that clattered against the ground. Its shell boasted an ominous skull-like shape—and Percival split it straight down the middle.

“Percy! Hey!” Kasim called as he erased a nearby crab with magic. “What are you trying to do? Where are you going?”

“I’m going to get you your mana crystal,” Percival said as he cleanly cleaved through another.

Kasim tiredly straightened his hat. “Hey now... Are you trying to atone or something? No need for that, Bell’s not even angry. Didn’t I tell you? He’s gotten strong enough to make it all the way here. There’s nothing you need to stress yourself out over.”

“I am not pleading for forgiveness... I do not have the qualifications to meet Bell. I will return once I have what is necessary.”

“H-Hey.”

Percival had a strangely philosophical expression on his face as he chuckled. “He’s lived a good life—even got himself a daughter. That’s enough, don’t you think? What does he need me for, at this point?”

“That’s not true! I don’t want to see you or Bell in any pain! I got to reunite with him

proper, and it's time for you to lower your burdens too!"

"That's because... it's not *your* fault Bell lost his leg."

Kasim froze as though his feet had been covered in ice. Pressing his sachet to his mouth, Percival turned back to him.

"When I saw his missing leg back there... I knew it was hopeless after all. The sights from that day, the scent of blood, the sound of labored breathing... It all came right back to me. In the end, I haven't redeemed myself one bit," Percival muttered as he swung his sword to remove the fiend bits clinging to it.

"I should have just gone off and croaked. But I was scared. I said it time and time again... But it's ridiculous. I stole my friend's future away, and there I was, clinging to my own... I'm a coward."

"You're wrong... Bell didn't lose his future. Hey, have you tried talking to Ange? You saw her, right? Bell's daughter. She's a real good girl. Bell did his best even when he was alone. How long do you plan on running?"

"That's... not all. Even when I was with Bell back there, I..."

Before he could finish, a fiend's claw came down upon him. Percival easily sliced it in twain, then took a leap towards the chasm. His cape fluttered behind him as he fell into the darkness.

His eyes widening, Kasim raced to the rim. "Percy!" he cried out.

There was no response. For a moment, Kasim hesitated, but he began mustering the strength to chase after him. Before he could jump in after him, a figure overtook him from behind, throwing itself into the hole. As his feet locked up in surprise, he witnessed the fluttering of long, braided black hair floating past on the tepid night breeze.

CHAPTER 96

FOR A MOMENT, BELGRIEVE COULD SMELL THE WIND THAT BLEW THROUGH THE FOREST

For a moment, Belgrieve could smell the wind that blew through the forest. A refreshing breeze seemed to pass from his heart to the tips of his fingers and toes, and his body suddenly felt a great deal lighter. When his eyes slowly opened, he saw a weathered stone ceiling, which had been blackened with soot in places. As he stirred, he could feel rough stone through the thin, portable bedding they had used for the journey.

“Oh, are you up?”

Belgrieve looked in the direction of the voice and saw an elven woman sitting there. She seemed to be boiling something in a pot over an open flame, and it let off a fine smell that stimulated his appetite.

Scratching his head and lightly smacking his palms against his brow, Belgrieve tried to clear his mind.

“It’s... Maureen, right?”

“Yes, and a good Maureen to you too,” Maureen said with a joking chuckle. “That’s good. It looks like the elixir did its job.” She ladled something large and steaming from the pot to a dish and offered it to Belgrieve. It appeared to be as thick as an arm and resembled a bundle of fibers sporadically striped in vivid red—a rather strange thing that smelled of the sea. “Monster crab boiled in salt. Not half bad.”

“Oh, thanks... By elixir, did you mean an... elven elixir?”

“Well, I made it myself, so it definitely did come from an elf.” She giggled as she stuffed her own mouth with crab meat. “*Nom, nom...* It’s not as effective as the ones made back home, but... I think it might be a bit more effective than the foreign stuff.”

“I’m so sorry you had to use something so valuable... But you really saved me. You have

my utmost gratitude.”

“Oh, no, we should help each other out when we can. Not to mention, I’ve got loads of elixirs. Thing is, I never end up using them, so I forgot where I left them... This really is nice.”

Even as she spoke, Maureen never stopped pulling out chunks of crab meat, blowing on them, and chowing down.

She marches to the beat of her own drum, I guess, Belgrieve thought with a wry smile. He got the feeling the elven maiden from his memories had been similar. Perhaps it wasn’t so uncommon for elves to be laid-back and undeterred by others.

In any case, though he wasn’t in peak condition, he neither felt sluggish nor tormented. What remained of his weariness likely came from resting on the hard floor. “Are the fiends still coming?”

“They managed to fight off the latest wave. That’s what you’re eating,” said Maureen, pointing at the pot. “But maybe the big wave has started already. I can already feel the presence of the next fiends. Everyone’s getting ready around the big hole even though it’s not a full moon yet.”

“Hmm...”

Belgrieve stroked his beard. His party—and that boy who seemed to be Maureen’s comrade—were probably there, in that case. He felt both thankful and apologetic that Maureen had gone out of her way to stick around.

“I must have caused you some trouble...”

“No, I was just in the mood for a break. It’s not like I enjoy fighting or anything. Still, it’s quite amazing, you know. I’ve met all sorts of people, but I think yours might be the first father-daughter adventurer team I’ve ever seen.”

“I’m not exactly an adventurer...”

“Huh? Really? Marguerite said something about you training under Paladin Graham, of all people. And that sword is Sir Graham’s, isn’t it...? *Nom.*” Maureen glanced at the holy sword leaning against a pillar.

"That's true, but... How should I explain it...?"

Belgrieve scratched his head as he scanned the area. There didn't seem to be anyone around save for Maureen. *Where did Angeline go? And as for Percival...*

His thoughts were interrupted as the cloth partition was pushed aside to reveal a face framed by locks of black hair. "Pardon me."

"Oh, Ms. Yakumo."

Yakumo, adorned in the style of Buryou and with her hair tied back, entered with a warm smile. Lucille's face peeked in at him from behind Yakumo. "Long time no see, baby."

"It has been a while, Mr. Bell... I heard you were ill, but it looks like there's nothing to be worried about."

"You two seem to be in high spirits... Did everything work out all right with Hrobert?"

"Indeed. It seems he had his hands full with his own political struggles, and he did not doubt the matter in the slightest. We managed to squeeze a fine reward out of him. The way he's going, he won't last long. All that's left is for him to self-destruct, heh heh heh," Yakumo said, chuckling as she took a seat. Her gaze rested on Maureen; she quirked her head in apparent curiosity. "An elf? Don't tell me... You found that old companion of yours?"

"No, it's not *her*. I only met Maureen since arriving here."

"Hmm... It won't be that convenient, then."

Maureen was still eating crab as she mulled over the topic of discussion. "*Nom, nom...* Angeline brought that up too—are you searching for an elf?"

"Yes, we used to be in the same party... An elven woman named Satie."

"Satie, Satie... hmm..." Maureen's eyes wandered in thought.

Then, Lucille popped in again. "Did Mister Exalted Blade come here?"

"Percy... You old..." Belgrieve had a bitter look on his face as he recalled his old friend,

who had run off without even looking him in the eye. *Looks like my timing couldn't have been worse. Showing up sick might have given him the wrong impression about my health. If we could just sit down and talk...*

Lucille flapped her ears and pressed harder. "He didn't come?"

"No, he did. But he left before we could talk."

"As the people of the past once said, '*Is it not a joy to have friends coming from afar?*'"

"I don't know... Has he been suffering?"

Yakumo folded her arms with a strained look on her face. "He is a man who never lets others get near... I was too afraid to approach him, but men like him do often keep their pain to themselves."

"You have him wrong. Mister was just lonely."

"Lonely, huh..." Belgrieve closed his eyes. *Perhaps that is so.* From what Yakumo and Lucille told him, Percival had been on his own for a long, long time now. Belgrieve had his dreams broken, but he still found happiness in his homeland and eventually even a daughter. He had it far better than Percival, who had remained where he had been left, all those many years before. "I need to go find him."

Belgrieve tried to stand up, but Maureen frantically held him down. "You can't, you have to wait until the elixir works its way all around your body! Otherwise, you'll just relapse."

"Aww..." Yakumo chuckled. "Don't be so hasty, it's not like you. Everything's happening so suddenly for Percival, he might just be having trouble processing it all... But are you sure you really *want* to meet him?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I'm anxious, to be honest. That man's sorrow is great, but at times it looked like hatred to me. Time is a cruel mistress. It can warp people's hearts... It isn't rare for goodwill to turn to loathing. And the human heart is a delicate thing. There are times when feelings will triumph over logic."

"You're right... I think so too. But I still have to meet him. I appreciate the concern,

but..."

"I see... No, I stuck my nose where it doesn't belong. But you see, I am the one who told you about the Exalted Blade... So it feels like I can't just leave things to play out on their own."

"It's all right. Thank you, Ms. Yakumo." Belgrieve smiled.

Yakumo cast her gaze downward, awkwardly scratching her cheek. "Good grief... It's been on my mind for a while now, but you're all such difficult people."

"Ha ha... Sorry about that..."

At times, it was hard to face the past. It had been like that for Belgrieve as well. He was stricken with sorrow when he lost his leg, and it was painful to quit his life of adventuring. However, in Turnera, he had found and raised Angeline, and she was responsible for so many other friendships since then. It was thanks to his daughter that he could face all that he had been averting his eyes from. For this very reason, he couldn't run; he had to face this head-on. At least, that was how he had some to see things.

With Angeline fresh in his mind, Belgrieve looked around. "Come to think of it, where's Ange...?"

"Ms. Angeline? Well... Mr. Percy, was it? She was saying she'd bring him back and ran off."

"I'm truly hopeless," Belgrieve murmured, holding his head at the realization that his daughter was doing all the heavy lifting for him once again.

Lucille began to strum the instrument in her hands. "*Everything's gonna be all right...*"

○

It was a darkness that coiled around the flesh. With every step, it felt like something uncomfortably warm was brushing against her skin. The lantern light was hardly reassuring, only barely illuminating a few paces ahead.

As he walked beside her, Percival would occasionally steal curious doubtful glances at

Angeline. "Why did you follow me?"

She looked back at him sullenly. She had been so afraid of this man before, but now she felt strangely irritated. *Dad just wants to see you, so what are you doing all the way out here?* she wondered. And by this point, she wouldn't shrink back even if the man was squaring off with her face-to-face. She had even fostered the nerve to glare back. "Dad wants to see you... So I came to drag you back."

"I see..." The creases in Percival's brow grew deeper as he continued facing forward.

For a while longer, silence reigned between them. Though they could feel the presence of fiends about, few of them seemed to be keen on going after Angeline or Percival—perhaps the tense air between the two was intimidating enough to dissuade them.

"Do you not want to see my dad, Mr. Percy...?"

Percival did not answer that, only speeding up a slight bit. Angeline matched his pace. She could feel the rugged rock through the soles of her boots. When she looked up, there was nothing but darkness overhead—not even the moon or stars. *Come to think of it, we passed through something misty when we jumped down*, she recalled.

All of a sudden, Percival drew his sword. Angeline immediately put a hand on her hilt. She heard the sound of something scraping against the ground, and in the next instant, an enormous centipede-like fiend with countless legs shot out of the darkness.

Percival slickly evaded it, swatting its head down as it rushed past. While it was stunned, Angeline sliced it in two. This could not even be called a battle—the victors had been decided in an instant. The presences around them seemed to grow in number.

Percival turned to Angeline. "Not bad."

"That goes without saying... when dad's the one who taught me."

Percival's eyebrow twitched. "Bell...? I already heard it from Kasim... But is it true that he's still swinging a sword?"

"He is. Dad is ridiculously strong... I'm sure he's even stronger than you."

"I see..."

Percival let out a bemused laugh for a moment, but he suddenly scowled and took out his sachet. Once again, he was facing forward resolutely and walking.

Angeline was dazed by that brief glimpse of a smile, which certainly did show some traces of a cheerful youth. After freezing for a moment, Angeline snapped back to reality and sprinted to catch up to Percival, grabbing the hem of his cape when she caught him again. “Have you been fighting here all this time, Mr. Percy?”

“I’ve forgotten just how long it’s been.” Percival gazed off into the distance; his was the face of a man rushing through old memories. “But in the end, *it* isn’t here either... I knew. A part of me always knew. Maybe I just wanted an excuse.”

“What...? What isn’t here?”

“The fiend that stole Bell’s leg.”

Angeline was taken aback. “You’ve been chasing that fiend?”

“Yeah... At first, I was looking for a way to heal him. But after his disappearance, I was sure Bell was dead. Then, at the very least, I thought it was my duty to avenge him... What a farce.” Percival let out a cynical laugh. His smile now was completely different to the previous one and was painful to look at.

“I only saw it for a brief instant, but I can still remember it now. A black quadrupedal shadow with wolflike features... The closest thing I’ve found so far was a demon... But whether that wolf was a sort of demon, or some other fiend entirely... Even now, I haven’t the slightest idea.”

“A demon... You’ve beaten a demon before?”

“Yes. It wasn’t anything special. If it’s not the one I’m looking for, then whether it’s a demon or dragon makes no difference.”

“That’s why... you’ve been here all this time?”

“I already said it. In the end, I’m just making excuses. I just didn’t want to think I was doing nothing at all.”

Angeline pursed her lips. She felt like she’d heard something similar from Kasim, back when she’d confronted him at the estate of Archduke Estogal.

Percival stopped to catch his breath. He took out his sachet and pressed it against his face.

“But... now that Bell has appeared before me, I...”

“You what...?”

“Cough...” Percival started walking again without giving any further answer. Angeline silently tagged along.

For a while, the two of them walked in silence. Fiends would appear from time to time, but these were quietly laid to rest.

Angeline wiped blood from her sword and tucked it into its scabbard. “I thought it would be harsher in the hole, seeing how dreadful it was outside.”

“It depends on the location. These parts are already... I can see it.” Percival pointed farther down. There was something white jutting out of the ground. When Angeline squinted, she could make it out as some sort of tower. The tower itself seemed to emit light, as the area around it seemed strangely bright, enough so that she could see the uneven rock face of the cavern walls. The structure was made of white brick, and it stood out as a stark contrast to everything around it.

From afar, it looked so small and slender, but as they neared it, she found it was actually rather large. “This is...”

“The den of the á bao a qu. The other fiends don’t approach it,” Percival said, walking straight through the doorless entranceway.

Angeline hurriedly followed behind and found it to be empty inside. Though the ceiling was surely somewhere above, it was too high to see. A spiral staircase stretched out along the walls, trailing off into this endless expanse. Everything was made of white brick, all of which glowed faintly.

Percival turned to Angeline. “Wait here.”

“No.”

“I see.”

Percival grabbed Angeline's shoulder and guided her to the side of the stairs closest to the wall. With him so close, she could pick up the peculiar, refreshing scent of the many herbs in his sachet.

"One thing you need to know—don't turn around. Even if you sense something, don't look back."

"Uh, okay... Why?"

"You'll see when we get there. Until we reach the roof, just keep your eyes on the stairs ahead of you."

With that, Percival began to climb, and Angeline was beside him. With the light coming from the brick material, everything was strangely blank and featureless without even the accent of shadows. She felt she might accidentally misjudge a step and take a tumble.

Then, for some reason, Kasim crossed her mind. She had overtaken him and jumped into the abyss herself, but what exactly happened to him? Presumably, he followed her down after, but he hadn't appeared where she had landed. According to Percival, space was distorted within the Navel, and even those who entered from the same spot could end up in different places.

"I wonder what Kasim's doing..."

"Who knows? He'll manage," Percival answered curtly. Yet his words reflected a sense of trust, as though he truly believed the magician would be just fine.

"You trust Kasim, I see."

"I don't. I just know he'll manage."

Isn't that what you'd call trust? she thought, giggling. Strangely, all that pressure she had initially felt from him was no longer scary in the slightest.

Percival glanced at her doubtfully. "What?"

"Heh heh... Hey, Mr. Percy. What sort of adventurer was my dad?"

"Bell was... cautious, cowardly, and levelheaded. I learned much from him—although

he never got the better of me in swordsmanship.”

Angeline puffed out her cheeks. “Dad won’t lose to you now...”

“You adore him quite a bit. Who’s your mother? You don’t take after Bell at all.”

“I was adopted... I only know dad.”

“I see.”

Behind her and flanking, she felt a strange presence. She was about to face it when Percival grabbed her shoulder to stop her. “Don’t look.”

“B-But...”

“Endure until we reach the ceiling. It’ll attack if you turn now. You won’t stand a chance.”

“What sort of fiend is the á bao a qu...?”

“Invisible. It sticks closely to anyone who climbs the tower and ascends behind you. The higher we climb, the more it will materialize. It will only take complete form on the roof. It will attack if we turn along the way, yet our own attacks will pass straight through it if it hasn’t fully materialized.”

“Even magic doesn’t work?”

“Not magic, nor anything else.”

She felt a chill. How could she possibly deal with something like that?

Seeing her stiff expression, Percival cackled. “Don’t be so scared. Our attacks work if we climb all the way up. At that point, they are no different from any other S-Rank fiend.”

“I see... That’s good...”

Angeline placed a hand on her chest in relief. But why, then, did Percival know about that?

“Have you fought one before, Percy?”

“I have. At first, I nearly died. It was a never-ending exchange of blows with a foe impervious to all my attacks. And with such poor footing as well.”

“H-How did you survive...?”

“I realized I couldn’t win and made a mad dash to escape. I hadn’t climbed so far yet, so I managed to survive jumping from the stairs. They do not chase once you leave the tower. I was wounded and exhausted by then...”

Percival’s eyes narrowed in seemingly fond reminiscence.

“It may have been Bell who taught me not to be stubborn—to run when you know you can’t win. Kasim and I, we were both the sort who would stick it out. We thought we could do anything if we fought with all our might.”

“Satie too?”

“You know about Satie... Right. She was confident in her own skill. All three of us were. Bell may not have had what we did... But he had everything we *didn’t*. He is the man who embodied the concept that strength in battle does not define an adventurer’s worth.”

It took only the slightest trigger for these memories to spill from Percival’s lips. As the presence behind them was gradually growing stronger, Angeline was in no position to settle down. But Percival’s stories were so interesting, she didn’t even consider turning back.

Yet if his memories were so warm, then why was he so sad? He was reuniting with the friend from those memories, so why was he here, twiddling his thumbs? Angeline couldn’t understand this, and she gripped his cape feeling irritated.

“Meet my dad, Percy...”

“If we make it out of here in one piece.”

“That’s a promise. Dad wants to see you.”

“Ha ha... Has he got all his complaints in order? Venturing all the way here just to...”

"My dad is not that sort of person!" Angeline insisted, her voice so loud she surprised even herself.

Percival looked at her sidelong, the corners of his lips curling up in amusement. "You may have been adopted, but you are certainly Belgrieve's daughter."

"Do I resemble him...?"

"Couldn't say. You don't exactly resemble him, but... you give off the feeling I would imagine from Belgrieve's daughter."

Angeline's eyes wandered as she struggled to find the words for what she wanted to say. The presence looming over her back was only a nuisance at this point.

"There are loads of things I want to talk about. About memories, goals, and dreams. All sorts of things happened on our way here, Percy. I'd like to tell you about that."

"I'll bet. Honestly, I'm surprised Bell made it all this way... He's quite something." Percival adjusted the sword at his hip. "It goes to show he walked forward with his head held up. I... couldn't do that."

"That's not true... I mean, Percy, you're really strong. Doesn't that mean you worked really hard?"

"The important thing is for whose sake I put in the effort. There are plenty of things you might say just from the results. I thought it was all for Bell... But in the end, I..."

"I don't think blaming yourself will accomplish anything... For whose sake would that be?"

"Who knows...? Enough talk. We're here."

Before she knew it, they had climbed a great distance. The ceiling was now visible when she looked for it, and the stairs continued on even beyond that. The presence behind her had grown substantial; both the uncanny sound of its breathing and the tepid exhalations tickling her ears gave her goosebumps.

The moment she set foot on the last step, Percival grabbed her hand and yanked her up.

"Jump!" he shouted. And with one final step, they bounded off. They had reached the roof—the last floor. The moment she touched down, she drew her blade and turned.

There before her was a strange life-form. It resembled a shaved rat, but it was far larger than Angeline. On its face was an asymmetrical mishmash of eyes of all sizes, each shifting independently. Its fangs were long and sharp. There were sharp claws at the ends of its limbs as well. Unlike a rat, its hind limbs were larger than its forelimbs, and it was bipedal. Its forelimbs were more armlike, and it wielded its sharp claws like bladed weapons. Only a thin layer of downy fur grew over its pink flesh, resembling peach fuzz.

The á bao a qu opened its mouth and screamed. However, she did not hear the shrill voice she was imagining—it was faint and feeble, like rustling fabric.

"We're splitting up. The claws strike twice. Look out."

"Twice? How does that—?"

Percival dashed to the left without waiting for Angeline to finish. She immediately made for the right, positioning herself on the opposite side.

At first, the á bao a qu took in both of them with its many eyes, but it decided to pounce at Angeline. It was fast and swung its curved claws like sickles. Angeline calmly backed off slightly to evade. However, feeling a strange premonition, she immediately held her sword out to guard. The claws had already passed by, yet she felt an impact race down the blade.

Pouncing from behind it, Percival severed the á bao a qu's right arm at the shoulder. The fiend retreated back with a faint scream.

Angeline looked at Percival with a pouty expression. *You didn't say anything about invisible slashes...*

"'Twice'...Be clearer next time."

"Don't be spoiled. I'm not your father."

Tightening his grip on his sword, Percival bounded off to chase the retreating beast, and Angeline joined the pursuit. Although no words had been exchanged, her feet turned in the opposite direction as his, and they had pincered the fiend again. Their

eyes met for a moment before they stepped in at the same time.

Without warning, the á bao a qu swayed like a mirage. Angeline squinted but still swung her blade in a horizontal arc. Her sword bisected the monster's torso, while Percival's swing from the opposite side lopped off its head.

This was strange. This was too easy.

"Is it over...?"

"No... It's still here!"

The duo stood back-to-back, their swords at the ready. Around them, they could hear the faint sound of something scraping against the ground. It was circling around them, closing in bit by bit.

"What's that sound...?" *Its claws are getting caught on the ground. Sharpen your senses. Don't rely on sight.* "It's still invisible... Was all of that an illusion?"

"Correct. But unlike fighting it on the stairs, our attacks actually work. Don't lose your composure."

"I'm calm... Just checking to make sure."

Angeline unerringly channeled her strength into her grip on the hilt and concentrated on the sound that grew disconcertingly near. The sound overlapped with itself, and she could hear the rustling of fabric.

"There are two of them..." Percival said, clicking his tongue. "This isn't how it was last time."

"We take on one each... It works out just fine."

"Ha ha! You're too confident to be Bell's daughter. You can have that one."

In the next moment, Percival was dashing off and Angeline was stepping forward. She couldn't see it, but it was close. She raised her sword to catch the first blow.

"And the next one!" She held her sword firmly. A second impact jolted the sword that was already holding the claws at bay. She endured it and pushed back.

Looking closely, she could see that it wasn't completely invisible. Atop the glowing white brick floor, she could see a slight distortion, like a shifting mirage. It was considerably fast, but not too fast for her. Angeline had subjugated many a fiend, and her eyes were already accurately following the faint signs of the á bao a qu.

"There!" Her muscles tensing, she stepped in with the tip of her toe and, using her shoulder's rotation, unleashed a sharp stab. She had matched the fiend's movements, and the tip of her sword accurately pierced its chest. It let off the faintest of screams before collapsing backward.

As Angeline caught her breath, the area around the heart of the á bao a qu overflowed with a blinding light. Alarmed, she prepared to fend off another attack, but the mass of light eventually shrank until it had coalesced into a lump small enough to fit into the palm of her hand. She took a deep breath; her nerves were stretched thin, so her fatigue was significant despite having hardly moved. Perhaps she *would* have been in danger had she come here alone. Having now stood shoulder to shoulder with Percival, she had come to understand how abnormally reliable the man truly was.

Angeline looked back. Although it looked as though Percival had finished up, his prey had not dropped the same bundle of light. "Rather than there being two, it must have copied itself. Yours was the real one," Percival said, sheathing his sword.

"I guess so... Is this the mana crystal?"

"It is. You take it."

"No. You're going to give it to dad."

"How stubborn... But your skills are decent. It's been a while since I fought side by side with someone else... Not bad."

"I'm the daughter of the Red Ogre, after all."

"Hmph... You don't *look* like him, but you definitely *feel* like you're his daughter. How strange, though... Red Ogre?" Percival inquired, looking at her curiously as he tucked the crystal into his pocket.

It was at that moment they heard someone racing up the stairs from below. The two swordsmen immediately reached for their blades, only to release them when they saw the face of their visitor—it was Kasim, who was completely winded.

“You really just left the magician behind... Are you crazy?!”

“Oh, shut it. You’re perfectly fine, so it all works out in the end.”

“Looks like you’re just as insensitive as you used to be! And Ange! Thanks to that ‘surprise’ of yours, I was caught flat-footed and missed my timing, and the spatial axis shifted!”

“Heh heh, sorry... But, Kasim, I’m surprised you knew where to find us.”

“I sensed your mana to chase you down. But all the other mana sources are enormous around here, and it was a huge pain to find you!” Kasim angrily stamped at the ground, making a flopping sound with his sandals.

Percival tiredly stretched his arms and rolled his shoulders, limbering up. “Good job, I guess. But we’re done here. Let’s go.”

“Ah, now I’m pissed! Percy! You’re not getting away until you properly talk to Bell!”

“I didn’t think I could get away from the start...” Percival said, taking a brief glance at Angeline.

Angeline grinned as she tightened her grip on his cape.

CHAPTER 97

THE SOUNDS OF BATTLE ECHOED INTERMITTENTLY

The sounds of battle echoed intermittently. The night had drawn on, and though a nearly full moon shone down, its glow was being drowned out by the numerous magic lights flying through the air as shadows moved about beneath them.

Ever since the bahamut, there had been barely any break between the waves of fiends. They continued to pour forth from the chasm incessantly. Their corpses were dragged away from the battlefield to be stripped down for materials, and thus they littered the area behind the lodging building. Each individual material would have been priceless in the outside world, but with so many gathered, they would be treated rather roughly here.

The sky started to brighten before anyone had realized it. Although there were clouds casting dark shadows here and there, the night was mostly clear. A refreshing breeze caressed the skin now, but once the sun finally rose, it would be hot enough to induce sweating.

“Perhaps the big wave has started already,” said Ishmael. “It’s not like there’s a rule that says it has to be the full moon. Just a rough estimate that mana and fiends will overflow around that time.”

“Hmm... But this is quite something” Belgrieve mused, cracking his neck loudly as he looked out the window.

“Now then, perhaps I should get a bit of rest. This is wearing me out.” He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes, not bothering to stifle a great yawn.

“Take your time. It must have been taxing, being a part of that chaos.”

“I didn’t know what to do when I lost sight of the others,” Ishmael admitted, scratching his head and turning his already messy hair into an unsalvageable mop. In the poor visibility of dusk hours, he had apparently been fighting while separated from the

others.

Belgrieve took a deep breath before slowly exhaling. The elixir had run its course while he was asleep, and only a hint of fatigue remained in his body now. He was moving just fine again and could most likely fight with a sword.

"Care for some soup, Mr. Bell?" Anessa asked, her head peeking out from the partition.

Belgrieve turned to her. "Yeah, I'd love some... Don't you think you should get some sleep though, Anne?"

"I got some napping in... But I can't really sleep soundly here."

The stone floor was certainly hard. Since they'd made the journey on foot, their bedding was hardly satisfactory, consisting of little more than thin sheets spread over the ground with a makeshift pillow of miscellaneous articles of rolled-up clothing. Even after they fell asleep, they would feel like their bodies had become one with the stone.

I must have slept well thanks to the elixir, Belgrieve reasoned and silently offered his thanks to Maureen and Touya once more.

The broth left behind from Maureen's boiled crab made for a fine soup base. Some garnish was added along with simple seasonings. It was a reassuring, homey sort of taste with a warmth that seemed to permeate through his body.

Within the partition, Miriam and Marguerite were sleeping side by side. Duncan was leaning against the wall with folded arms, nodding off, and beside him, Ishmael sat hugging his knees, slowly falling into the steady rhythm of sleepy breaths.

Ultimately, Angeline had not returned, and nor had Kasim and Percival. If they had been out there fighting the fiends that emerged from the depths, it was high time for them to show up.

Belgrieve's gaze was affixed on the steam rising from the pot, but his mind was on the face of his old comrade, whom he had only seen for a brief moment. "He's gotten old... Well, that goes for both of us."

Anessa, who was stirring the soup, looked at Belgrieve. "Are you talking about Mr. Percival?"

"Yeah... He didn't use to have that grim look on his face... You met him, right?"

"Not really 'met' per se. I just saw him... Honestly, I found him terrifying. He looked so big in my eyes, like I might suffocate in his presence... Ah, sorry. I didn't mean to talk about your friend like that."

"No, don't worry about it... He's not really like that. At least, he didn't use to be. He would laugh a lot and get up to all sorts of mischief with Kasim... Oh, Satie would join in too. They'd try to cause all sorts of trouble for me." Belgrieve chuckled. "It may have been like how Ange and Merry tease you."

"Oh, now that you mention it..." Anessa giggled, serving some soup into a bowl.

Meanwhile, Miriam began to stir, and with a rustling of clothes and blankets, she was up. "Nyah... It's hard to sleep..."

"Hey now. You better sleep, or you'll feel worn out all day," said Anessa.

Miriam puffed out her cheeks and reached for a cup. "I mean, it'll just make me feel stiffer, sleeping here. That bed in Istafar sure was soft..."

"Don't be like that. You're making it harder for me to sleep now." Now Marguerite was up too. She rubbed her sleepy eyes and yawned as she rolled her neck and shoulders.

Camping came with a mindset that "this is how it's just supposed to be." But sleeping as though they were camping out while *indoors* felt like a bit of a mismatch. Still, it should have been far easier to sleep here than if they actually were roughing it. The unique tension in the air around the Earth Navel put them on edge, only further contributing to their discomfort.

Belgrieve, for his part, had been resting the whole time since they'd arrived, and knowing that Percival was nearby made it hard for him to settle down again. Once he had finished his soup, he stood and picked up Graham's greatsword.

"I'm going to head out for a bit. I'm feeling better."

"Oh, then I'm going too. Give me a sec."

"I don't mind... But don't you need to rest, Maggie?"

"Going for a walk would do me better than sleeping here. Let's go to the bar. How about it? Some ale will pep me up, I just know it."

"Hmm, well, maybe... Let's just head out, for now."

"Hold on, I'm coming too. I want some of the good stuff," Miriam insisted. She stood up with a groan and donned her hat.

Bell smiled awkwardly, resting the greatsword over his shoulder. "Drink in moderation... What about you, Anne?"

"Ah, um, well, what to do...?"

"What's the matter?" Miriam cajoled. "Not like you've got anything better to do. Duncan and Ishmael are both asleep, so let's go."

"Y-Yeah... Let's go."

They removed the pot from the heat and smothered the flames with ash before they left the building. The weather was fine—the clouds that were there at dawn had thinned out, and a translucent moon hung in the sky. There was still a lingering stench of blood in the air as some adventurers continued to field dress the day's kills.

Apparently, the bahamut meat had been a hit; the various food stalls and bars were already putting out all sorts of meals featuring it. What had been an atmosphere of life-and-death struggle the previous night had now become like a festival as daybreak neared, reflecting the resilience of the folks who made their living here.

They hadn't gone far before they spotted Yakumo and Lucille drinking at a table by the side of the road. Yakumo smiled as they approached. "Oh, a fine morning to you. Are you treating yourselves to a morning drink too?"

"That's what I came for! Is the ale here good?"

"A brew in the morning's great no matter what it is. Nectar of the gods," Lucille said before gulping down her glass as though it were the most delicious thing in the world.

At any rate, they had been wandering aimlessly until then, so they didn't hesitate to join their table. Marguerite, who was bold-natured and longed to hear tales of foreign lands, quickly made her acquaintance with Yakumo and Lucille.

"But it's incredible," Miriam boasted with a grin. "We made a fortune just from yesterday's bahamut materials. All thanks to Ange and Percy."

"Can't argue with that. I can see why people come here from far-off lands," Anessa said, touching her cup to her lips.

A plume of smoke erupted from Yakumo's mouth. "As expected, Ange and that man are masters of their craft. The mere thought of leaping at that thing with a sword sends shivers down my spine. They must have allotted you a good proportion of the materials. You don't have to turn it all into cash; it makes for quite effective armor and weapons too."

"Yes, I heard bahamut whiskers are excellent for bowstrings," said Anessa. "They're supple, shoot straight, and have good mana circulation."

"Hmm, good for you," Marguerite said. "You think I can get myself something like that?"

"It's the big wave, after all. I'm sure you'll have another chance," Yakumo said, reassuring her.

"But, Maggie, make sure you don't get impatient and rush out on your own. I'm not sure how it is with so many powerful adventurers here, but high-ranking fiends are supposed to be quite dangerous."

"I get it already! It's nothing but lectures with you, Bell!" Marguerite pouted and turned away.

Lucille's nose perked up. "As the people of the past used to say, '*There's nothing like a father's love.*'"

"Pipe down, you. So, Bell—did you talk to him?"

Belgrieve silently shook his head.

Yakumo breathed out some smoke with a sigh, then tapped her pipe against the edge of the table to discard the ash. "I'm scared but curious... And at this point, I just want you to talk already."

"I'd love to, but I don't know where he went..."

All of a sudden, the sword on his back began to quietly growl, prompting Belgrieve to look up at the sky. It appeared as though a black speck was dotting the radiant sun, but it rapidly grew larger—something was rapidly descending upon them.

“A fiend! From above!” Belgrieve shouted, drawing the greatsword.

Moments after their party had all stood up and scattered, a bizarre fiend with bat-like wings swooped down, landing on all fours. Its torso was human, but it had the lower half and face of a goat, and what looked to be a flute dangled from its neck. The nearby adventurers were immediately in a frenzy with weapons in hand.

“Fallen faunus! Another S-Rank! Business is gonna be booming!”

“Anyways, let’s get on with the slaughter!”

“Hey, watch out for its flute!”

This warning, ironically, heralded the sounding of that very flute. It was a shrill, eardrum-rattling sound which forced many of the adventurers to clap their hands over their ears. Small bumps began to protrude from the nearby ground. One by one, a sprout emerged from each, which would quickly grow into a mature plant. Yet all of them were deformed, either with bent stalks or crooked, wilting petals, and their smell was unpleasant by any reckoning.

“Dammit! It’s mocking us!”

“Destroy that flute!”

But in the blink of an eye, the faunus had taken to the skies once more, lording over the land-bound adventurers with unflappable contempt. Manipulating the leaves, stalks, and vines of the plants, it launched its attack on the adventurers. It seemed this vegetation boasted considerable firepower, making it a threat even to the higher ranks. In no time at all, the battlefield had descended into chaos.

Anessa cut down an approaching vine with a dagger. “What’s the plan, Mr. Bell?”

“Anne, Merry, take aim at the goat fiend. Maggie, the two of us will protect them.”

“Yes! Just leave it to me!”

Marguerite swung her sword, easily mincing the vegetal foes. Anessa and Merry quickly took aim and unleashed their arrows and magic. As expected, the other adventurers were also experts, and soon they joined the fight with forceful firepower. Unfortunately, it only took a nonchalant swing of the fiend's hand to knock down any projectile before they could strike.

Miriam stamped her feet. "Oh, now I'm mad! One more smirk from that thing, and I'm gonna fire off Bold Emperor!"

"No need to stall! Just fire it already!"

"All right, here we go!"

With some prompting from Anessa, Miriam began her incantation. Belgrieve tore through any plant headed their way with one eye on the sky.

"I guess grand magic is our only option... But will it really let us use it that easily...?"

Scattered chants for grand magic had begun all around them. But just as he feared, the fallen faunus blew its flute once more. The magicians immediately covered their ears, interrupting their chants. *First the bahamut and now this...* It seemed that powerful fiends all had various countermeasures against adventurers.

Poised with her instrument, Lucille let out an angry howl. "This messed-up noise ain't rock!"

"Enough nonsense, just work around it!" Yakumo roared, using her spear to mow down the nearby stalks.

Somewhere nearby, a fire had broken out. A magician who specialized in fire magic attempted to light the plants up. These plants were drier than they looked, so the flames immediately spread, and the stalks twisted in agony as they were swallowed in the blaze. However, this elicited not praise, but condemnation from his fellow adventurers.

"You damn fool! You tryin' ta burn us too?!"

"Someone, cast water magic!"

Belgrieve swung the sword to blast the plants away, fire and all, and looked up once

more. The fallen faunus was watching the adventurers' disarray below with a smile on its face. *I can't attack it up there...* As he gritted his teeth in frustration, he heard a displeased grunt from his hands—the sword sounded angry.

"Can you do something about this?" He found himself talking to it. The greatsword roared in reply and it began to glow with a faint light. *Come to think of it, both Angeline and Graham had managed to fire great shock waves from this sword.* He didn't know what it was trying to tell him, but it felt far more worthwhile to test out his theory rather than spending his time mowing down these weeds. But he wasn't sure how to actually do it. There was no telling what would happen if he swung the greatsword blindly, especially at this distance. Even if he did manage to launch an attack, he didn't know if it could reach from here.

"I just have to give it a shot." Belgrieve took a deep breath and concentrated. The mana within him swirled and spiraled as it flowed through the sword and back to him. Its mana mixed with his, and the greatsword glistened and growled. In his mind's eye, he pictured not a slash, but a slender, long, piercing blow. Just like that, he drew it back, coiling his body. The tip remained aimed at the fiend. He forcefully stepped in with his left foot, thrusting the blade out towards the sky.

Suddenly, mana spiraled out of the tip, shooting out as sharply as a spear as it crashed straight through the flute dangling from the fiend's neck and stabbed into its chest. The faunus's eyes widened in shock, but its scream was muffled by blood bursting from its mouth. It lost its balance and fell to the earth below with a loud thud, and from there, it moved no longer.

"I guess it worked out after all..."



Belgrieve sighed and sheathed the sword. *There's no harm in trying out new things*, he thought. But he never imagined it would work out *this* well. He felt more confused than accomplished.

With no one unifying it, the plant horde lost motility and withered away on the spot. Still, the flames did not die out with them, and where the plants had been the thickest, smoke continued to pour forth and spread all around.

Now that the fiend had been taken care of, the adventurers were in a hurry to extinguish the fire. Nobody yet knew who had taken down the faunus. A commotion of questions and demands for answers had soon taken the place of the earlier chaos. The flames were put out, the plant scraps were cleared away, and the corpse of a fallen fiend began to be inspected.

Marguerite patted Belgrieve on the back. "Nice work there! Looks like you've gotten quite a handle on that thing!"

"Well, even my body feels lighter when I wield it... It's all thanks to the sword."

"So that's the might of the Paladin's sword... Incredible..." Yakumo joined them, scrutinizing the blade with intrigue. "But you handle it well... Mr. Bell, your skills are certainly nothing to scoff at."

"At least compared to before." As he bashfully scratched at his cheek, Lucille tugged his sleeve.

"They're here."

"Hmm?" He looked up just in time to see Angeline running his way before she latched on to him. Belgrieve braced his legs to catch her.

"Dad!"

"Oof... Oh, Ange. Where did you run off to...?"

"Howdy! So the fiends made it all the way here? I guess those flying ones really are a hassle," Kasim blithely observed as he trudged after Angeline, laughing.

Belgrieve's eyes met with those of the man standing behind Kasim. His lion's mane-like hair was the color of straw, and the tapered slope of his nose gave him a strong-

willed impression. A deep, angry-looking wrinkle was chiseled into his brow. Perhaps his face had been stuck in a sour expression for so long that it would never go away now.

Angeline hugged him even harder. “It’s Percy.”

Percival’s scowl was unchanging as he took in the sight of his old friend. He stood there wordlessly for some time before finally managing a simple utterance. “Hey, Bell.”

Belgrieve broke into a smile. “It’s been a while, Percy.”

○

The air was strangely tense as Belgrieve and Percival sat across from one another at a table at the bar. Kasim sat between them on another side, while the others watched over from farther away with bated breath. The adventurers who had nothing to do with this all merrily drank their troubles away or loudly bemoaned their woes. However, it felt as though all this hustle and bustle was an entire world away from the three men.

“It’s been a long time,” said Belgrieve.

Percival nodded.

Belgrieve went on, “Over twenty years...”

“Per... haps.” Percival glanced at Belgrieve’s prosthetic leg, then shut his eyes.

“Back when we were only seventeen, I believe.”

“Yes. The two of us were seventeen. Kasim was still only fifteen.”

“Right, right. You two were the same age, and Satie was a year younger. Then there’s poor old me, the runt of the litter,” Kasim chimed in.

Percival sighed before staring straight at Belgrieve. “What did you come here for after so long?”

“I thought we needed to settle things with our past. Both me and you.”

"Settle things, eh..." Percival gave a self-deprecating smile. "If only that was possible."

"I'm sorry for leaving you all behind and departing from Orphen."

"Don't say that!" Percival erupted loudly, smacking the table. Their cups teetered, spilling some ale on the table.

Kasim's eyes widened. "What's that all about...? Why're you so angry?"

"There's nothing for you to apologize about! Back then, I'm the one who said we should venture farther in. If only I had kept my mouth shut..."

"That's just hindsight, Percy. It was an E-Rank dungeon. No one could have expected a fiend like that."

"I can't just dismiss it so conveniently." Percival's gaze shifted. "It doesn't change the fact that you lost your leg in my stead."

"If I hadn't... you would have died."

"I should have."

"Don't you dare say that, Percy!" Kasim angrily smacked both hands on the table. "Just now, you saw Belgrieve fight, didn't you?! Losing his leg never slowed him down! There's nothing for you to beat yourself up over!"

"That's precisely it..." A sickly smile crossed Percival's face as his gaze lingered on Belgrieve. "I don't even have the qualifications to be your friend. Hey, Bell, you know... Back when I first saw you here, I'd go as far as to say... I felt loathing for you."

"Wha..." Kasim looked shocked.

Belgrieve quietly stared back at him.

"I kept giving excuses, saying it was for your sake and driving myself into a corner... And when I finally see you, I feel nothing but hatred... How disgusting can I be?!" Percival grasped his own head, exasperated. "With Kasim and Satie... I searched for a way to heal you. I got stronger, I climbed higher, I thought we could find spells and techniques we could never have even dreamed of. Thinking back, I might have already gone mad back then. I was reckless as could be and Kasim and Satie would yell at me

time and again. Satie was driven to tears. ‘Are you even trying to save Bell?’ she would ask, and all sorts of other things that pushed me farther and farther to the edge. And I knew well she had already reached her limit.”

“But, but that was...”

“Shut up, Kasim. Bell, the moment you vanished, I was sure you were dead. It was frustrating, yes, but then... There I was, feeling strangely relieved. I thought maybe I didn’t have to keep pushing myself anymore. But then, I couldn’t forgive myself for thinking *that*. So I hastily cobbled together a reason not to stop. I traveled all over and slew fiends in search of the one who took your leg.”

“Did you ever find it...? The fiend, I mean?” Belgrieve asked.

Percival clenched his fist. “I wouldn’t be like this if I had. But I was also *relieved* I never found it—it meant I’d never have to lose my reason for going on. I’m a coward. I told myself it was all for your sake, but I swung my sword for myself alone. Doing so was my makeshift reason to keep on living.”

Kasim’s shoulders drooped. “Percy, I went through something similar. I convinced myself Bell had to be somewhere out there, alive. So I spent the whole time searching for a way to heal him. But Bell was just fine—he even got himself a daughter. He lived happily. Why do *you* need to feel any more responsibility? What’s the use in clinging to the past forever?”

“I said it, didn’t I? I’m a coward. Hey, Kasim. You’re strong; that’s why you could sincerely rejoice when you found out Bell was all right. But I’m different. It was like the pointlessness of everything I’ve ever done was shoved right in my face. I was envious that Bell could continue walking forward. Do you get me? A part of me wished that Bell had died!”

“That’s... that’s... You only *thought* it!”

“That’s right. I only thought it. But can you stand to have someone who would even *think* that way as a friend? Do you think I’m even qualified for that? Of course not!”

Suddenly, Percival scowled and grasped for his sachet. He took it out and pressed it against his mouth.

“Cough... Dammit...”

"You're still using that bag..." Belgrieve calmly observed.

Percival bit his lip. Suddenly, he pulled it hard enough to tear it from its string and held it out to Belgrieve. "Take it back. I don't need it anymore."

"Don't be stubborn. It's pointless to try and goad me into hating you."

The wrinkle in Percival's brow grew deeper and he glared at Belgrieve. "Can't even find it in yourself to hate me? I'm not even *worth* it?"

"Don't be such a downer. Or did you really want me to hate you? Would you rather I had come all the way here just to let out all my pent-up resentment?"

"That would have been far easier for me." Percival barely propped his head up with one hand, casting down his eyes. "If you told me to die, maybe I could finally..."

Kasim was speechless. Percival, too, stayed silent for a while, but he eventually lifted his face and looked at Belgrieve.

"You said you wanted to settle things, right?"

"Yeah."

"Then it's settled. We're through. Go home. You've got a daughter, right? Good on you, making it all the way here, but I'm going to stay here forever. It's too late... I shouldn't be forgiven. And mostly, I just can't forgive myself."

Belgrieve let out a deep sigh. "I see... Got it."

"B-Bell...?" Kasim gazed at him in despair.

But Belgrieve was smiling cheerfully. "Let's have a fight, Percy."

"What?"

Just as Percival gave a doubtful look, Belgrieve suddenly grabbed a cup off the table and splattered the ale within all over Percival's face.

"Bwah?!"

Belgrieve leaned over the table and grabbed the shocked Percival by the lapels before delivering a powerful punch to his cheek. Although Percival was knocked off-balance, he immediately caught himself. The table and their two chairs had been knocked over in the scuffle.

Kasim darted up in shock. “Hey! Bell?!” the magician cried out.

Without another word, Belgrieve kicked the table aside, this time hammering a fist into Percival’s solar plexus. Percival immediately fell to one knee, spitting out a bit of blood as he glared at Belgrieve.

“You little—!”

“Talk is cheap—I came here for *satisfaction*. Did you really think all that navel-gazing would cut it?”

“Don’t screw with me!” Percival leaped at Belgrieve.

Their brawl was nothing like a civil sparring match—they went for each other’s throat, grappled on the floor like rambunctious children, and even yanked at each other’s hair. Although the other adventurers had been shocked at first, they soon realized it was just another fight and were quickly back to nursing their drinks. It was nothing rare.

Rushing up to them, Angeline was also left not knowing what to do. “D-Dad! Percy! S-S-Stop it! Enough!”

They ignored her, and their unsightly slugfest continued. The two were caked in dirt and grime by the time Belgrieve fell on his back, Percival pinning him down with a hold on his collar. Both men were exhausted and struggling to catch their breath. But even in pain, Belgrieve still smiled. “*Huff, huff...* Looks like I still can’t win.”

“*Wheeze... wheeze...* Of course not! What’s your problem...? Why are you...?” Tears seeped from Percival’s eyes, running down his face and dripping from his chin.

“Why are you always like this?! You’re the one who pulled the short straw... And when you—when the guy without a leg *laughed* and told me not to worry about it, that was *agony* for me! I was distraught when you flashed us that fake smile of yours! Why won’t you get angry?! Why didn’t you ask for help?! I... We... we were lonely without you...” Percival’s shoulders drooped. He quivered as he broke down in tears. All the feelings he held in were flowing out.

"You finally spoke your mind... Ouch..." Belgrieve rubbed where he'd been struck and smiled. "I'm sorry. You really did think of me as a friend, I see."

"It wouldn't be so painful if I *didn't!* Goddammit..."

"I'm not a saint," said Belgrieve. He wiped away the blood oozing from his cut lip. "Hey, Percy—it was the same for me. I resented you guys when I quit as an adventurer. I thought to myself, 'Why was it only me?' Even before I left Orphen, I'd go out of my way to avoid you."

"As you should have. I knew it."

"But I've lamented it all this time, the fact that I left without a word, and that I resented you... In the end, I was only thinking about my own interests. I used my own lack of skill as an excuse, all because I was scared of getting hurt any more. I hurt you—of course I did. I would have realized it if I thought about it for even a second, but I averted my eyes."

"You don't have to lament that... It was only natural to feel that way."

"You're wrong. Come this far, I'm thankful for it all. If I had stuck it out as an adventurer in Orphen... I doubt I'd have lasted much longer. I was never as skilled with a sword as you. So I was impatient. I struggled to see where else I could be useful..."

"You helped us out quite a bit."

"Ha ha, you think so? But I was impatient. I always felt inferior... Eventually, I would have jumped the gun, hoping to finally accomplish something—and I would have been killed by a fiend."

"You never know... Anything could have happened."

"You're right. But there is one thing I'm sure of. If I hadn't lost my leg and returned home, I would never have met Ange."

"Ange... Oh." Percival looked at Angeline. She was standing to one side, bewildered, her eyes shifting between Belgrieve and Percival.

"She's strong. There aren't many adventurers who can keep up with me."

"Isn't she? I'm a lucky guy. But the fact that I found this happiness by running away continued to weigh on me. All the while, I made excuses. I told myself you must have been doing just fine. Eventually, I realized I was just choosing to look away."

"It took... a long time to realize that."

"Because I was selfish... I only recently found the courage to face my past. Even that is only due to Angeline. And I've met all sorts of people thanks to her." Belgrieve closed his eyes. It was the truth—without Angeline, he never would have seen Percival or even Kasim again.

"But I looked at you with loathing, you know...?"

"I don't care. You're not perfect—did you think I didn't know that?"

"Argh... I really am no match for you, Bell." Percival resignedly rolled over off of Belgrieve and sat cross-legged on the floor. His expression had softened. "Good grief... I'm getting into bar fights with a forty-year-old dad... Not where I ever thought I'd end up."

"Ha ha, we both need to start acting our age... Forgive yourself already. You worked hard enough."

"Can I... really be your friend?"

"Even if you don't think of me that way anymore, I will still consider you my friend—I always have, and I always will." Belgrieve sat up and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Sorry it took so long, Percy. Thank you for staying alive. I'm glad I got to see you again."

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

Percival shut his eyes tight, pressing his fingers against their corners.

"Did you make up?" Angeline said, jumping onto Belgrieve.

"Ha ha! We did. It's thanks to you, Ange." He ruffled up her hair, and Angeline seemed content.

"Not on my watch!" Suddenly, Kasim kicked Percival in the shoulder. Staggering back, Percival glared at him.

“What now?”

“Shut it! You had me on edge there! You stubborn mule! In the first place, you’ve always been like this! Selfish, never caring about what I thought... Ah, for crying out loud!”

“I get it, I get it. Don’t be so mad.” Percival shook his head, fed up. “You’re not much better than me on that front.”

Then, Lucille poked him in the shoulder. “Good for you, mister.”

Percival’s expression froze, startled. He awkwardly scratched his cheek. “Um... Sorry. For everything.”

“*Don’t worry. Be happy.*”

“Heh heh heh... You’re suddenly a lot mellower—like the devil has left you,” Yakumo observed. She set the stem of her pipe between her smiling lips.

Percival ruffled up his own hair and climbed to his feet. “Shut up. Is there something wrong with that?”

“No, I think it’s a good thing. Right?” Behind her, Anessa, Miriam, and Marguerite nodded in apparent relief.

Belgrieve chuckled and prodded him. “They were quite scared of you. Right, Ange?”

“Yeah... You were terrifying, Mr. Percy.”

“Now the father and daughter are bullying me together!” Though he roared in affected anger, Percival’s face had bloomed into a cheerful, boyish smile.

Out in the direction of the great pit, there was some noise brewing. Evidently, another fiend had crawled its way out. Percival took a deep breath and adjusted the sword on his hip. He picked up the sachet that had fallen on the floor and tucked it away. Then, he grabbed a bottle of ale from Angeline’s table and began chugging it down.

“It’s never tasted this good before!” he proclaimed as he wiped his mouth. Then he threw aside the empty bottle. “Bell, Kasim, let’s go on a rampage. That’s the sort of mood I’m in.”

"Just what I wanted to hear! Heh heh, it's been so long! We really need to find Satie next!"

Kasim pulled down his cap. Belgrieve stood with a wry smile and picked up the greatsword. Angeline happily stood beside them.

"Isn't that nice, dad?"

"Yeah... Truly."

It felt like their divergent paths had come together once more. Small, faint connections became threads that intertwined until they had led to this moment. *Just one more...* The silver hair of an elf swayed in his memories.

As the party ventured forth, Percival suddenly turned back. "Come to think of it, Bell."



“Hmm?”

“Ange mentioned something about a red... ogre? What was *that* about?”

“Ange...?”

Angeline pretended to whistle, even though she didn’t know how. She stared off into the distance. The winds had shoved the clouds away and out of sight, leaving an endless blue sky in their wake.

EXTRA

SUMMER ON THE BORDER

The sheep bleated loudly as they ran about, while sheepdogs ran circles around them to keep them from straying too far. Come summertime, Turnera's plains were always lively. The sheep were let loose to graze in late spring, and they would spend all day engorging themselves on grass. After briefly returning to the village for an early summer shearing, they were let loose on the plains again. Feeling refreshed from their lighter coats, these sheep would eat their fill of the soft foliage, growing out their coats once more for the distant winter.

Rounding up the sheep for the shearing was a huge job that required all the shepherds and farmhands. However, once the job was done, they just had to patrol at fixed intervals to make sure the sheep didn't wander off. When the herd spread out too much, they would use sheepdogs to lead them close to the village.

Watching from atop the hill, it looked as though all the sheep moved as one great living beast. The barking of dogs and the boisterous bleating of sheep, the shrill orders the shepherds would issue—all of it echoed ceaselessly through the plains.

"Amazing!" Charlotte exclaimed as she took in the sights. "I thought so before, but those dogs are really well trained!"

"They have to be. Otherwise, we can't do our job," Barnes explained, tapping a walking stick against his shoulder. "It's because my old man went and grew the herd... Our dogs are getting old. We're going to have to raise a new litter."

"Really? I'd like to raise one too."

"It's a good experience. But it's not easy to train them as proper working dogs."

Barnes heard a voice calling for him from the distance. "Ah, crap. Sorry, Char, we'll have to continue this conversation later."

With his walking stick in one hand, Barnes ran off, trampling the grass underfoot.

It was fun watching the herding from afar, but Charlotte didn't want to squander all her time just watching—she wanted to join in too, eventually. After all, Angeline had apparently helped Belgrieve with the herding when she was only ten years old. However, even if they were the same age, there was no guaranteeing that a sickly girl raised under the tutelage of a Lucrecian noble's curriculum could handle herself just as well as a robust Turnera girl.

Don't be hasty. Take it one step at a time, Charlotte reminded herself. She put on her straw hat and started walking towards the village. Along the way, she could hear the farmers singing folk songs. Now that the first harvest was over, the wheat fields—and all the land that had been devastated by the march of the trees—were being tilled. Around the fields of spring-sowed wheat, where fresh green shoots swayed in the breeze, farmers walked the perimeter and inspected the fencing.

The scars left by the ancient forest were healing, and Turnera was returning to its everyday life. Charlotte had helped with the orphanage's garden in Orphen, but this was her first time experiencing agriculture as a *way of life*. It was all unfamiliar for her, but she found a lot of it to be quite interesting.

She would frequently find herself wondering where Belgrieve and Angeline were now and what they were doing. It was lonely without the pair she regarded as a father and elder sister; but compared to the dreary days when Charlotte had been wandering the land seeking vengeance, Turnera's daily routine was simply dazzling. Her path took her past houses where she could see the villagers stooped over under the eaves of their respective houses as they sorted through potatoes or dried wheat.

For a time, the musky scent of sheep's wool had wafted from all around, but this had mostly been whisked away by the summer breeze. The sheared wool would be washed, then soaked in hot water to remove even more grime and oils. The stench was quite powerful, and Charlotte, who was unaccustomed to it, had been at a loss at first. After going through the processes of washing and carding, though, the resulting wool would be white, fluffy, and delightful to the touch. Charlotte had been given a tuft, and she would never get tired of stroking it with Mit.

The wool would then be spun on a spindle into yarn. This yarn could be used to make clothing or textiles. Belgrieve only made the sorts of simple pieces that could be crafted with knitting needles, but the shepherds' homes had looms which made a clickety-clacking noise she could hear whenever she passed them by. These wool products were an important commodity for Turnera. The villagers themselves had use

for them, of course, but they were also sold and bartered to passing peddlers. Turnera had a fine reputation for the quality of its wool, and though it only happened once a year, there were merchants who would come all the way from Estogal to buy some.

As Charlotte arrived in front of Kerry's house, she could hear the sound of looms at work. There were several different workshops on the premises that produced cheese, textiles, and other products. The man's work ethic really spoke to why he was one of the biggest names in Turnera, and quite a few villagers were employed by him.

It was too early for lunch, so she thought she'd sneak a peek at the textile mill. The walls of stone and wood were lit by a south-facing window, which was left wide open. Charlotte had to stand on the tips of her toes to peer in. There were four looms in an orderly line, and the village girls and madams were hard at work.

It was a wonderful, mysterious sight to see crossing threads form into sheets of cloth. She marveled at the display until she felt a pat on the back. "Eep!" she shrieked and turned to see Rita.

Rita was holding a basket loaded with balls of yarn. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Well, you know, you know... I just thought it looked nice..."

Charlotte hadn't done anything wrong, yet she felt like she had been caught in the middle of some mischief. She nervously rubbed her hands together.

With a giggle, Rita reached out to take Charlotte's hand. "Then... watch a little closer."

"Huh? Can I?"

She was led into the workshop. The women momentarily paused in their work and smiled at Charlotte. Though she still fidgeted nervously, the girl took another look around at the looms and large spinning wheels. The average household made use of smaller spindles, but Kerry's operation was on a different scale altogether.

"Over here," Rita said, encouraging her to sit down in front of one of the looms. Charlotte's heart was racing.

"Does your leg reach?" asked the older girl who had been sitting there moments ago.

Charlotte peered at her feet; there was a pedal that seemed to move the vertical

threads—the warps—up and down. Charlotte scooted herself a little forward in the chair, stretching her foot as far as it would go. That seemed to do the trick. The heddle guide shifted: some warp threads were pushed forward while others were pushed back in an alternating pattern. She passed a horizontal weft thread through the gap in the alternating warps, then used a comblike tool called a reed to fasten the weft down. She shifted the pedal, and she passed another weft through. This had to be repeated again and again.

It looked like simple work, but once she had tried it out personally, it was surprisingly difficult. Charlotte found herself in quite a predicament.

“You shouldn’t pull it too much.”

“Oh, you fed it through the wrong way. You have the heddle reversed.”

She tried several times, only to feel bad for ruining what had already been a half-finished fabric. Her hands stopped.

On the wall hung one pretty length of woven cloth—perhaps meant as an example of pattern work to be imitated. It was incredibly beautiful, using yarn of six different colors.

There had been plenty of pretty textiles in Lucrecia, the land of her birth; Charlotte, as the daughter of a cardinal, had plenty of exposure to such crafts. However, the material in the warmer south was thin and slick. It was flax, cotton, and silk, and they did not often weave in patterns. That was more fit for wool, which was thicker and heavier, and had a firm, substantive feel to it.

Would I be able to weave something like that if I practiced? Charlotte wondered.

The loom began to move again, and behind it, Charlotte helped with the spinning. Belgrieve had brought wool all the way to Orphen, spinning it in his free time. Charlotte had helped him with it then, so she knew the work. Bit by bit, she tugged at the wool atop the turning spindle. The way the yarn stretched between her fingers was like magic.

Belgrieve had been a fine spinner, but Rita was even better. She worked briskly, spinning pretty yarn without a single clump. In no time at all, the spindle was full.

“You’re really good, Rita...” Charlotte said with a touch of jealousy.

Rita smiled. "You'll be able to do it soon."

"Do you really think so...?"

She looked at the cloth on the wall again. *Surely, it would have taken skillful spinning on top of skillful weaving to produce that. I need to practice more,* Charlotte thought as she turned back to her work. Then a sudden thought occurred to her. "Did Ange ever weave?"

"Hmm... I don't think so. That girl preferred playful sword fighting with the boys," Rita said. The other women chuckled in agreement.

"Right, Mr. Bell did do some spinning, so she imitated that much, at least."

"Ange liked helping Mr. Bell out with his work. But I don't think she ever thought about learning to weave."

"And then she went off and became an S-Rank adventurer. You can't imagine how shocked I was."

"But that dress she wore at the spring festival—that was a nice one."

"Right, right. I never imagined the girl who was always running around with the boys could be that cute."

"She said it was a gift from the archduke's daughter. She's really something."

Though their conversation became animated, the women never stopped working. *They can do it without even thinking,* Charlotte mused. She noticed her own hands had stopped, and frantically began to turn the spindle again.

For a while, she entranced herself in the work until Byaku appeared from the open doorway with a frown. "It's lunchtime."

○

Hannah's house was like a workshop, and she possessed a modest assortment of woodworking tools as well. Her late husband had bought the tools with money he slowly put away from his work as a lumberjack, and even now, Hannah made sure to keep them in pristine condition. Thus, they all retained a fine cutting edge.

Behind the house was a small annex, beneath which she would keep branches and wood scraps that weren't suitable for construction. These were her materials for woodworking. She would find time between cooking and working in the fields to fashion the wood into cutlery and tableware, which she'd give to her neighbors in Turnera or sell to peddlers.

Mit's eyes were brimming with curiosity as he paced back and forth in front of the entrance to the workshop. The built-in shelves were lined with various tools; atop the highest, there were carved dolls and bowls, while a half-finished plate still rested on the nearby workbench. Apart from those, she also had baskets made of tree bark and colanders woven from vines. In Mit's eyes, it was like a mountain of treasure.

"No playing with anything sharp. You'll hurt yourself," Hannah said, pouring hot water into her teapot. Mit had been reaching for a hatchet and hurriedly drew his hand back. "That one might be too heavy for you," Hannah added with a giggle.

"Heavy?" Mit cocked his head.

"Yeah, because you're supposed to swing that with one hand. Come here, have some tea."

Mit obediently toddled over to the table.

He'd eaten breakfast already, and after helping out with the field behind Belgrieve's house, he wandered the village on his own. For a while, he had felt guilty about drawing the ancient forest to him and had been fearful of everything. The villagers did all they could to be nice to him, and by the time Belgrieve had set off for his journey, Mit was able to live as he had before. Naturally, he missed all those who had gone, but he still had Graham, Charlotte, and Byaku as well. He felt lonely, but never like he was actually alone.

With that said, he did happen to be on his own today. It wasn't that everyone else was busy—the other small children had gathered at Belgrieve's house where Graham would look after them for their busy parents, and usually, Mit would play with them too. But not today—even he wanted time to himself occasionally.

Mit had spent time gazing out at the fields of spring-sown wheat and watched the sawmill at work until he had eventually found himself here at Hannah's house. Back before Duncan had left on his own journey, the adventurer had gone to Hannah's house

to get a cup made, and Mit had been with him at the time—but that had been a long time ago. When Mit had come today, he found Hannah at work preparing lunch for the lumberjacks, and she welcomed the boy with her usual vigor.

The windows and doors were left open, allowing the breeze to pass through with a rustling sound as the meager wood scraps littering the floor rattled faintly. Hannah adjusted the hand towel she had wrapped around her head. “What’s wrong? Is the cup really that interesting?”

“Yeah.”

Mit nodded, cradling the teacup in both hands. It was handmade, carved from wood. Mit stared at it closely without taking a single sip of tea.

“It’s just a wood cup,” Hannah said with a merry laugh.

“Did Hannah make it?”

“Hmm? Yeah, I did.”

“Can I... make it?”

Hannah looked pleasantly surprised. “Sure you can. I don’t mind teaching you if you agree to do what I say.”

“I want to learn. Teach me.”

Hannah glanced at the pot over the fire and then back at Mit. “It’s too early for lunch... Okay, I’ll show you a bit.”

“Yay. Thank you!”

“Heh heh, I like kids who know when to be grateful. Now come here.”

He was handed a dazzlingly sharp chisel, which he nervously clenched in his fist. Hannah brought him a stick only slightly thicker than his arm.

“Watch me for a bit. The hatchet’s probably too much for you to start with it.”

With that, Hannah began to shave away at the wood. She stripped the bark and created

a smooth surface. Her masterful motions were a joy to watch. After she had a flat plane, she drew on it with a fine bit of charcoal. It seemed to depict a cup when seen from above. Then, she placed it atop a shaving horse. With one press of a foot pedal, sturdy wood clamped down to hold the unfinished product in place. Hannah sat Mit down, then burst into laughter.

“Aha ha ha! Sorry, sorry. You can’t reach it yet.”

Mit was too small to step on the pedal. So Hannah sat at the shaving horse herself and let Mit sit on her lap. In front of the fixed wood, Mit held a chisel and mallet.

“Now hollow it out.”

As Hannah instructed, Mit touched the chisel blade against the inside of the circle she had drawn with charcoal.

“Yes, now use that to hit the back. Tap it, like this.”

Mit tapped the mallet against the back of the chisel. The blade sunk into the wood.

“Stronger! Tilt the blade a bit.”

Mit nervously strengthened his chisel hand and swung the mallet. He struggled to get his aim right.

“This is hard...”

“Ah ha ha... You’re not going to start out doing everything right. Now calm down. It’s dangerous if you twist your hands.”

Again and again, he struck the back of the chisel, and a reassuring tapping sound resonated through the room. At first, Mit had been unsure, but he was gradually grasping the fundamentals, and the sound of his falling hammer was becoming stronger. By now, it had begun to feel fun for him. His initial nervousness had faded, and now his mind was on how he should best angle the blade.

“Good, you’re getting better... Duncan was the same, you know. He hesitated at first, but he quickly got the hang of it.”

“Duncan too?” Mit paused, looking over his shoulder at Hannah.

She smiled. "That's right. When do you think he'll be back? We promised to make a tureen next time."

That sounds great, Mit thought. He couldn't let himself fall far behind. Turning back to the cup, he adjusted his grip on the chisel and mallet. For a while, he worked as though he was in a trance, and Hannah watched him amusedly. Then, a sizzling sound came from the fireplace.

"Hmm? Ah, that ain't good!"

Hannah's alarmed voice caused Mit to freeze up in surprise. The woman dashed straight for the fireplace, where the pot was furiously bubbling over the rim, dripping down the sides and into the fire below.

Mit could not continue without Hannah to hold down the wood. He stayed there, sitting on the shaving horse, watching Hannah frantically stirring the pot. He looked at the cup he had been working on. Surely Belgrieve and Ange would be shocked when they saw what he could do. Once he'd finished his own cup, he wanted to make one for everyone in the family.

It was then that Byaku entered through the open doorway with Charlotte behind him. "Lunchtime," Byaku announced with a sour face.

○

The summer sun shone down in full force, though not harshly enough to cause sunburns. There was no heat on the wind, and each time it swept across the grass, it soothed their sweaty skin.

Once breakfast was over and water had been sprinkled across the field in the back, both Charlotte and Mit took off on their own. Byaku cleaned the area around the fireplace, did the laundry, and invested a bit more work into the field. When it came to household chores, the boy who contained a demon within his being had been just as good, if not better than all the girls who used to occupy the crowded house. Perhaps he had always had a knack for it.

Though viewed as an eccentric in the eyes of his people, Graham was still an elf, and he had little desire to intervene in the workings of mother nature. This disinclination of his had only grown stronger with age; thus, working the field was not his strong suit.

Graham split wood near the end of the yard as he watched over the small children who had gathered at the house. The kids would help out with the fields and housework during the busier times, but once work had settled down, they would immerse themselves in their games. The other adults did not have the time to care for them, so the children often came to Graham. After all, under Graham's watchful eye, they could even head into the forests that their parents so sternly told them to keep out of.

A girl of about seven years of age tugged at Graham's clothes. "Grampa, are we going to the forest today?"

"Give me some time." Graham tied up the chopped bits of firewood, staring at the new residence that was nearing completion. When Angeline was still around, the children would sneak into that house every night to play board games and card games. Now that work had commenced on the building's interior, they could no longer play there all night. Instead, Charlotte and Mit would lie in bed and listen to Graham's tales of adventure before falling asleep.

For Graham, those moments imbued him with a strange sense of fulfillment. He had no wife or heirs, and apart from when he'd been asked to look after Marguerite, he rarely interacted with children. Most of his life consisted of battle. Even when he had returned to elven territory to retire, his time spent fighting in human lands came back to bite him, as his journeys were the cause for his brethren to hold him at arm's length.

Just like that, he was supposed to rot away in silence, yet now he was living in Turnera surrounded by children. *Fate works in mysterious ways*, Graham thought. Angeline and Belgrieve had changed his life in many respects, and perhaps he had changed Marguerite's as well. He had never imagined he would gain lifelong friends at his age.

Graham wondered how the sword he left with Belgrieve was faring. He had grown old, but his sword had not; it still hungered for new adventures. At those times when he remembered its absence on his back, it felt like he had forgotten a piece of himself. But perhaps that was precisely how the sword felt when he had retired from active duty.

He piled up the firewood, then gazed up at the position of the sun. There was still some time until noon, and though they couldn't venture too deeply into the woods, perhaps they could gather some tree vines for weaving. Graham had begun gathering his equipment when Byaku returned with a basket under one arm.

"What are you doing?"

“I thought I’d go to the forest... What about you?”

“If you go, then who’s going to prepare lunch?” Byaku replied with the same scowl as ever. The basket contained vegetable thinnings alongside some small summer produce.

“I see. Please look after the house.”

“Just be back by noon,” Byaku said as he went to the washing station to clean the vegetables.

Thus, Graham led the children outside the village. The kids enthusiastically waved around sticks as though they were swords all the while. They crossed the plains and reached the edge of the forest. Their arrival was heralded by the sound of the leafy boughs ruffling in the breeze, but the wind abated soon after entering.

The children immediately set to searching all over for whatever treasures they might find, be they strangely shaped sticks, leaves big enough to use as masks, pretty flowers, or tasty fruits. There were plenty of things to capture a child’s heart.

“Stay close to me.”

“Okay!” the kids energetically replied.

Graham couldn’t be negligent. As careful as they might try to be, it was in the nature of children to easily lose sight of their surroundings. He was watching the children in Belgrieve’s stead, and he wouldn’t be able to look the man in the eye should anything happen to one of them. Whenever Graham steeled himself like this, he couldn’t help but crack a smile. Back when he was an active adventurer, he had guarded nobles, and some who were even greater than that. Yet back then, he had not been this vigilant. These meandering children were far more troublesome to guard than any cocky noble.

In any case, Graham’s senses had been honed since the ancient forest’s attack. He wasn’t back to his prime, but he was certainly better than he had been until now. Even when his attention was elsewhere, he could immediately sense any fiends before they could come near the children. But that wasn’t all—when Graham elevated his ki, his very presence would act as a ward against evil. Thus, nothing dangerous even tried to approach.

The trees were all splendid in their own right, though they were shorter in some

places and absent altogether in others. In those otherwise bare patches, bushes and shrubbery thrived, and the undergrowth grew thickly. That was where akebia and noz vines could be found in tangles. The vines would be unraveled and collected, making sure not to harvest too much—they would bear fruit in the fall, and he didn't want to ruin the children's fun in the future.

Elves rarely cultivated fields, instead receiving the blessings of the forest. This went beyond just their food; their handmade tools, used on a daily basis, also came from this bounty. Any elf worth his salt could weave a basket.

They proceeded slowly with detours aplenty until they reached a point where the plains could no longer be seen. The ground began a slight incline that would have tired them if they intended to scale it.

“Grampa, are you tired?”

“Can we keep going?”

“Let's rest around here,” Graham decided after scanning their surroundings.

Green leaves scattered the summer sunlight from above, forming a mottled patchwork of shadows on the ground. The children, tired from frolicking about, sat on the ground or on stones and tree trunks. Their mouths still moved as busily as ever, though—this was a grand adventure to every little boy and girl there.

Graham took a seat as well and began to roll up the vines they had gathered, clearing away slender branches with his knife. Time seemed to have slowed to a crawl. The sounds of the swaying trees above formed a harmony as it mixed with the chatter of the children. He felt he could sit there forever.

But soon enough, it was time to turn back. The children were starting to look hungry, although they didn't seem completely satisfied with their outing. Nevertheless, some of them were more forthright about their empty stomachs.

Graham looked around and snapped a stalk from a krulberry bush. “It might not fill your stomach, but it will distract you for some time.”

The krulberry's stalk was too fibrous to eat, but chewing on it released a pleasantly sweet yet tart flavor. The children chewed on them as they followed Graham back home.

It felt like the return trip was far shorter than the way there, but once they had left the forest, the sun was farther in the sky than Graham had anticipated. *How strange*, he thought.

In the village square, they ran into Byaku, who was leading Mit and Charlotte.

“Ah, it’s grampa.”

“Did you go to the forest?”

“I did...” Graham looked at Byaku with a rather troubled expression.

Byaku stared at him, evidently disgruntled. “What did I tell you?”

“Sorry...”

○

Byaku could be quite fastidious, and he was noisy when it came to arrangements and agreements. It irritated him when meals were not on time and when work did not go as planned. He couldn’t stand it when things were not put back in their proper place, and he detested when used tableware was stacked without being cleaned. It was simply in his nature.

After Graham had departed with the children, Byaku washed the vegetables. The seedlings were growing rapidly, and they were beginning to bear fruit. New flavors were slowly making their way to the dining table.

Little by little, from the time he lived in Orphen until now, Byaku had begun to pick up housework. It had been a pain at first; before then, his life had been spent wandering with no permanent home, and he hadn’t even known how to clean or do laundry. However, once he had distanced himself from his bloody past, he grew accustomed to living in the same place every day, and once he was making his own meals, he simply couldn’t bear to cut corners. It was frustrating to have to learn from Belgrieve and even worse to learn from Angeline, but he had relented. The fact that Belgrieve was such a good teacher did not help his mood.

Not wanting to endure this tutelage any longer, Byaku took the basics he had learned and worked out the rest on his own through trial and error after that. To his surprise, it all came naturally to him, and now he could do all the housework to perfection.

Rather than sitting around, he found that doing something—anything—helped him calm down, and perhaps that played a large part. He was also a fussy person, and once he had grown accustomed to cleanliness, it would rub him the wrong way when dirt and messes crossed his line of sight.

He had given up on a normal life long ago—yet here he was, being so meticulous about every daily task. It was incredibly idiotic, and he knew it—but it wasn't a bad feeling. It wasn't bad at all, and yet here he was, refusing to accept it. Byaku would often scowl at himself.

Once the vegetables were washed, he wiped the sweat from his brow, which had been drawn forth by the heat of the steadily cresting sun.

"Tsk..." He idly clicked his tongue.

The washed vegetables were brought into the house. As the new annex was having its interior worked on, he brought them into the main residence, where he kindled a fire in the hearth and hung a pot of water over it. The vegetables were sliced to bite-size pieces before being added to the pot with some preserved meat. Then went in an assortment of herbs for flavor; the meat on its own would provide enough salt.

As the pot simmered, he crushed some boiled potatoes and mixed them with flour into a ball of dough. The dough was torn into small bits, which he would later parboil right before the meal.

Ever since Belgrieve left, Byaku had become the main chef. Charlotte and Mit would help out, but the two of them were unable to whip up an entire menu. Graham could cook, but he wasn't so particular about taste; his meals weren't bad, but they weren't that good either. In the first place, Graham had a somewhat detached sense about him. He showed peerless strength in battle, but he could be rather absentminded when it came to normal life. Byaku was not keen on letting him work unsupervised.

In any case, Byaku was the one mediating all the housework. It may have been by process of elimination, but he didn't dislike cooking. He wasn't used to it, so he didn't have a large repertoire, but he liked trying out new things, and he had grown considerably from where he started.

Having reached a good stopping point, Byaku plopped into a chair. The light poured in through the open window, and he could see the specks of dust drifting through the air.

It was hot out there, but the winds passing through would make it cooler wherever there was no direct sunlight.

Byaku stared at his hand, front to back. There was still a bit of soot on it. His fingertips were slightly wrinkled from the water. It was a hand once soaked in blood, but *this* was what it looked like now. He couldn't even laugh about it. Letting out a self-deprecating snort, he breathed in deeply and exhaled. He closed his eyes and allowed mana to circulate through his body.

With Graham and Kasim as his instructors, he had refined his meditation technique to a remarkable degree. The demon lurking in his soul was still trying to break out, but he was now fighting fewer battles against it, and his heart was more stable. He no longer had to connect his mind to the demon's, and it had been relatively quiet as of late.

He opened his eyes and manifested a three-dimensional magic circle. The sand-colored, flickering shape drifted slowly around him. His technique had improved from the time he had traveled with Charlotte. Whether he wanted to strengthen them or deploy more of them, he didn't have to rely on the demon's mana.

"Hmph." He stood up.

That old guy's journey would have been a lot easier if he took me along... This irritating thought crossed his mind. Byaku looked up at the sky. The sun was reaching its zenith; it was high time for lunch. However, Graham was still gone, and Charlotte and Mit hadn't returned either.

"What are they even doing?"

Once lunch was over, the tableware would have to be cleaned. Without a clean kitchen, he would be too distracted for afternoon work. Byaku was already a little irritated as he followed the traces of mana in town. Charlotte's mana was immense, while Mit's mana was of demonic nature—both were easy to locate.

Byaku stopped by Kerry's home and found looms clacking back and forth. Through the door, he could see Charlotte chatting with Rita while spinning yarn. He entered with a frown. "It's lunchtime."

"Oh, is it already that late?" The women stopped what they were doing and looked out the window.

"Oh, you're right. I never noticed the sun getting that high."

"Lunch, huh? Are you leaving, Char?"

"Yeah. I'll be back later."

After collecting Charlotte, his next stop was Hannah's house. The building was a distance away, but he could already hear a wooden tapping sound from here. Suddenly, that came to a stop. Once Byaku was near enough to peer through the doorway, he saw Hannah looking crestfallen before the fireplace and Mit sitting on a shaving horse in the back.

Byaku stepped through the door with a sour face. "Lunchtime."

"Lunch?" Hannah lifted her head. "Oh, Byaku... Right, it's already that time."

"Did it boil over?"

"Pretty much... Good grief, I'm lucky it didn't spill over too much."

There seemed to be enough left to satisfy the lumberjacks. Mit hopped off of the shaving horse and rushed up to Byaku.

"I made a cup."

"I see."

And so he led Mit out under the summer sky. The sun, shining down as brilliantly as ever, had gone just a little bit westward since last he saw it.

Byaku stared up at it in irritation before his gaze shifted to the two children. "Is gramps still in the forest?"

"Dunno..."

"I mean, we weren't with him..."

Byaku scratched his head in irritation. It would be a pain to search for them in the forest. An elf's mana was easy enough to track, but navigating the trees would be troublesome, and lunch would be delayed even more. Then there would be no telling

when he could clean up, and the afternoon work would never get done. Of course, there were plenty of other ways to go about it, but that degree of flexibility was something Byaku had yet to develop.

Thinking he would at least let the kids eat, Byaku turned towards the house. But as he passed through the village, he happened to run into Graham around the square.

“Ah, it’s grampa.”

“Did you go to the forest?”

“I did...” Graham looked at Byaku apologetically.

This only caused Byaku to furrow his brow. “What did I tell you?”

“Sorry...”

Graham looked around awkwardly. Byaku scoffed and resumed walking. Jogging to keep up, Charlotte tugged at his sleeve.

“But, Byaku, the sun’s still up there. You don’t have to be that angry.”

“That’s right, Bucky. Don’t bully grampa.”

“And we weren’t playing around. We were helping out.”

“Yeah. I made a cup.”

Charlotte blinked, confused. “You carved it? Did Hannah teach you?”

“Yeah. What about Char?”

“I fiddled with a loom! Also, some spinning. Rita’s really good.”

“Maybe I should try too... Hannah looked busy.”

“I don’t see why not. I’m sure everyone will welcome you. Now that that’s settled, let’s hurry and eat.”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

The two overtook Byaku and raced off. Then, recalling along the way, they stopped and turned. “Byaku, Graham, hurry!”

“Don’t be late.”

“You little...” Byaku scowled even harder. But not paying him the slightest regard, the two of them were off. Byaku folded his arms. “What’s so funny?”

“Heh heh... It’s nothing.” Graham rarely ever laughed, but something had gotten him chuckling now.

Each and every one of you... Byaku sighed. I'll have them carry a packed lunch tomorrow. That'll save me the trouble. I'm sure that's what Belgrieve would do—and suddenly, he twitched at the realization of what had just crossed his mind. He shook his head.

The leaves on every tree glistened brightly in the summer sun.

EXTRA

TAKE THE ELF!

The city of Orphen gleamed under the summer sun. It was the largest city in the empire's northern reaches, and it was as crowded and lively as ever.

I've come here again... Belgrieve felt a strange sensation come over him. However, he had to get used to it—after this, he was headed to somewhere even farther beyond his wildest dreams. With this in mind, perhaps Orphen was actually the place to compose himself.

"I'm glad I got to see you again so soon," Lionel said with a smile, holding out a cup of tea.

After arriving in Orphen, Belgrieve's party first stopped by the guild. They only intended to exchange a few formalities, but they were let into the back office and seated across from the guild master. And before that, they had received a warm welcome in Bordeaux.

We're friends, so I don't really second-guess it, but from a normal person's perspective, we're really getting special treatment from lords and guild masters, Belgrieve realized. He didn't know whether to feel happy or humbled about that.

"We found a lead faster than expected... Thank you. Aren't you busy, Mr. Leo?"

"I'm busy, for what it's worth—but it only makes sense for me to attend to our guild's precious guests. Or rather, please let me attend to you. Otherwise..."

"Dad, the guild master is looking for an excuse to rest."

"Ha ha! You saw right through me, Ms. Ange." Lionel scratched his head.

Kasim teased, "Working too hard will ruin you. Take a page out of my book and let loose a bit."

"Oh, I'd love to imitate you, but they get angry at me when I do," Lionel said, his

shoulders dropping.

Anessa and Miriam giggled. Belgrieve found himself breaking into a smile as he sipped his tea.

“Still, I feel a bit bad for borrowing so many of your capable adventurers...”

“Don’t be. I mean, there’s certainly nothing wrong with having Ms. Ange around, but we can handle our current workload... And if I’m being honest, it feels more like I was the one holding her down here.”

“That’s right, dad... It’s pathetic for an entire guild to be reliant on one party.”

“That stings...” Lionel recoiled a bit.

After scoffing at his antics, Angeline took a look around the office, which prompted Belgrieve to do the same. The documents looked more organized than the last time he had stopped by.

These musings were suddenly interrupted by the office door bursting open and someone racing in to swiftly pounce upon Angeline.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing, leaving me behind?!”

“Whoa there...” Angeline stood and caught the figure shooting towards her with a smile. “Maggie, have you been well?”

Marguerite smiled from ear to ear as she pinched Angeline’s round cheeks. “Good as can be! I’m already D-Rank! A little more to C! Ange, if you’re in Orphen, forget about old Lionel. Come see me first!”

“Hmmm... You’re right. Dad, we should have seen Maggie first.”

Lionel looked upon their reunion in misery. Without a hint of tact, Marguerite forcefully invited herself onto the sofa. Anessa cried out as she wiggled her way in.

“It’s already cramped. Don’t wedge yourself in!”

“Oh, shut it. Don’t make me feel left out. But what’s with you all suddenly showing up like this? You’ve even got Bell with you.”

"Yes, well the thing is..."

They explained the purpose of their journey and their planned route. However, the more the story went on, the more Marguerite's face seemed to light up, and Belgrieve had a terrible premonition. As expected, the moment the story was over, she shot to her feet and declared, "I'm going too!"

I knew it... Belgrieve placed a hand on his brow.

Angeline laughed at her cockily. "You want to go? A mere D-Rank?"

"Ah, now you've said it! I'm gonna have to teach you a lesson!"

Seeing Marguerite's temper boil over had Anessa and Miriam in a fit of giggling.

"But Maggie's got the skill, despite her rank. Isn't it fine, Mr. Bell?"

"That's right. And it'll liven up the trip."

This is bad, Belgrieve thought, scratching his cheek. The girls were all for it, and Kasim was grinning—he knew he didn't have much room to put his foot down. It wasn't like he had any reason to refuse her request, but he felt like he'd be doing a disservice to Graham. The Earth Navel was a den of powerful fiends, and he thought it might be irresponsible to take her along. With that said, Marguerite was stronger than Belgrieve himself, so perhaps his worries were unfounded.

The more he silently ruminated, the more impatient Marguerite became. She jumped up again, pinning his arms from behind.

"That does it, Bell! I'm going even if you tell me not to! Prepare yourself!"

"Gah! H-Hey, Maggie, stop!"

Maggie was mercilessly squeezing his neck, and the two grappled until Angeline jumped onto her father with puffed-out cheeks.

"Not fair. Why only Maggie...?"

"Huh? Not fair? What was—h-hey, stop! That hurts!"

Belgrieve was being squeezed hard from both front and back, and Kasim was cackling and clapping his hands together.

“Look at you, Mr. Popular!”

“Um... So I take it Ms. Maggie is going along? She’s low-ranking, so it shouldn’t require much paperwork, but there are still a few forms to fill...”

“Yeah, go right ahead. She’d come along even if we turned her down, that tomboy.”

“Oy, Kasim! Don’t just make that decision on your—grah!”

He was locked in a terrible position and had no way to get out of it. He quite literally could not lift a finger against the two roughhousing women. Anessa and Miriam merely looked on in laughter. Lionel shrugged and got up to gather some papers from the shelf.

It went without saying that Marguerite tagged along.

AFTERWORD

My close friend, a cameraman, takes his family to Thailand every winter to escape the colder days, and spends a whole month kicking back in relative warmth. The goods are cheaper in Thailand, and the food is tasty too. I hear he has a great time.

I took a page out of his book and decided to visit Turnera. Turnera's a nice place to spend the summer: the air is crisp and cool, and the greenery is beautiful. Sure, it may be winter where I come from, but Belgrieve just set off on his journey, so it's early summer in Turnera—surely. And since I'm writing from Turnera, I'm definitely going to make some good headway on my manuscript. Although it's so comfortable, I keep falling asleep and end up not making any progress at all. How troublesome.

Now then, volume 7.

Seven is apparently supposed to be a lucky number. I don't know if that makes this volume lucky or what, but in any case, we reached seven volumes of publication. I never thought I'd get this far—the world truly works in mysterious ways. If you're reading volume 7, I'd have to imagine you've read all the previous volumes too. I mean, only an incredibly superstitious person would have started from volume 7, and I can't imagine there are too many of them out there. For the time being, I'm going to just assume you read the other volumes while writing this afterword.

With that said, I can't guarantee there are no readers who read all the way up to volume 7, yet decided to read the afterword first—so I'm going to refrain from talking about what happens in this book. But if you take that away from me, well... I hardly had anything to write here in the first place. It is quite troublesome, believe me.

I'm the kind of person who thinks afterwords are wholly unnecessary. Troublingly enough, when I get to writing them myself, I find myself terribly curious about what other people put in them. And that's how I became the sort of reader who reads the afterword first. I became what I set out to destroy. My life is a mess.

Regardless, the other authors all write wonderful afterwords. They skillfully weave in their thanks towards everyone concerned along with snippets of what happens in the work. I really must tip my hat to them.

Don't get me wrong. I believe some heartfelt thanks are in order for Master toi8 who does the illustrations, and Urushibara-sensei who does the manga, and editor M-san, and of course all the readers who stuck with me for this long. It's only good manners. However, when the work has gone on for seven volumes and you put your thanks in every new book, it kinda feels like you're making an appeal: "Look at me, everyone! See how grateful I am!" It feels quite unsettling to me.

I know I shouldn't worry about it. I should just put down my sincere gratitude, but I've always been something of a cynic. Whenever those thoughts pop up, I shove them into a corner of my brain. When you really get down to it, I'm not even worthy enough to express this gratitude. I mean, Master toi8's illustrations are wonderful, and Urushibara-sensei's manga is interesting. Isn't that why you're here?

If you'll allow me to make an excuse, it's not that I'm ungrateful. But that's precisely why lining up excessive acknowledgments makes me feel like I'm putting on a false front. It's a needless concern, I know. So I want to sincerely thank you here—to everyone concerned, and all you readers out there, thank you.

Ouch. That felt really brazen when I put it down. I think it's because of all that unnecessary preface. The more I put down my sincere feelings, the more I begin to doubt them. Writing is truly difficult.

Putting all that aside, how far will Belgrieve go after setting off from Turnera? And how far will he go beyond *there*? How about you read and see for yourself?

The story takes another turn. I don't know if the rest will reach you all in print format, but it will if it sells. Here's hoping we meet again in the afterword of volume 8.

MOJIKAKIYA, January 2020

I can finally
draw this cool
old guy...

Tois

2020



BONUS SHORT STORY

THE PEOPLE OF THE PLAINS

Though the plains looked like a long, flat stretch of land from afar, a closer look would reveal hillocks, gullies, and small rivers that flowed across its surface. Several muffin-shaped tents had been erected alongside one such brook.

"We'll let the sheep graze here for a while. But there are wolves in these parts, so we'll return them to the pen at night. That is a job for the younger ones," said an old man adorned with a robe of many-colored threads. He pointed towards the summer grass, which glistened in the light of the sun that was about to crest the towering mountain range to the west, then to the sheep, and finally, the dogs and horse riders herding them.

This kind of reminds me of home, Belgrieve thought.

In the midst of their southward journey, Belgrieve's party had come across a small nomad encampment. It was something like a settlement, but it comprised only close relatives, an encampment of a single traveling family. It was less a town or village than it was one extended household.

Sunset was approaching, so Belgrieve's party had asked if they could borrow a room for the night. The nomads seemed eager to mingle with travelers and offered them a warm welcome.

By the time the sheep were returned to their pen, the sun had hidden itself beyond the mountains, and the air was suddenly cold enough that they had to wear coats. Around an outdoor bonfire, they were offered roasted meat and alcohol made from fermented mare's milk. Belgrieve brought forth the sweets and preserved foods they had bought in Yobem and Mansa. Drinks were shared in bowls as they sat back and entertained one another with stories.

"We raise sheep in my homeland, but we've never used horses."

"Oh? Then what do you do?"

"We have dogs all the same, but our shepherds chase them on foot."

"And they catch up to the sheep like that?"

"They do. They know the ups and downs of the hills, so they just have to keep a good eye on the sheep."

"That's quite something. But can you chase them with that leg?"

"You'd be surprised. It just takes a little getting used to." Belgrieve chuckled as he slapped a hand against his peg leg.

Meanwhile, Kasim spoke with a few of the young men who seemed interested in magic, while the girls chatted with the other youths off on their own.

As was usually the case for Tyldes nomads, it seemed that all the boys who herded sheep on horseback could also handle a bow. They were now competing among themselves in target shooting. Angeline observed their contest while a young nomad girl played with her hair. The nomad women had a habit of weaving threads of all colors into their long manes. The patterns were meant to ward off evil and bring luck, though it was mostly a fashion statement for the younger girls. Such chances didn't come along often, so Angeline let them do her hair as well. Miriam and Marguerite looked on with amused looks on their faces.

"That's interesting stuff. And cute."

"Hey, not bad. How about you do me too?"

"Hee hee, of course." The nomad girl giggled. "I'll do it for all of you once she's done." She was a young woman of about Angeline's age with a dark tan and a very gentle look to her.

With a loud swishing noise, an arrow pierced a target leaning against a tree. A nomad boy puffed out his chest with pride. He looked to be about twelve or thirteen years old, right at the peak of his mischievous phase.

"How's that? Smack-dab in the center."

"Good going," Anessa said, clapping her hands.

"Heh heh, don't you think? Even my older brothers don't hit the center too often. You look like an archer, missy, but you can't beat me."

The boys on the sideline were watching intently to see how things would pan out. After cackling, Anessa lifted her bow, took aim, and let loose. Her shot tore straight through the boy's arrow, landing in exactly the same spot.

"What?!" The boy's eyes widened while his brothers cheered Anessa on.

Anessa patted the boy on the shoulder, an impish smile on her face. "Your turn."

"I... I'll do it, just you watch!" The boy anxiously drew his bow, but he seemed to be taking an awfully long time to aim. It didn't seem he would fire at all.

"You're being childish, Anne," Angeline chortled.

"Am I, now? But the kid's got some growing to do. I think that's just what he needs now... Hmm, that suits you pretty well. You've gotten a bit cuter."

On top of the threads woven into her hair, Angeline had also donned the clothes the nomads wore. Grinning, she spun around to show off her new look.

Eventually, someone brought out an instrument, and a lively performance began. They used a different scale from the one used in the empire, but it was easy enough to dance to their plucky rhythm. Their inhibitions lowered by the milk-wine they had drunk, Angeline and the other girls, now in their own nomadic dresses, were soon twirling with the youths.

As Belgrieve and the adult nomads laughed at the spectacle, a muscular, dignified-looking man approached him—evidently their patriarch. "What lovely girls you have. And good with the bow too... How about it? Would you let her marry my eldest? I'm sure they'll be a wonderful couple."

"I appreciate the offer, but that's something they'll have to decide for themselves."

"Hmm, I see. He's a hardworking boy..."

"I can tell just by looking at him. You have been blessed with a fine heir."

The man laughed merrily and held out a pot of the milk-wine. "You have a silver-

tongue indeed. Drink up, have your fill."

"If you insist."

The moon rose through the clear sky, and the night gradually drew on.



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My Daughter Left the Nest and Returned an S-Rank Adventurer: Volume 7
by MOJIKAKIYA

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