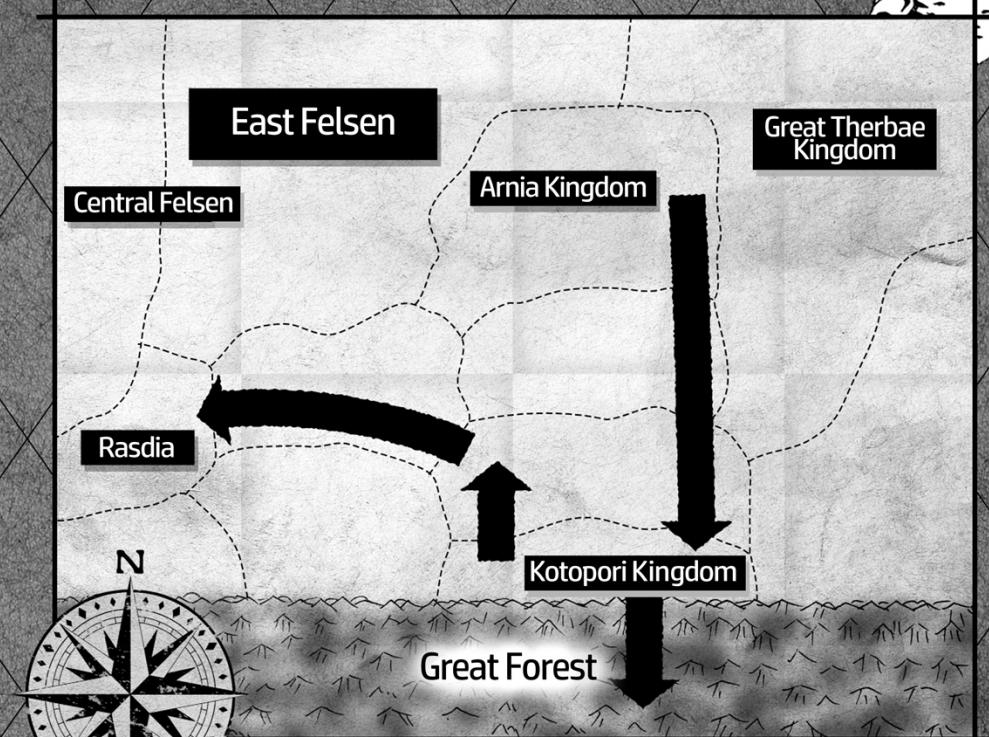




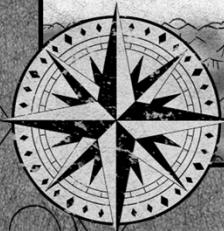
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# Tracking Moon Blossom's Progress



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Map design: Kimura Design Lab

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# **Extra Episode One: Dear Great Hero Axel Ehrnrooth, I have a report regarding mercenary group Moon Blossom.**

This is Iris, and it's now the day after Asura killed Pietro. Moon Blossom is apparently going to take the day off, so I decided to follow them and see how they spend their time.

Let's start with Lumia Canarre, their vice captain. She's been relaxing in her room at the inn, drinking tea and reading. She's so laid-back that it reminds me of a cat napping in the sun. Since it doesn't look like she plans on leaving, I'm going to go check out the other members!

By the way, I'm writing this at the same time I'm watching them!

I went to Marx's room and saw him doing some strength training. He's pretty buff now, but I believe that in the future, he'll become as super-duper macho as you, Sir Axel! After observing him a little more, I saw him start practicing his magic. Marx is really studious! But since it doesn't look like he'll do anything else, I'm moving on.

I entered Jyrki's room and saw him sleeping. He's really handsome, and he's blond just like me. He often checks up on me, so I think he's the nicest person in Moon Blossom! But I can't get over that he treats me like I'm a child! Anyway, I'm moving on.

I entered Iina's room and she said, "Here comes the idiot." I got really angry and we started arguing. Iina's terrible. She said a lot of mean things and made a lot of lewd comments about me, and made me want to cry, so I left her room.

Reko and Salume aren't in their rooms. I looked around for them and saw the two of them in Asura's room. But Asura isn't inside. Reko looks really happy. He's saying something about "Boss's smell" and is lying on Asura's bed. Salume said hi to me. Salume's such a sweetheart. I wonder why she's in Moon Blossom. How bizarre! But they're not doing anything

else, so I'm gonna leave.

It's night now. All of the Moon Blossom members went to the pub, and they're drinking it up. They even called for courtesans!!!

Even though Asura's a girl, she seems to like them a lot. She's been acting all lovey-dovey with a courtesan, and Lumia looks really mad! After they partied it up, they went their own ways. By the way, the food was really yummy!

And that concludes Moon Blossom's day off!

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This is Iris, and it's the day after Moon Blossom's little pub party. Today's the day that Asura and Lumia get their punishment. It's for how Asura lost control while they were on a mission, and how Lumia disobeyed orders. I wondered what they were going to do, then I saw Asura and Lumia dress up in maid costumes, complete with an apron over their dresses. They kind of looked like the maids at home.

Apparently, for today only, Asura and Lumia will act as the group's servants. I don't know whether to call it "light" or "wholesome," but it's nothing like the extreme punishment I imagined. Considering who we're talking about here, I thought that they would punch the two until they were covered in blood so I'm pretty relieved.

Er, wait a second, they're not treating them like servants at all!!!!!!!!!!

The group suddenly ordered the two to prostrate themselves on the ground and now, everyone's stepping on their heads! They're apologizing nonstop! Or, I should say, they're being forced to apologize nonstop.

Apparently, this is Jyrki's idea! I have no idea why they're wearing maid costumes! Lumia looked really humiliated, but Asura didn't look bothered at all.

After they finished kicking them, it was time for Marx's idea. The two of them are doing strength training. Marx is forcing them to do so, and they're still in their maid costumes! They're covered in sweat and even though they look ready to collapse, Marx isn't letting them off the hook!

Not only that, but he's forcing Lumia to repeat, "My muscles get sore way after a workout. My muscles get sore way after a workout." It looks like this is super embarrassing for her. Her expression is terrifying.

As for Asura, Marx is making her say, “I love strength training so much I’d even die for it. I love strength training.” Asura doesn’t look like she likes strength training at all!

It was only after they both collapsed to the floor that Marx finally gave them the all clear. But now it’s Iina’s turn. Iina’s sitting in a chair with her legs stretched out, and she’s ordering them, “Lick...”

If I had to describe Lumia’s face when Iina said that, I’d say it looked like that of a Demon Lord!

I’m pretty surprised that Asura started licking Iina’s foot as if it’s normal for her to do so. I didn’t expect anything less from their leader! It feels like she’s assertively accepting her punishment! She looks kind of like a puppy when she’s licking Iina’s foot, and it’s a little cute.

Lumia started licking too, making a face like it’s the end of the world. When he saw that, Jyrki said, “Vice Cap’n, you’re so hot, I can’t even watch this anymore. You’re all sweaty and you’re licking with your tongue and...” After he said that, he kind of leaned forward. I wonder why he can’t stand up straight?

“I wonder if I can withstand this temptation...” Marx said, looking like he’s doing his best to hold something back. But I have no idea what the problem could be.

“How about me?” Asura asked.

“You do nothin’ for me, Boss,” Jyrki said.

“I don’t feel anything at all,” Marx said.

Iina made them lick her feet for a very long time. She looked very happy!

“My feet are gonna get wrinkly...so you can stop now...”

It looks like she’s finally forgiven them. Next is Salume’s turn.

“I’m sure it’s embarrassing, but please take off your clothes.”

As soon as Salume said that, the two of them immediately started to strip. AHHH!!! AHHHHHH!!! AAAAHHHH!!! Why didn’t the two of them even hesitate?! Even Salume looks surprised!

“We undergo torture resistance training naked, so it doesn’t matter at this point,” Asura said. “This actually feels great, since we can finally take off those sweaty clothes.”

“I agree. I’m already used to being naked,” Lumia said.

“I’m so used to starin’ at your naked bodies that it actually calmed me

down!” Jyrki exclaimed.

“Same here. Salume, this is hardly a punishment at all. Don’t you have anything else?” Marx asked.

“Huh? What? Oh dear, I didn’t think of a second one.”

“Then, let’s skip Salume and go to me,” Reko said. “Ah, sorry. I got so turned on by Boss’s sweaty, naked body that I forgot what I came up with.” Reko couldn’t seem to stop staring at Asura.

“You’re so stupid...” Iina muttered.

“Hmm. It was a pretty lukewarm punishment,” Asura said.

“No, it wasn’t. I can’t take any more of this. Can you all forgive me? Please?” Lumia clasped her hands before her chest and looked at us with tears in her eyes.

Oh my goodness, my heart skipped a beat! I’d forgive her! I’d definitely forgive her!

“C’mon, let’s let the vice cap’n off the hook. She didn’t cause any real harm, and Boss was more at fault.”

“Oh, yes, we don’t need to punish the vice captain anymore. I agree that Boss isn’t done with her punishment yet, though.”

“You guys are all idiots...” Iina sighed.

Personally, I can understand how Jyrki and Marx feel.

“Hmm. Well, this has been a terribly humiliating experience for Lumia, so that’s fair. Lumia, you’re done. Now, the problem here is me. To tell the truth, I don’t feel remotely bad about what I did, even if the strength training was exhausting.”

She just came out and admitted that she hasn’t been repenting at all!

Salume handed Lumia a towel and Lumia is wiping off her sweat with it. Then, she started to put on her clothes.

“What should we do?” Jyrki asked Marx.

“Hmm...”

“Boss won’t cry...no matter what we do... This is boring...”

“Sh-Should we try tickling her?”

After Salume’s suggestion, everyone made a face like “Oh, I didn’t think of that!”

Then, everyone started tickling Asura. I joined in. Asura began to cry. Granted, it was from laughing too much.

“I thought I’d die while laughing... I see, this truly was a hellish

experience. Not even I could deal with that.”

After we finished, Asura nodded with a really impressed look on her face!

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“I did order her to keep an eye on Moon Blossom... But is she an idiot?!” Axel screamed after he finished reading Iris’s letter.

“Calm down, Axel. Iris may have unparalleled talent, but she’s a little weak in the head, isn’t she?” said a woman sitting across from Axel.

“Elna, you really don’t mince your words, huh?”

“Hee hee. That’s one of my virtues, isn’t it?” Elna Heikkila giggled.

She was a forty-two-year-old woman with her long cream-colored hair tied in a low ponytail. There was a gentle expression on her face, and her clothes were neat and tidy. It wouldn’t be wrong to describe her appearance as one of a noble lady.

“I guess...”

Affixed upon Axel’s left arm was an artificial hand made of steel. Since the prosthetic constantly had its fist clenched, he could punch someone with it if he wished.

“Now then, Axel, has there been any progress? I haven’t come up with anything on my end!” Elna sighed.

In between Axel and Elna, there was a small round table. And upon that table, they’d placed the map of Arnia Kingdom and its surrounding areas.

“Same here. Truthfully, we’re stuck.”

“We’re neeever going to find Matty’s murderer.” Elna shook her head. She was East Felsen’s other Great Hero.

“We don’t even know which direction the arrows flew from,” Axel said frustratedly. “Just two arrows. Can you imagine that? Killin’ Matias with nothing more than two arrows? Do you think *you* could pull that off, Miss Demonslaying Huntress?”

Elna used her archery skills to become a hero, and it was through her prowess with a bow that she’d been promoted to a Great Hero. Prior to her accomplishments, archers had been viewed with disdain and mocked as “cowards.” But Elna changed the general perception. Now, everyone had archers in their armies.

“If we’re talking about Matty, then no, that’s impossible. If it was a youth who only recently became a hero, then perhaps.”

“Someone managed to turn that impossible into reality. And I can’t even find them to get them to pay for it.”

“Plus, we can’t come up with any countermeasures against assassinations without knowing how it was done.”

“Asura told us to hide ourselves in a sturdy underground room. Tsk, she doesn’t get that we heroes have our own lives to lead.”

“Yup. Heroes are humans too, after all. An arrow through the head is more than enough to kill us. If it was an arrow that not even Matty could detect, then there’s nothing that he could have done. I’m sure that it’d be possible to kill off the rest of us with the same tactic!”

“That’s exactly the issue. What kind of arrow could it have been that Matias couldn’t detect it?”

“Now, this is just my hypothesis, but...” Elna looked down at the map and pointed at the forest drawn upon it. “If the archer was here, then it’d be impossible for anyone to see or detect them.”

“Stop joking around, Elna. Do you realize how far away that is? No one can aim for Matias’s head from that distance. It wouldn’t even reach him.”

“What about with magic?”

“Magic?”

“That’s right. Perhaps the archer used some spell we don’t know about. Didn’t you say that the mercenaries of Moon Blossom use magic? I hear they call themselves ‘soldier-mages.’”

“I know that too, but they’re not behind it. You haven’t met Asura, so you probably still have your doubts, but she’s seriously the type who would go around bragging about it if she’d done Matias in.”

“Are you suuure that she wasn’t just tricking you?”

“Positive. I was seriously freaked out by her. Can you believe that? Intimidated by a thirteen-year-old girl. She’s a terrifying brat. She truly thinks it’d be fine to have an all-out war against the heroes. So she wouldn’t have hidden it if she killed him.”

Axel had already removed Moon Blossom from the list of suspects. However, they were still a dangerous existence, so he continued to monitor their activities.

“Hmm... Then, do you think the culprit was a peak-tier monster?”

“I’d prefer that. It’s better than being killed by a human.”

“But if the culprit *was* a peak-tier monster, we’d neeever be able to find them!” Elna sighed with a shake of her head.

“It’s our complete and utter defeat.”

“Yup, it sure is. If the culprit was a human, then I truly, from the bottom of my heart, fear them.”

“Yeah. It’s the perfect crime. I don’t wanna admit it, but they’re the type of genius who’s born every few hundred years. That’s only if they were acting alone, though.”

“A genius...you say? I still suspect Asura, to be honest.”

“She’s a scary brat, but I wouldn’t call her anything more than that. She was just fearsome. She smiles like a Demon Lord does.”

“Oh, reaaaally? I hear that they use a basic combat tactic called ‘fire and maneuver,’ but its description sounds like something I’ve been utilizing my whole career. If that was something a thirteen-year-old girl conceived and implemented on her own, I think it’s accurate to describe her as a ‘genius.’”

“I don’t get what you’re talking about, except that you consider yourself a genius.”

“Hee hee, that’s because you fully specialize in combat, Axel,” Elna laughed. “Think about it. Asura is using magic, which we all looked down on, on the battlefield. The only spell that could’ve ever been considered ‘strong’ was Jeanne’s Divine Retribution.”

When Jeanne was in the prime of her power, magic briefly became popular. However, everyone reached the same conclusion: *Jeanne* was special, not magic. After that, magic returned to the bottom of the hierarchy.

“I changed my view on magic. How could I not, when it kicked my ass like this?” Axel said, raising his arm.

“Twenty years from now, wars will be fought with soldier-mages. And I suppose that half of the heroes will be warrior-mages?”

“Are you saying that Moon Blossom will change the world?”

“That’s right. If they continue to achieve victories on the battlefield, then it’s inevitable. It’s just like what happened with archers.”

“Then she’s truly a terrifying little brat. Some kid like her, change the world?” Axel shrugged his shoulders and huffed a soft laugh.

“And that’s why she should be a suspect. We should *always* suspect her, Axel. Asura is a genius, I’m sure of it. She can come up with angles we

would never even begin to think of.”

“Even so...I don’t believe she was the one who killed Matias. Why don’t you try meeting her yourself?”

“Yes, I will. It just so happens that I have a job I’d like to hire them for. I can also use the chance to train Iris.”

“What’s the request?”

“I want them to investigate the Great Forest in the south. To be more precise, I want them to protect the surveyor.”

“Hey, are you serious, Elna?” Axel glared at her. “The Great Forest is too early—*way* too early—for Iris. Do you plan on letting a candidate for your replacement die?”

In the south of Felsenmark, there was a vast forest. However, no one knew what was beyond its borders. No one had ever entered it and reached the other side.

“This is technically a job for Moon Blossom! It’d be convenient if Iris can gain some more combat experience on the side...is how I feel about it.”

“I-If it’s an investigation, then that means you want them to go into uncharted territory, right? Powerful monsters might appear. I’m sure Moon Blossom will be fine, but there’ll be trouble if they’re up against a large number. Another hero should accompany them.”

The majority of monsters came from the Great Forest, so there was a high chance that an unprecedented threat lurked among the darkness. During investigations that required journeying to unmapped areas of the Great Forest, more than two heroes were assigned to act as guards. Depending on the situation, a Great Hero would go with them. That was how it had always been.

“Huuuh? It’s fiiine. If we’re only looking at combat strength, then isn’t Iris on your level, Axel? And Moon Blossom will be with her! They’ll make up for her inexperience. If Iris ends up dying alongside them, then that simply means she’s got rotten luck.”

“You... Whose luck are you testing? Iris’s? Or Moon Blossom’s?”

“I’m testing both, Axel. I believe that Iris will become a Great Hero who’ll make her mark on history. In terms of raw talent alone, she’s better than even Jeanne was. All that’s left is whether or not she’s got fortune on her side. Am I wrooong?”

“Tsk... Fine.” Axel, too, had high expectations for Iris.

“As soon as Iris matures, I’ll give her my position as the Great Hero and then I can finally retire,” Elna said cheerily.

“Lemme retire first. My body’s already falling apart thanks to all the battles I’ve been through. I’m nothing like what I was in my prime. I don’t even think I’m worthy of my title at this point.” Axel had been planning to give his position to Matias at the end of the year.

“All I can say to that is good luck finding a replacement for Matty. Besides, it’ll take about five years for Iris to mature! In any case, I sure would like to retire before I’m fifty.”

“At this point in time, none of the heroes in East Felsen are on Matias’s level. The closest one would probably be Milka Ramstead of the Azure Skies.”

It was a given that even among the heroes, there was a ranking based on their strength. And when it came to choosing who would be a Great Hero, one had to carefully consider the hero’s personality and aspirations. At least that was Axel’s opinion on the matter.

“Milka’s real handsome, so that sounds good,” Elna said with a smile. “My personal recommendation is to have Asura Lyona become a hero.”

“Don’t joke about that, Elna. She’s the type who would only take advantage of her privileges and neglect all of her duties.”

“Be that as it may, I believe that her natural talent would be useful in defeating Demon Lords!”

“You’ve always been the type to look at things from a different angle than warriors. I’d say you’re more similar to those Moon Blossom folks.”

“Well, I *did* defeat alllll the people who mocked archers, didn’t I?” Elna chuckled. Though she exuded a calm atmosphere now, Elna had been the aggressive type prior to becoming a Great Hero. “Well, in any case, Axel, if Asura really is as scary as you say, then she’s the type who’s more useful on our side. I’ll ask her if she’s interested in participating in the next Hero Selection Exam, okaaay?”

“I highly doubt she’ll be...” Axel sighed. It was impossible for him to imagine Asura as a hero.

## **Extra Episode Two: Me fetish, the new kink! But I'm the fetish and not the violence I dole out?**

The mercenary group, Moon Blossom, booked the military police's exterior training ground for a day to practice their magic.

"My attack spell, Mines, can only make a maximum of seven petals at once. I'm still unclear on whether this is because of my weakness, or simply the limit of the spell. I've been working on creating the eighth petal, but it hasn't been going well," Asura said, sounding like she was having the time of her life.

Reko and Salume were sitting in front of Asura, who was standing. Though the two were concentrating in order to feel the flow of MP, they were still paying attention to what Asura was saying.

"I'm able to cast two spells at once, but for some reason, I can't simultaneously cast two instances of Mines. If I could do that, I'd be able to create fourteen bombs. However, in this case, it's either due to my lack of talent, or because I'm still too weak. This is because Jeanne could cast the same attack spell thrice at the same time."

Since Reko and Salume had undergone close-quarters combat training the entire morning, they were covered in little wounds and looked absolutely filthy.

"For starters, no one's ever fully mastered magic, so the upper limits of it are still unclear. At this point, we consider the pinnacle to be obtaining a Fixed Element. Honestly though, I wouldn't be surprised if there's something more powerful than that. Speaking as a romantic, I'd *love* for there to be one."

The three of them had already eaten their lunch and taken a break. Now it was time for their afternoon training. The other members of Moon Blossom had spent their morning working on their teamwork, and all of

them with the exception of Lumia had moved on to practicing their individual magic. The only way to improve your magic was to use it frequently, gain more experience with it, and increase your MP. Then, one day, you'd awaken to your Fixed Element.

"In regards to magic's properties, I sometimes wonder if there really are only four elements. Maybe 'system' is a better word than 'properties.' My personal training has been to come up with a new system, and it's still pretty rough. But I've noticed some improvements, so I feel like I can establish something pretty soon."

Asura was always trying to test the possibilities of magic.

"What's wrong, Iris? This can't be all you've got!"

Meanwhile, Lumia was training Iris on her swordsmanship. More precisely, Iris had been swinging her sword by herself all morning and Lumia suggested training together with, "It'd be better with a partner, right?"

No matter how Lumia treated Iris in the past, she was the most fired up when it came to teaching her. Asura suspected that the idea of a fifteen-year-old hero reminded Lumia of Jeanne. The two of them were facing off against each other with wooden practice swords, but it was a freestyle spar without any particular rules.

"Um, Boss, may I ask a question?"

"Go ahead, Salume."

"Is MP different from fighting spirit?"

"They originate from the same thing."

"Um, Iina said that fighting spirit has bad compatibility with magic. But after seeing Miss Iris, I thought it looks like a pretty effective ability..."

Salume turned her gaze to Iris and Lumia. Since Iris activated her fighting spirit in response to how badly her match with Lumia was going, Salume must've thought of the question then.

"You idiot. What do you think you're doing, spamming fighting spirit on the regular? Only use it in emergencies." As she said that, Lumia released her own fighting spirit.

She'd had no choice but to do so in response to Iris's. Or rather, it was because she didn't want to lose to Iris yet. That was Asura's read on the situation, anyway.

"You're strong, but inexperienced," Lumia continued. "Even without his

fighting spirit, Matias was stronger than me. But that's how it should be. It wouldn't do if a hero needed to unleash their fighting spirit against a mere civilian, right?"

In the past, Lumia was a warrior-mage, so it was quite the outlier for her to use fighting spirit. Iris looked surprised that she could wield it.

"Salume, when you train with fighting spirit, you use your full strength. There's nothing to improve, so you cannot grow any stronger. Do you understand?"

"Sort of. But it looks useful in a normal battle."

"Are you asking why *we* don't use fighting spirit?"

"Yes. I was curious about it."

"Then, let me explain."

Lumia slammed her sword against Iris's abdomen. If this had been a real battle, then Iris would've been killed. The shock at seeing Lumia's fighting spirit had left Iris open. Her lack of experience really *was* a major problem for her. The very idea that her opponent might be able to wield fighting spirit was something that had never even occurred to her.

"If I may be blunt, fighting spirit is the shittiest thing in the world," Asura said. "First off, it eats up your MP, so it can't last for very long. Yet all it does is let you use your original full strength. Of course, since you're using your MP, you can extend the duration the more you use it. At the end of the day, it all comes down to the user. However, it's much better to self-adjust on the regular so that you can be as close to your best condition as possible on your own."

Iris rolled on the ground, curled up against the pain in her stomach. Her low threshold for pain was also a major problem. Asura wondered if she should have her undergo torture resistance training.

"Secondly," she continued, "when you're using fighting spirit, you can't use magic. If you're going to use something like fighting spirit in battle, you might as well learn magic instead. A soldier-mage who can't cast spells isn't even funny as a joke."

Lumia stared down at Iris and shook her head disappointedly. Iris was truly strong, but there were still plenty of hurdles for her to overcome.

"Thirdly, fighting spirit enhances your presence too much. You definitely can't use it on a covert operation, and in a normal battle, it makes your moves easy to read. If you're so agile that it doesn't matter if your opponent

can predict you, then that's another matter entirely. Fighting spirit is only effective if it's used by a hero who's strong without it."

"So if people like the vice captain or Marx use it, then..."

"Like I said, it eats up your MP. What'll they do after the effect wears off? They wouldn't be able to use magic anymore. Unless they turn off their fighting spirit halfway through battle, their MP will be drained. What'll they do if the enemy was able to defend themselves against their maximum strength? Or if the enemy waited out the effect? All they can do then is lose."

"I...see. I think I understand. But on the other hand, it means that if you have an infinite source of MP, you can simply switch between the two, right?"

"*If you have an infinite source of MP, yes,*" Asura laughed. "But none of us have that. So it's better not to even bother with fighting spirit. It's far more useful to have a wide number of tools. But if you really want to learn it, I can personally tutor you in it after you become a soldier-mage."

"Boss, you can use it too?"

"Lumia taught me, but I immediately figured out it was useless as shit and haven't activated it since. I don't plan on wielding it in the future either. If I ever became a Great Hero, I'd teach magic, not fighting spirit, to all the novice heroes."

"Boss, I think I can feel my MP," Reko said calmly.

"Oh? That's faster than I expected. You must have a great focus," Asura said with a smile. Reko had been continuing with his training even while listening to Asura's explanation on fighting spirit.

"Grr!" Salume didn't want to lose to him, so she quickly shifted gears to concentrate on her MP.

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"Hey, Asura!!!"

That night, Iris shoved open the door to Asura's room, her eyes burning with anger. Asura looked up from the spellbook she'd been reading.

"Reko touched my boobs!!!"

"I see." Asura returned her gaze to the spellbook.

Spellbooks were a valuable resource. Not a lot of people researched

magic, so only about one book was published every decade by a collaboration of grand mages. Asura was actually working on her own book in secret, but she hadn't told anyone that yet. She was currently reading the newest one.

"What do you mean, 'I see'?! He touched my *boobs*!!! Why don't you tell him off?!"

"It's no big deal. It's not like you're losing anything from it."

"How can you say something like that?! Aren't you a girl too, Asura?! You wouldn't want someone touching *your* boobs, would you?!"

"Reko touches me far more than he touches you. He's hugged me and sniffed me before too, but I've never been that mad at him for it. I just tell him not to touch me." Asura looked up at Iris. She'd already folded up her robes, and was dressed in nothing more than a shirt and underwear. "Oh, but, I've headbutted him on accident once. He was groping my breasts with everything he had, then asked, 'Boss, your boobs are missing, so can I go search for them?'"

"You got mad at him for saying you're flat-chested?! You should've been angry at him for touching you in the first place! Reko really likes you, so if you tell him off, he'll listen to you!"

"It's not as if I'm flat-chested. They're just a little small because I have a low body fat percentage. Since I've had the pleasure of being born in a female body, I, too, would enjoy touching my own breasts. But since I'm a mercenary, I have to train my body. And when I do, my body fat percentage goes down. It's painful for me too, you know?"

"What in the world are you talking about?! I'm not talking about your boobs! I'm telling you to scold Reko!"

"Reko's mind has been broken, so he won't easily repent his behavior. He's eleven years old, so it's not unusual for him to be curious about the female body."

"Uh, that doesn't mean it's okay for him to touch one!"

"Why don't *you* scold him? You were the one he touched, so you can go ahead and punch him. He must take responsibility for his own actions, after all."

"Fine... I got it... I'll tell him off. And I'll be really tough on him too, okay? It's not my problem if I make Reko cry."

"Do what you want. But if you're going to be violent, then make sure

you hold back. It's fine if you punch him, but make sure it doesn't become abu—" In the middle of Asura's sentence, Iris left the room and slammed the door shut. "You should finish listening to someone when they're talking..."

After Asura heaved a heavy sigh, she returned to her spellbook. Time passed in silence.

"Asuraaaaaaa!!!" Iris ran into the room, tears welling up in her eyes.

"What is it *now*?"

"He touched me again!!!"

"Aren't you a hero...? Why don't you just dodge him? It's just Reko..."

"B-Because...because I didn't think he'd suddenly grope me while I was in the middle of lecturing hiiiiim!!!"

"All right, I got it. I got it, so stop yelling, Iris. Go get Reko. I'll give him a scolding."

"Make sure you give it to him good..." Iris said with a sniffle before she left the room again.

"Goodbye, my silent reading time..." Asura sighed. She waited for a little while, and then both Reko and Iris entered her room. "Reko, I hear you touched Iris's boobs? And twice, at that?"

"Yup."

"How were they?"

"Soft."

"I see. Did you get excited?"

"Not really. I mean, they're Iris's."

"Wait just a secoooond!!!! 'I mean, they're Iris's'?! What do you mean by that?!"

"Did you *want* him to get excited?"

"No, I didn't! No, I didn't, but don't you think that's too harsh?! Why was I touched, then?!"

"Because I was curious about boobs. Vice Captain is more like a mom, and Iina's Iina. Salume quit being a courtesan because she doesn't like this kind of stuff, so I figured I could make do with Iris."

"I DON'T LIKE THIS STUFF EITHER, HELLOOOOOOO?! AND WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY 'I COULD MAKE DO WITH IRIS'?! JUST WHERE AM I IN THE RANKING OF WOMEN?!"

"Good job, Reko! If you'd groped Salume, I would've gotten actually

mad at you. If you'd touched Lumia, she would've punched you. Iina's Iina. Your judgment was sound."

"Eh heh heh." Reko looked happy.

"WHY ARE YOU PRAISING HIM?! I thought you were gonna scold him!"

"Oh, that's right." Asura stood up.

"Boss, your bare legs make me excited," Reko said.

"You didn't even get excited when you touched my boobs though?!"

"Hmm. How about this, then?" Asura lifted her shirt, revealing both her bare stomach and her underwear.

"Boss, your tummy makes me excited," Reko said.

"I see. My tummy, huh? By the way, Reko, Iris technically counts as a girl, so try not to grope her breasts. I'm a fan of sexual harassment too, but it is a crime. I'm going to punish you, so come here."

After Asura finished talking, Reko trotted up to her. Immediately, Asura slapped Reko across the face. It wasn't a particularly strong hit, but she didn't hold back too much either. It was the perfect amount of force for a slap. It wasn't excessively painful, nor was it so weak that he felt nothing.

"That counted as punishment for touching Iris's boobs, but... Did you get excited from that too?"

"That was the most excited I ever got!"

Asura looked down between Reko's legs. His excitement was no joke.

"Why?! Hey, what's going on?! Reko, you just got hit, didn't you?! Why'd you get so excited from that?!"

"Hmm. If you ask me, Reko's got a fetish."

"What's...a fetish?" Iris tilted her head to the side.

"It's a kind of sexual preference, and most people have an obsession with things like body parts, specific clothing, or boots. But in Reko's case, he's a little different."

"How so?"

"Reko has a me fetish."

"Huh?"

"As long as I'm involved, he's fine with anything. He'll get excited at any part of my body, or at anything I do to him. A me fetish is what he's got. He must've been genuinely curious about boobs when he groped you, Iris. It's pretty wholesome behavior for a growing boy."

“I don’t think that’s wholesome at *all*...”

“Don’t be silly, Iris. Look at me. I’m a pretty little girl, aren’t I? You could even say I’m on my way to becoming an unparalleled beauty. Marx and Jyrki are the ones in the wrong for not being interested in me. So that means Reko’s normal, including the fact that he’s attracted to breasts.”

“I’m normal for loving Boss.”

“You’re *definitely* not normal!” Iris screeched. “Speaking of which, Asura, you’re okay with this? Doesn’t this mean that he’s always horny for you if Reko has...um...er...an Asura fetish??”

“I don’t think anything of it at all. Oh, but, Reko, unfortunately for you, I’m interested in women.”

“And *speaking* of which, why do you even like girls, Asura?! Jyrki’s so pretty whereas Marx is so masculine and cool!”

“Because I’m an old man on the inside.”

“What in the world are you talking about??”

“Yeah, it’s too much of a pain to explain, so let’s cut this conversation here for now.” Asura sat down in her chair again.

“Why?! Reko isn’t repenting at all! He’s definitely going to touch me again!”

“Yeah. If I feel like touching breasts again, I’ll go to you,” Reko said immediately and without a hint of remorse on his face.

“See?!?” Iris exclaimed.

“What do you want me to do?” Asura sighed. “I already slapped him. Do you want me to spank him while I’m at it?”

“Yes, please! There’s no point to any of this unless he learns his lesson!”

“I’d be *so* excited if you did that, Boss.”

“Wait, don’t spank him!”

“No matter what I do, Reko will enjoy it, so no punishment will work. Figure this out yourself.” Asura huffed out a small laugh. “Wow, I’m truly impressed by you, Reko. A me fetish. Ha ha! I never thought I’d meet someone so interesting.”

“It’s not interesting at all! It’s super not interesting at all!”

“Iris, you’re so noisy.” Reko shook his head and sighed.

“Jeez, what in the world should I do??”

“If he’s about to touch you, then dodge him, Miss Hero,” Asura said. “And punch him while you’re at it. I’m sure he wouldn’t get excited if

you're the one hurting him, so feel free to do so. But don't go too far, got it? Do it within the confines of punishment. Don't let it become abuse."

"I'd never do that."

"I figured. I said it just in case. All of us have been through our fair share of troubles."

Asura had never punched a member of Moon Blossom for no good reason. The only times she'd done so was during training or doling out punishment for insubordination. Even if it looked to an outsider like she was beating the living daylights out of someone, she'd been careful that she didn't leave permanent physical or mental damage.

"Yeah..." Iris said.

"So, we're a little sensitive about that. Of course, that only applies to those we've deemed members of our group."

Asura could still remember how furious the members of Moon Blossom became when they saw Uno sexually abusing Salume. Back then, Salume hadn't been an official member of the group. But Asura'd been trying to recruit her, and they'd all been on board with her. In their hearts, Salume had already been a mercenary of Moon Blossom.

"Well, even if Salume wasn't one of us, I'm sure we would've gotten seriously mad on her behalf."

"I told you, I'd never do something like that..."

"Let's get back on topic, Iris. You're a hero, and you're truly strong enough to deserve that title...even if you're a little dumb. So, even if you don't intend to abuse someone, it can look like that to someone else. If you punched Reko with your full strength, what do you think would happen?"

"I think...he'd get hurt..."

"That's right. I dealt Reko the appropriate amount of pain for his punishment. And though it ended up making him horny, that's the end of it. Of course, if he plans on repeating his offenses, then we'll increase how much it hurts. It won't count if I'm the one doing it since that'll just make him happy. So you do it. Do you understand what you need to do? You have to have a conscious grasp of your own strength, and calmly mete out a fitting punishment."

"Okay..."

The moment that Iris said that, Reko grabbed Iris's breasts. While Asura and Iris were conversing, he'd sidled up to Iris's side. Though Asura had

been aware of it, she didn't think that Reko would grope Iris again at this very moment.

"What'll you do, Iris?" Reko goaded before he ran out of the room.

"Hmm... All right, you can go ahead and give him a good wallop... If one of the other Moon Blossom members tries to say something, just tell them that I gave you permission."

"G-Get back here, you damn braaaat!!!" Iris screamed as she raced out in pursuit of Reko.

"Reko's completely turned Iris into his toy. Oh well. As long as they're all having fun."

Asura lowered her gaze to the spellbook. Finally, she could enjoy her reading in peace.

# **Part Four, Chapter One: I'm a natural profiler? At least I'm smarter than fictional detectives.**

“I didn’t think you would come all the way here. If you had sent a messenger, I would’ve gladly made the trip to the castle town.”

The “here” Asura spoke of was the military police headquarters for the Kingdom of Arnia, located in the trading city, Nielta. The room they were in was used for interrogation, and it was small, simple, and plain. Asura sat in a hard, cheap chair with a table in front of her. Seated opposite her was Circie.

“This is no trouble. There is something I have to do here as well.”

“I see. What do you need? I assume it has to do with my request, yes?”

“Yes. We got our hands on some information, so here is the list.” Circie pulled out an envelope from the inner pocket of her uniform. She held it aloft for Asura to see. “Will you consider my debt repaid with this?”

“Of course. I was never going to collect on it anyway. Besides, it must’ve been difficult for you to get your hands on this, right?”

“I suppose. I didn’t have the authority to access it, so I had to call a meeting to get permission for it.”

“I’m surprised they granted it,” Asura said with a small laugh. “Isn’t foreign intel usually considered highly confidential for an intelligence agency?”

“Well, it’s a list of countries currently engaged in war, or likely to engage in war in the near future. It’s not that important. However, this list only covers countries in East Felsen. Arnia does not engage in intelligence operations past regional borders.”

“That’s more than enough.” Asura shrugged. “It would cost too much money to collect that information on our own, and I was able to teach my members something new while we were waiting for you.”

“Here you go, then.”

Circie placed the envelope on the table and then slid it towards Asura. She picked it up and pocketed it inside her robes.

“That list has information on each country’s current military and economic status. Please make good use of it,” Circie said.

“Thank you, Circie. If you have time later, would you like to have tea with me?”

“I’m grateful for the invitation. However, that’s not the kind of relationship we have.”

“Yeah. I just wanted to say it.” Asura stood up from the chair.

“Are you going to be leaving the country?”

“That’s right. There’s nothing else we need to do in Arnia. We’re mercenaries, remember? I’m starting to itch for the battlefield too.”

The majority of the requests Moon Blossom received in Arnia were focused on training. However, Asura wanted her next job to be one where she could act as both a commander and a combatant. She wanted to feel both the despair as deep as a wound and the euphoric ambrosia of victory. The desire to kill and be killed thrummed under her skin.

To put it in other words: she wanted to fight a strong enemy.

“Did the Felmafia not satisfy you?”

“Killing small fry is good for practice, but it was a little boring.”

*Granted, I did mess up at the end.*

“The...Felmafia that we weren’t able to take care of is...small fry to you?”

“That’s because you have to obey the law. You can’t use the same strategies we can employ. There’s no helping that.” With a last wave of her arm and a, “Well, I’ll see you again some day,” Asura left the room.

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Within the day, Moon Blossom decided on where they would go next. They’d based their choice not only on which country was currently engaged in war, but also which one was on the losing side. It had been a unanimous and easy pick.

“There’s...way too many people here...” Iina said.

She had been able to put up with it for the most part, but now that the

conversation was over, she could no longer hold it in. All of the members were gathered in Asura's room. Despite ample space, it felt a little cramped with everyone inside.

"You can all go back to your rooms now. We leave first thing in the morning, so you can take the rest of the day off..." Asura turned her attention to the door. "How annoying..."

"Why can't people ever visit us normally?" Marx said with a light grimace.

"This ain't Axel. Who is it?" Jyrki held up his twin daggers.

"It's a hero...undoubtedly," Iina replied as she took out her own weapons.

"I wonder if it's a rule among the heroes that they have to greet people with fighting spirit."

"Boss! Salume just made a joke!" Reko exclaimed excitedly.

"You can put your weapons down," Lumia said. "If it was a fight they wanted, they would've already kicked in the door."

"I don't enter rooms while letting out fighting spirit, do I?" Iris asked in a serious tone, responding to Salume's joke.

"Come in!" Asura yelled. "For future reference, we prefer a knock rather than fighting spirit!"

The door opened and a woman who looked like she was in her forties walked in. Her cream-colored hair was tied in a low ponytail, and she had a gentle smile on her face.

"Oh? The population in this room is quite dense!" With that, she stopped emanating her fighting spirit and shut the door.

"Lady Elna?!" Iris yelped, sounding shocked. "Why are you here?!"

"Isn't it obvioooous? I have something I want from you. You're soooo silly."

Still smiling, Elna looked around the room for a place to sit. But she couldn't find an empty spot, so she gave a small half shrug. She wore a hooded dark-green shirt with a dark-brown vest over it, and her pants and boots were the same color as her vest. She carried a quiver upon her back and a small bow in her left hand.

"There really are too many people..." Iina muttered.

"Elna Heikkila? The Great Hero?" Lumia asked, sounding surprised as well.

“Yep! It’s nice to meet you, Lumia Autun. I was on the same Demon Lord Expedition as your sister, you know!”

“My name is Lumia Canarre,” Lumia corrected with a small shrug.

“That’s not important,” Asura said. “Don’t visit us while leaking fighting spirit everywhere. Knock like a normal person.”

“Whaaat? But Axel told me that if I let out fighting spirit, you would all notice me! Hey, I wanna sit, so can someone give me their chair?”

“Here ya go.” Jyrki stood up and Elna gingerly sat down in his place.

Incidentally, Asura and Salume were sitting on the bed, while Marx leaned against the wall. Lumia was sitting in another chair and Reko was on the ground. Iina had stood up earlier when she pulled out her daggers, but she joined Reko on the floor. Lastly, Iris was against a wall opposite Marx’s.

“Oh, that reminds me,” Asura said as if struck by a sudden epiphany. “This is the perfect opportunity. I want you to use what I taught you during practical training.”

“Against Elna?” Marx asked. “I thought we had the rest of today off.”

“Then, from this moment, your day off will start after Elna leaves.”

“Oh dearie me, what in the world is about to happen to me?” Elna giggled as if she was having fun.

“You seem confident,” Lumia said, “but I saw you tighten your grip around that bow. As I’d expect from a Great Hero, you’re already on your guard, unlike *someone* I know.”

“Elna Heikkila is a Great Hero who fights with a bow,” Marx said. “If I recall, she used to be a hunter. With nothing more than her arrows, she climbed through the ranks, beating into warriors the usefulness of archery and overcoming their mocking accusations of cowardice. Because of that, she has an aggressive and determined personality. She hates to lose and it’s highly unlikely that she’ll ever yield to torture.”

“She’s wearing dark clothes...but I don’t think she likes them,” Iina said. “She only wears them because she used to be a hunter... Is red your favorite color?”

“Yes, that’s right! Red *is* my favorite. How did you know?”

“Apparently, people who hate to lose love red,” Jyrki said. “Other attributes of red lovers are that they’re decisive and have strong leadership skills. Oh, and they’re also quick to pick a fight. Right?”

“Miss Elna, you’re pointing your toes towards Boss,” Salume said. “So it looks like she’s the one you’re most interested in.”

“Wait a sec!” Elna exclaimed. “What are you all doing to me? How do you know all this about me? Did you look into me? Or are you looking into me at this moment?”

“What we can deduce from those words just now,” Reko said, “is that you really *are* interested in Boss. And that you’re really smart. You’re probably capable of really flexible thinking.”

“Yes. She panicked for a second because she didn’t realize what we were doing to her, but she was quick to make an inference,” Lumia continued. “Her expression is full of shock, but I can see a hint of happiness in it. She’s strong enough to be able to enjoy the situation. She’s nothing like those idiotic warriors. I’m sure she stands out even among the heroes.”

“Even after all of this talk, her mental state remains calm,” Marx added. “Her emotions are normal, so she’s not like Boss or Reko. She wouldn’t hurt someone without reason. But she’s likely the type to hate being ridiculed. If she loses her temper, then it’s probably whenever someone looks down on her, or when someone mocks archery.”

“I don’t lose my temper as often now!” After she said that, Elna let out a soft sigh. “There aren’t many people who make fun of archery anymore, after all.”

“She answers quickly...so she has a lot of self-confidence... Probably in her looks, and not just her skills...”

“Well, it’s super obvious that she was hot when she was younger. Ah, wait, you’re plenty pretty even now, despite your age. You put a lot of effort in your looks, and you haven’t stopped trying to look feminine. So that means...”

“Wow, you guys are amazing,” Iris interrupted. “How are you doing that? I was listening in on the lecture too, but I can’t do that thing at all.”

“It’s not ‘that thing,’ it’s ‘Asura-style profiling,’” Asura said. “It used to be a way to catch criminals, but I improved on it. It’s a technique that lets you know someone better through observing their expressions and analyzing their behavior. I also use statistics to make deductions and hypotheses. Once you understand your opponent, you can predict their words and actions, which can help in gaining the advantage. And it comes in handy in an emergency. By the way, the reason you can’t do this is

because you weren't paying attention and thought it had nothing to do with you. The members of Moon Blossom listen closely to my lessons. Granted, it's because I punish them if they don't."

"I respect you, Boss, so I'd pay attention even without a punishment," Marx said with a light shrug.

"Let's continue," Salume said. "That you haven't stopped trying to look feminine...is it because you have a lover? It doesn't look like you have a wedding ring, or a mark to indicate you had one. You've never been married, then. Is your lover also a hero?"

"I have noooo reason to expose all of my private details!"

"You say that, but it looks like you're making two different expressions," Reko said. "You look panicked because we guessed right, and you also look a little angry. So your lover *is* a hero."

"He's nooooot. I told you, my private details are—"

"So that means you're friends with benefits. With who? Axel Ehrnrooth?" As soon as Lumia finished talking, Elna's eyes widened. "I simply named a hero that I was familiar with, rather than speaking from a place of confidence. At least, until I saw that face." Lumia lifted her shoulders as if in mild exasperation.

"I can't figure out why you would hide that. There are too many possibilities."

"Then let me demonstrate, Marx," Asura said with a thin smile. "It's because they've been sleeping together for a long while, since before she became a Great Hero. In other words, Elna doesn't want anyone thinking that she used her body to attain her current status. I'm sure there's already a small number of people who view you in that light, hmm? And you don't like that. Well? Oh? Judging by your expression, I think it's safe to say that I'm right."

There was no need to always say the correct answer at this stage in time. Asura got lucky and hit the nail on the head this time, but one would normally search for the answer while gauging the other person's reactions.

"All right, fiiine, I get it. Everything you said was correct. Truthfully, it was so amazing that I still can't wrap my head around it! I didn't expect to be laid out sooooo bare by people I just met. You are a smart and dangerous lot...enough to kill Matty and cover it uuup."

"The reason you're trying to forcefully change the subject," Salume

said, “is because you truly love Axel and don’t want us to talk about him anymore? In that case...”

“In that case, her weakness is Axel.” Reko laughed. “If we want to use her, then all we need to do is take Axel hostage. We don’t even have to physically do it.”

“Let me say this,” Elna said with a dark tone. “I’m angrier than even Axel is at the fact you blew away his left hand, you knoooow? So this ends now. I’m going to conduct my business now, all riiight?”

“That’s not up to you to decide. This is part of their training, so they’ll continue until I tell them to stop. We haven’t even gotten to the good part yet. Let’s say we have to face off against Elna in this situation. How will you stop her? How will you kill her?”

“W-Wait just a sec, you guys! How can you say such a thing?!”

“It’s fine, Iris. I would loooove to hear this,” Elna said, her expression dead serious.

“Since we’re inside, her bow is at a disadvantage,” Lumia said calmly. “I’m sure she has a knife in that vest of hers, though. Whether we choose to kill her or keep her alive, breaking her dominant arm would be more than enough to neutralize her. But I’m sure that Sir Axel already told her about Asura’s Mines, so she’ll prioritize dodging them. They won’t hit her.”

*I’m sure she knows about Flashbang as well then,* Asura thought. The heroes must have exchanged a ton of information in regards to Matias’s death, so it wouldn’t be a surprise if Elna had heard about it from there.

“She’s holding her bow in her left hand. Judging by the balance of her muscles, her dominant arm is her right. Our best course of action would be breaking or cutting off her right arm to stop her from fighting back. A way to do that would be to strike in intervals. Currently, we’re all surrounding her. All of us would then attack her while adjusting our timing to accommodate for each other. After all, there’s a high possibility of getting in each other’s way if we attack at once. Of course, we will fight to kill, and as for magic usage, we would wait for Boss’s orders.” After Marx said that, he glanced at Jyrki.

In a room as cramped as this, Jyrki’s fire element was dangerous whereas Iina’s Accelerate would be the most effective.

“You won’t be able to dodge all our attacks,” Jyrki said. “While you’re in this room anyway. If any of us can mess up your right arm, then we win.

I'm sure you can use those legs of yours too, but we're probably better than you if it comes down to pure martial arts."

Elna was ultimately an archer and not a fighter. As long as they could seal away Elna's bow, her fighting capabilities would be greatly reduced.

"But...the first person...and at most the first two attackers...will die... I'd probably be one of them. But if Boss says to do it, then...of course I will."

"There's the chance that Miss Iris will try to stop us." Salume stood up and walked towards Iris. "So Reko and I will cling to her to immobilize her movements."

"It's not like Iris can kill either of us." Reko stepped up to Iris's side too.

"Even after hearing all that, you're not even trying to tense up?" Asura smiled wryly. "Don't you think you're a little too happy-go-lucky?"

"It's...not like you'll really do it, right? All that was about *if* you were going to fight her, right?"

"Why do you think we won't? I'm shocked to learn that you bear the gift of premonition. By the way, Elna's prepared to fight, you know?"

"Huh?" Iris turned to stare at Elna, her eyes wide with surprise.

"Iris, can't you tell? They're serious, on top of being absolutely correct. I'm an archer, remembeer? I'm confident that I wouldn't lose if we were outside, but fighting indoors halves my effectiveness. Fire and maneuver is my basic strategy, so I'll die at little Asura's command. But I'll do my best to take three with me rather than only two."

A short silence permeated the room.

"All right. Training's over. Everyone, relax." Asura clapped her hands loudly and in an instant, the dangerous atmosphere in the room dissipated.

"That was amaaazing!" Elna said with a relieved sigh. "You let out that much killing intent during training? I seriously thought I was gonna get attaaacked. Iris, I can't believe you didn't notice that. You're soooo dumb."

"That's because we were working on the assumption that we'd really kill you." Asura laughed. "I'm sorry, Elna. We have no intention of having you as an enemy. It was only training."

"It's bad for my heart, you knooow. I feel like I lost years of my life. If you're *really* sorry, then take my request. Then I'll forgive you."

"A request, hmm? I don't mind hearing you out. But why do you know about fire and maneuver?"

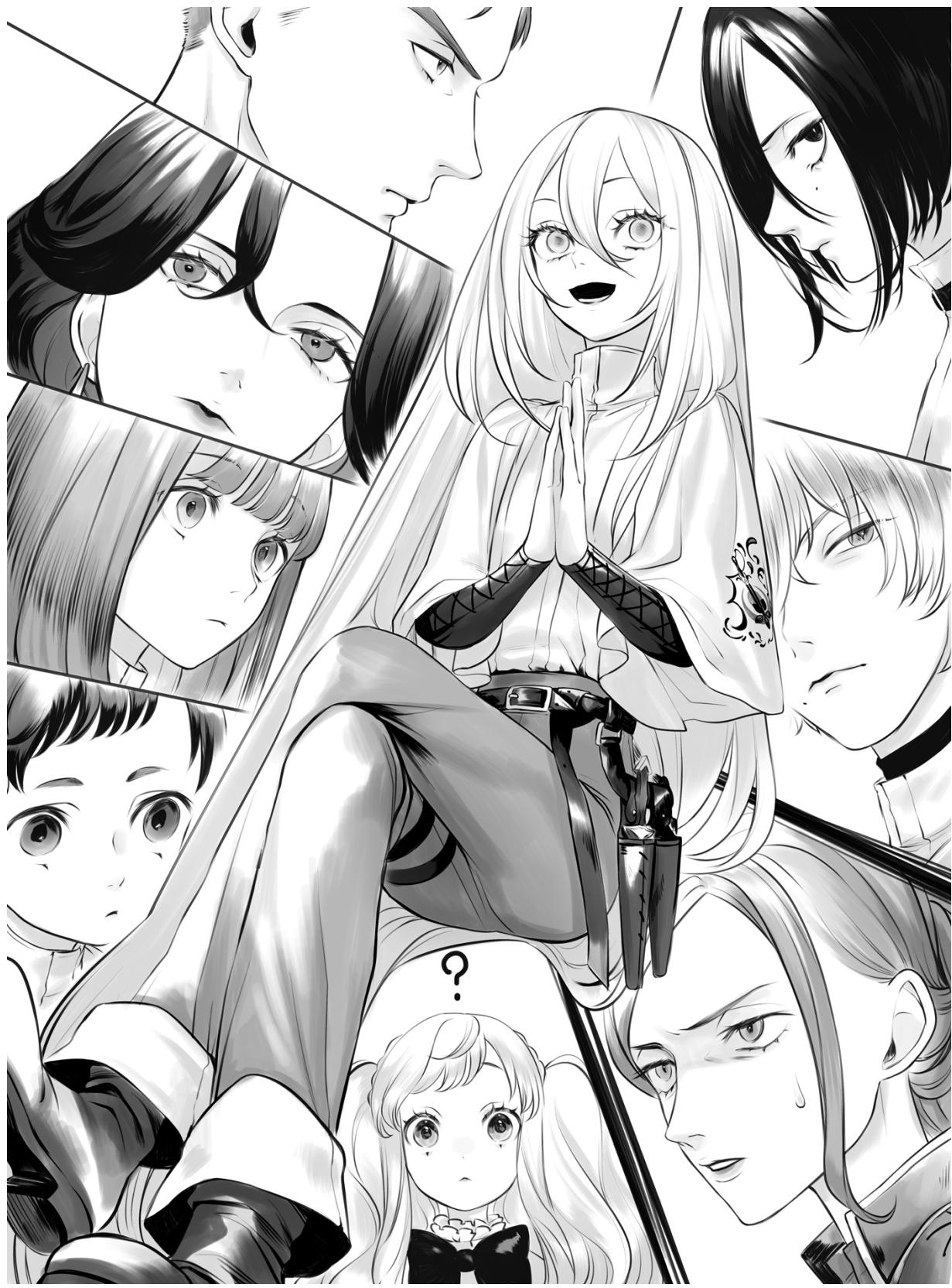
"Ohh? It was the same thing that I've always been putting to practice, so

I just borrowed the name. Was that not okaaay?"

"It's fine, I don't mind. So? What's your request?"

"I'd like to hire you as the bodyguards of a surveyor who will be investigating the Great Forest in the south. It's the Great Forest, so you can expect monsteeers. No one's set foot in the area the surveyor will be going to, which means there's the chance you'll encounter high-tier monsters. Well? What do you saaay?"

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## **Part Four, Chapter Two: “Hey, little Asura, do you wanna be a hero?” No matter how ya cut it, Boss is on the Demon Lord’s side!**

“I refuse. Though a place full of monsters sounds quite alluring, I’d prefer a regular war, where humans fight among themselves to recreate the bloody rivers of Hell. I’m sure it’ll be lots of fun.” After she said that, Asura laughed low in her throat.

“I see!” Elna said. “So that’s the laugh that Axel was talking about!”

“Hmm? Did he mention how lovely my smile is? I’m surprised Axel talked about that with you.”

“Your smile is as bright as the sun, Boss,” Reko said.

“In that case, we woulda all burned to a crisp,” Jyrki said.

“I plan on giving you about two hundred thousand dora as advance payment. Do you still plan on refusing my offer?”

“It’s certainly a tempting amount of money, but I want to go to war.”

Asura loved gruesome battlefields, especially if the ground turned thick and muddy from the blood. She adored fierce battles where the cacophony of screaming and yelling rose through the air like a symphony.

“Two hundred thousand dora for a bodyguard job is very appealing, Boss,” Marx said. “And since she said that was advance payment, I believe there’s a separate bonus for if we succeed.”

“That’s riiight. If high-tier monsters show up, then I’ll hand you a hundred thousand dora per kill. How does that sound?”

“High-tier monsters are fairly dangerous,” Lumia said. “If I recall, those are ones too dangerous for a hero to handle alone, so they’re supposed to try to slay them in teams of two or more, right? In other words, there are monsters out there whose strength rivals a hero’s.”

“That sounds hard... But I also thought intermediate-tier monsters were

hard until just recently. We won't know until we try."

Back then, the members of Moon Blossom had not been fully aware of their own strength. Granted, it had only been their second job, so it was a given that they wouldn't know their true capabilities. Now, things were different. As proof of that, Iina only said it would be "hard," but she never claimed that it would be "impossible."

"An intermediate-tier monster would be an enemy befitting our strength," Asura said, but her expression was still blank. "Hmm. Personally, I'm still much more interested in going to war."

"To tell you the truuuth," Elna said with a smile, "I also want to take this chance to give Iris experience in slaying monsters."

"That has nothing to do with us. The tuition Axel gave us was solely to make her useful in a normal fight. It wasn't to teach her how to exterminate monsters."

"Um, what tuition are you talking about?" Iris asked. "I thought I was supposed to be watching over you. I've been writing letters to Sir Axel every day."

"Oh, yes, they're suuuch lovely letters. I've been reading them as well. You actually weren't just sent here to monitor them. We also wanted to speed up your training by involving you with Moon Blossom. So, we gave little Asura just a tiiiny bit of money and asked her to give you some lessons."

When she heard what Elna said, Iris made an expression like she couldn't believe her ears.

"That's why I've been answering all your questions and lecturing you. It's also why Lumia's been training with you, and why all the other group members have been taking care of you in their own ways."

"I take care of you the most," Reko said.

"That's 'cause all you wanna do is touch my boobs!" Iris yelled. Reko replied with a cheery laugh.

"Hey, little Asura, I'm of the opinion that in twenty years, soldier-mages and warrior mages will become the norm."

"Oh?"

"So I want Iris to stand at the vanguard of that revolution. I want her to become the strongest, most amazing hero, who won't be left behind by the changing times. Iris has even more talent than Jeanne, you knooow?"

“Does she really?” Lumia said in a slightly irritated tone.

“What are you trying to say, Elna?” Asura asked.

“Can you train Iris into a soldier-maaage?”

“Huh?” Iris yelped.

“No. She’s not even a member of Moon Blossom, so I have no intention of teaching her the ins and outs of being a soldier-mage. If you *really* want her to learn, then pay me a million dora. Then I’ll teach her. Being a soldier-mage is worth that much.”

“Phew...” Iris sighed.

“Then let her join your group!” Elna said casually.

Asura and the rest of Moon Blossom blinked at her. Iris’s mouth hung open as she stared at Elna in shock.

“I don’t mind that, but the problem right now is whether Iris wants to join or not. Plus, my orders are absolute. I can’t imagine Iris obediently following them, and it’ll be troublesome to have to punish her every time she goes against them.”

“Don’t worry about that! Riiight, Iris?”

“Uh, no! No way! Lady Elna, it’s because you have no idea how disgusting these people are that you can so easily suggest such a thing. I’ll never join! I can never work under Asura!”

“Oh dear,” Elna said as she rested a hand upon her cheek. “If I pay you dora and have you teach her the techniques she needs to be a soldier-mage, could I pay in installments?”

“That’s fine. I’m sure that Iris would prefer to simply learn the tricks of the trade rather than actually becoming a member of Moon Blossom. But depending on how motivated she is, it might take a year before we’re ready to put her through our basic training regime. She still has to learn magic, after all.”

“Basic training regime? What’s thaaat?”

“It’s a short but intensive course on how to become a proper soldier-mage,” Marx explained. “Perhaps it’s easier to imagine it as an exam.”

“You should reconsider,” Jyrki said. “It’s hell ’til you get there, and it only gets worse once you start the training. Like ‘Bye, hope you enjoyed hell,’ and ‘Oops, welcome back.’ Don’t do it. You can’t handle it, Iris.”

“Iris...you’ll definitely cry, for sure... You might even run away during torture resistance training...”

“What?! Are you mocking me?! I would never cry or run away! If *Iina* could do it, then I can do it too!”

Iris impulsively reacted to Iina’s perceived taunt. She didn’t actually want to become a soldier-mage. She just wanted to prove Iina wrong.

“But, Iris, didn’t you wet yourself after getting whipped twice?” Lumia pointed out. “You’ll have to learn to withstand five lashes from it, you know?”

At Lumia’s words, Iris started to shudder all over. “N-No way... That’s impossible...” she murmured.

“Iris doesn’t handle pain very well. I’ve been wondering if I should give her some torture resistance training as a special treat. In any case, if you’re giving us a million dora, then we’ll turn her into a real soldier-mage. Of course, that all depends on if *Iris* wants to be one.”

“She does, doesn’t sheee?”

“Um...no...”

“Oh dear... Why don’t you want to be one? You’re going to fall behind when the times change.”

“Because...I’m scared of getting whipped...” Iris muttered in a soft voice.

Elna sighed. “Well, I won’t force you. But if we take you to a Demon Lord Expedition as you are right now, you’ll die, Iris. So I personally would like you to learn how to be a soldier-mage.”

Demon Lords were supernatural forces of nature and appeared regularly, but no one knew what they were. The only thing certain about them was their strong hatred towards humans. They constantly indulged in destruction, laughing maliciously the entire time.

Heroes had to defeat Demon Lords. No matter what region they hailed from, all heroes had to gather and risk their lives in battle. Iris couldn’t be the exception to this rule. After all, the Demon Lord Expedition was a hero’s most important duty.

“Oh dear, this really is a headache,” Elna said. “I don’t want you to diiiie, Iris.”

“Why are you talking about my death like it’s a certain thing?”

“Oh no, you’ll die for sure,” Asura said with a smile. “You’ll be dead in seconds. Maybe even one second.”

“Why are you making fun of me?! Asura, didn’t you tell me that I’m

strong?"

"Because you've still got your head in the clouds. You're the type to spout rubbish like, 'Let's go have a chat with the Demon Lord.'"

"Not even *I* would try that!"

"Really? I like that part of you, and find it to be quite dazzling."

"Same here," Jyrki said with a light shrug.

"For people like us, who have to wander through the dark, that part of you is truly a shining beacon," Marx said.

"All I want...is for you to fix that stupid head of yours..." Iina muttered.

"We want you to walk proudly under the sun, Miss Iris, for that's a path that I can no longer take." Salume giggled.

"I don't hate you, Iris. Your boobs are soft," Reko said with a grin.

"We're all quite taken with Iris, Lady Elna," Lumia said. "So we'll teach her how to fight properly, even if it's not as a soldier-mage."

"My oh my! Iris, you're sooo popular."

"Humph. As if we could like her more than you or your Great Hero friends." Asura huffed. "All right, fine. We'll head south to the Great Forest for you. You'll have to pay us a separate fee of ten thousand dora a day though."

"I didn't expect this from you, but you're pretty greedy when it comes to money, little Asura." Elna laughed. "Okay, I'll give you that money."

"I don't sell myself short. All I want is to get fair payment for my services. We'll protect the surveyor in the Great Forest and train up Iris at the same time. It'd keep us up at night if Iris ended up getting killed by something like a Demon Lord. Whether Iris becomes a soldier-mage or not can be something we think about in the future. Even if she fights as she does now, she'll eventually become a Great Hero anyway."

Some day, perhaps in the not-so-distant future, the Iris that they spent so much time training might turn around and become their enemy. But, wouldn't that be the most sublime way to end their story? One day, Asura planned on confessing to her, right out of the blue: "Hey, Iris. You know, *we* were the ones to kill Matias." Upon hearing that, she'd feel like her heart was ripped out of her chest. It would be a difficult battle, full of pain and hatred and love.

*Ahh...I'm getting the chills...*

"Hey, Boss has got an evil smile on her face. She's plottin' something. I

got a bad feeling.”

“It’s very disquieting.”

“She’s definitely thinking of something terrible... That’s all we can say for sure...”

“Humph. In any case, we’ll be leaving tomorrow.”

“Oh, thank goodness!” Elna smiled. “Iris, think long and hard about the soldier-mage thing!”

“All right...” Iris was looking down at her feet. She didn’t look enthused at all.

*Oh? No, that’s not what her reaction is.* Asura looked a bit closer. Iris’s cheeks were flushed. She was embarrassed.

“Okay, let’s move on, theeen,” Elna said.

“There’s more?” Marx grimaced. “This is quite the lengthy conversation, don’t you think?”

“Hey, little Asura, what do you think about becoming a hero?”

Elna dropped the bomb of a question so casually. She didn’t prepare them or anything, and the members of Moon Blossom froze as the words registered in their brains. Even Asura looked gobsmacked.

“W-Wait, wait, wait, wait!” Jyrki exclaimed. “No way! No way, no way! Do you plan on destroyin’ the world?!”

“All she’ll do is exercise her privileges and ignore all of her duties,” Marx said. “I can already see Boss getting her title stripped away within the day.”

“Boss is the type...who would befriend a Demon Lord...rather than a hero... So, no... That’s the one thing that can’t happen...”

“I thought I would faint,” Lumia said, massaging her temples. “That was an insane thing to say. Lady Elna, are you secretly an enemy of humankind? That was terrifying...”

“Ohhh? Isn’t it nooormal to recruit strong people? What say you, little Asura?”

“It sounds like a world of trouble, so I’ll pass.”

There were lots of advantages in being a hero, but on the flip side, there were plenty of disadvantages as well. Having to go exterminate the Demon Lords was the worst one, as Asura wouldn’t be able to take command of the expedition herself.

A part of her wanted to try and defeat a Demon Lord once she gathered a

larger group for herself because it sounded like lots of fun. But it was inconceivable to cooperate with heroes who weren't even soldier-mages, and she didn't expect musclebound idiots to understand her tactics.

In Asura's opinion, the reason that half of the heroes died every expedition was because their only plan was charging in with *no* plan. Heroes were a gathering of powerful individuals, but there was a limit to what such a group could do.

"Then, I suppose you have confidence you can pass a Hero Selection Exam?"

The test to find and choose heroes differed from region to region when it came to qualifications. However, the one common thread they all shared was that only the most powerful fighters would be chosen.

Incidentally, the Hero Selection Exam in East Felsen had three stages. The first stage tested your basic fighting skills and your stamina. In the second stage, your personality was put to the test. In other words, it was an interview. This part was what differed from region to region.

In the west, they didn't hold interviews; all candidates needed was pure strength. In Central Felsen, your faith was an important factor. In the east, vague qualities like etiquette or heroic traits were valued.

It was only when you passed the second stage that you could call yourself a hero candidate. At this point in time, there would only be a few people left. The third and final stage would have the candidates face off against each other in combat, and the strongest one would be given the title.

If you counted from the first stage, tens of thousands—no, maybe even hundreds of thousands—of people confident in their skills gathered for the exam. And from among that crowd, only one person would be picked. That was why heroes were strong. There was no other way to describe them.

However, the third stage of the exam was held on a regular basis, so even if you lost, you could always try again later. People trained themselves between them, and challenged their rivals again and again.

Throughout history, only two people ever passed the third stage on their first try. The first was Jeanne Autun Lala. The second was Iris Craven Lily. Even Elna failed it twice.

"If you can give me a pass through the second stage, then the third stage would be a cakewalk. That's only if I'm allowed to kill everyone. If killing is acceptable, then I wouldn't mind going up against all the candidates at

once.”

“Lady Elna, Asura will seriously win even under those conditions, I guarantee it,” Lumia said. “Asura can pass the exam, but that’s only if you’re willing to sacrifice all of the hero candidates. There are no ‘if’s or ‘maybe’s here. There is no one that Asura can’t kill.”

If there weren’t any rules, then Asura could even murder a hero. Lumia already knew that. In fact, she might have also noticed that the rest of Moon Blossom was capable of such a feat as well. The group’s ability to carry out a mission bordered on terrifying, after all. Asura had known this from the start though.

“How aboooot...if you’re not allowed to kill them?”

“Then I won’t even take the exam. It’s too much work.”

“Let’s say for this scenario that you’re taking the exam.”

“Hmm, I wonder. Would I be allowed to dismember people?”

“Oh dearie, noooo. The condition is that you cannot permanently ruin someone’s career as a fighter. How about it?”

“If there are that many limitations on me, then it would depend on my opponent. I’m not good in a match, with all those rules and regulations,” Asura said with a wry smile. “Normally, I make a living from killing people. To tell the truth, if I had to have a proper, regulated match against Iris, I’m not sure if I could win.”

“‘Not sure’?! I *did* win against you!” Iris exclaimed loudly. She was talking about the battle they’d had in the Felmafia’s headquarters.

“You won against a three-year-old version of me,” Asura corrected with a light shrug. “Not only that, but I wasn’t even in control of myself.”

“If you’re able to put up a fight against Iris, then that’s more than enough...” Elna said in a serious tone. “And besides, I think someone like you is exactly who we need on a Demon Lord Expedition, little Asura.”

“I think so too. Don’t worry, Elna. Once I expand my group, I’ll go hunt down a Demon Lord. Then that’ll be the end of your heroes, ha ha.”

“Even so, I’d love for you to become a hero. I want you and Iris to lead the next generation of them!”

“This is a hypothetical, but let’s say I was the one who killed Matias. What then? Will you still want me to become a hero?”

The atmosphere froze. The Moon Blossom members’ expressions so clearly stated, “What is this bitch talking about? I’m gonna kill her,” to the

point that it was hilarious.

“There’s nooo evidence, is there? So it’s the same as if you didn’t kill him!” Elna was acting calm, but her expression was tight.

“All right. Then, what if I confess that I was the culprit? Will you still make me a hero?”

“If...I was the only one to know about that, then I’ll look the other waaay.” Everyone blinked in surprise at Elna’s statement. “I feel bad for Matty, but all it means is that you were better than him, little Asura. That you’ll be far more useful than he ever was.”

“You really do stand out among the other heroes. You’re way too smart, with a flexible and logical way of thinking. It must be painful for you, considering how stupid everyone else seems. I bet the other heroes only care about taking revenge, right?”

“Yes. Yes, that’s riiight. But I was considering revenge too, you know? However, that changed after I met all of you. I thought that if you really were the culprits, it’d be better to use you than to kill you for revenge.”

“I see. I understand. By the way, you can rest easy, because we didn’t kill Matias. And I also turn down the hero thing. I’m far more suited to being a mercenary and living life as I please.”

“Oh, that’s toooo bad.” Elna took out an envelope from her vest. “Take this and go find Kaarlo Häkli in the Kotopori Kingdom. He’s at the forefront of the Great Forest exploration team. Your job will be to protect him. Good luuuck.”

## **Part Four, Chapter Three: Let's enjoy the dance party. The rules are simple: We dance until we collapse.**

Asura slowly rode her horse through the castle town of the Kotopori Kingdom. “It really is a lively place,” she observed. “It doesn’t feel like it’s right next to the Great Forest.”

“I agree,” Marx replied. He was driving the horse-drawn carriage serving as Moon Blossom’s base of operations. Iris was perched next to him.

“Monsters come from the Great Forest, right?” Reko asked from atop his own horse. He was no longer riding behind or with someone, but controlling the horse all by himself. Both him and Salume were learning how to ride a horse on this journey.

“That’s right, Reko. Not all monsters come from there, but the majority of them do,” Asura answered. “That’s why I thought this country would be a far more quiet place, but it looks like the intel was correct. It appears they’re doing pretty well for themselves.”

A large number of stands and stores lined the main street with a huge crowd of people. It seemed that Moon Blossom’s carriage and horses were in the way, judging by the many sour expressions the group received.

“It’s thanks to their high-quality lumber, right?” Salume asked. She was riding her own horse as well.

Meanwhile, Jyrki and Iina were resting up inside of the carriage. Lumia was on horseback too, but since she was behind the carriage, she couldn’t hear the conversation. Normally, the person at the rear of the group could listen in on what everyone was saying. However, the only reason Lumia couldn’t participate this time was due to how loud the main street was.

“That’s right. Kotopori harvests wood from the Great Forest, then exports it. The lumber industry is the backbone of the country.”

Before Asura and the others entered Kotopori, they'd spent time gathering some basic details about the place. They'd had more than enough time to do so, since they'd needed to travel through two separate countries to get to Kotopori from Arnia.

"Since it's close to the Great Forest, no one tries to steal territory from Kotopori. In my opinion, it's much more peaceful here than in other countries. Back when I was a knight, I even spent some time stationed here."

Kotopori cut down trees in the Great Forest to expand its territory, but that was the same thing that its neighbors did. They'd agreed on what parts they could each take, so no one fought over land or territory.

"It does seem quite peaceful. The soldiers here have received anti-monster training, and there's even a Knights of the Azure Skies headquarters. Unless a high-tier monster shows up, they'll be able to handle things."

"What if lots of intermediate-tier monsters appear?" Reko asked.

"I wonder. If there are too many, then the situation might be pretty dire."

An intermediate-tier monster referred to one that a trained team couldn't handle, but a hero could by themselves. Since this was a broad classification, there was much variety when it came to the strength of intermediate-tier monsters.

The Arrian soldiers hadn't been able to lift a finger against the intermediate-tier monster the Great Therbae Kingdom had been using. However, the hero candidate, Punti, had been able to defeat it all by himself. That meant that it had been fairly weak among the intermediate-tiers.

"Um, Boss, would you like me to go and book us an inn?" Salume offered.

"No. Marx, I want you to go. The base is too big for us to walk around easily. Iris, come here."

"Understood. What would you like me to do afterwards?" Marx asked.

"Come get me from the Surveyor Commission. You can send Jyrki or Iina instead as well. If you want me to deduce and guess which inn we'll be staying at, that's fine too," Asura joked with a light huff. Meanwhile, Iris stood up and leaped onto the back of Asura's horse. Though it startled at the sudden weight, Asura quickly calmed it down.

“Understood, Boss.” Marx looked in the distance and narrowed his eyes.  
“The Azure Skies Headquarters... Sure takes me back.”

Marx was staring at a large building with high walls around it. A crest bearing a blue sword and shield was proudly emblazoned upon the flags that fluttered from the walls.

“If I recall, the building next to that is the Surveyor Commission’s office, right? See you later, Marx. Salume and Reko, don’t rush. Take your time. Just make sure you don’t hit anyone and cause trouble for us,” Asura said as she turned around.

As soon as she saw Salume circle back to speak with Lumia, Asura kicked her horse’s sides and trotted off.

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The Surveyor Commission’s office was snug and neat. If Asura had to compare it to something from her past life, then it felt like a slightly bigger modular hut. Though the lot wasn’t very big, it boasted a large storeroom. There were only three people—two women and a man—inside of the office.

“Are you...my bodyguards?” the man asked nervously.

He was sitting behind his office desk while Asura and the others remained standing. If Iina were here, she would have undoubtedly muttered about how many people were squeezed in the space.

“It’s exactly as it says on that document there,” Asura said calmly. She’d already handed Elna’s letter to the man, Kaarlo Häkli. And of course, he’d already read through it.

“Um... But, I’m going to be exploring some unmapped regions on this trip. So I wanted to have Lady Elna protect me...”

“We’re much more suited to be your bodyguards.”

“Yes, um...so you say, but...” Kaarlo looked over at Asura and her group.

“But you’re made up of women and children.’ Is that what you’re thinking?”

“Well, it’s true, isn’t it?” Kaarlo replied with an awkwardly forced smile.

He was in his early thirties and had a muscular build. Since he was an explorer, he was in good shape. He wasn’t very tall, and had short brown hair. His outfit made him look like any normal villager.

“The girl with the blonde pigtails is Iris Craven Lily,” Asura said,

gesturing to Iris with her left hand. “She’s an official hero.”

“I’ve heard of that name before, but... Hmm... I’m still uneasy. I feel like I’d be better off hiring the people from the Azure Skies...”

“Hey. I hate being looked down upon,” Asura said grumpily. “So I’ll give you a special treat. I’ll let you watch our training, and then you can make your decision after that. If you still feel uneasy after seeing us fight, then you can go into the Great Forest with the people from the Azure Skies and die with them.”

“W-Wait a sec, Asura. Control your language,” Iris hissed, nudging Asura with her elbow.

“So, what’ll it be, Kaarlo? We’re going in the Great Forest with or without you.”

They were going to enter it to let Iris gain experience in killing monsters, and to let Moon Blossom practice as a whole. They’d gone out of their way to come to the southernmost corner of East Felsen. There was no way they were going to leave this place empty-handed.

“All right, fine. Show me your training,” Kaarlo said. “I’ll decide after I see it. If I don’t think I can trust you with my life, then I’m sorry, but you’ll have to leave. Exploring the Great Forest is no game.”

“I figured, considering how much the country will pay you if you bring back something of value.” Asura laughed.

The Kotopori Kingdom’s government was unenthusiastic about investigating the Great Forest. They were under the impression that they would reach the other side eventually so long as they continued their deforestation. It would be far more beneficial to spend their time and resources on preparing against a monster attack. That was why official investigations into the forest were rare, but they would still purchase investigative reports from civilians who entered it.

“That’s important too. But for me, exploring is what I live for. Thankfully, the heroes are cooperative, so I’ve been able to enter the Great Forest for investigation and come out alive.”

Elna in particular was very passionate about investigating the Great Forest. She wasn’t interested in exploring. Rather, her interest was in scouting out undiscovered threats and training up other heroes.



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“So you think that you won’t come out alive with us as your bodyguards? Fine. Let me change your mind for you.”

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“We’re going to have a mock battle. No one’s allowed to use magic. Focus on using your weapons and martial arts so that Kaarlo can have a nice, clear idea of our strength.”

Asura had reserved the Knights of the Azure Skies’ training field for the day. To be more specific, Iris had been the one to ask them if they could use it. As a hero, Iris had the privilege to temporarily commandeer the property and that was why Asura had gotten her to speak with the commanders.

Granted, the Knights were more than happy to lend their grounds to Iris, even without her utilizing her status. The members of Moon Blossom, save for Salume and Reko, were twirling the wooden training weapons they’d taken out from their base.

“That’s Marx Redford, isn’t it? He used to be part of the Knights.”

“Didn’t he mess up during his second Hero Selection Exam so badly it completely ruined his chances at moving up the ladder?”

“They turned him into an instructor, didn’t they? Right when he was in his prime on the front lines too. Did he quit to become a mercenary?”

The Knights of the Azure Skies were watching over Moon Blossom’s training, though it appeared it was more about enjoying the show rather than because they wanted to make sure the mercenaries didn’t mess up the grounds.

“Yo, Marx, what’d you do?” Jyrki asked.

“Nothing much. It was within the realm of expectation if we’re going by Moon Blossom’s standards,” Marx replied with a light shrug.

“Now then, as for our teams, we’re going to take it seriously. Lumia will take command of one team, and I’ll lead the other. The loser team will have to treat us to a nice and expensive dinner.” As soon as Asura finished talking, the members of Moon Blossom gazed at her with sparkles in their eyes. “Salume and Reko, you two can practice your close-quarters combat skills in the corner there.”

“Yes, Boss,” they replied in unison.

The two of them dipped their heads and then moved to the corner of the

training grounds.

“I want to make sure the teams are as even as possible when it comes to strength,” Asura continued. “Since I’m obviously the strongest, I’ll take the useless Iris.”

“Who are you calling useless?! I’m a hero, remember?! Don’t you think it’s a little mean to treat me like a handicap? I won’t lose if it’s a proper match!”

Iris would also participate in the intragroup mock battle. Since their ultimate goal was to convince Kaarlo to hire them, they had to demonstrate Iris’s ability as well.

“You should wait until you can beat me before calling yourself ‘the strongest,’” Lumia said. “If you’re going to take Iris, then I’ll take Marx. I didn’t pick you because you’re weak, all right? I picked you because you’re strong. ‘If Asura is going to take a hero, then I’ll take Marx’ was my thought.”

“Yes, Vice Captain. I understand.” Marx moved to stand by Lumia.

“Haven’t I defeated you plenty of times now, Lumia? Have you gotten forgetful in your old age?” Asura grinned. “I’ll take Iina.”

“Okaaay...” Iina walked up to stand by Asura’s side.

“Oh? If we’re not allowed to use magic, then don’t I still have the advantage?” Lumia smiled as well. “Also, thirty isn’t so far away from you that you can joke about age. I’ll take Jyrki.”

“’Kay. Vice Cap’n, you’re hot no matter how old you are.” Jyrki moved to Lumia’s side.

“We’ll take a minute to work out a plan, and then the battle will start. Kaarlo, you can give us the signal.”

“Ah, er, me?” Kaarlo pointed at himself.

“Here, use this.” Asura took out a one-minute sand timer and tossed it at Kaarlo.

“What...should I say?”

“Just yell ‘dance time.’”

“Dance time?”

“You can also say ‘party time’ if you wish. Choose whichever you please. Now, put the sand timer on the ground.” After Asura saw Kaarlo setting down the sand timer a little distance away from himself, she turned her attention back to her team. “All right, Iina and Iris, it’s time for a plan.

We're going to beat up Lumia and her team, then enjoy a nice, fancy dinner.”

“Kay...” Iina said with a happy nod. “I...can't wait...”

“Hey, are you sure you haven't lost sight of why we're here?” Iris asked with a wry smile. “We're showing Mister Kaarlo how strong we are, right?”

“We're gonna take it seriously, so that won't be an issue. At least, unless there's something *seriously* wrong with Kaarlo's eyes.” Asura huffed out a laugh. “Let's discuss more important matters. Listen...”

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“Party time!”

It seemed Kaarlo preferred parties over dances. As soon as his voice echoed over the grounds, Iris rushed forward.

*I knew it*, Lumia thought with a smile. Iris slashed out with her wooden sword and Lumia parried it with her own. Then, instead of further engaging, Lumia ignored Iris and charged straight for Asura. Marx and Jyrki moved forward to corner Iris, cutting her off from the rest of her team.

“So you immediately abandoned Iris since she's unable to fight as part of a team?!” Lumia exclaimed as she ran, holding her wooden sword up in front of her forehead.

“It's not ‘abandonment,’ she's a ‘noble sacrifice.’” Asura also readied her sword in front of her face.

The two of them swung their blades, clashing them together before the force of the blow struck them apart. The vibrations traveled from the hilt all the way up Lumia's arm, and a small laugh flowed out of her. She'd been the one to raise Asura Lyona, all by herself. And what a wonderful enemy Asura turned out to be.

“And...boom...”

From Lumia's right, Iina threw a wooden knife at her. But because Iina opened her mouth, Lumia's eyes flicked towards her direction. At the same time Lumia's attention focused on Iina, Asura swung her sword once again in a horizontal slash.

Lumia quickly swapped her grip on her sword so that she was holding it upward to block Asura's hit. At the same time, she twisted her body to the side and avoided Iina's dagger. Iina immediately followed up with yet

another knife.

*I have to put some distance between myself and these two.* With that thought in mind, Lumia started to move. But Asura darted forward to where Lumia was headed towards, and she swung her sword down upon Lumia's head. *Oh no, she read my movements!*

She blocked Iina's dagger with her sword and sidestepped Asura's attack. But she knew that she could no longer press the offensive. Iina had closed the distance between them, two daggers clutched in her hands. With the grace of a dancer, Iina twirled, blades poised to land a hit upon Lumia's body. Meanwhile, Asura fought alongside Iina as if to compensate for any openings in Iina's moves. She slashed out with her wooden sword at precise moments when Lumia tried to retaliate, and no matter how much Lumia tried to get away, they refused to let her gain any ground.

It was taking all of Lumia's attention to dodge and defend herself. She didn't even have the space to breathe. However, Lumia's mind remained calm.

*This is all going exactly as planned!*

Their plan was a straightforward one. So long as Jyrki and Marx wasted no time in getting rid of Iris, they'd be able to turn the tables on Asura and Iina. From the beginning, Lumia's job was simple: either defeat both Asura and Iina, or hold out until reinforcements could arrive.

Lumia had predicted this from the start. Iris was unable to coordinate her attacks with Asura and the rest of Moon Blossom. In other words, all she would do was get in the way. Thus, Asura would have her charge at Lumia's group to separate Lumia from the others, and Lumia simply accommodated Asura's strategy. While Iris kept Jyrki and Marx busy, Asura and Iina would defeat Lumia. After that, they would take care of the remaining two. If they were lucky, there was the chance Iris would take out one of them on her own.

Lumia had already known this would be Asura's plan. Everything happening was within her expectations. If Lumia could remain on her feet until Iris was taken out of the battle, then that was checkmate. Of course, this would only work if both Marx *and* Jyrki remained in the fray.

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“It was exactly as the vice captain said.”

“What are you talking about?!”

Iris was focusing all of her attention on Marx. This was because Asura had told her to do so. Iris’s part in Asura’s plan was to attack Lumia and separate her from the group, and then to defeat Marx if she could.

“That you would charge at us, but there’s no way you can win if it’s two on one.” Jyrki tossed a dagger at Iris as if to interfere with her attack.

“Don’t underestimate me! I’m a hero, remember?!”

In saying that though, Iris had almost no experience fighting against multiple opponents on her own. Most of her swordsmanship training had been one-on-one. She’d also been practicing her swings and her basic katas all by herself. Even the third part of the Hero Selection Exam had been a one-on-one match.

She wanted to focus her attention on Marx, but Jyrki got in her way. Iris had no idea what to do. Every time her attention was drawn to Jyrki, she couldn’t land an effective hit on Marx. Not only that, but the two of them worked impeccably well together, and Iris found herself going on the defensive.

It was possible to unleash her fighting spirit and put Marx into the ground. However, that would defeat the purpose of this training. If she used her fighting spirit, her natural abilities would never develop. Asura also strictly forbade her from using it.

“Iris, all that’s happening is going up against two opponents at the same time. Yet, you’re already unable to keep up?” Marx asked in a calm tone.

“Oh, shut up! If this was one-on-one, then neither of you could defeat me!”

“Yeah, we all know that. But say that during a one-on-one match,” Jyrki scoffed as he attacked. “Besides, you didn’t even win when you were up against the vice cap’n, remember? Isn’t that why you gotta deal with us?”

“Grrr!”

It pissed her off to be reminded of that. But they were right. Without her fighting spirit, she couldn’t win against Lumia. That was why Asura hadn’t ordered for Iris to handle her, and that there was a higher chance of her emerging victorious when up against Jyrki and Marx.

“I can’t imagine that Boss would underestimate us. Jyrki, let’s finish this before Iris can awaken to her full potential.”

“Yeah! All she’s got is talent. We don’t wanna have to wait until she suddenly learns how to fight off two people at once.”

Marx and Jyrki’s attacks suddenly intensified. But even so, Iris was able to dodge and block them. Their weapons sometimes grazed her skin, but nothing hurt her to the point that she had to stop fighting. Since they were using wooden swords, they’d set a rule where you had to stop if you received a blow that would’ve killed you in a real battle.

*Hmm?* Iris blinked. She was starting to get a feel for their breathing.

*Over here, right?* She held her wooden sword to the side and parried Marx’s attack.

*Like this, right?* She held her wooden sword at an angle and Marx’s sword slid across the blade. She stepped to the side to stand beside Marx, and Jyrki’s knife stabbed into the ground where Iris had been only a second ago. *And here, attack!* She flicked her wrist and swung out, slamming her sword against Marx’s body.

“Yay! I did it!” Iris had managed to get a clean hit against Marx’s abdomen.

“It’s not over yet, you know?” Marx tossed away his wooden sword and grabbed onto Iris’s with both hands.

“Huh? But if this was a real battle, you would’ve died... Ow!” Jyrki’s knife slammed into Iris’s head.

“With how much strength you’d put behind your strike, you wouldn’t have been able to slice me in half. That means I’m still alive. In that case, this is what I would do so that one of my companions could defeat you, even if it results in my own death.”

“It ain’t time for ‘Yay! I did it!’ yet, Iris,” Jyrki said with a wry smile. “You held back so you wouldn’t actually hurt Marx, right? But don’t you think that was a little rude of you?”

“But...” Even if they were only using wooden swords, a swing with Iris’s full strength would hurt enough to knock someone unconscious.

“I don’t mind,” Marx said. “You did well until halfway through the fight. If you didn’t hold back at the last second, you would’ve won. Too bad. We’re not as naive as you. To die a vivacious death is our rule as a mercenary group, so we won’t roll over and let someone kill us. So next time we do this, come at us with the intention of slicing us in half.”

“By the way, my knife hit you in the head, so you’re out, Iris.”

“Grrr, how frustrating...” Iris tightened her grip on her wooden sword.  
“I’m out too though. Jyrki, hurry to the vice captain.”  
“Roger that!” Jyrki ran towards Lumia and the others at full speed.

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# **Part Four, Chapter Four: We'll step on your corpse and carry on. A corpse wouldn't get mad at us for that, right?**

Kaarlo Hääkli found himself incapable of closing his mouth as he watched the mercenaries fight in dumbfounded silence.

“Hey, was Marx always that strong?”

“Isn’t his opponent a hero?”

“Yeah, she’s a hero, but that’s Craven, isn’t she? Didn’t she just become a hero not so long ago?”

“So she’s the weakest one of them?”

“Even so, I don’t think it’s normal for a hero to lose.”

Even the Knights of the Azure Skies couldn’t stop their impressed murmurs.

“Wait, remember that Marx was one of the potential candidates for the next commander, on top of being a hero candidate.”

“Don’t you think that blond guy is also ridiculously strong? His movements were fluid like water.”

Whether it came down to how fast they moved, how quick they made their snap judgments in the thick of battle, or how well they worked together, Kaarlo had never seen an offense as beautiful and coordinated as Jyrki and Marx’s attack just now.

“Marx Redford and Jyrki Kuusela...” Kaarlo had already finished exchanging introductions with the members of Moon Blossom. “And those children...”

He glanced at Salume and Reko, who were practicing their martial arts in the corner of the field. It looked like they were going through their katas, but they were as serious as if it was a real fight. They were covered in wounds despite it being only practice. It looked to Kaarlo that they could even be stronger than the average adult, despite the fact that they were only

children.

“More importantly...” He swallowed. That young silver-haired girl, who’d called herself the leader of Moon Blossom, was incredible when it came to her combat technique. Iina moved quickly and lightly, working in coordination with Asura. Lumia continued to fend them off with nothing more than a sword. “Aren’t they all...stronger than the Knights of the Azure Skies?”

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*This is tough!* Lumia was close to her limit. Her lungs screamed at her. All she wanted at the moment was the chance to catch her breath. Even a second to suck in some air would be fine. Iina’s attacks were a little simplistic and because of that, they were easy to block. The distance between the two of them was also a bit too far for her daggers.

However, Asura mixed in minute changes in her attacks, forcing Lumia to stay on guard. If this was a real battle with real weapons, then Lumia would be covered in wounds. If she had to guess, then Iina’s attacks were intentionally basic so that Lumia’s actions would become predictable in her attempts to block them. In the meantime, Asura would find an opening and land a deciding blow. From the corner of her eye, she could see Jyrki running towards them.

“Tsk.” Asura clicked her tongue and as soon as she heard that, Lumia relaxed.

This meant Asura’s plan had failed. She hadn’t been able to defeat Lumia while Iris distracted Jyrki and Marx. She could finally take the opportunity to catch her breath. The thought only lasted a second—barely even a second, in fact—when she felt a sharp pain in her right side.

“Wha...?”

What happened? Lumia couldn’t immediately figure it out. She’d dodged Asura’s attack. As for Iina’s predictable attacks, she’d used her wooden sword and... Wait, she hadn’t blocked it?!

Iina had changed up her move at the last second. Instead of twirling at Lumia with her blades, she’d thrust, driving them straight into Lumia’s side. If this was a real battle, then the dagger would have stabbed right into Lumia’s body. They’d taken advantage of that one brief second when Lumia

had let her guard down.

As soon as she realized that, Asura's real aim became clear. She had planned everything up to this very moment. Even the frustrated click of her tongue had been an act. From the very beginning, their goal had been to pressure Lumia until she was at her limit and then attack in the minuscule second when her guard was down.

That was why Iina had maintained a simple and predictable rhythm of attack. It was all so that at the very end, she could change the path of her daggers. It was all so that until the very end, Lumia would only focus her attention on Asura. Iina had always been intended to deliver the final blow in Asura's script.

*Ahh, but, Asura, a stab wound to the side won't be enough to kill me.*

Lumia kicked Iina away to get herself some distance. There was little strength behind the kick, as it was a move solely intended to create the perfect range for her sword. As soon as Lumia regained her balance, she swung at Iina from an angle. At the same time, Asura slashed sideways with her sword and slammed the blade of it against Lumia's left side.

“Gah...!”

Asura had put both her entire weight and genuine killing intent behind the strike. Lumia's body, folded in half, was thrown into the air for a moment before she crashed to the ground. Even breathing was too painful for her, and she curled up to protect the site of the blow. Iina was on the ground next to her, suffering from Lumia's hit.

“Vice Captain... You look so cute when you're in pain...” Iina offered her a small smile, her entire face softening.

“You too...” Though Lumia wanted to laugh after she said that, the sheer amount of pain she was in prevented her from doing so.

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“You're as nimble on your feet as ever! Aren't men usually a bit too muscular for this kind of speed?”

“Like you're one to talk! What kinda woman swings a claymore around, eh?!”

“This wooden sword isn't *that* big!”

“I know! I'm talkin' about how you normally act, you brat!”

Jyrki darted before Asura's eyes and swung out with his daggers. Asura had slammed all her strength into Lumia, meaning she had slightly let down her guard. Jyrki was simply taking advantage of the opening. His speed rivaled Lina's, and Asura tossed her wooden sword aside and pulled out her own daggers, one in each hand. Since Jyrki had already closed the distance, a wooden sword wouldn't provide the speed and dexterity she needed to defend herself.

"What's wrong, Jyrki? You're not gonna pretend to show me respect?"

"Ha! As if I can focus on that in battle!"

The two of them clashed daggers. Though both wanted to use their legs and kick out at their opponent, each had a strong understanding of the other's fighting style, so there was a high chance that they'd get countered, thus creating an opening.

"How impudent! I'll send you rolling on the ground like always soon enough!"

"Boss, why don't *you* try takin' a nap once in a while?!"

In terms of strength and technique, they were even. Normally, Asura would emerge victorious, but she'd used up so much stamina against Lumia that it was difficult for her to gain the upper hand.

"Do you plan on jumping me after you knock me unconscious?!"

"As if! I prefer *mature* ladies with a lot more meat on their bones!"

Jyrki was faster, and he had a lot more energy even after dealing with Iris. Asura managed to keep up through a combination of technique and experience. She'd wanted to preserve some stamina for this fight, but if she had, then she would've never been able to defeat Lumia. Slowly but steadily, Asura felt herself losing ground.

"Guh... To think that I'd be on the losing end against you!"

"Ha ha! Boss, lemme tell ya something: your only weakness is that Marx and I can beat you when it comes to physical strength and stamina!"

He wasn't lying. Asura was having a fairly hard time right now. If her focus wavered for even a second, she would lose. She racked her brain for a way to defeat Jyrki. However, she couldn't use magic, nor did she have enough energy left. There wasn't anything within the training ground she could use to her advantage.

*Wait, there is.*

Asura leaped to the left. It was a bold move that created an opening, and

Jyrki was not one to let the opportunity slip by. At the same time Asura moved, Jyrki drove his dagger into Asura's right arm. If this was a real battle, then Asura's right arm would've been permanently put out of commission.

At the same time Asura's feet touched the ground, she dashed forward. Jyrki followed her. Before Asura was Iina, who was still lying down and murmuring, "Ahh...it hurts..." Asura mercilessly stepped on her as she continued on her way, causing Iina to screech.

"GURK!"

Asura didn't stop and this time, she stepped on Lumia.

"Wait... KYAH!"

While still on top of Lumia, Asura spun around. In order to avoid Iina, Jyrki had to slow down and go around her. In other words, he'd left himself open. As soon as Jyrki's feet touched the ground, Asura threw the dagger in her left hand.

"Whoa!"

Though Jyrki managed to dodge the weapon, he lost his balance. Before he could recover, Asura charged at him and slammed her right shoulder into Jyrki, knocking him to the ground.

"Wah..." Iina rolled away to avoid getting crushed under the tussle.

Under normal circumstances, a corpse shouldn't move, but it was fine. As Asura and Jyrki both fell to the ground as one, Asura grabbed Jyrki's wrist and twisted, disarming him and claiming his dagger for herself. She only used her left hand for the task. As soon as she had a proper grip around the hilt, she reached down and slashed at Jyrki's throat. At the same time, Jyrki's other dagger stabbed into Asura's thigh. Since it was a wooden knife, it didn't *actually* embed itself into Asura's body. However, if it had been real, it would've been buried deep into her flesh.

"I win, even if it's at the cost of my arm and my thigh."

"That's...crazy!" Jyrki's cheeks twitched. "What kinda person would step on Iina and the vice cap'n?"

"They're just corpses, so who cares? You're surprisingly kind, so I figured that you would avoid them. Even if this was a real battle, I assume you would've taken the time to dodge Iina's body," Asura said with a bright smile.

"Well, of course... Iina and I practically grew up as siblings. Even if it's

her corpse, I'd feel bad steppin' on her."

"Cruel... Boss...you're so cruel... You stepped on me so you could win..." Lina sniffled, pretending to cry.

"That's better than what she did to me. Not only did she roll all over my back, but she also used me as a launching pad to lunge at Jyrki." Lumia's voice sounded like she couldn't decide if she wanted to be angry or weary. "Now that I think about it, did you *have* to step on me? Is this your idea of a prank?"

"Oh, come on, where's the harm? You're just a pair of corpses, so you shouldn't be complaining."

"Ahh, my neck is killin' me," Jyrki sighed. "Also, don't you think it's about time to get off me?"

"Hmm? Does it look like I'm riding you and it's getting you too excited?"

"It's 'cause you're heavy." Jyrki said it with such a straight face that Asura heaved a deep sigh.

"I'm not *that* heavy." Even so, she slowly climbed off of Jyrki's body. "Ahh, nope. It looks like I'm at my limits too." With that, she fell to the ground.

"I was watching from the side. Boss, your plan was impressive," Marx said as he walked up to them.

"It was a cheap trick... Like, do people normally step on their friends' bodies?" Iris asked with a small smile.

"Who cares what people do to a corpse? 'Dead men tell no tales,' as they say. It's not as if they can complain to us."

"Don't you have any respect for the dead, Asura?" Iris asked as she tilted her head to the side. "I mean, this is just training so it's not like they're actually dead or anything."

"Nope. On the battlefield, corpses are there to be stepped on. That's the world we live in, Iris. Do you know what kind of soldier goes out of their way to avoid corpses? They're the ones that'll be lying on the ground next, like Jyrki here."

"Fine, fine. All I'm good for is being a bad example." Jyrki sat up and crossed his legs.

"Hey, Moon Blossom!" Kaarlo ran up to them. "When can you leave?"

"Humph. Are we good enough to be your guards?" Asura asked, pushing

herself up and settling down on the ground.

“Of course! You’re so much stronger than the Knights of the Azure Skies! *Please* be my bodyguards!” Kaarlo exclaimed, sounding terribly excited.

“And where’s the magic word?” Asura asked, staring up at him.

“Ah, yes! Please! I’m sorry for my rudeness earlier! I was in the wrong!”

“Kaarlo, you’re a nice, straightforward guy. No matter what happens, we’ll make sure you’re able to return from the forest without a single scratch on your body. However, as you can see, we’re exhausted. We’d like to take a day off to recuperate, so how does the day after tomorrow sound?”

“That’s perfectly fine! I’ll make some preparations, but could you bring your own sleeping bags and provisions?!”

“We’ll do that tomorrow.”

“Then, come by in the morning the day after! We’ll be going into uncharted territory, so it should take around five days in total. Make sure you pack enough supplies for that time! Thank you, oh tiny but strong leader!” As Kaarlo spoke, he roughly ran his hand through Asura’s hair, messing up the silver strands.

“You’re a nice and straightforward person, but don’t you think you’re getting a bit too excited?” Asura asked, a slightly weary expression on her face.

It looked like Kaarlo wasn’t the type who could maintain his cool. It was hardly a surprise though. There was no way that someone willing to risk their life to explore could be the type of person to remain calm.

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The Blessed Child, Tina, had dropped by the Felmafia’s drug fields. The field had been planted in the expansive space between mountains, and eighty percent of the drugs the Felmafia sold came from here. They were growing a plant known as cannabis, and processed it here as well. The majority of the leaves were dried and packaged into rolls. They were easy to smoke, which made them easy to sell.

As soon as the guard in front of the gate saw Tina’s face, he moved aside and let her through. Tina stepped onto the property with a sigh. There were

plenty of people working the fields. Some of them were from criminal organizations that the Felmafia had assimilated into their ranks. Others were slaves they'd purchased through trafficking. Tina headed straight for the administrative office and walked in.

“Tania, there’s something I wish to discuss with you.”

The administrative office was a fairly small wooden hut. This was because the office was only to maintain sales and worker records. The workers’ dormitories, as well as the processing plant, were a lot more spacious.

“Oh, my. I wondered who would drop by my humble office, but if it isn’t the Blessed Child herself.”

Tania had been lounging about on the long sofa, but she sat up when Tina walked in. She was in her late thirties, and she kept her dark green hair in a short bob. Her entire body was toned, and it was clear even from a glance that she was well trained.

“My name is Tina.”

“Everyone calls you the Blessed Child, so why don’t you own it? We’re all jealous of you for the love that Mistress Jeanne showers upon you.”

“It’s because we’re sisters,” Tina said calmly. “More importantly, were you slacking off?”

“Oh no. My job is to supervise, and that means I get to hurt people who are slacking off. If no one is, then I don’t have any work. So I was just taking a break.” Tania grinned after she said that.

“I see. That’s fine. We received reports that production rates have fallen, so I’ve come to ask you about that.”

In truth, Tina already knew the reason. It was because they were understaffed. If you stopped working for even a second, Tania would put you through hellish torment, thus making a large number of the workforce unusable.

“What? Is Mistress Jeanne angry?”

“She’s not angry yet.” Tina lowered her gaze as she thought, *Besides, even if she gets mad, the only person who’ll get their bum spanked is me.* It was because Tina didn’t want that to happen that she was doing her best to quickly resolve any problems that came up in the Felmafia’s operations.

“Then could you send me some new slaves? We don’t have enough people.”

“I understand. But could I request that you refrain from breaking them? Slaves are an important resource, after all.”

“If they were hard workers, then I wouldn’t break them. But, if they’re slacking off...well, I have to make an example out of them, don’t I?”

“You’re not even bothering to hide it anymore. Could you not torture people for the slightest infraction?”

“Huh? You don’t like the way I run this ship?” Tania’s expression twisted. “And here I thought I got promoted to this position because of my skill.”

“You did. It was because of your stellar reputation and ability that we left you in charge.” Tania sighed. “However, you have been going overboard lately. You torture the slaves more than necessary, and you engage in lewd behavior with both men and women alike when you have time to spare. On top of that, you’ve been using our products without permission, haven’t you?”

“Ha! As if a little pet like you can understand anything about *real* work!”

“A...pet?”

“Aren’t you? With that cute body and pretty face of yours, I bet your job has been to warm Mistress Jeanne’s bed! Those slutty clothes of yours that show off your belly, and your skirt being so short that I can practically see your underwear... Everything about you is Mistress Jeanne’s type, right? We *all* know! Ha! If only the rest of us could strut around like you do, thinking you’re so much better than us just because you sleep with Mistress Jeanne!”

Tania’s horrible words made Tina’s blood boil. She grabbed Tania by the neck with her left hand and held her aloft in the air.

“Summon Lightning.” The spell was a manifestation magic that utilized her Fixed Element, Lightning. Tina gathered electricity in the palm of her hand.

“GAAAAAAHHHH!!!!!!”

She’d created it in the same hand wrapped around Tania’s neck, and jolts of high-voltage electricity shot through her body. Of course, Tina had gone out of her way to adjust the output so that she didn’t accidentally murder the woman.

“Tania Cafaro, I humbly request that you take those words back. I don’t enjoy fighting, nor do I enjoy needlessly tormenting my enemies. So this is

not something I would normally do. However, that doesn't mean that you get to call me a pet." With that, Tina released Tania's neck.

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Tania fell to the ground and coughed. She was genuinely sobbing from the pain.

“I humbly request that you take those words back,” Tina said again.

Tina and Jeanne were sisters. Though they weren’t connected by blood, they loved each other as much as real family. She wasn’t Jeanne’s pet. There was simply no way. Jeanne didn’t hesitate to hit Tina, and when she did, she never held back. On occasion, she’d slapped Tina in front of other people and for the slightest of provocations.

Tina knew that Jeanne was using this violence to maintain her own sanity. She also knew that Jeanne enjoyed inflicting pain upon her. But more than that, she knew that Jeanne did it from a place of love. Tina, too, loved Jeanne. She wasn’t her pet.

“I...take it back... You’re not...her pet... Please...Mistress Tina...please forgive...”

They were relying on each other. That was how they’d lived for the past ten years. However, slowly but surely, Jeanne was falling apart. The burden on Tina’s shoulders grew heavier and heavier. All she’d ever wanted to do was protect and save Jeanne...

Jeanne hit Tina. Again and again and again and again... Tina was at the end of her rope. Soon, she would reach her own limit. And once she did, she and Jeanne would both end up breaking.

“Lumia...” She gazed up at the ceiling.

If it was Jeanne’s real sister, perhaps Jeanne could be saved from herself? Jeanne wanted to seek out Lumia, but at the same time, she was scared to see her. So all she did was keep an eye on what Lumia was doing, and she hadn’t gone to face her yet.

*I must convince her to find Lumia.* Tina was no longer capable of supporting Jeanne all by herself. She loved her, and wanted to be loved by her, but she no longer had confidence in weathering this storm.

“Please help me, Lumia Canarre... No, I should say, the former...”

She trailed off, murmuring the words softly to herself so that Tania couldn’t hear her. However, Lumia had started her own life as a vice captain of the mercenary group, Moon Blossom. That was what Lumia was now.

“I suppose...I’ll have to use some forceful tactics to recruit her...”

Moon Blossom also needed Lumia. In the worst-case scenario, war would break out between the two factions. However, Tina needed her as

well. And Jeanne was the one who needed her the most.

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## **Part Four, Chapter Five: Picnics are really fun, even if monster blood and guts occasionally fly at you.**

Asura and the others walked through the Great Forest. The canopy of leaves and branches overhead blocked the sunlight, so the wind was nice and chilly.

“Hmm. The trees are quite concentrated over a large area. If you were to look down upon this place from the sky, I imagine it must look like an ocean,” Asura said. “It’s less a forest and more a jungle.”

The path they were walking down was hardly a proper path at all. The majority of the ground was green from the moss covering it. Vines of all shapes and sizes were wrapped around the trunks of the trees around them, creating a fantastical sight.

“This is the first point we’ll be heading to,” Kaarlo said as he stared down at the map. “There’s a small spring there. It’s clean so you can drink the water or take a bath. However, monsters like to rest there as well so we have to be careful.”

There was a large bag on Kaarlo’s back. Despite the weight, he didn’t slow down the group at all. It was evident that he spent a lot of time training his body so that he could explore the Great Forest.

“Take a bath, you say?” Asura said. “What are you trying to hint at? Do you want to see my naked body?”

Asura was walking next to Kaarlo. Behind her were Marx and Jyrki, with Salume and Reko behind them. At the end of the group were Iris and Lumia. Iina was scouting ahead as the vanguard, so she wasn’t in Asura’s field of vision. Salume and Reko were in charge of holding everyone’s gear, so they were walking as fast as they could so as to not get left behind.

“Ha ha ha! What benefit would there be in seeing your naked body, Little Boss?!” Kaarlo laughed enthusiastically.

“Tsk. I figured. I suppose I have no choice but to resign myself to a fate of being popular with pedophiles and little perverts like Reko back there. And here I thought I was a pretty girl...” Asura had little interest in men. However, she enjoyed being the center of men’s attention.

“Lots of dudes like young girls. In your case, your personality is just too rotten, Boss,” Jyrki said. “No one would wanna sleep with you if they knew what kinda person you are.”

“Personality is important, but in my case, I’m only interested in mature wo— I mean, I swore a vow of celibacy, so I don’t feel lust towards any women.”

“Don’t push yourself, Marx,” Asura said with a sly smile. “Men your age shouldn’t be ashamed of having sex every day.”

Back when Asura was in her twenties, she’d had her fair share of fun with escorts. Of course, this was back in her old life. In her current one, she was still only thirteen years old.

“Ha ha! Little Boss, you sure know a lot for your age!” Kaarlo said, sounding like he was having a lot of fun.

Ever since he witnessed Asura and Moon Blossom’s strength with his own eyes, he’d been in a good mood. Suddenly, a red arrow buried itself in a nearby tree.

“Oh, it looks like there are monsters nearby we need to exterminate. Wait here.”

Upon hearing Asura’s orders, Kaarlo obediently stood still, as did the other members of the group. Iina, from her place in the front, had shot the arrow at them. They had decided on a method of communicating via three arrows whenever they discovered some monsters. A red arrow meant that they needed to get rid of them. A blue one meant that they could pass by without any issues. A black one meant that the monster they needed to kill was likely a dangerous one.

In order to make the right judgment call, Iina had spent the entire night before the expedition memorizing a bestiary. She wasn’t an idiot. The only reason she came across that way was because there were a lot of things that she didn’t know. However, both she and Jyrki were clever, and their only flaw had been that they never received a proper education.

“Let’s go, Iris.”

If they discovered a monster, Moon Blossom would split up into an

attack team and a defense team. The defense team would stay in the same place and protect Kaarlo. The attack team would move on ahead to kill the monster, as well as secure a path forward.

The team members would change depending on the color of the arrow. Since Iina had shot a red arrow, the attack team would consist of Asura and Iris while the rest of Moon Blossom stayed behind with Kaarlo. If it had been a black arrow, then Iris would've been on the defense team, with Jyrki and Marx on the attack team. They'd decided on these members so that they could accomplish their mission while simultaneously training up Iris.

Asura jumped into the air and grabbed onto a branch with both hands. Then she used the momentum to twirl up and land on top of the branch. Iris approached another tree to perform the same feat as Asura.

"Wow, you two sure are athletic!" Kaarlo exclaimed, deeply impressed.

Asura and Iris moved, leaping from branch to branch, towards where Iina had shot the arrow from. A short distance away from the group, Iina was standing on top of a branch, her bow held loosely in her hand. Asura silently landed close to her, as did Iris.

Two monsters were grazing upon the moss. Though they were herbivores, they were aggressive and dangerous. However, their strength only classified them as low-tier monsters. Asura had also memorized the bestiary. In terms of physical appearance, the monsters resembled the wolflike monsters that the Therbaen army had controlled.

*Actually, they're closer to dogs than wolves*, Asura thought since they resembled large black dogs. Asura signaled for Iina to wait with her hand. Iina returned her arrow to her quiver and lowered her bow. Still using hand signals, Asura ordered Iris to defeat the monster on the right before saying that she would kill the one on the left.

She grabbed the claymore from her back. In most cases, monsters had thick fur that could deflect a dagger, so everyone also had their own powerful weapon that they would use for monster extermination.

Asura released the claymore and signaled that she would use magic. She was still a little scared to jump into the fray with only Iris at her side, in the sense that she couldn't fully trust Iris yet. Though she'd taught her all the hand signals, she didn't believe that she could properly coordinate with Iris on the battlefield.

In the worst-case scenario, there was the chance that Iris would get in

Asura's way or she'd accidentally slash at Asura with a sword. Asura still hadn't figured out a way to communicate with or fight next to Iris. In other words, she hadn't started training Iris for that yet. If Iris decided to become a soldier-mage, then Asura would teach her teamwork.

She raised three fingers in the air and then lowered them one by one.

Three—*Don't you dare mess up, Iris. Ambush attacks are a basic strategy for soldier-mages.*

Two—*You're strong. If you set your mind to it, you have the potential to defeat both monsters at once.*

One—*Granted, that goes the same for me.*

With the final finger she'd raised, Asura pointed at one of the monsters. At the same time, a pink flower petal fell upon its face and exploded. By the time all the pieces of flesh landed on the ground, Iris's sword was already embedded in the other monster.

She'd used the momentum from jumping off the branch to put extra strength behind her blow, resulting in the monster becoming bisected. The monsters both died within seconds without ever realizing what had happened to them.

“Wow...Iris...” Iina murmured.

“Right? But it seems like it was a bit too much for her mentally.” Asura leaped from the branch and placed her hand on Iris's shaking shoulder. “Is this your first time killing something?”

Iris nodded furiously at Asura's question, her body continuing to shudder from the weight of what she'd done. The gore that had splattered from the monster's body still caked Iris's face, so Asura gently wiped it off with the hem of her robe.

“I...” Iris started, but Asura cut her off.

“It's over now. Put your sword away, Iris.”

Though she was still clearly unnerved, Iris managed to return her sword to the sheath on her back.

“Good, good.” Asura hugged Iris and patted her back several times. “It only hurts the first time. By the time we get out of this forest, killing will become second nature.”

*I guess we can't all be like Reko,* Asura thought. If this was her reaction from killing something like a monster, then would Iris be able to retain her sanity if she had to kill a human? Asura had no choice but to slowly work

her up to the task.

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After Asura's team eliminated the threat, the rest of Moon Blossom and Kaarlo stopped at the spring for a break. They ate a light lunch before setting off again. The group didn't stop walking until they reached the checkpoint for the first day of the expedition, and by the time they reached it, the sun was already starting to set.

"We'll be camping here tonight, at the base of the dead tree monarch," Kaarlo said, pointing at a giant tree. It was clear from a glance that it was much older than the surrounding trees, but it had already dried up.

"Dead tree monarch? Why did you attach the word 'monarch' after 'dead tree'?" Asura asked with a tilt of her head.

"I called it that because its corpse is so grand, it's like a monument a country would erect for its fallen monarch. Is that so strange?"

"Very, but it has nothing to do with me. I was just curious." With that, Asura sat down on one of the exposed roots and leaned back against the trunk. The other members of Moon Blossom followed suit, sitting down in the area.

"All right, good work, team," Kaarlo said. "I want to leave at sunrise, so make sure you don't stay up too late. I plan on reaching the edge of the mapped territories before nightfall tomorrow, so long as none of you end up needing to tap out."

"Don't worry, we're well trained," Asura said with a shrug. "Salume and Reko, if you slow down our progress, I'll punish you." She finished that threat with a small smile.

"I-I'm...fine..." Salume said, but it was obvious that she had been struggling all day. Since she had to traverse through a forest while carrying large and heavy bags, it used up more stamina than if she was just walking around.

"A punishment? How exciting. What will you do to me? Can I walk slower?" Reko, meanwhile, had an abundance of energy.

"I won't be the one doling out punishment. Iina will, so what the punishment entails is up to her."

"I'll make sure to keep up." Reko nodded.

“So far, there aren’t many monsters in the forest,” Marx said, forcing the conversation back on topic. “The defense team has plenty of energy to spare.”

Since all of the arrows Iina had shot throughout the trip were red, Asura and Iris were a little exhausted. And while the attack team was out eliminating threats farther down the path, no monsters rushed out for the defense team or Kaarlo. Though things could always change as they progressed through the Great Forest, it was a comparatively peaceful and easy mission for most of Moon Blossom.

“You’re right. Let’s change how the teams are split up, then,” Asura said. “Tomorrow’s vanguard will be Jyrki. The attack team will be Lumia and Marx. Everyone else will be on defense.”

Upon hearing Asura’s orders, Iris let out a small sigh of relief. Asura and Iris had killed about fifteen monsters thus far and since they were all low-tier monsters, it wasn’t a difficult task. She still had plenty of strength to keep fighting. However, the problem was Iris’s state of mind. Asura judged that Iris needed to rest up if she wanted to make the trip back without any incident.

“Hey, Kaarlo,” she said. “How many intermediate and high-tier monsters have you encountered here?”

“Hmm, I’ve run into intermediate-tier monsters a few times a bit deeper in the forest. I’ve only seen a high-tier monster once and it was at the final checkpoint,” Kaarlo replied while setting down his supplies.

“Oh, that’s not a lot.” It really did seem like it would be an easy mission, then. Getting a full two hundred thousand dora for this job was a steal. “It’s scenic here and the weather is lovely. It’s as if we’re getting money for simply enjoying a picnic.”

“I know I’m safe in your hands, Little Boss!” Kaarlo chuckled. He opened up his huge bag and took out a sleeping bag from it.

“There’ll be the chance of a high-tier monster showing up once we start to explore unmapped territories, right?” Lumia asked, her expression serious.

“So that’ll be when the picnic ends. Small fry like intermediate-tier monsters aren’t scary anymore, are they?” Asura directed this question at the rest of Moon Blossom.

“Yep,” Jyrki said with a nod. “They ain’t a match for us.”

“The problem is with...the high-tiers...” Iina mumbled. “If they appear, then this mission...will transform into a really difficult one...”

“I’d rather they show up, since that means an actual challenge. Besides, we’d be able to sell ourselves as a mercenary group that can take out even a high-tier monster.”

“And here I thought you weren’t even interested in this job,” Lumia chuckled.

“It was a lot more fun than I imagined,” Asura admitted. She stretched slightly and continued, “All right, we’ll have teams of two taking turns to act as the watch. Everyone else, rest up. Making sure you have ample stamina for the rest of the day is an important part of the job too. Keep on feeding the fire and make sure it doesn’t go out. If it does, just wake Jyrki up and have him light it again.”

“I’m not sleepy yet, so I’ll be on the first watch,” Marx volunteered.

“I’m not sleepy either,” Asura replied, spreading her arms to the side. “But it’s important to rest when you can. Does anyone else want to take first watch?”

“Me,” Reko said, raising his hand. “Can I stare at your face while you sleep?”

“Sure, but keep an eye on the fire and your surroundings.”

“Can I touch your boobs?”

“Okay, but if you squeeze them too hard and wake me up, I’ll punch you.”

“Ah, wait, Boss, did your boobs run away from home again? It doesn’t look like they’re there.”

“They’re there. They’re just small. Are you asking for a headbutt, Reko? Of course you are.” Since Reko had an Asura fetish, he was delighted in experiencing anything she could dish out. “So I’ll give you the harshest punishment: nothing.”

“I’m exhausted!” Salume exclaimed, sitting down on the spot.

“Salume, take out everyone’s sleeping bags. Don’t forget your own. If you want to rest, then rest up in a sleeping bag,” Asura called out to her.

“Yes, of course.” Salume sat up and started to rummage through the bags.

“Jyrki, have you memorized the bestiary yet? There’s a chance we’ll see an intermediate-tier monster tomorrow.”

“I did! If somethin’ shows up that wasn’t in the book, I shoot a black arrow, yeah?”

“Yes, that’s perfect. Iris, come here.” Upon hearing Asura’s orders, Iris obediently stood up and moved to stand before Asura. “Sit down.”

“What?” Even as she asked the question, Iris lowered herself down to sit in front of Asura.

“You did good today.”

“It was nothing...” Iris said, lowering her face. “It...feels awful to kill something...”

“I bet. But you have to get used to it. Even if you don’t want to, you have to kill the Demon Lord, after all.”

“Yeah, I know, but... It’s like I can still feel the sensation of my blade cutting through flesh and I...”

“It’s fine, Iris. Come here.”

Asura spread her arms wide, clearly inviting Iris for a hug. But Iris didn’t move, too busy blushing.

“Iris, if you’re not gonna go, I will,” Reko said.

“No, I will!” Salume exclaimed.

“Hurry up and go...” Lina moved to stand behind Iris and shoved her from behind.

Iris stumbled forward into Asura’s embrace, and Asura gently wrapped her arms around her to kill the momentum of Lina’s push. She slowly rubbed circles into Iris’s back. In response, Iris started sobbing. Killing made her heart feel like it was about to rip apart, but even so, as long as Iris remained a hero, this would be part of her job. After all, eliminating monsters was one of a hero’s duties. She had to get used to it.

Granted, the only times a hero was conscripted to kill were the arrival of a peak-tier monster or when it was time to go after the Demon Lords. If it was something like a high-tier monster, then the closest Great Hero, or perhaps a group of about three heroes, would be able to take care of it.

Of course, there was a high possibility that very scenario could one day befall Iris.

## **Part Four, Chapter Six: Please don't die. I want to see your future.**

When Tina returned to the old castle, it was as if a hurricane had gone through the building. It was hard to discern the damage from the outside, but as soon as she stepped inside, she saw that much of the furniture had been destroyed. The walls, the floor, the tables, the pillars, the decorations... Everything was in a terrible state of disarray.

“Lady Jeanne?! Lady Jeanne?!”

Tina hurriedly checked all of the places that Jeanne usually wandered around in. She ran here and there, but it was only when she entered Jeanne’s room that she finally found her. She was sitting in the corner of the room, quivering violently as she sobbed. With her hands in front of her face, it was impossible to see her expression.

“Lady Jeanne! Lady Jeanne! I’m back! Are you all right?!” Tina ran towards her and fell to her knees. She cautiously placed a hand on Jeanne’s shoulder.

“Tina... Ahh, Tina!” As soon as Jeanne looked up and saw Tina’s face, she immediately threw her arms around her. Unable to withstand the momentum and Jeanne’s weight, Tina fell backward onto the floor.

“Is it another flashback?” she asked, returning the hug by wrapping her arms around Jeanne’s back.

Jeanne was leaning her entire body onto Tina. It was a little heavy, but Tina kept her mouth shut.

“I had a horrible dream. It was a memory from when...”

“Lady Jeanne, it’s all right now. I’m here. You don’t have to worry about anything anymore.”

Jeanne really had been the one to go rampaging through the castle. This wasn’t the first time she’d done this, so Tina already had an inkling as to who the culprit was. Jeanne was becoming more and more unstable. She’d never been *stable*, per se, but she steadily got worse since two years ago.

Ever since she carved the cursed sigil into herself, her mental state had deteriorated at an alarming rate.

“Why... Why weren’t you by my side?!” Jeanne demanded. She pushed herself up and wiped away her tears with her right hand.

“I’m sorry...” Tina said, standing up as well.

“I have to punish you.”

“What?”

Jeanne sat down on the bed and patted her lap.

“Lady Jeanne?! I didn’t try to sneak away! You *ordered* me to investigate why we’ve been exporting less product and to improve the situation...”

“Tina.”

“Why? Why do you hit me so much? I can’t do this anymore... I don’t want to feel that pain again...”

Tears started pouring down Tina’s face. In the past, spankings were not something that happened this often. It was a punishment that Jeanne only doled out on occasion. The slaps were also a lot lighter, as if it were an extension of a game. Tina enjoyed them, since the spankings often erased her feelings of guilt.

“It’s because you didn’t stay by my side, Tina. The God Hands are more than reliable enough to run the organization.”

“But...”

Tina was suspicious of the God Hand in Central Felsen. She wasn’t worried about betrayal. Rather, the God Hand was unable to differentiate between Jeanne and the actual God. It made them dangerous. In the worst-case scenario, there was a high chance that Tania would be killed. As a person, Tania was absolute scum, but as a criminal, she was an incredibly useful asset.

“If you had been here with me, then I wouldn’t have been so scared. Isn’t that right?”

“That’s true... But, Lady Jeanne...”

Tina only left because Jeanne had ordered her to. It was true that she had the option to leave it to the God Hand, but for Jeanne to punish her for something *Jeanne* ordered was much too unfair, in Tina’s opinion.

“Oh, Tina. I love you so much and yet you’re going to abandon me?”

“What?! That’s not true! I love you as well, Lady Jeanne! I would never

leave you behind!" Tina's real aim was to save her, if she could, but she no longer had any confidence that she could handle that responsibility.

"Then, hurry up and take off your clothes."

"How...many times?"

"How many times are you going to slap me?" was what Tina really wanted to ask. She could only hope that it wasn't so much that she would pass out, like the punishment she'd endured when the Arnian headquarters were destroyed.

"I'd planned on spanking you twenty times, but you didn't come as soon as I called for you, so it's thirty times now."

"I...understand..."

Tina gave up and took off her clothes. Now that it had come to this, she had two choices. The first one was to let Jeanne slap her to let Jeanne feel in control and stabilize her. The second one was to abandon Jeanne and leave.

She lay down on Jeanne's lap, her stomach against her knees. The second option was out of the question. No matter how many times Jeanne spanked her, she could never just up and leave.

*Ahh... Please, someone come and rescue me... I can't handle the pain anymore. But I also can't deal with the idea of losing Jeanne to her own mind.*

"Lady Jeanne, I'd like to say something before we begin..."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Do you...have any intention of meeting with Lumia? I've been keeping an eye on Moon Blossom's actions, so you can go see her any time you—Ow!"

Jeanne unleashed her fighting spirit and smacked the palm of her hand against Tina's butt with her full strength. "I do wish to see her," she said as she continued the punishment. "I want to save her."

*You're wrong!* Tina thought. *You're the one I want to save.* With Lumia's help, they'd be able to help Jeanne.

"And so, we should go see her some time in the near future," Jeanne concluded.

She'd said that several times in the past, and yet never actually asked for Lumia's location. But Tina would not rest this time until she convinced Jeanne to go. *But what would Lumia do if she found out Jeanne's plan? Would she still save Lady Jeanne if she knew about the cursed sigil?*

Jeanne wanted to unleash the despair of salvation upon the world. Her plan to cause an extinction event could only blossom from the roots of despair. Even if Lumia knew all that, would she still extend a hand and pull Jeanne out from the depths of madness?

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*Shit, I ran into something nuts!*

Jyrki released a black arrow into the forest. The sun was already setting and the checkpoint for the day was only a few steps away. He held his breath, holding himself as still as he could. He couldn't handle this monster alone. The second it noticed him, he'd be dead.

The monster slowly making its way through the trees was a high-tier monster that Jyrki'd seen before in the bestiary. It had the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a scorpion, and it was about three meters in length. According to the bestiary, this monster was called a chimera.

Jyrki observed the beast with a careful eye. Its pelt looked hard, so there was a high chance that daggers and arrows would bounce right off. However, considering it was still fur, he could likely set it on fire. If he lobbed three of his strongest Fireballs at it, would he be able to burn it to death? Perhaps he'd need more?

*Speakin' of which, what's it doin'?*

The chimera kept walking in slow circles around the same area. This was not normal behavior that chimeras exhibited. Then the roar of a beast rang out from the direction Jyrki had shot his arrow towards. He immediately realized that the main group had also run into a monster. The chimera by Jyrki roared as if to answer the first one. It was almost identical, with almost the same volume.

It was clear that the first roar came from another chimera. Two monsters from a species that a hero wouldn't be able to handle alone had appeared at the same time.

The chimera lowered itself to the ground in preparation to run. The main group should have already sent forward the attack team. In that case, the only people left for defense were Asura, Iris, and Iina. Reko and Salume didn't count as combatants.

The three of them would be able to handle a chimera. But two? There

was the chance that if this one joined the fight, the main group with Kaarlo would be annihilated. Even if they managed to avoid complete destruction, there was no way they could come out completely unscathed.

“Shit!”

Jyrki threw his dagger to draw the chimera’s attention. If he didn’t stop this thing here, then the situation would only get worse. Though the dagger hit the chimera’s body, its hard fur deflected the weapon and it fell onto the ground with a clatter. However, just as he’d planned, the chimera turned to glare up at Jyrki.

“Ah, jeez. Looks like today’s gonna be my last.”

Nonetheless, he continued to smile. He wrapped his hand around the hilt of the hand axe hanging from his waist. Asura had called this weapon a tomahawk. It was much more lethal than a dagger, and was Jyrki’s favorite weapon. At the same time the chimera pounced, Jyrki jumped backward.

“Shit, he’s fast for somethin’ that big!”

Despite the chimera’s large size, it easily leaped up to the branch Jyrki was perched on, destroying it with its sharp claws. As he fell through the air, he concentrated a Fireball in his left hand. Since Fireball had a fairly short range, it was actually a lot more efficient to directly slam it into an opponent’s body.

The chimera landed on its paws, but it didn’t immediately attack. Instead it arched its body backward, then breathed flames from its mouth.

“Wha— Hey, fire is *my* thing!”

Jyrki threw his body to the side to avoid the pillar of fire aimed straight at him. Before he landed and rolled on the ground, he extinguished the Fireball he’d been preparing. He’d never live it down if he ended up burning to death from his own magic. By the time he could get up, the chimera’s sharp claws were already bearing down on him.

*Ah, I’m dead.*

The thought ran through his head for only a second when Lumia’s claymore blocked the chimera’s blow for him. The monster stumbled back a few paces and paused to determine the situation.

“Are you all right?” Lumia asked.

“This isn’t good. The fire is spreading,” Marx said.

“Thanks, Vice Cap’n,” Jyrki said, his eyes wet with tears. “I seriously thought I was gonna kick it.”

The chimera roared before breathing fire once again.

“Scatter!” Lumia yelled.

The group leaped to avoid the flames. Lumia jumped to the right, Marx to the left, and Jyrki straight up into the air. He used the branch of a tree to jump even higher into the air. The chimera decided to attack Lumia and started to close the distance between them.

“It can tell who the strongest is or somethin’?” Jyrki muttered to himself even as he prepared a Fireball again. As soon as he saw an opening, he’d jam it right into that monster.

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“Iris, you idiot! Focus!” Asura yelled, but Iris was unable to react in time to the chimera’s sudden appearance.

The monster charged at the group as soon as the attack team left. By the time they realized it, the chimera was already right in front of Iris. Asura snapped her fingers, but she wouldn’t make it.

The chimera’s claws dug deep, sinking into flesh and drawing blood. However, they were nestled inside *Salume*’s chest. The girl had shoved Iris aside when Iris froze in panic. At the same time, three explosions assaulted the chimera’s body. It roared in pain and flung Salume aside, her body thrown off of the claws and sent flying into the air.

The various packs Salume had been carrying opened up and the insides tumbled out. The bags fell off of Salume’s back as she slammed against a tree. Her arm bent at an odd angle upon impact and she slowly slid down to the ground, blood smearing against the bark.

The injured chimera started to turn and leave, but Iina shot an Accelerated arrow into its back leg. It lost its balance and fell to the ground. Asura leaped towards it and upon seeing that, Iina cast Aircraft upon her. With a single leap, Asura managed to jump right above the chimera and readied her claymore in two hands.

Instead of holding it sideways like she always did, she held it up straight into the air. Then, using the acceleration from the fall, she slammed the claymore’s blade into the chimera’s neck.

“It wasn’t enough?!”

Even with everything, she didn’t have the arm strength or weight to kill

it. Though she'd heavily injured the chimera, its head remained attached to its body. The monster screamed in pain and lashed out at Asura with its front claws. She quickly deflected it with her claymore, but the strength behind the chimera's attacks still sent her flying backward.

As she flew through the air, she snapped her fingers. Her plan to instantly kill the chimera by beheading it had failed. However, just because one attack failed didn't mean the entire plan was a bust. A continuous assault was important. All she needed to do was change up her plan and move onto the next attack.

Asura's petals fell onto the chimera's back. The first Mines were to hurt the chimera enough to give Iina a clear shot. Her Accelerated arrow would land in the beast's leg and slow down its movements, which would give Asura an opening to kill it with one strike of her claymore. Since she wasn't able to, she'd try Mines again. If that didn't work either, they would try something else. They would continue this cycle over and over again until the enemy stopped moving.

Petals continuously fell onto the chimera's back, causing explosion after explosion. Blood and flesh scattered onto the ground as each bomb destroyed more and more of the chimera's body until finally, it collapsed to the ground where it remained still.

"Iina! Confirm that it's dead!" Asura yelled as she hurried to Salume's side. She was in a horrendous state and Asura wasted no time before casting her magic. "Floral Cure."

White flower petals attached themselves to Salume's wounds. Asura flipped Salume onto her stomach, removed her robes, and cast the same spell upon her back. Floral Cure was a healing spell using Asura's Fixed Element of Flower. It stopped the target's bleeding and increased their natural healing speed, as well as soothing pain.

Asura took a deep breath and then yelled,  
"LUUUMIAAAAAA!!!!!!!"

Asura's healing magic wasn't enough to save Salume. She'd die. Only Lumia could heal her and even then, there was a fifty-fifty chance that Salume wouldn't make it. Asura laid out Salume's robes on the ground and then placed her upon them.

"Salume, you did good. You were able to move without freezing up."

Her reaction speed had been incredibly fast. Asura guessed that her

position in the group meant she'd been the first to see and notice the chimera's approach. What had likely happened was that the monster had reached the group before Salume could open her mouth, so she moved to protect Iris.

“Boss... Am I...going to die?”

“You’re fine. Everything’s going to be all right, Salume. Don’t worry. Lumia’ll be here any second,” Asura reassured her with a smile.

“Boss... The chimera’s dead...”

“Good. Go meet up with the attack team. The roar we heard from their direction was a chimera just like this one, I bet. I called for Lumia so the other team’s offensive capabilities have dropped.”

“Understood...” Iina hurriedly ran off in pursuit of the attack team.

“It was my fault... I did this... I...” Iris stumbled over and then fell onto the floor.

“No, it wasn’t your fault. Tsk, Reko, I’ll leave this to you!”

“Yes, Boss!”

Asura stood up for Reko to take her place and then she approached Kaarlo. He was the only person they had to protect and for their mission to count as a success, he needed to be fine. She looked around the clearing, concentrating to see if there were any other threats lurking about.

There was no time to speak with Iris. It was possible that other chimeras were waiting for their chance to strike, and its roars could have attracted the attention of other monsters. Kaarlo’s safety, not Salume’s, was their priority.

“Ahh... I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I’m sorry... I... I...” Iris started to sob and Asura’s brow furrowed in irritation. She couldn’t concentrate like this.

“Shut up,” Reko said, slapping Iris’s cheek. “Salume is a mercenary and so am I,” he continued, his face cold. “Dying is part of the job description. So it’s not your fault, Iris.”

“That’s right... Miss Iris...” Salume whispered before her words cut off with a series of violent coughs. Blood flecked her lips. “I...messed up... That’s all this was...”

“You’re really such an idiot,” Reko laughed. “Boss didn’t order you to save Iris so if you survive this, you’re gonna get punished.”

“You...think...?”

“We were ordered to carry the supplies and to act as a shield for Kaarlo if needed. Don’t you remember?”

“Ah... I’m scared, so I...think I’ll just die now, thank you...”

“You must be all right if you’re still able to joke around.”

*No, she’s not,* Asura thought. Reko was acting as usual, but Salume was pushing herself to keep up with the conversation. Even so, the rule of the group was to die a vivacious death. Salume was simply trying to follow that philosophy. She’d be a good member of the team. *So please, don’t die.*

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# **Part Four, Chapter Seven: “If you’re going to live, you can sob as hideously as you wish.” I don’t want to die! I don’t wanna die!**

*If it’s the three of us, we can do this,* Jyrki thought.

Lumia parried the chimera’s attacks while Marx attacked from the monster’s flank. By the time Jyrki landed in the treetops, the chimera had already forgotten about his existence. Lumia was only focused on parrying the attacks and so she didn’t go on the offensive, but she managed to corral the chimera towards the tree Jyrki was in.

He leaped down onto the chimera’s back and slammed the Fireball he held into it. As the monster started to buck, Jyrki jumped off and immediately leaped away, following the principles of fire and maneuver. Right when Lumia and Marx were about to attack the struggling monster, they heard Asura yell for Lumia.

It was clear from the scream that something had gone terribly wrong, and all three of them froze for a moment, distracted. The chimera took advantage of the opening to leap away from the group and roll on the ground to extinguish the flames.

“I’m going! I’ll leave this to you!” Without hesitation, Lumia ran off towards the main group.

“We’re going to move, Jyrki!” Marx exclaimed. “The smoke and the flame are going to get in our way soon!”

The fire the chimera breathed was burning their surroundings. Though it still counted as a small fire, it would become dangerous if it spread farther. If they had to continue their fight against the chimera, it was best to take it somewhere else.

Jyrki and Marx leaped from branch to branch as they moved through the forest while the chimera followed them. Inside of a forest, Jyrki and Marx

were able to travel much faster than the chimera and its giant body. Smaller bodies lent themselves to better maneuverability thanks to all the canopies of leaves that could be used to hide, as well as all the nooks and crannies to use as stepping stones in the air.

“We’ll kill it here!” Marx yelled as he jumped down and slashed his sword out at the chimera.

But the chimera dodged the attack. Jyrki leaped down from the branch, swinging his tomahawk. The chimera didn’t avoid it and instead swung its right arm, perfectly timed to smack Jyrki out from the air.

“Tsk.”

Jyrki immediately pivoted from an offensive stance to a defensive one and parried the chimera’s front paw with the blade of his tomahawk. The force behind the blow still tossed him to the side. Before the chimera could continue its assault on Jyrki, Marx attacked the chimera and redirected its attention to him.

“It’s tough without the vice cap’n here!” Jyrki said. He’d had to roll on the ground to kill the momentum behind the attack before he could get up.

He saw Marx dodge the chimera’s front paw by jumping to the side. The monster ended up hitting a thick tree and snapping it in half. Its strength was incredible. Eating a direct hit from that would instantly disintegrate your bones.

“Shit, it ain’t jokin’ around!”

“It’s possible to deflect its attacks if you focus. Calm down, Jyrki. This thing is slower than Iris.”

Despite the chimera’s large body, it moved extremely fast. However, its speed only seemed impressive when compared to its size. Jyrki had already attacked it with a direct Fireball. Though the monster put it out, they were still able to damage it.

“Yeah, I know that!” Jyrki said.

The chimera had turned its attention to Marx and had left its back open to Jyrki, so Jyrki threw his tomahawk at it. His weapon dug into the chimera’s body, but it was hardly a lethal blow. It jerked and froze briefly at the sudden pain, and Marx took the opportunity to slash at it with his sword.

“Damn, its fur is like armor. We can damage it, but we can’t kill it. Jyrki, your Fireball is still our only hope.”

“Yeah, I know that too.” Jyrki created a Fireball in his right hand, but he

had to get close to lob it at the beast.

The chimera was attacking Marx who was using his sword to deflect its claws. Jyrki quickly closed the distance from behind. However, the chimera's tail swung at him from the side with the same arc and speed as a whip.

"Whoa!" He just managed to block it with his left arm, but pain shot up the entire limb.

*Shit, I think it's broken.* However, who cared about a bit of pain? Who cared about a broken arm? Jyrki had survived Asura Lyona's torture resistance training. Something as trivial as agony wouldn't stop him.

"Don't look down on Moon Blossom!" He slammed the Fireball in his right hand into the chimera's butt and immediately, its fur caught on fire.

The monster screeched in pain and leaped to the side before it started to thrash on the floor. Jyrki immediately summoned another Fireball as Marx jumped in to attack the chimera with his sword. Their plan had always been for Marx to act as a decoy while Jyrki used his magic to deal actual damage.

Suddenly, an arrow planted itself in the chimera's right hind leg.

"Reinforcements, you were too slow!" Jyrki complained even as he tossed the Fireball through the air.

Normally, Fireball couldn't travel a long distance and could only fly at slow speeds. However...

"Accelerate."

At the same time Jyrki threw the Fireball, Iina cast Accelerate on the flames. Before that Fireball hit the chimera, Jyrki created yet another Fireball and immediately launched it. Just as before, Iina cast Accelerate on the second one. Marx had kept the chimera so busy that it couldn't react in time to the two spells, making it scream.

It tried to jump to the side, but soon collapsed to the ground. With an arrow stuck in its leg, it couldn't get very far. Yet another Fireball landed on its body and the combined flames consumed the chimera's body. Marx readied his sword, holding it above his head. The moment he swung down, Iina cast Accelerate upon his arms. The monster's head was separated from its shoulders and fell onto the ground.

"We did it..." Jyrki said with a sigh of relief. "You were too slow, Iina..."

"I didn't know where you guys were..." Iina replied with a light shrug.

“The place where we were originally fighting got set on fire,” Marx explained as he swung his sword through the air to get rid of the blood on it. “We moved here after the vice captain left us.”

“It’d be so stupid if we died in a fire, right?” Jyrki laughed. Since the fire wasn’t a very big one, it would die down once rain came in.

“Jyrki, how’s your arm?” Marx asked.

“It’s all swollen. Speakin’ of, Marx, you’re covered in wounds too.”

“Look at the pot calling the kettle black.” The two of them grinned at each other.

“High-tier monsters really are super strong... The intermediate-tier ones were so easy...”

“Ah, yeah, but hey, on the bright side, aren’t we super strong? I’m pretty shocked at myself. Plus, it’s nice to know my magic is super effective against monsters. They burned like crazy.”

Granted, it wasn’t as if every single monster in the world was covered in fur. But Jyrki was in too good a mood for logic.

“Yes. We’re strong and we will only continue to grow stronger as we increase our ranks. I believe that we’re still fairly weak if we’re fighting alone,” Marx said calmly.

“That’s why I said ‘we,’ yeah? I think we’d die if Boss wanted us to face down one of these things all by ourselves. I’m sure she and the vice cap’n could do it though. I don’t think we’re that great just yet either.”

All three of the mercenaries present wouldn’t have been able to defeat the chimera had they been on their own. It was only because they’d all fought and worked together that they had been able to eliminate a high-tier monster without Lumia or Asura present.

“I also...thought intermediate-tier monsters would be impossible for us to kill... I underestimated us...”

“Friends and teammates are a good thing to have, especially when they’re working towards the same thing as you,” Marx said, sounding like he was lost in thought.

“Was it tough being in the knights?” Jyrki asked with a small smirk.

Marx fit in so well with Moon Blossom that it was hard to imagine his philosophies lining up with the Knights of the Azure Skies.

“Ah,” Iina said, sounding like she just remembered something. “Speaking of friends and teammates...Salume probably died.”

“For real?! A chimera got her?!” Jyrki exclaimed, sounding terribly shocked.

“Yeah... Its claws were deep inside her...so she might not make it... I dunno why Salume tried to protect Iris... I knew that we wouldn’t be able to count on Iris...”

“I see. So that’s why Boss called for the vice captain.” Marx crossed his arms with a grimace.

“Let’s go meet up with the main group. I’m worried about Salume but if Iris can’t fight, then that means Boss is the only combatant.”

“I agree. The vice captain will be busy healing Salume and she won’t be able to help in a fight. There might be more monsters lurking about. We’re heading back.”

“Since it’s on fire...we’re gonna have to take another path...”

The three of them sheathed their weapons and ran off into the forest.

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“Ugh... It hurts...” Salume groaned, her voice thick with tears.

The anesthetic effects of Asura’s Floral Cure were beginning to wear off.

“It’s all right, Salume,” Lumia said gently. “My magic can heal anything. But the downside is that it takes a lot of time. Do you understand? You will survive as long as you keep fighting and don’t give up. You have to endure this pain. Understand? Keep your eyes open. Answer me.”

“I...understand...”

Reko was currently letting Salume rest her head on his lap. Every once in a while, he placed his hand on her forehead and rubbed soothing circles into it. Asura was a distance away at Kaarlo’s side. Lumia guessed that Asura had judged they would get in the way of a fight should more monsters show up.

That was the right call. Protecting Kaarlo was their top priority.

“It’s getting dark,” Reko said as he stared up at the sky.

“Yes, the sun is starting to set. Looks like we’ll have to camp here for the night.” It wouldn’t do to move Salume in her state, especially when there was still a fifty-fifty chance that Salume wouldn’t last long enough for Lumia’s magic.

“I’m cold...” Salume whimpered.

“Yes, it’s quite chilly. Once Jyrki arrives, we’ll have him light a fire for you.” Lumia looked down at the petals Asura had placed over Salume’s injuries. They were white when Asura first created them, but now they were dyed a deep red from the blood, with only the edges still clean. Asura’s Floral Cure would lose its effect once the petals became completely red.

“Iris, switch with Asura.”

“Huh?” Iris looked up from where she was sitting on the ground and stared worriedly at Salume.

“Call Asura here and protect Kaarlo in her stead. Do you understand? Can you do it?”

“I don’t...know if I can...” Iris whispered, looking down at the ground.

“Aren’t you a hero? You’re so pathetic,” Reko said. “You’re supposed to have been able to defeat that chimera thing all by yourself, aren’t you?”

Chimeras were high-tier monsters, which meant that they were difficult for heroes to defeat by themselves. Since Reko had also been forced to memorize the bestiary, he was more than aware of that fact. Whether Reko was trying to encourage Iris through tough love or beating her while she was down, Lumia couldn’t tell. Both his expression and his tone of voice were completely neutral as he spoke.

“Fine... It’s not as if I have the right to become a hero anyway...” Iris sniffled as she rubbed at her tears. She was still in shock from seeing Salume get injured right in front of her.

“Yes, you’re probably right,” Lumia said coolly. “But Salume made the choice to protect you. It’s not something you have to concern yourself with.”

*She made a good judgment call,* Lumia thought. In terms of combat strength, they could afford to lose Salume over Iris. She likely understood that herself. However, that didn’t quell the anger burning in Lumia’s chest. There was honor in sacrifice, but not if it was a selfish decision made on your own.

Salume couldn’t protect anyone with her lack of combat experience or knowledge. If Lumia had been the one to shield Iris, she would also know how to avoid a lethal blow as well. In other words, Salume’s actions had been completely inappropriate for her skill level.

“You really went and did what you wanted instead of following orders, hmm? Even if Asura forgives you for that, I’m going to punish you. No one

wants you to die, you know? You're still just a trainee, Salume. All you needed to do was listen to us."

Even Asura must have been taken by surprise. But no one could blame her for that. How could anyone predict that Salume, a mere trainee, would jump to protect Iris, a hero?

"I'm...sorry... My body moved...of its own accord..."

"Don't do that!" Iris screamed. "Salume protected me! So don't tell her that you're going to punish her for that, Lumia! If you must, then I'll take her place! So don't do that to her..."

"Very well. That's what I'll do. Then hurry up and protect Kaarlo in Asura's place. You're hurt both mentally and physically, and you can't stop crying. But I'm not going to sit here and comfort you. Cry *after* we're done with this mission. That's your punishment."

Upon hearing Lumia's words, Iris used her right arm to wipe at her eyes. Then she stood up and ran towards Asura.

"What a weird punishment," Reko laughed.

"I'm glad that Iris fell for that," Lumia said with a relieved sigh. "Salume, you're hurting without Asura's magic, aren't you? And I still need her to stop your bleeding."

Though it was true that Lumia was angry at Salume, she'd never intended on punishing her for her actions. She was in enough pain already.

"Was that...your way of provoking Miss Iris?" Salume asked. "I...really thought I'd get...punished..."

"Why would I do that, silly?" Lumia replied with a gentle smile.

"How is she?" Asura asked as she hurried over.

"Honestly, there's still only a fifty-fifty chance that she'll make it. I'd say she'll pull through if I can heal her major wounds before my magic runs out."

"Hmm." Asura thought for a moment, her face solemn and serious. "Salume, I'm going to give you a choice. First, if you ask me properly, I can put you out of your misery. Floral Cure can ease your pain, but it can't take it away. That means you'll have to lie there and suffer for hours on end. If you think you can't handle it, then ask me for my help. Don't worry. I'll cut off your head in a single strike before you can feel any pain. In return, I ask that you die while smiling like you're having the time of your life. Since it'll be your last moments, I'm sure you'll be able to do it."

Salume was already drenched in sweat and her face was flushed from fever. But to live, she had to remain conscious. The second she fell asleep, she'd likely never wake up again.

"The second choice is that if you want to live, you can cry in as undignified a manner as you like. I permit that. In return, you absolutely cannot lose consciousness. If you still wish to live after suffering through the pain and having the fever cloud your thoughts, then saving you will become my highest priority. I can leave Kaarlo to Iris, as well as the other Moon Blossom members once they return."

"We'll need Marx here," Lumia cut in.

"I know. We need his water. Ha ha, I'm quite the greedy person. I want to finish the mission while keeping all of my mercenaries alive, so I recommend the second option, Salume. Of course, I'll respect your decision, so I won't get mad at you even if you choose the first one. All right, there's no time to think. Make your choice now."

After Asura finished talking, Salume began to sob.

"Ahh... It hurts! It hurts...!" She'd been biting back the tears the entire time, trying her best to remain strong even in the face of absolute agony. "But...I don't want to die! Boss! I don't want to die! Please, save me! I beg you!"

The fervent scream that tore out of Salume's mouth was her true feeling.

"I don't want this...! I don't want to die...in a place like this!" Through her tears and her wails, she revealed her true wish. "I haven't become anything yet! I haven't done anything yet! No! I don't want this! I want to live! I still want to see the world! If I die here, then just what was the point of my life?! Beaten by my father, sold as a courtesan, raped by disgusting men! I still kept praying that one day, I'd manage to escape, and I finally attained my freedom! I don't want to die! I don't wanna die!!!"

Salume continued to scream as if she was trying to distract herself from the pain and despair.

"Of course, Salume. You won't die. Let's switch your petals for some new ones. You made the right choice. I'll give you a nice and gentle kiss in the morning. Cry as much as you like, but don't lose consciousness. Say everything that you want to say."

# **Part Four, Chapter Eight: Is Asura Lyona special, you ask? Of course. Can't you tell by looking at her?**

Elna Heikkila had made a trip to visit a certain bow maker.

“Hmm, so this is a composite bow...” she murmured as she stared down at a bow that had been made by combining a variety of materials. She was sitting in a chair in the bow maker’s workshop and spinning the composite bow in her hand, looking it over from numerous angles.

“Lady Elna...the fact that I told you about this has to remain...”

The owner of the workshop, a man in his fifties, grimaced. He was a fairly well-known bow maker in the East Felsen region.

“Yes, I know. Can you show me the contract again?” Elna placed the composite bow back on the workbench. The owner hurriedly grabbed the contract and handed it to her. “Hee hee, little Asura sure commissioned an amazing bow.”

She read through the contract. She’d already skimmed it once, but this time, she was going through it slowly, taking in every word.

“That one there’s a prototype... It didn’t meet her needs,” the owner said as he stared at the bow.

“Looks like I hit the bull’s-eye investigating the bow!” Elna said cheerily.

All of the heroes from East Felsen had been working together to look for Matias’s murderer, but the investigation was called off. But from the moment Elna met Asura, she knew that she’d found the culprit. Perhaps Asura had done it through magic, or she had a bow more advanced than normal ones.

With that thought in mind, she’d started looking into bow makers. Since she’d prefaced her search with the fact that she was looking into Matias’s murderer, the owner couldn’t turn her away. Granted, not many people

would dare to straight up reject a request made by Great Hero Elna.

“‘You must keep quiet about the composite bow for three years,’ hmm?” Elna read from the contract.

“I’ve already received the dora for that...”

Asura had been more than happy to pay the construction fee, the completion fee, and the bribe.

“Did you ask why she wanted you to keep this a secret?”

“Yes. She said that for at least three years, she wanted her group to be the only one with the privilege of using a composite bow. Afterwards, if I want to sell the composite bow, I’m free to do so.”

“Hmm. So if you go back on your word and tell people about it, you have to pay little Asura a fine of a million dora?”

If he paid that fee, then the workshop would be forced to close down. That would be the best-case scenario. It might even lead to him and his family killing themselves rather than facing the debt.

“That’s why the fact that I told you needs to remain—”

“Yes, yes, of course,” Elna replied with a smile. “I’ll pay the million dora for you.”

That being said, Elna wasn’t that rich. It just wasn’t hard for her to make money as a hero. No employer would turn down the chance to hire a hero. Even a random bar would have more prestige if it had a hero as an employee.

“W-Wait a second, Lady Elna. You’re going to talk to her about this?”

“Oh, of couuuurse I will. I wanna turn little Asura into a hero, after all.”

Since Asura had turned her down when Elna asked her normally, she had to think of another method of recruitment. The composite bow was hardly enough evidence to prosecute Asura for Matias’s murder, but it could be useful in negotiations.

“This puts my reputation on the line... So I hope you will reconsider...”

“But you *did* tell me, didn’t youuuu?” Elna giggled. “I won’t change my mind, but don’t worry. I’m going to use your bows from now on and I’ll recommend you to other archers I know.”

She started to think about how she would convince Asura. It had been a year since the composite bow was completed, but Asura likely didn’t want it out in the world just yet. So Elna would start from there, as well as bring up Matias’s murder. The only thing left to do afterwards would be telling

her all about the merits of being a hero.

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As soon as morning came, Lumia collapsed. Her MP was completely empty and since she had been using magic all night, her stamina was at its limit as well. Lumia needed to continuously apply her healing magic, so she had to focus on her patient while using it. Since it only used up a little bit of her MP, she could maintain it for a long time. The problem with prolonged use was that it used up the entirety of the caster's—Lumia's—energy.

"Good job, Lumia. Take your time resting. Have Marx carry you when we have to leave."

"I'm so sleepy..." Lumia closed her eyes.

"Salume lived and Kaarlo's unharmed. It's truly wondrous." Asura had taken her turn to sleep, so she wasn't as tired as Lumia.

Salume was snoozing while Reko was asleep next to her. The moment the fatal wound closed up, Asura gave her permission to sleep. Her broken arm hadn't healed up yet and there was a huge scar on her body. But they could take care of all that in time.

"I agree." Marx let out a long sigh. "When will we leave?"

"I'll go ask Kaarlo. We're a little behind schedule, but it would be nice to rest up a little bit. For everyone's sake and not mine, of course."

Asura quickly walked towards Kaarlo. Though he was still in his sleeping bag, his eyes were open. Next to him stood Jyrki and Iina. Meanwhile, Iris was sleeping in her own sleeping bag.

"Jyrki, how's your arm?" Asura asked.

"Hurts. At least it ain't broken, I think," he replied with a slight shrug.

"Kaarla, our ability to fend off the monsters has taken a hit. We're behind schedule, but I want to let my people rest a little. Do you mind?"

"Can we add a day?" Kaarlo replied.

"Do you mean to the expedition schedule?"

"Yes. It was supposed to be five days total, but can we make it six? I want to properly explore the unmapped areas."

"Hmm..."

So long as Marx was around, they didn't have to worry about water. It was also lucky for them that the forest had edible nuts and plants they could

forage. Their contract also dictated that Kaarlo had to pay them ten thousand dora per day, so there was no downside to an extension.

“If we can rest until noon, then we can add a day to the trip. How about that?”

“That sounds good. Did little Salume make it?”

“Yeah. She’s fine.”

“That’s good to hear. I’m glad.” Kaarlo sighed.

“All right, let’s gather over where Salume is. We’ll take turns resting there until noon.” After Asura said that, Kaarlo crawled out of his sleeping bag.

Iina kicked Iris awake. “Iris, Salume made it.”

Upon hearing Asura’s words, Iris burst into tears.

“Stop being so emotional about it... We have to meet up with everyone there...” Iina muttered as she kicked Iris again. Still sobbing, Iris got out of her sleeping bag and started to pack it up. “What a relief...” Iina said, smiling. “I’m glad that...Salume didn’t die...”

“Yeah, I’m stoked about that too,” Jyrki said as he stretched.

After that, the group recuperated until noon. Luckily, no monsters appeared to attack them, and they were able to pass the time in peace. Then it was once again time to move.

“We’re going to change our strategy,” Asura said. “Lumia, can you walk by yourself?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I haven’t even gotten back half my MP though, and I’m only at half my usual strength. I don’t think I’ll be much help in battle.”

“Hmm. Then, Iina, you’ll be the vanguard.”

“Understood...” Iina nodded.

“If it’s a red arrow, then Iris, I want you to go on the offensive and get rid of the monster with Iina. Got it?”

“I’ll do my best,” said Iris.

“If it’s a black arrow, then I’ll join you in the attack. Everyone else is on the defense team. Reko, you’ll still be in charge of handling all the luggage. Jyrki, I want you to help him out with that. If an intermediate-tier monster appears, then don’t participate in the battle. However, if it’s a high-tier monster, drop the bags and help us out.”

“Got it.”

“Salume, you’ll be moving around on Marx’s back.”

That was the best option under the current circumstances.

“I’m sorry, Mister Marx...” Salume had survived her injuries, but she was in no condition to walk around the forest by herself. She was still running a low fever too.

“Don’t worry about it, Salume. However, if we get attacked by monsters, I’m going to drop you on the ground. Make sure you don’t hit your head.”

“A-All right.”

“Good. Then let’s get moving.” At Asura’s command, Marx bent down to pick up Salume from the floor.

“U-Um, wait a second,” Salume said apologetically. “Everyone, I’d like to thank you... I’m also sorry that I caused so much trouble...”

After Salume said that, the members of Moon Blossom one by one ruffled her hair. Even Kaarlo casually joined the crowd and gave her a few pats on the head. Though Salume looked embarrassed at all the attention, she held still.

“Um, Salume, thank you,” Iris said before she gave Salume a hug. “Thank you for protecting me. Today, I’ll return the favor!”

“That reminds me. I promised that I would kiss you, didn’t I? Well? Do you want one?” Asura asked with a grin.

“Ah...” Salume flushed, though her cheeks were already red thanks to her fever.

“If Salume won’t let you kiss her, I will,” Reko said.

“N-No! I want one...”

After she said that, Salume gently shoved at Iris, who was still hugging her, to get her to move away. Iris immediately understood what Salume wanted and let go. Then Salume closed her eyes and pursed her lips.

“I suggested a kiss...under the impression that it would be on your forehead or cheek...”

“O-Oh! R-Right... Ha ha...”

Salume turned her face slightly to present her right cheek to Asura, who gently pressed her lips against it. It was so quick and light that it was more a peck than a kiss.

“Next time, I wanna almost die.”

“And then go right to Hell? Stop thinking about stupid shit, Reko.” Asura sighed with a shake of her head.

After that, Marx picked Salume up.

“Just carry her on your back, Marx,” Asura said with a wry smile.

“Carrying her like a princess will tire you out.”

Marx looked a little embarrassed before he set Salume down, then had her climb onto his back.

“All right!” Kaarlo said and clapped his hands. “It’s time to go! Let’s make it to some uncharted lands before the sun sets!”

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Asura and the others managed to make it to the unmapped areas of the Great Forest before the next morning. They camped there and though monsters attacked them several times throughout the night, they were able to make it until sunrise. They would spend the day exploring the area, since Kaarlo wanted to find something they could use as a landmark.

Salume recovered to the point that she could walk around by herself, so Asura once again messed around with their formation. Because they hadn’t decided on a set route, there would be no vanguard. Asura would walk at the front of the group while Lumia remained at the rear. On either side of Kaarlo, they would station Marx and Iris. Aside from Reko and Jyrki, who were in charge of the luggage, everyone would move while protecting Kaarlo. Salume’s place in the formation was right next to Kaarlo. For now, it was more than enough that she could walk around without aid.

“Vice Cap’n, can you heal up my arm tonight?”

Lumia had spent the previous night healing up Salume’s arm with magic. Though it was still swollen, it was a lot better than before.

“Yes, yes,” Lumia said. “I’ll treat you if you’re a good boy.”

“I’m *always* a good boy!” Jyrki laughed. But then suddenly, he stopped.

Everyone, including Asura, stopped and tensed for battle. Asura unsheathed the claymore from her back and held it in front of her forehead. Then, while still holding on to the hilt, she started gathering magic in the palms of her hands. In this state, she could use magic at any second, though she had not yet altered its properties.

Lumia also readied her sword, on guard against any possible threats, while Marx took out his sword and focused on the surroundings. Iina nocked an arrow, ready to fire at any second. At the same time, she started

channeling, and even altering her magic in her hands so she could use it at any time. This was also so that she could switch between using her bow and her magic depending on the situation. Jyrki readied his tomahawk in his right hand and gathered his magic in his left. He could create a Fireball at the drop of a hat.

“Wh-What is up with this creepy feeling...?” Iris muttered. She took out her single-bladed sword and held it steady. She’d been doing good since the previous day, pushed forward by her strong determination to protect Salume.

“I don’t know,” Asura said. “But it’s unnatural.”

There was a strange anxiety in the air, causing cold sweat to break out on the faces of everyone present. Then, a mound appeared from the ground and someone slowly climbed out of it. Asura and the others remained still. None of them were idiotic enough to act first out of fear.

“Hu...mans...? What you doing here?” The being that emerged before Asura and the others took on a humanoid shape.

“Are you a monster that lives underground?” Marx asked.

“What you doing here?”

The being’s body resembled a female human, but with green skin. Its hair was a lighter green and so long that it reached its waist. Since it wasn’t wearing any clothes, its breasts were exposed, but it didn’t look concerned. There were two things about it that were quite curious. The first was that the bottom half of its body was a peach-colored flower. From far away, it resembled a person sitting atop a large flower. However, the reality was that the person’s entire bottom half was the flower.

The second thing was that it was talking. That meant it had enough intelligence to converse with humans. Asura swallowed and slowly removed her right hand from the claymore, but kept her left hand on it. She moved her other hand behind her back and sent a signal.

*Retreat.*

Monsters with intelligence were dangerous. It meant that they were in the upper echelon of the high-tiers. In the worst-case scenario, the monster could even be considered a peak-tier monster, which was a threat second only to a Demon Lord. It was exceedingly rare to come across one, but if it was peak-tier, there was a chance that it could slaughter all of Moon Blossom. It was still too early for them to handle such a monster.

“Sorry, was this your territory? We have no desire for conflict. Think of this as us having a walk,” Asura said, smiling up at the monster.

“A walk? Don’t understand... You all...become my food. If you do...I tell you future.”

This type of monster wasn’t in the bestiary.

“No, thanks. We don’t have any interest in knowing the future. By the way, what’s your name? I’m Asura Lyona.”

“Name... Species... Alraune... No...individual name. Become...my food. I tell...you future.”

“So you’re Alraune? It’s nice to meet you. But it’s time for us to say farewell. We’re going to leave so unfortunately, we can’t be your food.”

“Soon...salvation...come... A large shadow...will perform dance to destroy God...like divine retribution... And then...everyone die... You will be happier...becoming food now. Despair in the name of salvation will come.”

“I can’t believe you’d try to convince us to jump into your gullet with such meaningless words. It’s so ridiculous that it’s not even funny.” Asura once again held her claymore with both hands and adjusted her stance.

“Told you future. Now become food!” Plant roots began emerging from the ground.

“Run!!!”

At Asura’s yell, everyone else started running down the path they’d just come from. Asura used her claymore to slice apart the roots and buy them time. She intended on acting as the rearguard so that everyone else could escape in one piece.

At first glance, Alraune couldn’t move from the spot it was rooted in. That meant they could simply leave the area without having to push themselves and try to kill it. After cutting apart several roots, Asura started considering retreating herself when a swarm of roots pushed out of the ground, surrounding Alraune and Asura like walls.

“Oh, come on, that’s too much, don’t you think?” Asura’s mouth quirked in a half smile. “How big are your roots? It’s unbelievable...”

“I wanted you...from start... You look...very delicious.”

“Ha ha. So you’re saying you let the others escape on purpose?”

If it could create these walls, then it could’ve been able to capture everyone right at the start.

“You...were the only special one...in group. So I want you.”

“Well, I *am* a pretty girl who can use any weapon and a Fixed Element. Not to mention that I have an IQ of a hundred and ninety. Ha ha! I’m impressed that you realized how special I am! Did you see it in my future? Then I suppose that means I’ll be able to carve my name in history! Ah ha ha! Let me promise you something. I’m going to make you regret trapping me in here!”

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# **Part Four, Chapter Nine: Asura Lyona always gets beat up. Is it destiny? Or is it just because of my personality?**

“Ah...guh...”

Asura was held aloft in the air, her arms tied up by plants. Her claymore lay on the ground, surrounded by a vast number of destroyed roots. On her own, she'd managed to fight off Alraune's attempts to grab her, but there were simply too many. In the end, a few broke through her defenses, and that was how she ended up in her current situation. She'd sustained a fair amount of damage during the fight, and her entire body hurt to the point that she couldn't even tell where her injuries were.

“Now...become food,” Alraune said. Its expression remained completely blank. It dragged Asura before its eyes using its roots.

“I'm the type of person who always keeps my promises,” Asura said with a quiet chuckle. “More importantly, I have a question: why do you know about humans?” Alraune didn't reply, but there was a chance that it didn't understand what Asura was asking. “Have you eaten people in the past?”

Officially, this was unmapped territory that no one had set foot in. Judging by that logic, Asura and the rest of Moon Blossom should've been the first people the monsters here saw. And yet, Alraune saw them and clearly identified what they were.

“Turned people...to food... Adventurers...explorers...investigators... I tell them secret. Then turn to food.”

“I see. So we weren't the first.”

Many people romanticized the Great Forest into a challenge to conquer, so an unofficial team must have gotten this far. But since they never made it back, the area remained unmapped. Their adventure ended in Alraune's gullet.

“Do you...want to know secret?”

“Sounds good. Let’s hear it. It’ll serve as a nice bedtime story before you kill me.”

“Do you know...why I know words?”

“How should I know that? Did a human that you ate in the past teach you?”

Alraune made a confused sound before it continued, “They...taught humans speech. Alraune...asked them.”

“Hmm. So the first being to invent words was also the one to teach you how to speak? You must’ve been around for a long time. I guess that makes sense considering you’re a plant.”

“I told you secret... Become food.”

The flower that formed Alraune’s bottom half opened up its massive maw. It was lined with sharp, jagged teeth, and the moment it opened its mouth, a slightly sweet scent wafted through the air.

“I see. So that’s your true body, and the upper humanlike half serves as a disguise, or maybe bait? I’ll tell you a secret of mine as well, so hold on a second.”

“Secret? Want to know...” Alraune’s mouth remained open.

“You’re not a peak-tier monster. I’d say you’re probably in the middle of the spectrum for a high-tier monster. There’s a terribly unsettling air about you, but I assume that’s due to your pollen. I’m guessing that there’s a component in it that can cause anxiety in your prey. It must be a form of self-defense to make yourself seem like a stronger monster.”

Alraune didn’t reply. It simply listened to Asura speak.

“Man, you’re the first monster I’ve ever seen talk, so I thought you were a peak-tier and made everyone retreat. But my mercenaries would’ve easily killed you. Oh, and it seems that you’re unable to see your own future. Regret the fact that you trapped me in here as I kill you. Thank you for listening to me. Now, die.”

Asura activated her Mines inside of Alraune’s mouth. After seven explosions, Alraune blew up from the inside, bits of its body flying every which way. Asura fell to the ground but landed on her feet. However, she quickly pressed herself down onto the ground. The moment Alraune had exploded, the roots forming the walls all fell apart.

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“I’ll have them list my name in the bestiary as the first person to kill an Alraune,” Asura said with a dark chuckle.

The flower being its main body and its lack of defensive measures were useful pieces of information. It was also helpful to know that its strength was average among high-tier monsters, even if it was easy to feel nervous from its unsettling atmosphere.

“Asura!!!” Iris ran towards her. Since she hadn’t been hiding her footsteps, Asura wasn’t too surprised to see her.

“Didn’t I order a retreat?” Asura said as she pushed herself up to a sitting position.

“I’m not a member of Moon Blossom! Everyone was worried about you, so I turned back! Did you beat that thing all by yourself?!”

“Yep. It wasn’t very strong at all.”

“You say that...but you look all beaten up,” Iris pointed out with a dry chuckle. “And you’re all sticky! Plus you smell awfully sweet...”

“Oh. When Alraune tragically turned into a mushroom cloud, I got a healthy dose of its body fluids or nectar or sap or whatever.”

“Is that so? Are you all right? Is it poisonous?” Iris leaned down to stare into Asura’s face, her expression tight with worry.

“Alraune turned into a mushroom cloud, ha ha. Did you hear me? It turned into a *mushroom* cloud.”

“Huh?” Iris tilted her head to the side.

“Tsk, can’t you recognize a joke when you hear one?” Asura shook her head. It was no fun without a reaction.

If Jyrki was here, he’d say something like, “Wooow, Boss, you sure love sayin’ stupid shit!” and play along.

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“Boss, you’re super hot, all covered in slime like this.” The moment Asura and Iris met up with the rest of the group, Reko flung his arms around her. “Wow. But you smell so bad right now... It’s so bad that I can’t even get excited about this.” He immediately released her.

The fact that even Reko with his Asura fetish couldn’t stand to be around her was a testament to the unbelievable stink on her body.

“It’s so sweet that I feel like I’m going to throw up,” Lumia said with a

grimace.

“Boss, seriously, can you get away from here? My nose is gonna fall off,” Jyrki complained.

“This is pretty bad... Boss, you don’t smell anything?” Marx asked with a wry smile.

“See?! I told you that it’s an awfully sweet scent!” Iris exclaimed. “I’m not the one with a problem, *you* are! And yet you made fun of me and said, ‘This is why I can’t stand rich little ladies’!”

“On my end, I just smell a little sweet. Sorry, Iris. I thought you were overreacting.” In truth, from Asura’s perspective, the smell emanating from her wasn’t as bad as everyone said it was.

“You smell sweeter than a cake,” Kaarlo said with a weak smile. “Well, it’s a different kind of sweet from baked goods, I suppose.”

“And because they’re following the scent...monsters keep showing up...” Iina said calmly.

A large number of low-tier and intermediate-tier monsters were gathered around Asura. There were so many that it was tempting to describe them as a swarm. They’d never had to deal with an assault of this scale before. In that case, the reason behind their appearance was likely Asura’s smell.

“So it’s my fault that monsters are gathering? Shit... I’ll take this off for now, then.” Asura quickly took off her robes.

“This ain’t good. There’s so many that it’ll be tough to kill ’em all.”

“I know. It would be difficult to emerge completely unscathed if we’re dealing with this number of monsters. It’ll be best to retreat. Marx and Iris, I want you two to hold up the rear. The fight against Alraune took a lot out of me so I can’t handle it.”

The monsters were slowly closing in, emitting low growls the entire time.

“But they’re here thanks to your smell, Boss,” Reko pointed out. “If we leave you here as bait and escape, wouldn’t we be all right?”

“Are you sure you like me? That was a pretty sadistic thing to say. Chills went down my spine.”

“Is this really the time to be having chills?” Marx asked, sounding exasperated. “Please hurry up and decide on a course of action.”

“Kaarло, I’m sorry, but can we retreat here? So long as we’re alive, we can come back at any time for another expedition. Or would you rather we

all die here?"

"I think that adding to the bestiary was enough of a success for this trip. I'd love to hire you all again next time."

"Great! Retreat! Hurry!"

The moment that Asura and the others started to run, the swarm of monsters leaped at them.

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Asura and the rest of Moon Blossom were completely covered in wounds. The sun had already set and they were sitting around their camp. They'd run a significant distance while fighting off enemies the entire time, so everyone was exhausted. None of them even knew how many monsters they'd slaughtered.

Asura was currently letting Marx use his attack magic on her to clean off the scent that had seeped into her skin. She'd stripped off the rest of her clothes while they were fleeing and thus was entirely naked. It was nighttime so even with a campfire, getting drenched by water felt freezing. However, thanks to her taking off the sullied clothing, the monsters stopped attacking them halfway through their retreat.

"That damn Alraune sure left behind a nasty souvenir," Asura complained in a low breath.

Her entire body was covered in thin scratches and bruises. No one remained unharmed. Lumia was casting healing magic on Iris, who had been in charge of protecting the group's rear. She had the most injuries because of that. Salume, too, collapsed as soon as they'd finished setting up the campsite. She was snoring away in her sleeping bag, but considering how much she ran when she had barely recuperated from a fatal wound, no one could blame her. Iina and Jyrki were guarding the perimeter, but the two of them were fatigued as well.

"A horde of low-tier and intermediate-tier monsters is a lot more troublesome than a single high-tier," Marx said as he stopped casting his magic. His attack magic was simply splashing water onto someone, so it was useful as a makeshift shower.

"Yeah," Asura replied as she shook the excess water out of her hair. Then she immediately sat down in front of the fire.

“Would you like to wear my robes? They’re covered in blood though.”

Marx was also in the rearguard with Iris. He’d been soaked with the blood of the monsters he killed during the escape. The reason he was less injured than Iris was due to the difference in their combat experience.

“Nah. Once I’m dried off, I’m going to get into a sleeping bag.”

“Boss, you’re super hot all beaten up,” Reko said as he hugged Asura from behind. “I’ll warm you up.” He unbuttoned the front of his robes and spread the fabric out as if he was trying to cover up Asura’s body.

“What excites you more? Getting hit by me or seeing me all beaten up?”

“Seeing you messed up like this is the best!”

“Are you...becoming a sexual sadist, or is this just an extension of your fetish for me? Well, whatever. Stop pressing your erection against my back.”

“Okay.” Reko moved his hips away from Asura slightly. Despite all of his faults, he was still a fairly obedient kid.

“A sexual sadist,” Marx said. “That’s someone who derives sexual excitement from causing physical or mental pain?”

“That’s right. It’s a sort of paraphilia that’s different from regular sadism. Consensual play between partners is healthy, but true sadists don’t give a damn about the other person, nor do they bother getting permission. In my past life, these types were usually pretty nasty criminals. They were the kinds of serial killers who would murder you after raping you or torture you to death.”

“They sound even worse than you, Boss.”

“In a way. I get excited from being hurt rather than hurting others, especially when my life is in actual danger.” Asura chuckled after she said that.

She loved situations where life and death were balanced on a knife’s edge. Her heart was still pounding from the retreat earlier that day. The fight with Alraune wasn’t bad either. If there was one thing Asura wanted to ask for, it was for Alraune to have been smarter, stronger, and been better at entrapping her. That would’ve been amazing.

“I see...” Marx said with an awkward smile.

“My mind broke and I got a Boss fetish, and now I’ve turned into a sadist too?”

“It’s an absolute fact that your mind is broken and that you have a me

fetish, but I'm still not sure about the sexual sadism part. There's a good chance that it's just another version of your kink."

"I have a Boss fetish. I love you, Boss."

"Ha ha, I like women, but it feels great to be popular," Asura laughed. "For now, let me rest. Give me a gentle shake when it's time for me to stand watch. We'll just be returning to the city tomorrow, so I doubt there'll be any more major threats."

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## **Part Four, Chapter Ten: “Everyone repents before divinity.” Aside from me, right? I’m always snubbed.**

Three days had passed since Asura and the others returned to the castle town of Kotopori Kingdom. Everyone had the last two days off to rest and recuperate from their injuries.

“Now, the reason I gathered you all here first thing in the morning is because I wanted to know everyone’s conditions.”

All members of Moon Blossom were sitting in the room Asura had booked. Despite not being part of the group officially, Iris was also present. Iina wasn’t making a fuss about how crowded it was because the room was extremely spacious. Since they always had meetings in her room, Asura had decided to book one of the inn’s larger offerings this time. The bed was meant for married couples to share, so it was a little too big for Asura to sleep in by herself. However, since Salume and Reko snuggled under her covers almost every night, it was perfect for the three of them and their small bodies.

“I’m feeling fine,” Lumia said. “I can leave at any time, though I suppose we have to wait for Lady Elna to arrive.”

“I’m also all right. My condition is good enough to take on another job if you wish,” Marx said. “It would be nice to receive the money from Lady Elna first, though.”

“I’m also feeling fine,” Jyrki said as he shook out his left arm. “Vice Cap’n, you were pretty busy, weren’t you? You were healin’ up everyone like every day.”

“But I’m feeling fine since I was able to properly rest up in the inn’s bed. It’s completely different from a sleeping bag in the forest.”

“Has old age made roughing it out in the wilderness harder for you?” Asura chuckled.

“You’ll know how I feel fifteen years from now, I’m sure,” Lumia replied with a light shrug.

“I’m...fine. I didn’t get any major injuries... But I wanna have fun before the next job...like we usually do...”

“I agree with Miss Iina,” Salume said with a cheery smile. “I want to eat some yummy food. Ah, that’s not to say the inn’s food is bad or anything...”

Salume had almost completely recovered, and the sight of her healthy, rosy cheeks naturally put a gentle smile on Asura’s face. *I’m glad that you’ve got your energy back. I’m going to put you through Hell to turn you into a proper soldier-mage*, she thought, managing to hide the cruel grin she wanted to make.

“I want to eat something delicious too. Preferably using Boss’s naked body as a plate.”

“What kinda kink is that, Reko?” Jyrki snorted.

“That’s so niche, I can hardly hope to comprehend it,” Marx said.

“Reko, you’re such a pervert.” Iris glared at him. “Oh, I’m fine too, by the way.”

“Good, good. Since it looks like everyone is doing all right, we can do some light training tomorrow,” Asura said, a bright smile blossoming over her face. “But I don’t believe we can take on a job under the current circumstances. That can wait until after we get our money from Elna and then we can go have some fun, as per everyone’s request.”

After she said that, they noticed a ruckus outside. Asura walked over to the window to see what was going on, followed by Lumia and Jyrki.

“What is it?” Lumia asked as she pushed open the window.

As she did so, they heard someone yell, “A dragon! A dragon appeared!”

“Oh? A dragon is a high-tier monster, isn’t it? I remember seeing several species in the bestiary,” Asura said.

Kaarlo had sold the Alraune’s information to the government, where they planned to add it to the bestiary. Asura’s name would also be included in the entry, since she had been the one to defeat it, and she couldn’t wait for the next issue. A company owned by all the countries bordering the Great Forest was in charge of publishing the bestiary, but since explorers needed the latest information to safely trek into the woods, updated issues came out at a fairly fast pace.

“I wanna see a dragon,” Reko said.

“Me too!” Salume exclaimed.

“You’d never see a dragon under normal circumstances,” Marx hummed. “I’m not surprised to see them appear in Kotopori Kingdom.”

“All right, let’s go check it out,” Asura said. “Fighting it won’t earn us any money, so there’s no need for any bloodshed. This is just a little field trip. I’m interested in dragons as well.”

“That part of you reminds me you’re still just a kid,” Lumia said pensively. Then she, along with the other members of Moon Blossom, filed out of the inn.

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Asura and the others felt a deep disquiet at the bizarre sight before them. But Asura’s curiosity got the better of her. She’d already experienced fighting against high-tier monsters, so she thought it would be all right to get close.

The dragon had landed in the main street, and though the Knights of the Azure Skies had sealed off the surrounding area, they were on their knees for some reason. The members of Moon Blossom weaved through the sea of kneeling people until they stood right in front of the dragon. Its body was covered in green scales and it had an aggressive aura about it. With its long tail and massive wings, it was exactly what one would expect from a dragon, but its body was rather compact.

If Asura had to compare it to something from her past life, it was about the size of a bus, or perhaps a little smaller. However, the dragon wasn’t the problem. Two people—a girl with red hair and a woman with white hair—leaped down from atop the dragon. They were definitely special if they could control a high-tier monster.

“We didn’t have to waste time or effort looking for her,” the red-haired girl said.

“So it seems.” The white-haired woman’s eyes were focused directly on Lumia.

“You two look exactly the same,” Asura said. The white-haired woman’s face was the spitting image of Lumia’s, as if they were twins. “You agree with me, don’t you?” She turned around and saw the rest of Moon Blossom on their knees, their heads bowed.

“I...” Jyrki said, sounding like he was about to cry. “I wanna repent for being a bandit and stealin’ a buncha stuff.”

“Me too...” Iina said, kneeling as well. “I did so many bad things... I don’t like pain, but I think I should get some punishment...”

“My parents disowned me because I became a soldier-mage, and that’s always been a weight on my mind...” Marx said, his eyes squeezed shut.

“Hey, what’s going on?” Asura asked, confused at her mercenaries’ behavior.

“I’m strong, but that’s my only merit. I don’t know anything! I don’t actually have the right to be a hero! I’m not heroic at all, considering I needed a trainee like Salume to protect me!” While still kneeling, Iris frustratedly slammed her fist upon the ground.

“I... What should I do? I was pretty much the person who killed Uno... I have to be punished for that...” Salume stared at the white-haired woman with dull eyes.

“Even when my family was being murdered, all I did was run... I couldn’t do a single thing to help,” Reko said, sounding vexed.

“H-Hey, you were alive?” Lumia sobbed. “You stayed alive for me? I’m so sorry that I wasn’t able to protect you. I *couldn’t* protect you.”

“It’s all right,” the white-haired woman said with a smile. “Your name is Lumia Canarre now, yes? I’m very happy that you took on that name.”

*Just who are these people?* Asura wondered. “I assume you’re God, the leader of the Felmafi — I mean, of a criminal organization? The one who calls herself Jeanne Autun Lala?”

The white-haired woman didn’t reply to Asura’s question. The red-haired girl did instead. “That’s right. My older sister took on the name of Jeanne Autun Lala. As for me, my name is Tina. It’s very nice to meet you, Asura Lyona.”

“You know me? I suppose I can’t be surprised, considering I destroyed a branch of your organization,” Asura said with a light shrug.

“Asura... Why don’t you kneel?” Tina asked, staring at Asura as if she was looking at something absolutely incomprehensible.

“More like, why is everyone else kneeling before you two? Did you do something? Is this magic, or perhaps a special skill?”

“They’re not kneeling at the two of us, you know? Everyone here is prostrating before my older sister’s divinity; it has nothing to do with me.”

“Oh, so this is divinity? How interesting.”

This was the first time Asura met one, but people with divinity appeared occasionally throughout history. Whenever they did, they always brought salvation. It was unknown if someone destined to become a savior possessed divinity, or if someone became a savior *because* they had divinity. The strength of their divinity depended on the scale of what they would save. Ten years ago, Jeanne Autun Lala saved the country, and even though she accomplished such a feat, she hadn’t attained this level of divinity.

Asura heard that, at most, Jeanne had been able to make her voice echo like that of a divine revelation and emanated a faint glow. She could also make people want to receive a light scolding from her. However, all of these traits were more than enough to make her seem special. Everyone had taken Jeanne at her word when she referred to herself as a disciple of God. Granted, that opinion had changed the moment she was found guilty of her crimes. The moment Jeanne admitted to her sins, she lost her divinity.

“Now then, how strong is the power of divinity? Let’s give it a try,” Asura said with a grin. “Lumia! If you can hear me, then stand up! This is an order!”

Asura spoke in an uncharacteristically stern voice. Lumia’s body twitched, then she quickly pushed herself to her feet before she made an expression like she just came back to herself.

“Even I was about to lose myself in her divinity. I probably would have if Asura hadn’t called me back,” Lumia said as she slumped her shoulders.

“Huh, is that the best divinity can do?”

It was more like putting them under a light hypnosis, or smoking too much marijuana and having a bad trip.

“You’re unaffected by divinity on top of being able to pull others back from it? How does that work?” Tina asked, looking completely confused.

“My Asura,” Lumia said, “has no sense of sin. She has zero intention of ever repenting for any of her sins, nor does she understand anything about God. To her, divinity might as well not even exist.”

“That’s impossible! Even beasts can feel some measure of guilt!”

“That’s right,” Lumia said calmly. “Asura is worse than a beast and she’s always been that way.”

“Hey, that really hurts my feelings, so can we cool it with the bad-

mouthing?” Asura could remain unaffected because she felt nothing about the sins she committed. “It’s true that people consider me insane, that I have low empathy, and that I don’t feel the need to repent. But to consider me lower than a beast for that is pretty mean.”

However, the Asura born in this world had been an ordinary person. Normally, her consciousness was a mix of the original Asura and her past life, but if her saner personality had been at the forefront of her mind, then she might have also bowed in the face of divinity.

“How interesting,” Jeanne said with a smile. “How very rare. I think I feel a little happy from this.”

Asura was the only person who didn’t confess their sins to Jeanne upon seeing her. Everyone else, including the members of Moon Blossom, either knelt or blanked out. In Asura’s opinion, they were pathetic.

“Hey, Jyrki! Snap out of it or I’ll shove Marx’s arm up your ass!”

As soon as he heard Asura’s yell, Jyrki jumped to his feet. “No thanks. My ass’ll get all ripped up.”

“Marx! Do you want to put your arm up Jyrki’s ass?”

“Absolutely not.” Marx stood up as well.

“Iina! Do you want me to tie you upside down in the air and whip you until you cry?!”

“Wha— No... No way... Please don’t get mad at me, Boss...” Iina was in tears as she also pushed herself to her feet.

“Salume! Do you want to return to the whorehouse?!”

“I absolutely refuse,” Salume said as she returned to herself.

“Reko! Would you rather take my punishment or Jeanne’s?”

“Boss’s, of course!” Reko tried to embrace Asura, but Asura easily sidestepped him.

“As you can see,” Asura said with a grin, “these people obey me above all else, including the power of divinity. Ha! I feel like I was just forced to watch you perform a boring party trick.”

“Th-This can’t be...” Tina muttered, trembling in shock.

“Amazing!” Jeanne exclaimed, happily clapping her hands. “Wow! This is sort of exciting, isn’t it? It feels so refreshing to not have someone repent before me!”

Upon seeing her reaction, Asura realized that Jeanne’s divinity was completely out of her control. Her trait remained active at all times,

regardless of her intentions.

“So what are you two doing here?” Asura asked. “Chances are, you’ve come to take revenge for destroying your Arnian branch, but is that the reason?”

At Asura’s words, the members of Moon Blossom, sans Lumia and Iris, took up their weapons. Iris was still punching the ground, so Asura kicked her in the side.

“I didn’t know you loved kissing the ground so much. Pervert. Is the ground your fetish or something?”

“Owww! Why’d you kick me?!” Iris yelled as she stood up, protecting her side with her hand.

“We didn’t come for revenge,” Tina said.

“That’s right. We came for Lumia Canarre. Tina convinced me that sisters should remain together...” Jeanne continued with a shrug.

“You came to take who away? Lumia? Don’t be stupid. Who gave you the right to just take away my deputy? If you want to have some tea with her on her day off, then I won’t complain. Lumia is on a new life path right now, or is that too hard a concept for you to grasp?”

“She’s not living a new life. It’s the same life she’s always lived,” Jeanne said as she glared down at Asura. “It’s been continuing ever since that day. Come with me, Lumia, and I shall save your heart before it can be crushed by your guilt. If Moon Blossom will get in the way of your salvation, then I shall dice them all into pieces and feed their flesh to my pigs.”

## **Part Four, Chapter Eleven: Who's the biggest fool in the world? Anyone dumb enough to be my enemy.**

“Tsk. It’s impossible to have a conversation with you.” There was a high chance this encounter would end in a fight. The thought didn’t excite Asura, though, since they’d basically be working for free. But Moon Blossom would still raise arms to defend themselves against any trouble that came their way.

“Come now, Lumia.”

After Jeanne said that, a slightly strong gust of wind blew through the town. Jeanne raised her left hand to keep her long hair from getting messed up and as soon as she saw that, Tina’s body twitched and shrank backward.

“You’re abusing her...?” Asura muttered. Tina’s eyes widened when she heard that before looking down as if embarrassed.

“What are you talking about?” Jeanne asked, tilting her head to the side. “I don’t understand. More importantly, let’s leave, Lumia. There’s so many things I want to talk to you about.”

Asura knew that Lumia’s heart wavered ever so slightly at Jeanne’s words. The pair of sisters had been separated for so long, missing each other the entire time. However...

“Don’t go, Lumia. Terrible things will happen to you if you do. You must have noticed yourself. Jeanne will definitely end up abusing you.”

“I would never do that,” Jeanne pouted as if she thought Asura was levying false accusations at her. “Please do not just say the first thing that comes to mind. Lumia, what do you plan to do?”

“I want to talk with you,” Lumia said after a pause. “But I’m a member of the mercenary group, Moon Blossom. So like Asura suggested, why don’t we simply have tea together on my days off?”

“Hmm...” Jeanne let out a heavy sigh. “Revised Divine Retribution:

Dance of Divine Destruction.”

She suddenly activated her magic. A fallen angel with hair as dark as the midnight sky descended while spreading her black wings. With a single stroke of her ebony sword, she beheaded four of the people who had been kneeling before Jeanne. Bright red blood splattered about, and the sight caused the civilians to regain their senses and scream. But the fallen angel mercilessly continued the slaughter, shredding anyone she saw into thin slices.

She moved through the crowd at a blindingly fast speed, slashing and killing the entire time. She dismembered them, slicing them into ribbons, with careful precision. It was so sudden that even Asura needed a second to process what she was seeing. In the blink of an eye, Jeanne created a veritable hell on Earth. All around them, they could hear people screaming and saw bloodied pieces of flesh fly through the air. The dragon shuffled from place to place, munching on the corpses it found.

“Wh-What are you doing?!” Lumia yelled.

“This is all your fault,” Jeanne said emotionlessly. “Everyone here will die because you didn’t come with me. Everyone will turn into strips of meat.”

“Just wait a second! What are you talking about? Jeanne, come on, what are you even saying?!” Lumia screamed, looking and sounding panicked.

“What do you think you’re doing?!” Iris unsheathed her sword and launched herself at Jeanne. She took careful aim and swung her sword straight down, but Tina easily grabbed the blade between the index and middle fingers of her right hand.

*Impossible*, Asura thought. Iris wasn’t using her fighting spirit, but she was still a hero. Iris herself looked like she couldn’t understand how her attack had been blocked. Tina punched Iris’s face with her left hand, sending her flying until she crashed into one of the market stalls. She didn’t get up.

“P-Please stop, Lady Jeanne!” Tina screamed frantically.

“Why should I?” Jeanne asked, reaching for the claymore on her back with her right hand.

“There’s no need to go this far! Lumia will end up hating you!”

“That’s impossible,” Jeanne said. “Lumia would never hate me. Right, Lumia? Isn’t that right?”

The entire time they were talking, the fallen angel continued to massacre the innocent civilians. The sight was so unbelievably hellish that Asura felt herself getting excited.

“Ah, shit, we should’ve come with all of our equipment.”

Asura and the others didn’t have anything other than their usual daggers, which were hidden under their robes. Their original intention had only been to come and check out the ruckus.

“Has she lost it?” Jyrki asked.

“We wouldn’t...even go this far...” Iina muttered as she looked around.

“Dance of Divine Destruction.”

“Divine Retribution!”

At the same moment Jeanne summoned another fallen angel, Lumia called upon hers. A fallen angel with black wings and an angel with white wings descended from the heavens, then immediately engaged in combat. A sword of darkness met a sword of light, viciously clashing against each other. No blood was spilled and no flesh was lost in the fight, but it was so otherworldly beautiful, Asura’s heart beat faster at the sight of it.

It was a waltz between light and darkness. With the exception of Reko, all members of Moon Blossom looked terribly shocked at the sight of Lumia’s Divine Retribution. And who could blame them? Lumia said that her magic used the light element, but she’d kept mum about her Fixed Element: Heaven.

“Ahh, Lumia, this is all your fault. If you agree to come with me, then I shall spare your friends. How about it?”

“Are you an idiot?” Asura said, shaking her head theatrically. “You? Kill us? What an unbelievably stupid joke.” She laughed the entire time she spoke.

“Lumia, make up your mind now. I can still summon more fallen angels.”

Lumia bit her lip, remaining silent, then looked around her.



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*Oh, this isn't anything special. It's just hell,* Asura thought. "There's no need to go, Lumia. This is a pain in the ass so let's just kill her here," she said with a cruel smile.

The expression resembled that of a Demon Lord's, as if she embodied the very definition of malice. Lumia closed her eyes for a moment, quietly sucked in a deep breath, and then walked up to Jeanne until she was standing right in front of her.

"I'll go... So please don't hurt any more people." The two fallen angels vanished. After she saw that, Lumia called off her own angel, then turned to look back at Asura and the rest of Moon Blossom. "Asura, you too. Please don't hurt my sister."

"Lumia."

Asura's voice as she called out to Lumia sounded a little different from usual. Even she could readily admit that it sounded like she had lost something. She even felt like her heart was racing. She had to say it: *I don't want to lose you.*

"I've always respected my mercenaries' opinions, and I'll continue to do so," Asura said, her voice trembling. "So this isn't an order. This is a plea. Don't go."

"I'm sorry, Asura. I'm leaving," Lumia said quietly.

In that moment, Asura felt a bizarre pain in her chest, as if a phantom hand tightened around her heart. The comfortable ache of loss was exactly how she had imagined it.

"Vice Captain... I don't want you to go..." Iina said, sounding like she was seconds away from crying. Iina and Lumia were polar opposites in personality, so it looked like they didn't like each other. However, that wasn't the case at all.

"I'm sorry," Lumia said.

"No... No..." Iina sniffled. The reason Iina argued with Lumia or played pranks on her was simply because she wanted her attention. This was also why she often teased Marx. She just wanted the adults to notice and play with her.

Lumia didn't respond, only standing there with a vague smile on her face.

"I see. I see how it is. Shit. Fine, go. We're retreating. Iina, I'll give you a hug later, so let's go back."

Asura turned around and in that moment, Jeanne rushed forward, her unsheathed claymore in her hand. She slashed out, her blade creating a deep horizontal cut in Asura's back. Asura fell to the ground.

"Wh-What are you doing?!" Lumia's scream came from the bottom of her heart, her voice high and shrill.

"She threatened to kill me, so I had to punish her. It's not a lethal wound, though I'm sure it'll sting quite a bit," Jeanne giggled, a dark and dangerous smile playing on her lips.

"The hell do you think you're doin'?" Jyrki snarled. "You seriously ain't leavin' here alive." He gripped his daggers in preparation for a fight.

"We were done talking..." Iina said. "But you attacked Boss. You're dead...you white-haired bitch." She, too, had her weapons ready as she glared at Jeanne.

"If the vice captain truly wants to leave, then it's not our place to try and stop her," Marx said. "But what you did just now was unforgivable. You attacked the boss as if you were playing a game." He also unsheathed his daggers, his face dark with rage.

"Anyone who hurts Boss should go to hell," Reko growled. "Die." After they returned from the Great Forest, Asura gave him permission to carry weapons. He held said weapons in his hands, tightening his hold around their hilts.



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Lumia paled as she looked at the members of Moon Blossom.

“Boss! Boss!” Salume exclaimed as she rushed to Asura’s side.

“I’m fine. She didn’t attack me with intent to kill. Calm down, everyone. That’s why I was slow to react.”

She stood up and started to paste Floral Cure petals on her wound. A fight could break out at any second. The crackling tension in the air sent a shiver down Asura’s spine.

“This is just a hypothesis, but I was probably thrown off guard. Ha, so I suppose it’s not that I didn’t react and it’s more like I couldn’t. Ah ha ha... This is the first time that’s ever happened to me. What a wonderful feeling. So go. Don’t worry about me and just go,” Asura said. “Let’s do this again another time. Don’t worry, I’ll rip you apart the next time we meet. I’ll take my time and make sure to kill you as carefully as I can. I will work to destroy you all.”

With Lumia now on the enemy’s side, there was the risk of them all being killed if they gave in to their anger and charged in. It would be better if they targeted them—Jeanne, Tina, and Lumia—individually.

“Ahh, I can’t wait. This is so exciting. Lumia, you’re the same, aren’t you? Heh heh, go on now, before I change my mind.”

Asura truly looked like she was having the time of her life. As soon as Asura finished talking, Lumia took Jeanne by the hand.

“That child sure talks a lot for a little gnat,” Jeanne said coldly before she leaped onto the dragon’s back, followed closely by Tina and Lumia.

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The dragon had flown them to an ancient castle in Central Felsen.

“We can finally have a nice, calm chat together, my dear older sister,” Jeanne said.

Jeanne had taken Lumia to her bedroom. Once they were inside, she closed the door and locked it. It was only the two of them.

“Yes...” Lumia said with a smile, though it was hard to tell what emotion was behind it. She sat down on the bed. “I’m really happy that you’re still alive, you know?”

“Yes, I know, my dear sister. I’m also delighted to meet you again.” Jeanne sat down next to her.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

“It’s fine. It’s not your fault. But if you still want a punishment...”

“No. No, that’s not it, Lumia...”

“My dear sister, I am the one who’s Jeanne now. So please, refer to me as your dear older sister Jeanne. I shall continue to call you Lumia, my dear sister.”

“Yes, that’s fine. I’ll do as you wish, my dear older sister Jeanne. I want to grant as many of your requests as I can. But that’s not it.”

“What’s not it?” Jeanne asked, a childlike expression of confusion on her face.

“I will protect you. If you want to punish me, then I’ll take whatever you want to give me. But this time, I will keep you safe.”

“From what? I’m strong, you know? Probably stronger than you, Lumia. The only way to win against me is to bring along a Demon Lord.”

“You...”

“‘My dear older sister Jeanne,’ remember? I’ll smack your bottom the next time you don’t call me by my name.”

Lumia took a small breath. “My dear older sister Jeanne, you don’t understand what you’ve done... You made a huge mistake. A really huge and frightening one...” She looked terrified, as if she was about to burst into tears.

“I don’t understand.”

“You’ve gone and made Moon Blossom your enemy!” Lumia shrieked, sounding half mad.

“Please calm down, Lumia. If you’re worried about them, then I shall go kill them any time you wish. Don’t worry.”

“Why did you do such a foolish thing?! Asura didn’t plan on fighting you! She’d intended on leaving! And yet you’ve gone and painted a huge target on your back! That last strike was completely unnecessary! If you hadn’t done that, then Asura wouldn’t have decided to go out of her way to deal with us!”

Moon Blossom and the Felmafia were now at war. Even if the Felmafia had no interest in conflict, Moon Blossom was not one to take those sorts of insults lying down.

“Why are you crying? What’s so important about them?”

“You’re going to die! That is a definite thing! You’ll die unless I protect

you, even though you managed to survive and I managed to find you again! Why did you do such a stupid thing?! Why do you think I even came with you?! It's so that you wouldn't end up on Asura's bad side!"

The first people Jeanne had killed were innocent civilians. In that case, the next targets would've been Lumia's friends. Asura had had every intention of killing Jeanne and, given the circumstances at the time, she probably could have pulled it off. Not Asura by herself—rather, the members of Moon Blossom, with Lumia included, could have finished the task. Lumia had left Moon Blossom precisely so that she wouldn't have to see Jeanne die.

"I will not die," Jeanne said.

"You will! That's why I'll protect you!"

"Lumia." Jeanne's voice was frigid and Lumia twitched back at the sound of her name. "How many times did you say 'you' just now? You're such a bad girl." Jeanne grabbed Lumia and pulled her down until she was lying over Jeanne's lap.

"Hey, wait a second! Listen to what I have to..." But Jeanne ignored Lumia. Instead, she rolled up the hems of Lumia's robes and pulled down her pants and underwear. "You've got to be kidding, right? What are you doing?!"

Lumia tried to fight back, but Jeanne used her superior strength to hold her down. Though Lumia was used to being completely naked, she had little experience in only exposing just part of her body, so this was pretty embarrassing for her.

"I said I would spank you. Why can't you just obey me?"

Jeanne slapped the palm of her hand against Lumia's buttocks. The pain was so intense that it didn't feel like a smack, and Lumia's back arched against it. *What is this? Just how much strength is she putting behind her blow?* She could tell that Jeanne was using fighting spirit, but even so, the force was immense. She was clearly used to doing this. Tina's reaction to Jeanne raising her hand earlier had been like that of an abused child.

"I'm your older sister Jeanne. Do you understand? I'm your dear older sister Jeanne."

Jeanne continued her assault as Lumia's mind raced to calculate how many more slaps she could endure. It hurt so much that if she hadn't received torture resistance training, she would have screamed.

“I’m your older sister Jeanne. Now say it.”

Another slap landed against her buttocks. This wasn’t good. The damage was starting to accumulate and the more Jeanne hit her, the more painful it felt. Lumia would only be able to last about thirty more slaps at most.

“I understand! I’m so sorry, my dear sister Jeanne! I’ll call you that! So please let me down! We have to come up with a plan or Asura will—”

“No. The most important part of discipline is right at the beginning. You must listen to your dear older sister Jeanne, all right? You’re the little sister after all, Lumia.” Jeanne followed up her sentence with yet another smack.

“Why?! It hurts, my dear sister Jeanne! This isn’t the time for this!”

“That doesn’t matter. Please repent on your mistakes. You’re only hurting because you didn’t listen to me, Lumia.”

It was impossible to get through to her. Using the profiling techniques Asura taught her, Lumia quickly analyzed Jeanne’s behavior. It was almost certain that Jeanne had lost her mind. No matter what happened, it was someone else’s fault and not hers. She was also a sadist who used this punishment to both hurt and humiliate Lumia. The slaps were attacking Lumia’s body and mind.

At the same time, she was exercising her desire to dominate someone. People with such a strong need for control tended to have a deep-seated sense of powerlessness. She must have had some trauma in her past that forced her to realize how little power she had, and that same event must’ve broken her mind. Lumia guessed it probably had to do with what had happened ten years ago.

Jeanne wasn’t facing reality. She was lost in a world of her own fantasy, and she lost control of her emotions as soon as the real world didn’t go the way she imagined it to.

*She’s a lot more broken than I thought!*

# **Part Four, Chapter Twelve: Defeat me!**

## **Please defeat me! You can take as much time as you wish! Oh, I love the feeling of goose bumps!**

“So, what’re we gonna do now?”

As soon as they returned to the inn, an irritated Jyrki asked the question. The members of Moon Blossom were gathered in Asura’s room, including Iris. Marx had been carrying her back from the main street. Iris had regained consciousness on the way there, but remained in Marx’s arms, her expression twisted in frustration.

It was understandable, though. She hadn’t been able to raise a finger against Tina, who was about her age. If she didn’t feel frustrated after that, then she really should quit being a hero.

“We’ll go back to Arnia,” Asura said from her spot on her bed. “We’ll ask Circie to give us information on the Felmafia headquarters in other countries and go to them.”

“I see,” Marx said from his position near the wall. “We’ll go destroy them?”

“Marx, where’s the fun in that? We’re mercenaries, so we’ll have someone hire us. I’m sure there are plenty of military police who want to see the Felmafia bases destroyed.”

“How about the vice cap— I mean, Lumia?” Iina asked.

“If she appears before us as an enemy, then it’ll be business as usual. We’ll kill her. There’s no need for any sympathy or hesitation. Just kill her,” Asura said calmly, as if it was nothing to her.

“That’s gonna be tough, emotionally speakin’. To be honest, I really liked the vice ca— I mean, Lumia,” Jyrki said.

“I’m sure that goes for everyone here. But the enemy is the enemy. Lumia chose this path of her own accord, so there’s nothing we can do

about it.”

“Um, but,” Salume said apologetically, “Miss Lumia left because she wanted to protect us, right? So there’s a chance that we won’t have to fight her?”

“That’s impossible,” Asura said with a careless shrug. “That idiot wasn’t protecting us. She was protecting Jeanne. To put it bluntly, if Lumia’d remained on our side, we could’ve killed Jeanne back then.”

“Is that so?” Salume asked after a pause, her eyes wide. “That spell was so strong and, um...”

“Yeah, it was. It’s nowhere in the same ballpark as a normal spell, and so strong that it’s ridiculously unfair. But we’re soldier-mages, remember? We’d already seen it before, so there’s no way it would work on us.”

“Yeah. It was scary, but it ain’t gonna be enough to kill us, Salume,” Jyrki said.

“Yeah... We could’ve killed that white-haired woman... The problem was...”

“Tina, right?” Iris said from her spot on the ground. “She was way stronger than Lord Axel or Lady Elna.”

“That’s exactly right. Unfortunately, I couldn’t see myself winning against Tina either. To think that someone of her caliber was hiding away in the shadows this whole time. How interesting.”

“That’s rare. I don’t often hear you say that you can’t win against someone, Boss,” Reko said, looking at Asura with a slightly worried expression.

“To put it bluntly, we’re outclassed. Of course, that only applies to the level we’re at right now. Who knows what’ll happen in the future? But in any case, since dealing with Tina now is impossible, I’m going to try winning her over to our side.”

“Winning her over?”

“That’s right. She was so strong, and yet she was obedient to Jeanne. This is just a hypothesis, but I think Jeanne’s brainwashing her through abuse. In that case, there’s a chance we can recruit her to our side once we free her from it. However, this is not a certain thing. Did any of you notice something?”

“Is it really brainwashing? It looked...like she liked Jeanne...”

“But she’s being abused,” Salume said in a sharp voice. “Her feelings of

affection might be nothing more than a trick of her mind. Though I hate him now, I still liked my father even while he was beating me.”

“When Tina twitched back, she hid her hands behind her back. I wonder if she got trained into doin’ that whenever she got punched around,” Jyrki said.

“It looked to me like she was trying to protect something,” Reko said.  
“Maybe she usually gets whipped on her back or her butt.”

“That’s a common punishment in Central Felsen. Reko’s guess is probably right,” Marx said. “Granted, they use normal whips and not ones that are specifically for torture.”

“She’s probably not getting whipped on her back. If she was, then she wouldn’t wear clothes with such a short hem,” Salume pointed out. “You could see Miss Tina’s belly with what she wore so even the slightest breeze would reveal her back. I don’t think she’d want others to see her wounds. Speaking from experience, even if she’d been ordered to wear such clothes, she’d put in some effort to conceal her injuries or ensure no one sees her back. So if she *is* getting hit, she’s getting hit on her bum. Even if someone sees what’s under her skirt, she can cover things up with her underwear.”

“You guys really are amazing...” Iris said, looking down at the ground. She’d realized just how powerless she was.

“Will the same thing...happen to Lumia?” Iina asked.

“Probably,” Asura said with a small shrug. “Are you worried, Iina?”

“Not really... It’s just that if she had to get smacked around by that white-haired bitch...I’d rather it be me doing the smacking... I told her not to go...”

“Then smack her. If Lumia says she wants to come back to us, let’s smack her around until she cries and then let her back in. If she wants to remain our enemy, you can slap her all you want before you kill her.”

“May I ask a question about Lumia?” Marx asked.

“Yeah, go ahead. Lumia isn’t one of us anymore, so there’s no need to hide anything.”

“Which one is the real Jeanne? They both had the same face and could use an angel of death.”

“Lumia, obviously. Lumia Canarre was the one who once called herself Jeanne Autun Lala.”

“So that means the white-haired one was Lumia Autun?” Jyrki asked.

“That’s right. Though this is only a hypothesis based on their physical similarities and their conversation, it’s probably correct,” Asura replied.

“Wait, so that means that the older sister is using the younger sister’s name, and vice versa?” Iris asked. “Why would they do that?”

“That explanation can come later. Granted, I only know Lumia’s side of the story.” Asura turned to look at Iris. “What will you do, Iris? Are you going to report Lumia’s true identity to the Great Heroes?”

“I don’t know...” Iris murmured, looking down at the ground.

“I see. Well, do what you wish. For convenience’s sake, we’ll refer to the white-haired one as Jeanne. It’s too confusing otherwise.”

“Kay,” Jyrki said.

“Sorry to change the subject...but who should be our new vice captain?” Iina asked. After some thought, she continued, “Marx?”

“Sounds good,” Asura said. “Marx, you’re our new vice captain from today.”

“Me?”

“If you don’t want the position, we can always give it to Salume.” After Asura said that, Salume’s shoulders jumped.

“That...will kill us...” Iina said.

“I’m cool with Marx,” Jyrki said. “He was the strongest after the vice cap’n too.”

“I’m fine with that too,” Reko said. “Well, if you guys realllly insist, then I can be the vice captain, of course.”

“That’ll kill us too...” Iina said, looking like she was feeling sick. “So, Marx...please...”

“Hmm. Then I’ll be glad to take up the position.”

“It looks like we found our new vice captain,” Asura said. “I’m counting on you.”

“Understood,” Marx said.

“Hey...” Iris said. “Um...I...am absolutely useless, right? I haven’t accomplished anything at all...”

“That’s not true. I think you did a good job in the Great Forest,” Asura said.

“But I wasn’t able to protect anyone today either... Even though I’m a hero, I wasn’t able to stop Jeanne and got knocked out in one hit...”

“Your opponent was too strong. There’s nothing you can do about that.

Switch gears, Iris," Asura said coldly. "You said it yourself. Tina is stronger than two Great Heroes. We wouldn't have been able to defeat her either, so you really have nothing to worry about. The people who died were either unlucky or weak. You don't need to have them on your conscience—"

"Stop that! Stop saying things like that! I want to become stronger! I want to become someone who can protect others!" Iris looked desperate.

"So you say. But it's not as if you can magically become stronger just by wishing for it," Marx pointed out.

"I know! So please, teach me how to be a soldier-mage so that I can be better! If I remain as useless as this, then what was even the point of becoming a hero?!" Iris broke out into sobs.

"I'd like to make something clear just in case. You don't want to join Moon Blossom, right? You just want to learn how to use our techniques?" Asura asked. Iris nodded in response. "Then that'll be a million dora. Do you want to pay in installments? If you help us with our work, I think you'll be able to pay it off in no time. I'll be giving you your fair share of the last job's payment as well."

Iris nodded again after Asura finished speaking. Asura chuckled. This was truly an auspicious turn of events. How wonderful. How exhilarating. Her body trembled with joy. Iris was unmistakably a powerful fighter and in terms of pure potential, she was better than even Lumia, who had been considered the most powerful hero in history.

*That was also how Lumia described me before. Iris will become an amazing fighter, so long as we put in some real, earnest effort in training her. She could even become someone on my level.*

One day, sometime in the future, they would have to face off against Iris in a gruesome fight to the death. It would be a battle so painfully sad and delightfully fun, Asura's chest would burst from the kaleidoscope of emotions.

*Oh, I see. Is this how you felt as you raised me, Lumia? In that case, the time has come for you to harvest the fruits of your labor.*

Lumia had left Moon Blossom to protect Jeanne, as well as to defeat Asura. Or perhaps she left so that Asura would one day defeat her. She must've been dying to find out what kind of battle she could have with her protégé, Asura Lyona. No one in their right mind would leave a diamond in the rough. Lumia would clean and polish it with everything they had, only

to smash it into pieces at the end. Or perhaps, the diamond would be the one doing the smashing? It would be exciting no matter how things turned out.

*Ahh, I truly must give Lumia the fight to the death she desires. I'll put everything I have behind it.* As Asura started to lose herself in her dangerous fantasies, she heard a knock on the door. Then, Elna walked in.

“I didn’t say you could come in,” Asura said.

“Oh... Oh welllll. I mean, I knocked, after all!” Elna replied, smiling cheerily.

“Have you brought the money? We planned on partying it up tonight.”

“Hmm, I wouldn’t suggest that.” Elna tilted her head to the side. “The military police said that they wanted to arrest you and your group. Everyone in town is treating you like an enemy.”

“Why’s that?”

“Did something happen, little Asura?” Elna’s face turned serious. “Please explain everything to me. I told the military police that I’d interrogate you to keep them from coming here. You better thank me for that.”

“That was none of your business, but whatever. I’ll forgive you for that.”

“Little Asura, what happened to create that mountain of corpses outside? Who did it? It wasn’t you or Moon Blossom, was it? I heard a woman riding a dragon was the culprit, but who was she? They said that after you had a conversation with her, Lumia Autun left with her? Since the dragon rider isn’t here, I suppose she was the one behind the murders?”

“Before I answer your questions, I’d like you to answer one of mine, Elna. Why are we considered the bad guys?”

“It’s probably because you were there. It seems they thought that woman came for you and Moon Blossom.”

“That ain’t true,” Jyrki said breezily. “We’re the victims here. Boss even got attacked from behind.”

“That’s right... That white-haired woman was the only one at fault...”  
Iina shrugged lightly. “Go complain to her...”

“Considering how many people died, it’s a given that the survivors want someone they can direct their hatred towards,” Elna said, her voice tinged with anger. “And yet, all of you are smiling as if it’s any regular day. Even I’m a little mad to see it!”

“If you’re here for a fight, then you’ll get one, Elna. I don’t give a damn

about a bunch of random people dying,” Asura said, staring straight into Elna’s eyes.

“Lady Elna, it’s true. No one here did anything...” Iris said. “No one expected a massacre to take place without warning. We couldn’t react. If you want to punish someone, then punish me for being unable to stop it...”

“Are you daft?” Asura asked. “You’ll be executed if the people here think you were in cahoots with the real culprits. Get a grip, Iris. Switch gears. Stop making me repeat myself. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“In any case, I’d like you all to explain what happened. If we don’t do anything, then riots might start breaking out in the streets.”

“You mean the people might attack us out of hatred? Great, that’s fine by me. I’ll show them who’s the true evil between Jeanne and me. Just so you know, if the people here plan on becoming our enemies, then I won’t show anyone mercy. I’ll send everyone to hell, no matter how old they are.”

Asura had no intention of attacking people who were simply trying to live out their lives in peace. However, it was a whole other story if said people decided they would make enemies of Moon Blossom.

“Between working as heroes and acting as villains, we sure are a busy group,” Marx said with a faint chuckle.

“Yo, Marx, stop laughing and stop the boss. You’re the vice cap’n now, remember?” Jyrki said. “We’ll seriously be worse than Jeanne if we go around killin’ all the civilians.”

“I already miss Lumia...” Iina sighed. “Elna, stop trying to get a rise out of Boss... Since Lumia isn’t here, she’ll really do it...”

“I wasn’t trying to get a rise out of her, you knoooow? And wait just a second, you said ‘Jeanne’?”

“Hey, is that your idea of a joke? There’s only one Jeanne we’d be talking about—Jeanne Autun Lala, the God of the Felmafia and the one who dragged the heroes’ reputations through the mud.”

Asura explained in great detail what had happened earlier that day, but kept the fact that Lumia and Jeanne had switched their original identities a secret. It would’ve been too much work to explain all that. If Iris wanted to update Elna on that, though, Asura wouldn’t stop her.

“It really was Jeanne?” Elna asked to make sure.

“I saw Divine Retribution with my own eyes, so it was definitely Jeanne. All of the heroes will need to work together to defeat her.”

To get the heroes to go after Jeanne, Iris decided to keep quiet about Lumia's true identity. Asura was fairly impressed at that, since she'd been under the impression that Iris was the kind of person who would always be honest about the facts.

*It looks like she's picked up some cunning from spending time with us, Asura thought. Or perhaps this is her trying to change herself? I don't mind her telling a lie here or there, but I won't have her end up like the rest of us. I need Iris to become a soldier-mage while maintaining her current sense of justice. She wouldn't try and defeat me otherwise, would she?*

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# **Extra Episode Three: Jeanne Autun Lala's glory. I'll show you the path to victory!**

“We’re leaving this country at noon,” Asura said.

Elna had already taken her leave.

“Are we leaving on the off chance that the misunderstanding remains unresolved?” Marx asked.

“That’s right. Elna went to the military police to explain what happened, but that doesn’t mean the civilians will accept it. As you all know, I don’t show mercy even to noncombatants. If they want a fight, then I’ll destroy them.”

“An eye for an eye is the norm,” Jyrki laughed. “But it’ll affect our reputation if we kill civilians.”

“Yeah... It would suck...if no one wanted to hire us anymore...”

“That’s right. Our reputation should be pretty good at this point. We haven’t failed any requests yet, and we don’t kill more than necessary.”

For a moment, Asura remembered Uno and his gang, but she immediately put them out of her mind. They’d killed them out of self-defense, so it wasn’t a problem.

“Don’t you mean that all you guys do is kill...?” Iris murmured, but no one reacted to her.

“We exterminate high-tier monsters too,” Reko said gleefully.

“And we crush criminal organizations,” Salume added.

“And of course, we fight in war,” Marx concluded. “It’s true that our reputation has been stellar thus far.”

“That’s right. There’s no need to go out of our way to destroy it. Now then, everyone, since Elna has left, I’d like to tell you all about Lumia. Of course, it’s limited to just what I know.”

“I’m truly interested,” Marx said. “I’m a Jeanne fan, so I didn’t expect

my idol to be the vice ca— I mean, Lumia. It's a lot to take in.”

“I wanna hear about her too!” Jyrki exclaimed.

“Me too...” Iina nodded.

“I'd like to hear more about her as well. I can't believe Miss Lumia was behind the Great Massacre,” Salume said.

“That's because she wasn't,” Asura chuckled. “The only people Lumia killed were the pieces of scum at the execution site. It was trash like Pietro who went around pillaging the nearby villages.”

“I figured,” Marx said.

“Lumia wouldn't do anything like that,” Reko said with a bright smile. “I'm a really good judge of character. I even knew who she was before she revealed herself.”

“Huh? How'd you know?” Jyrki asked, his eyes wide.

“Reko witnessed her Divine Retribution back in Mullux Village,” Asura explained. “So it was easy for him to connect the dots between Jeanne and Lumia. You must've figured it out when Axel was going on about her, right?”

“Yep.”

“I see.” Marx nodded. “So that's why you were so interested in Divine Retribution.”

“Ohhh, right, that was Divine Retribution, huh?” Jyrki said. “There were those sliced up corpses in the Felmafia's base, right? I was wonderin' how they were killed.”

“Why did...Lumia hide her identity?” Iina asked, cocking her head to the side.

“She wasn't brave enough. She didn't have the courage to reveal herself,” Asura replied with a laugh.

“We would never hate Lumia...for something like that...”

“I figured. I thought the same thing. But Lumia was still unable to come clean. She must've been terrified of your reactions.”

“How vexing,” Marx said, his voice low with anger. “Do we truly seem that petty?”

“You can complain all you want to her the next time we run into each other,” Asura said with a shrug. “Now then, I'll tell you all about Lumia's past, and of the beautiful yet nauseating journey she's been on.”

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The first time Jeanne Autun ventured onto the battlefield, she was fourteen years old.

“Hey, little girl, have you brought some poison or a dagger to kill yourself with?” Nicola Canarre, the officer in charge of Lumia’s platoon, asked.

They were on the field of battle, though the signal to start fighting hadn’t sounded out yet. Both allies and enemies were lined up and facing each other, with a distance of about fifty meters between them.

“By ‘little girl,’ do you mean me?” Jeanne asked, tilting her head to the side.

“Who else could I be talking to? Jeez, what were you thinking, volunteering yourself like this? Conscription starts at sixteen years old, doesn’t it?”

In the Juaren Kingdom where Jeanne was from, girls had to go to war when they turned sixteen. Boys had to serve at fifteen. Military service for boys lasted twelve years and eight years for girls. Of course, if the war were to end, then they would have the choice to go home early or remain in the military. Though the rules of conscription seemed harsh on paper, Juaren had been at war for the past twenty years and was in desperate need of more soldiers.

Their opponent, the Holy Liyolure Empire, only had professional soldiers in their army. In addition, there was an incomparable difference in scale between the two countries. Juaren never had a chance of winning the war. The only reason it had lasted for twenty years was because Liyolure was holding back and using the war as a way to train up their soldiers.

“Is it so strange that I joined the army to save my country?” Jeanne asked, her face blank.

“Ahh, yeah, it is. You’ve got something wrong with you, little girl. We ain’t winning this. Tsk, why’d the higher-ups have to go and declare independence?”

Nicola was twenty-six years old, with black hair and stubble on his chin. Nothing else about him stood out; every inch of him looked like an ordinary man.

“It’s because they’ve twisted the Sacred Word for their own benefit, isn’t

it?” Jeanne asked.

“From their perspective, we’re the ones who’re twisting it,” Nicola replied with a shrug.

In the beginning, Juaren Kingdom had been a vassal state of the Liyolute Empire. But because of a religious conflict, the Juaren Kingdom decided to declare independence from Liyolute.

“Our interpretation of the Sacred Word is the right one. They’re the heretics,” Jeanne said, completely straight-faced.

Many countries in Central Felsen were founded on religion, with the Sacred Word being the most prominent faith. Those who interpreted the Sacred Word in the wrong fashion were deemed heretics.

“Wow, you’ve been completely brainwashed. Whatever. Do you have the poison and dagger you need for suicide?”

“Why would I need those?”

“Didn’t you hear me? They think *we’re* the heretics. They won’t give a damn what happens to us. You can figure out what they’d do if they caught a cute little girl like you, right?”

“I see. You’re a lot nicer than you look.” Jeanne finished that sentence with a light smile.

“Shut up. You didn’t have to add that last part. Well, you’ll probably survive, so long as you obey my orders. Listen, even when they give the signal to commence the battle, don’t rush out. Wait a little before you start your advance. The people who move first are always the ones who die first. Got it?”

“I got it. You really are a kind person, so you may call me by my name.”

“What?”

“I’m a servant of God, but I’ll give you special permission to use my name.”

“Seriously...did you hit your head?” Nicola smiled, though there was clear exasperation behind the expression.

“Charge!” The order rang out through the air.

As usual, Nicola didn’t move on purpose. However...

“You idiot! Didn’t you hear a single thing I said?!”

Jeanne ran forward, placing herself at the very front of the line. The commander hadn’t even finished the word “Charge” before she was on the move.

“Shit, I forgot that some idiots panic and end up taking off on their own!” However, Nicola didn’t try to stop or save her. He couldn’t risk his life, nor the lives of the other members of his platoon.

Jeanne ran ahead of the other soldiers. Before she reached the enemies, an inordinate number of arrows rained down upon her, but none hit her.

“No way! It was like the arrows avoided her on purpose!”

Nicola had been keeping an eye on Jeanne just in case. Since she was technically a member of his platoon, he’d wanted to witness her final moments at the very least. Jeanne unsheathed the claymore from her back and then leaped into the air. As soon as she landed, she lopped the head from an enemy soldier’s shoulders, then spun around, slaying the men around her with a wide arc of her weapon.

It was like something out of a surreal nightmare. A fourteen-year-old girl was killing scores of men all by herself. However, the enemies weren’t idiots. They quickly surrounded Jeanne in an attempt to kill her together, but she easily broke through their barrier using nothing but her terrifying combat prowess.

After killing the Liyolute soldiers around her, Jeanne stopped and turned around. Her face was drenched in the blood of her enemies.

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Jeanne raised her claymore into the air and yelled out in a voice that rang through the battlefield. “I am an agent of God! We must enact divine punishment upon the heretics that would twist the Sacred Word for their own evil means! Follow me! I will carve for us a path to victory!!!”

Everyone stopped and stared. For a brief moment, they’d been captivated by the promise behind her powerful and confident words.

“Behold the anger of God! Divine”—Jeanne swung down her claymore at the same time she finished the spell—“Punishment!”

An angel manifested from thin air. It flapped its resplendent, pure white wings, holding a sword of light in its hands. No one, whether friend or foe, could tear their eyes away, their bodies shuddering from the revelation: *Ahh, she truly is an agent of God.* The angel moved at breakneck speed, slaughtering enemy soldiers by the score.

“I’ll say it again! Follow me! I shall end this war with my own hands!” Jeanne yelled, and the Juaren Kingdom’s soldiers raised their voices in a roar as well.

They’d been completely taken by the fourteen-year-old girl’s overpowering charisma and strength. Nicola Canarre was no exception.

“Advance, you bastards! Follow the girl—no, follow Jeanne!” He raised his sword as he gave the command.

The battle ended with Jeanne and the Juaren Kingdom achieving an absolute victory. This was only one of many skirmishes, but it was the first win for the Juaren Kingdom in several years at that point. Everyone celebrated, singing Jeanne’s praises the entire while.

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“Er...Lumia was that impossibly powerful?” Jyrki asked with a pinched face.

“Hmm? It’s not as if she’s weaker now. She hasn’t improved her swordsmanship since then, but she’s much stronger now that she’s learned how to fight as a soldier-mage. If she could’ve fought the way she does now back during the war, she would’ve ended everything within three years.”

“The thought of ending a war that had been going on for twenty years in just three is impressive. Not to mention *winning* it.”

“Hey, are you still sleepy or something, Marx?” Asura asked with a

slight shrug. “We could end a war in ten days. Remember what happened in Arnia? It took us only four days after we joined up with the main forces to win the thing. Granted, it’s officially an armistice and it took us more time than necessary thanks to politics.”

“It’s not as if *you* were the one to end it,” Iris pointed out, looking confused. “It ended because Mister Matias died, remember?”

Silence reigned among the mercenaries. Asura deeply regretted her own foolishness; she’d been seconds away from confessing to Matias’s murder. The only reason Iris hadn’t been able to suss out the truth from Asura’s words was her lack of brain cells.

“Hmm? What’s wrong? Did I say something weird? Didn’t Therbae fall back because someone assassinated Mister Matias?” Iris continued.

“I admit that most of the credit goes to whoever killed him. Anyway, we would’ve won even if Matias lived. We’d been burning down the Therbaen army’s provision tents and since we’d been attacking the supply chain, they shouldn’t have been able to replenish any of their food. The despair of losing all their resources would’ve made them surrender quickly enough.”

That was the explanation Asura quickly came up with, and she said the words without any hesitation. Her earlier boast had been a careless mistake. She’d been speaking under the assumption that Iris was one of them. Iris had been with them for a long time now, and she’d said she wanted to become a soldier-mage. From Asura’s perspective, Iris already *was* a part of Moon Blossom. But the truth was that Iris was here to monitor them for the heroes.

“Iris, it’s as Boss said. We were on the path to certain victory. We were on the verge of winning the main battlefield when Matias died,” Marx said.

“That’s right. We were real popular in Arnia, right? It’s ’cause we had tons of achievements. We probably coulda crushed Therbae if King Arnia had hired us to,” Jyrki added.

“Yeah...we could do it...I think... *How* we’d do it...is up to Boss though...” Iina murmured.

“I agree. It feels like it wouldn’t be so difficult. Oh, did you know that was my first time on the battlefield?” Salume said. “I was clinging to Mister Jyrki the entire time though.”

“Boss, you’re pretty careless for someone who seems so put-together.”

Though the other members of Moon Blossom quickly jumped to help

Asura cover up for her misstep, Reko lightly teased Asura as if nothing was wrong.

“Hmm. Well, I don’t disagree that you all did a great job. I just thought that the final nail in the coffin for Therbae was Mister Matias’s assassination. It’s not like I knew you were a step away from victory,” Iris said.

“Right. Anyway, let’s continue with Lumia’s story,” Asura said, forcibly changing the subject. “Lumia won her first battle, as well as all the ones after. She was even promoted to lead a select company of elites when she was fifteen years old. That was the precursor to the Oathkeeper Brigade.”

“I’d heard that everyone there was strong enough to handle a thousand men on their own. However, Jeanne was so famous that no one else in her company was able to achieve any measure of fame of their own,” Marx added. “I researched them a little bit myself, so I know of the more prominent members.”

“‘A little bit,’ you say,” Asura laughed. “Don’t you mean ‘a lot’? Go on, name some of the commanders from the Brigade. We’ll hear you out.” She figured that since he was a self-proclaimed Jeanne fan, he’d want to show off his knowledge.

“All right, then,” Marx said with a light cough. “I’d always suspected Lumia was Lumia Autun. Granted, I never imagined she’d actually be Jeanne herself.”

“So?” Reko asked.

“The first of the Oathkeeper Brigade’s three pillars was Nicola Canarre, whom Boss mentioned earlier. It’s said that Jeanne trusted him until the very end.”

“Ohh, Lumia *Canarre*,” Jyrki said. “Is that where she got her last name from?”

“That had been my hypothesis. Now then, since there are three pillars, there are two more people I know about...”

“Oh, I know!” Salume exclaimed. “One of them is Miriam, a God Hand, right? Miss Lumia said that if Miriam had continued training for the past decade, she would’ve been as strong as a hero. One of the pillars *must* be Miriam. There can’t be *that* many people with strength on par with a hero.”

“You’re right, Salume,” Marx said with a nod. “The final one is the current Jeanne—the white-haired one. At the time, she went by the name of

Lumia Autun.”

“Hmm. It’s truly confusing to discuss those two thanks to them switching identities,” Asura said with a wry smile. “I’m going to skip everything about the Oathkeeper Brigade in today’s story. I only want to focus on Lumia.”

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# **Extra Episode Four: Everything began when Jeanne Autun Lala met her friend.**

Punti Arlandel gazed up at the clear, blue sky as he sat on a park bench.  
“What a good day to die!”

The phrase was common among soldiers, who would say it while laughing before going out to the battlefield. They’d say it even on rainy or stormy days. It was a way to express their resolve to fight for their country. Granted, since Punti quit the army, it no longer had anything to do with him. His silver hair danced in the breeze.

“Oh, here you are.” Axel Ehrnrooth approached him slowly. He was so bulky that from a distance, he looked like a bear.

“Hello, Mister Axel.” Punti raised his right hand in greeting.

“Can I sit next to you?”

“Sure, go ahead.” Punti smiled at Axel, who lowered himself down on the bench with a heavy *thump*.

“How’s your mom been?”

“She’s calmed down. After dad died, she was going crazy, saying that she’d find the culprit and murder them.”

“Ha ha, yeah, that sounds like her,” Axel chuckled with a shrug.

“Sooooo? How’s the investigation going?”

“Well,” Axel said, twisting his face like he was trying to find the words, “they called it off. I figured I should let you know.”

“I see... So you couldn’t find who did it, even though alllll the heroes in East Felsen came out to try... I see!” Punti’s shoulders slumped.

“It’s just that the investigation with all the heroes got called off. We’re all looking for who did it, but privately and on our own time. It’s not like we can keep forcing everyone to work on this case when there aren’t any clues, right? They have their own lives to lead, after all.”

“I understand. Thank you, Mister Axel.”

“I didn’t do anything. The culprit’s still out there...”

“It’s fine. One day, I’ll find them and kill them.”

“That ain’t gonna happen with your current strength. The culprit’s a real sly one.”

“I know... I’d gotten full of myself since no one within Arnia could beat me...” Punti sighed. “That’s why my father signed me up for the Hero Selection Exam.”

“Yeah, I heard him say he needed someone to humble his son during the third test.”

The Hero Selection Exam comprised several tests that took place roughly twice a year. The first test saw the most candidates and took the longest to complete. However, if a prospect was recommended by more than three heroes, they could skip this first test since they clearly had the strength and potential to be a hero. Punti had been given permission to skip it since his father had been a hero.

Once one passed the first test, one could move on to the second, which everyone was required to attend. Punti took it and passed, making him a hero candidate.

“Am I not fit to be a hero?”

Punti had counted on passing the third exam as well. However, it wasn’t going to be as easy as he’d expected. At his current strength, he’d fail.

“You wouldn’t be a hero candidate if you didn’t have what it takes,” Axel reassured him. “I can see you becoming one five or six years from now. Besides, you’d be in your early twenties then, right? You’d still be one of the youngest to become a hero. It took Matias until he was twenty-eight.”

“And then the year after, he was immediately sent on a Demon Lord Expedition. My father sure was unlucky!”

Matias had wanted to teach his beloved son the pain of losing so that he could continue to grow and mature in the future.

“But he survived. He survived the Demon Lord Expedition two years ago too,” Axel said, sounding nostalgic. “So, what are you gonna do now? You wanna try the third test just in case you get lucky?”

Punti shook his head. It was possible to drop out of the third test and not show up. So long as you still had your status as a hero candidate, you could take it as many times as you wished, which meant you could choose not to as well. Granted, since being a hero candidate didn’t have any privileges, most people tried to take the test as soon as they could.

“I see. Well, it’s your life. I’m not your dad, so I’m not gonna tell you what to do, but I’d like to know what your plans are.”

“I’m going to become a mercenary.”

“Wha—?!” Axel exclaimed, sounding shocked. “Do you know what it’s like to be a mercenary? They gotta do dirty, shady shit at times. You’re, like, the type to do things by the book. Are you serious?”

“I don’t want to become a mercenary. But there’s someone I want to defeat no matter what. And I’ll never get on her level if I don’t dirty my hands.” Punti smiled, but it was hard to tell the emotion behind it.

“Lumia Canarre?”

“That’s right, it’s Miss Lumia. When I lost to her, I thought I would never want to see her again, but lately, she’s been the only thing on my mind.”

Punti was certain that Lumia had nothing to do with Matias’s murder too. She’d been genuinely shocked to see him die.

“Have...you fallen for her?”

“That’s right. I’ve always been into older women.”

“Er...you know she was the one who beat you up, right? I heard that you couldn’t lay a single finger on her, and that you practically became a walking corpse after she stomped all over your pride.”

“That’s riiight. I learned a lesson in humility even without taking the Hero Selection Exam. But she was so beautiful,” Punti said. “Everything, from her looks to her Central swordsmanship, was exactly like what I imagined from a role model. I’d wondered if she was the same person I looked up to and asked if she was using a fake name, and she made such a scary face at me. Thinking back, though, it was such a lovely expression.”

“Who’s your role model, then?”

“For me, the definition of a hero isn’t my father. It’s Jeanne Autun Lala.”

Matias hadn’t even been a hero during the height of Jeanne’s career.

“You’re pretty sharp,” Axel said.

“Huh?”

“Lumia Canarre’s real name is Lumia Autun. She’s Jeanne’s little sister, and one of the three pillars of the former Oathkeeper Brigade. She ain’t someone you can win against.”

“I see.”

Shivers ran down Punti’s spine. The woman he’d fallen in love with was

the younger sister of the person he looked up to. It felt like fate.

“So which mercenary group do you plan on joining? Don’t tell me it’s Moon Blossom?”

“Of course not. I considered it, but I want to meet with Miss Lumia again after I become stronger. So I decided to join Flame. I even passed their entrance exam!”

Flame was currently one of the largest mercenary groups in the country. It had many headquarters across multiple regions, and took jobs in all parts of Felsenmark. They even accepted dirty work that could never be made public.

“Good for you. Do your best, then.” Axel started getting up from the bench and Punti hurriedly called out to him.

“Wait! I’d like to hear more stories about Jeanne.”

“Huh? I don’t know much about her since I wasn’t from the same region. I only met her in person during a Demon Lord Expedition,” Axel said as he sat down again. “Hmm, all right, I’ll tell you something that a guy from Central told me. It ain’t very interesting, but it’s something that happened during her Hero Selection Exam.”

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Jeanne Autun, fifteen years old, stared up at the sky and murmured to herself, “What nice weather we have. I’d love a spot of Arnian tea about now.” Though it was expensive, it was Jeanne’s favorite tea.

It was the championship match of the Hero Selection Exam’s third test, and Jeanne was standing in the ring. She’d won all of her previous matches within a minute and easily progressed through the rungs until she was in the final round.

“I’ve heard about you, Jeanne... You’re even more beautiful up close,” Jeanne’s opponent said as she faced her.

“Yes, I get that a lot. By the way, don’t you think the weather is lovely today? I’m glad we get to have our match outside. I don’t have much experience fighting indoors.”

Since most of Jeanne’s fights took place on a battlefield, she truly didn’t know much about combat in an enclosed space. Though it probably wouldn’t affect her performance *that* much, she still preferred being

outside. The third test was being held in the Holy Liyolure Empire's training field, so from Jeanne's perspective, she was in enemy territory. None of that mattered to her though.

A huge crowd of people stood around the training field to watch. Even ordinary civilians were allowed to spectate the third test.

"Are the two of you ready?" asked the Central Great Hero who was serving as the proctor.

"Wait a moment," Jeanne's opponent said. "My name is Noemi. As you can see, I'm a nun."

Noemi was twenty-one years old, with long, light blue hair. Even though she was wearing a habit, her figure was obvious. That wasn't to say that she was fat, but rather, had a slim body with voluptuous curves.

"My name is Jeanne. As you can see, I am a servant of God. You may bow if you wish."

"I have no intention of bowing. However, would you be interested in spending some personal time together?"

"Personal time'?"

"I'm asking if you'd be interested in going shopping with me. We can have tea and eat snacks together too."

"That's...a pretty nontraditional suggestion from a nun."

"I never said I was a *good* one. I want to become a hero and use that position to affect change."

"I see... I want to become a hero so that no one would be able to kill me. It'll be easier to conduct war if the enemy soldiers can't try to take my life."

"Is war the only thing in that cute little head of yours?"

"That is my mission."

"Hmm. Let me teach you something a lot more fun than that." Noemi approached Jeanne and whispered into her ear, "I'll instruct you all about pleasure too."

Jeanne didn't reply, but tilted her head to the side.

"How pure," Noemi said. "I'd love to corrupt that innocent soul of yours, but very well, then. Think over my suggestion. I like you enough that I wish to remain in your heart forever."

"I'm starting to find some delight in your presence as well. You're a very interesting person. However, I will not hold back."

"Of course. I'm not like the small fry you've defeated earlier."

“Hey, enough,” the proctor said. “We’re starting, got it?”

Noemi put some distance between herself and Jeanne again. Then when the signal to start was given, they began their match. Jeanne held up a claymore while Noemi wielded a spear. Their battle was so fierce that they could hardly catch their breath. It was a fight to the death so impressive, spectators would be passing the story of it through their families for centuries to come—that God had created two monsters within the same generation. However, the reality was that this was Noemi’s second time taking the test. She’d lost her previous championship match.

“What’s wrong? You’re not going to use your Divine Retribution?”

“The rules dictate I must not kill you,” Jeanne said. “Divine Retribution is a spell for killing. If I use it, you’ll die.”

Their match went on for thirty minutes until, in the end, Noemi surrendered. Afterwards, Jeanne and Noemi started socializing in private. At the time, Jeanne didn’t know that this decision would mark the start of her fall.

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“By ‘Noemi,’ do you mean Noemi Clapisson?” Marx asked. “She’s a Great Hero from Central Felsen. You’re telling me that Lumia defeated her without using Divine Retribution?”

“That’s the very one,” Asura said calmly. “She wasn’t at her current level back then, of course.”

“Lumia...is amazing...”

“Lumia said that if she’d spent the past decade living a normal life, she’d be a Great Hero. I guess that wasn’t a lie.”

“Of course it wasn’t, Jyrki,” Asura said. “This is Jeanne Autun Lala we’re talking about.”

“But you’re stronger than she is, right, Boss?” Reko asked.

“Only if I’m allowed to kill her.”

“I don’t get it,” Iris said. “I think you’re plenty strong, Asura. You were even able to defeat a high-tier monster all by yourself. You always say ‘if I’m allowed to kill,’ but does that really make such a difference? Aren’t good fighters strong in both a match and in a real battle?”

“Miss Iris, are you feeling all right?” Salume asked worriedly. “A match

and a real battle are two entirely different things. It's like comparing cooking to riding a horse."

"I'll simplify it," Asura said with a light chuckle. "In a match, I wouldn't be able to use any attack spells, since they're lethal if they hit the wrong spot. I'm a soldier-mage, and yet part of my magic would be sealed away. My hand-to-hand skills also use techniques that focus on breaking the enemy. Plus, I wouldn't be able to use fire and maneuver."

On the battlefield, Asura mercilessly targeted her enemy's vitals. She hid herself behind obstacles and moved around while ambushing her opponents. A match would completely lock away these basic tactics.

"So you mean that a match would put too many constraints on you and halve your battle effectiveness?" Iris asked.

"That's right. So there's a chance I'll lose. We also normally use teamwork to fight; we're far more powerful as a group than as individuals. Do you get it now?"

"I see," Iris said with a nod. "Then I was right all along. If it's a one-on-one match, I can win against all of you."

"Well, of course you can. You're a hero..." Asura said with a strained smile. "Just to remind you, once you become a soldier-mage, you'll need to stop fixating on individual strength."

"At the same time, though, everyone here's really strong on their own," Salume giggled.

"There's a certain threshold of strength and technique you need to have to work well on our team. That's why I went out of my way to devise a basic training regime. I look forward to the day you can reach our level, Salume."

"I'll do my best."

"Oh, what should I learn first to become a soldier-mage?" Iris asked.  
"My fighting skills?"

"Your magic," Asura, Marx, Jyrki, and Iina said in unison.

# **Extra Episode Five: The fall of Jeanne Autun Lala. Take heed, for it'll leave a bad taste in your mouth.**

When Jeanne was sixteen years old, she went on her first Demon Lord Expedition and survived to tell the tale. Right after she returned, the Noble King came by specifically to see her. This had never happened before. The Noble King stood at the top of all the noble families in Felsenmark. It was said that even the other rulers of the various kingdoms bowed before him. However, he did not actually have political control over any territory.

The Noble King belonged to a bloodline of nobles that had been around since the dawn of Felsenmark's history, with "Rolo" serving as their title. The head of this family—Nascio Faris Rolo—was the one who came to see Jeanne. The Faris family was the only one who could use the Rolo title. They lived in West Felsen, where slavery was still allowed.

Normally, Nascio wielded so much power and influence that he would never personally make the trip to see someone. That was why this was so unprecedented. After meeting her, Nascio liked Jeanne enough to grant her the name of "Lala," which had been a noble title at the time.

At this point, Noemi had also become a hero, and she and Jeanne still spent time together in private. When Jeanne was seventeen years old, the Holy Liyolute Empire granted the Juaren Kingdom its independence. On paper, the civil war had ended with the Juaren Kingdom's victory.

Most of the credit had to go to Jeanne. She and the Oathkeeper Brigade had been so strong that the Holy Liyolute Empire gave up on using the war to train their soldiers and began negotiating a treaty. By that time, Jeanne had started to view Noemi like an older sister.

That was, until Noemi pinned her down on the bed.

That day, Noemi was visiting Jeanne's house and they enjoyed a few drinks together to celebrate the war's end. That was when Noemi pushed

Jeanne down onto the bed. At the time, Jeanne thought this was a joke and just laughed. It had only been when Noemi slotted their mouths together and pushed in her tongue that Jeanne realized the danger of the situation. She shoved Noemi away and sat up.

“What are you doing?! That’s too far even as a joke! I’ve made a vow of chastity and I will not break it, even for a woman!”

“Ridiculous,” Noemi said. “Do you plan on dying without experiencing the pleasures of the flesh? Leave everything to me. In time, you’ll beg me to give it to you.”

“Are you crazy?! I thought you were my friend! Is that not what I am to you?!”

“You’re not. I’ve always viewed you as a potential sexual partner. What do you think I wanted to become a hero for? I wanted to create a harem. I wanted to train my fellow nuns until all they could think about was pleasure. But you were the one I’ve really had my sights on. I wanted to hear you moan as I defiled your divinity. That was all I’ve ever thought whenever I look at you.”

Jeanne felt as if the ground were crumbling beneath her. She’d truly looked up to Noemi.

“That’s the face I wanted to see,” Noemi laughed. “Jeanne the Holy. Jeanne the Hero. Jeanne, the servant of God. I wanted to see your face slack in shock, and that’s why I’ve put in this much time and effort to get you to like me. Next, I’d like to see your face twisted in pleasure. Don’t worry. I’ll be gentle for your first time.”

“Shut up! Do you really think I’ll permit you?”

“If you don’t, you’ll regret it. I’m more than aware of just how corrupt I am.”

“Get out! Go away! And never come back again! You’re vile!” Jeanne screamed. Anger, disappointment, and grief sat heavy in her chest.

“Sure, I’ll leave. In time, you’ll submit to me. I’ll be gentle to you now. But if I get my hands on you later...”

“Disappear from my sight and never show yourself before me again!”

“Hee hee, wonderful. That’s the way it should be, Jeanne. It never mattered to me if you were willing or not. I can’t wait until the day of reckoning.”

Noemi laughed delightedly and then left Jeanne’s house. Jeanne

collapsed onto her bed and buried her face into her pillow, wetting the fabric with her tears.

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“I never knew Noemi was so scummy,” Jyrki said with a twist of his lips.

“According to Lumia, anyway,” Asura replied with a light shrug. “To tell the truth, I don’t understand the way Noemi thinks.”

“I do,” Reko said. “I love you, Boss, and that’s why I wanna get in bed with you. If I can’t have you, then I want to bully you. That’s how she felt, right?”

“So...like how a boy pulls on a girl’s pigtails if he fancies her?” Asura said with a wry smile. “By the way, make sure you don’t try to do anything to me in the future. I just might kill you.”

“I don’t get it,” Iris said, tilting her head to the side. “Wanting to sleep with someone and wanting to bully them are two different things.”

“Why?” Lina asked. “It feels good...to bully someone...”

“Was Noemi a sadist?” Marx asked.

“She wasn’t. If she were, she could’ve easily tied up Lumia after getting her drunk and then raped her. Since she tried to get consent first, she probably isn’t a sadist,” Asura said.

“But it’s twisted, isn’t it?” Salume said, sounding furious. “It sounded like she wanted to punish Lumia for not having sex with her.”

“You’re right. Let’s continue.”

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Time passed peacefully and before long, Jeanne turned eighteen. The day after her birthday, the second prince of the Juaren Kingdom proposed to her and she accepted it. The country celebrated this news for days on end until one day, several members of the military police arrived at Jeanne’s house.

“You’re under arrest for suspicion of murder. Come with us,” one of them said.

Though Jeanne was furious at the accusation, she ended up

accompanying them to their headquarters. She figured that since she didn't kill anyone, she'd be able to leave as soon as she cleared up the misunderstanding. To her, the military police of the Juaren Kingdom was a trustworthy organization.

However, though the authorities had kept it secret from the public, the murder victim had been the second prince. The interrogation was practically torture. Jeanne's innocence was never proven, and she was exhausted after days of being questioned in her dark cell. The military police only gave her a little water from time to time, and she hadn't eaten a proper meal since she got there.

Days after her arrest, the first prince entered her cell. By that point, Jeanne had been so weary that she didn't even have the energy to greet him.

"I hardly even recognize you, nor do I feel any divinity emanating from your body," he said with a snort. "You were the one who killed my father and little brother, weren't you? If you confess to your crimes, then I shall grant you a comparatively lighter torture and execution. This is in consideration to your military accomplishments over the past years."

"I...never killed them..."

"But there are eyewitness testimonies. We may not know your motive, but we know that you were the one who murdered them, Jeanne. We cannot hide the king's death from the people forever. However, if someone killed the king, we need to provide the public with his culprit."

"How many times...do I have to say it? I didn't do it... Why would I kill my fiancé and his father?"

"Hmm. Then I suppose Lumia was the one who did it. You two look so similar that it's easy to mistake you for twins."

"Don't be...ridiculous. Why would Lumia..."

"Then I'll have Lumia tortured," the first prince said coldly.

"Why?! It's not Lumia! She would never murder someone!"

"That's what all killers say. But they almost always reveal their sins after some interrogation."

"Stop... Why would you do such a thing? What kind of sick joke is this?"

"It's either you or Lumia. Do you understand, Jeanne? One of you is definitely the culprit."

The first prince's lips twisted in a cruel and ugly grin. Upon seeing his

expression, Jeanne had a revelation: *Ahh, I've been framed.* They were going to pin the blame on her, no matter what underhanded tricks they had to resort to.

"I don't understand... Why? Why are you hurting me this way? I led this country to victory... Why must I be treated like this?"

"I told you you'd regret it, didn't I?" Noemi's voice rang out. Jeanne hadn't even noticed she'd been standing in front of the cell. "I also said that you would submit to me."

"So this was your scheme? You..." Jeanne glared at Noemi. "Divine—"

"Do you want Lumia to die?" Noemi asked, smiling. "She's already fallen into our hands. Isn't that right, Your Highness?"

"Yes. Jeanne, think about it. You accepted the second prince's proposal without even bothering to consider me. Do you realize how preposterous that is? Thanks to you, my father and the citizens all wanted the second prince to become the next king. Do you understand how much humiliation I've had to endure?"

"So you...killed them?" Jeanne asked, her voice shaking.

"But the one punished will be either you or Lumia. I'll let you choose: who will it be?"

"You bastard... I'll kill you... Both of you..." Jeanne clenched her fist and bit her lips.

"Try it," Noemi scoffed. "But we'll have Lumia suffer the consequences. I've prepared torture so painful that it'll surely destroy her mind and spirit. She'll experience a hell that you can't even begin to imagine. Perhaps she'll even beg for us to kill her by the end of it. Well?"

"You scum... Both of you are scum...from the very cores of your being..."

"We've already handed proof of your guilt to the Great Heroes, and you'll soon lose your title as a hero. I'm sure you'll admit to the murder to try and save Lumia," Noemi said with a gloating expression. "By the way, don't bother counting on the Noble King for help. We've already requested that he strip you of your Lala title. Of course, we made sure to provide him with plenty of evidence of your regicide."

For a moment, Jeanne didn't say anything. Finally, she asked, "Will you guarantee Lumia's safety?"

"Of course," Noemi said. "I'm only interested in you, not your little

sister. I'll make sure she's safely escorted out of the kingdom."

"I can't trust you..."

"And yet, you have no choice but to believe her," the first prince said. "As the new king of the Juaren Kingdom, you have my word that I will save Lumia. You will be the only one to die."

"Fine... Do as you please..."

Jeanne gave in. That was the only thing left for her to do. She didn't even know where Lumia was, and if she tried to resist, they would surely kill her.

"That's not the right answer," Noemi said. "It's 'I killed them. I'm sorry for referring to myself as a servant of God when I'm nothing more than a vile murderer.' Isn't that right?"

"I..."

"Bow your head!" the first prince snapped. "Press your forehead to the ground!"

Obeying his command, Jeanne lowered her face until she was rubbing it against the floor. "I killed them. I'm sorry for referring to myself as a servant of God when I'm nothing more than a vile murderer."

In that moment, the final dregs of divinity completely faded from Jeanne's body.

"Gah ha ha! How you've fallen, Jeanne!" The first prince stepped on Jeanne's head. "This is all because you ignored me and tried to marry my little brother! Now taste the dirt, dammit!"

"Ohhh, I can't stop trembling," Noemi said, her voice high in ecstasy. "Watching you submit to us sends chills through my body."

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"How cruel could they be?" Marx said.

"So you're tellin' me that those pieces of shit framed Lumia for such a shitty reason? Damn...makes me wanna go and destroy the Juaren Kingdom myself."

"They've already been destroyed, Jyrki. I'm going to continue now."

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Jeanne was paraded around town naked with her hands bound together by a pair of wooden manacles. She'd been placed atop of a horse while the first prince led the animal. Eventually, someone threw a rock at her. It was someone the first prince had planted in the crowd, but it was the impetus for the other citizens to start pelting rocks at Jeanne too.

The citizens yelled insults at the woman who had led the country to independence. There was a blank look in Jeanne's eyes as she was led through the streets. A thought started stirring in her heart.

*I fought for these pieces of shit...for these idiots who would blindly believe a lie woven by the government?*

Though Jeanne was staring straight ahead, she no longer cared about anything. Her heart had been broken. Nothing mattered. Though the stones that struck her skin hurt, everything would end when she died anyway.

*Why did I fight? Why did I go to war?*

The questions welled up in her heart, but she couldn't find an answer for any of them. They finally reached the stage for her torture, which was a fairly high wooden platform. After she climbed it, she was held aloft by the chains around her manacles, stuck in a pose that looked like she was in the middle of stretching out her back.

A torturer holding a large whip walked onstage as well. They wore thick and loose robes that completely disguised their figure, and their face was covered by a mask so that no one could see who they were. Thanks to their profession, most people despised torturers, so they had to protect their identity.

“Let’s enjoy this, Jeanne.”

Noemi’s voice emanated from behind the mask. Jeanne didn’t reply. Noemi’s whip bit into Jeanne’s back and she almost screamed at the intense pain. But the last thing she wanted to do was satisfy Noemi’s sadism, so she swallowed it as best as she could. She endured the second hit as well.

But at the third hit, she lost control of her bladder. The citizens yelled insults at her, but their words no longer reached Jeanne’s ears. The pain was so overwhelming that she could barely hold on to her consciousness.

The fourth hit was truly dangerous. For a moment, her vision flashed white and she thought she would die. Death might have been welcome at that point. Noemi walked forward and checked over Jeanne’s body.

“Open your legs,” she said. “If things had gone according to plan, I

would've been pleasing you with my tongue or fingers instead."

Jeanne despaired as soon as she realized where Noemi planned to target next.

"Please..." she whispered, terrified. "Please stop... I'm begging you..."

"I shall tell no one of your pleas. This'll be a treasured memory for the two of us to share. I will look back on this fondly from time to time."

"Please...please forgive me..."

She no longer cared about shame or her reputation. The only thing that filled her heart was fear. Her entire body trembled at the thought of the incoming pain.

"Do you not care if the members of the Oathkeeper Brigade die? Why do you think none of them have tried to save you or your sister? It's because the authorities arrested all of them for war crimes. Some of them managed to escape, though. Now, what'll it be, Jeanne? I don't mind letting you go, but they'll die in your stead. However, if you would simply open up your legs, then I shall let them go."

There was no other option. Jeanne slowly parted her legs. At this point, only the tips of her big toes were touching the ground.

"Good girl."

Noemi moved some distance away, then swung the whip with a scooping motion. Fortunately, Jeanne fainted instantly. Her brain simply refused to remain conscious.

## **Extra Episode Six: The end of Jeanne Autun Lala. If she is no longer anyone, then...**

“I’ll kill Noemi...kill Noemi...kill Noemi...” Iina muttered, her tone dark with rage.

“I don’t mind goin’ right this second,” Jyrki said furiously.

“She’s a Great Hero, remember?” Asura said. “Besides, Lumia is no longer one of us. She’s a traitor.”

“That may be true, but I would love to murder Noemi with my own hands,” Marx said.

“I feel the same way. I want to kill her after putting her through the same pain and humiliation Miss Lumia experienced,” Salume agreed.

“Same here. I wanna do the same to Noemi as she did to Lumia,” Reko said with a nod.

“A Great Hero...did such a horrible thing...” Iris gasped, sounding like she couldn’t believe Asura’s words.

“Well, you can go ahead and kill her if we meet her someday,” Asura said. “Let’s think about it then. I’m going to continue the story.”

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When Jeanne next opened her eyes, she found herself strapped to a cross.

“I wanted to witness your end, but I’ve been called away for a mission,” Noemi said as she stared up at her. “A peak-tier monster has appeared, so I must go. It’s unfortunate, but I’m satisfied that at least I got to hear you beg.”

Noemi stood up and left. For a while, Jeanne remained crucified for the public to stare at and mock.

“Do you have any final words?” the first prince asked, a spear in hand.

He wanted to be the first in line to impale her, but Jeanne didn't reply. She had nothing she wanted or needed to say. The faster she died, the better. Everything hurt so much that she wanted to sob.

"Hmm. Then let us begin the execution of the accursed villain who murdered my father and brother!"

Jeanne didn't even twitch. Her unresponsiveness bored the first prince, who wanted to watch her suffer. That was why he opened his mouth and made the mistake of saying something that should've never been said.

"I'm happy for you, Jeanne. You'll be able to see your little sister soon!"

Those had been the forbidden words. By saying them, he pulled back Jeanne's consciousness from the brink. He returned her to the present, when she had been prepared to completely give up.

"What...are you saying? You said you'd save Lumia..." she said, her voice shaking.

"Why in the world would we let your sister live?!"

"That's right, you traitor!"

"Everyone else in the Oathkeeper Brigade should go to hell!"

"Murderer! How dare you kill the king?!"

The citizens' yells filled the air. Everyone blamed and insulted Jeanne. In an instant, her blood boiled as a deep anger took root in her heart. The pain in her body disappeared. The despicable prince couldn't keep a single promise. The vile citizens had no intention of facing the truth. Jeanne opened her mouth and screamed. Her wordless cry was akin to that of an animal's roar, and the citizens fell silent, frozen in shock.

"I'll curse you all! Every single one of you bastards! Die! Burn in hell!!! None of you will leave alive!!! Die and apologize to Lumia in the afterlife!!! Divine Retribution!!!" Despite Jeanne's body being covered in wounds, she was brimming with magic. The angel of death descended from the heavens and cut down the gathered people.

"Divine Retribution!!!"

Yet another angel appeared, wielding a sword of light. More heads flew, flesh scattered, and blood splattered. There was no mercy and no quarter given. The angels worked together, ruthlessly creating a mountain of corpses.

"Scum! You pieces of scum! YOU PIECES OF SCUM!!! DIVINE!!! RETRIBUTION!!!"

The third angel sliced up the cross and freed Jeanne. Her body was still injured, but she snatched up a sword from the nearby corpse of a military police officer.

“St— Jea— Wait...I...” the first prince stammered from the ground. His knees were shaking too much for him to stand.

“Shut up. Die.” Jeanne beheaded him in a single strike. Then she ripped his cloak off him and wrapped it around herself. “One day, I’ll return to destroy this place... I won’t rest until I burn this entire kingdom to the ground...”

By the time she spoke, there was no one alive around her to hear her promise. The only things left were piles of corpses and the stench of blood. As soon as they lost targets to slaughter, the angels of death disappeared. Only Jeanne remained standing.

She headed east, dragging the sword along the ground. It wasn’t a conscious choice. She simply needed to leave that place for now. Once she had healed up and built up her strength, she swore she would return to destroy everything. After a few days of walking, when she was about to collapse from starvation, Jeanne came across a village set ablaze.

Jeanne didn’t know at the time, but the armies of multiple countries had been committing crimes across the land under the guise of searching for her. The village was burning as the result of such pillaging. Hoping that there would at least be some food left, Jeanne headed towards the village; as soon as she entered, she heard someone singing.

It was an unfamiliar song, but a young and innocent voice was weaving the lovely melody. Jeanne felt drawn to it, and before she realized it, she was walking towards where the song was coming from.

She found the source in the central square of the village. Surrounded by corpses, a silver-haired child was singing alone. Both the gruesome sight and the child’s appearance were terribly beautiful to her. She exchanged words with the child, who then asked her a question.

“My name is Asura Lyona. How about you?”

*I’m...I’m nobody. At this point, I am nobody at all. In that case...*

“Lumia.”

*At the very least, I’ll use my little sister’s name—the name of someone I couldn’t protect and the name of the person I loved the most in this world. That way, whenever someone calls out to me, I’ll be able to remember her.*

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“That’s terrible... Why did you and Lumia...have to go through such horrible things?” Iris sobbed.

“Cruel as our fates may be, in Lumia’s case, she had the opportunity and means to avoid everything,” Asura said. “If I were her, I would’ve killed Noemi in the underground cell, then threatened the first prince to reveal my sister’s location. She lost too much hope too early.”

“Wait, Boss, Lumia wasn’t a soldier-mage back then. Like, you can’t blame her. I woulda given up too, if I hadn’t been a soldier-mage and they took Lina as hostage,” Jyrki said.

“Hmm. Well, in any case, that’s all for Lumia’s story. It was a summary of everything that happened, but now you understand why she’s using her sister’s name, right? If you have any questions, I’ll answer them.” Asura looked around at the gathered members.

“Um,” Salume said, raising her right hand slightly, “you said that the Juaren Kingdom was destroyed, but was Miss Lumia the one who did it?”

“Nope, she wasn’t,” Asura said with a light shrug. “Everyone in the royal family died, so of course it disappeared. The surrounding countries snatched up huge parts of its territory and it simply ended. It’s not as if they had the military strength to fight anyone off, especially after they disbanded the Oathkeeper Brigade themselves. Lumia’s group had been the main source of defense, after all.”

“Even if everyone in the royal family had perished, so long as Jeanne and the Oathkeeper Brigade remained, I don’t believe anyone could have forcefully taken the Juaren Kingdom. How ironic,” Marx said.

“If I recall, there were over three hundred people in the Oathkeeper Brigade, right?” Reko said. “And if there were three main pillars in it, that meant there were three regiments of a hundred? Isn’t that a lot of people?”

“It sure is. The Oathkeepers were a third of the Juaren Kingdom’s military, after all,” Asura said. “Truthfully, the reason they were strong was because their officers were strong. The rest of them were the same as any regular soldier. The members who were part of the first team Jeanne picked out were powerful.”

“Aren’t all of them...as strong as a thousand men?” Lina asked, tilting her head to the side.

“They were rumored to be.” Asura chuckled lightly. “Rumors tend to get out of hand. I’m sure it was true that under Lumia and the three pillars’ command, they were stronger than they would’ve been on their own though.”

“Why do...such horrible things keep happening?” Iris sniffed. “It’s wrong... Things shouldn’t be this way...”

“Hey, Iris, I’m begging you to stay on the straight and narrow,” Asura said with a wry smile. “To put it bluntly, we’re living in an era of social upheavals with lots of little countries cropping up and declaring independence. It’s expected that there would be a certain number of people enduring horrible experiences. But not everyone is.”

“She’s right. I’ve not experienced any major traumas in my life. At most, one of my worst experiences was being forced to relocate during my time with the knights,” Marx said.

“Yep. All I went through was some bullyin’ ’cause I’m an orphan. My past ain’t anythin’ as bad as Boss’s or Lumia’s,” Jyrki said.

“Me too... My life has been normal since...meeting Jyrki...and Boss... Rather, the biggest misfortune in my life was...meeting Boss...”

“Oh, for sure.” Jyrki laughed at Iina’s words.

“I was also abused and sold as a prostitute, so I went through my fair share of troubles. But after hearing about Boss and Lumia’s pasts, I’ve started to think that my past wasn’t so bad,” Salume said.

“Same. I just had my family killed by monsters and my village burned down,” Reko said with a nod.

“Er, Reko, your past is just as shitty as Boss’s,” Jyrki said with a lopsided smile. “Well, there’s no point in tryin’ to compete over who’s got it worse.”

“Exactly,” Asura said with a light shrug. “For now, let’s finish preparing for our journey. Our job now is to hunt down the Felmafia. So I’m sure we’ll eventually have to face off against the God Hand, Miriam. She’s as strong as a hero.”

“There should be two more people other than Miriam we should watch out for,” Marx said. “The God Hands of Central and West Felsen. Whether they’re former members of the Oathkeeper Brigade or common criminals, we can’t let our guard down. We should approach them as if they’re on Miriam’s level of strength.”

“And after we get rid of them, we got Tina and Lumia to deal with?” Jyrki sighed, staring out into the distance. “The road to Jeanne looks pretty rough.”

“We’ll be proactive in hunting them down, but there’s no need to rush. We can even take on other requests when we have time. All right, Iris, wipe away your tears.”

After Asura said that, Iris rubbed at her eyes with the back of her right arm.

“The white-haired Jeanne must’ve gone through her own fair share of hell. The torture that Noemi prepared must’ve been carried out. I don’t know how she survived, what kind of life she’s led up to this point, or why she took on Jeanne’s name, but Jeanne Autun Lala died ages ago,” Asura continued. “She simply hasn’t noticed that the curtains have already fallen. In other words, she’s nothing more than a phantom from the past. She’s no match for people like us, who are living in the present. Now, start your preparations.”

Asura clapped her hands and at her signal, the members of Moon Blossom returned to their own rooms to start packing their luggage.

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# **Part Five, Chapter One: What'll happen if you kidnap a member of my group? Misfortune will befall the culprit.**

Asura and the others left the Kotopori Kingdom at the planned time. Jeanne had slaughtered the citizens of the kingdom, then targeted Asura and Moon Blossom; Lumia had left the group in order to stop her—and save her. Lumia was Jeanne's older sister, who had been separated from her for many long years. Since Jeanne's goal had been to locate and secure her, Lumia going with Jeanne ended up solving all of their problems.

From Jeanne's point of view, everything was over. However, that wasn't how Moon Blossom saw things.

Jeanne attacked Asura partly as a joke, but because of that, Moon Blossom planned on starting a war to get revenge. Though Moon Blossom was on their way to Arnia, they were currently in a country that shared Kotopori Kingdom's northern border.

In the country's castle town, Asura and Moon Blossom were partying it up as usual. However, they didn't hire any women this time. Sometimes, it was necessary to enjoy a day off with just the group.

“Come on, Elna, drink! It's delicious! Drink some more!”

Asura was drunk. The members of Moon Blossom, along with Iris and Elna, were drinking together in a bar.

“Asura, are you suuuure you should drink that much?” Elna asked worriedly.

“I'm finally able to drink alcohol without puking all over myself! Do you even know how happy I am about that?! Ha ha! Hey, is everyone having fun?!”

Up to this point, Asura had always vomited as soon as she had a sip of alcohol. Her body was normally unable to handle it, but she didn't feel nauseous at all today. She was so happy that she threw back mug after mug.

“You’re such a loud brat.”

That was when three men showed up at Asura’s table. All of them wore leather armor and had swords hanging from their belts. From the looks of it, they seemed more like mercenaries than soldiers.

“Get out of here,” Marx said. “Do you want to die?”

“Huh? Do you bastards know who you’re talking to?” A man with his leather armor dyed red glared down at Marx.

“We don’t,” Reko said. “The only thing we know is that you guys are all idiots.”

“*Rude* idiots on top of that,” Salume said. “Reko, we call people like them ‘trash.’”

“We’re mercenaries from Flame, dammit.”

“Ohhh? How cool,” Jyrki said. “Ain’t that the biggest mercenary group right now? We’re nothin’ compared to them.”

The mercenary group Flame had headquarters of all sizes around the entirety of Felsenmark, which meant that they were able to find work across the continent.

“What, you guys are mercs too? Anyway, shut that silver-haired brat up. She’s so loud that she’s causing trouble. Are we in the wrong here? Huh? Out here calling us ‘idiots’ and ‘trash.’ I get having fun in a pub, but that little silver-haired girl is a bit too loud.”

Since Moon Blossom hadn’t put in a reservation, they hadn’t been able to book the whole place to themselves. The bar was filled with other customers.

“It’s my fault?! Mine?!?” Asura laughed cheerily. “Why don’t you join us for some drinks? C’mモン, it’ll be my treat.”

“That’s not the issue. We’re telling you to lower your voice. You should listen when adults are talking to you. We’re not the only patrons who think you’re too loud. Everyone here does, but no one dares to say anything because you guys seem a little dangerous. We’re pretty confident in our skills, so we came to tell you about it.”

The mercenaries from Flame were people with common sense.

“I’m sorry,” Salume said obediently. “We apologize for the noise, as well as for suddenly insulting you all. I thought that you came to start a fight so I...lost control...”

“I apologize as well. We’ll ask her to lower her voice. I’m sorry for the

trouble,” Marx said as well.

“Nah, it’s cool so long as you get it. Seriously, we’re counting on you. We’re gonna leave now, but there’s lots of customers here tonight.” Then the three men who said they were mercenaries from Flame paid their bills and left the bar.

“Boss...we didn’t reserve the whole bar so...could you keep it down?” Iina said. “Oh, you look like you’re feeling sick...”

“Sorry...I’m gonna go throw up...” With that, Asura shakily pushed herself to her feet.

“Do you want me to go with you?” Iris asked.

“I don’t need a babysitter... I can throw up by myself. Or what, do you want to poke your finger down my throat? Of course, you’ll only end up with barf all over your hand...” Asura stumbled out of the bar and threw up everything in her stomach in the back alley. “Shit... I guess it was still too early for me...or perhaps I simply drank too much...”

She wiped at her mouth, but she immediately felt something start to well up in her throat again. Steadying herself on the wall, Asura vomited onto the ground. Right as she started, she sensed someone’s presence.

“Iris, I said I didn’t need a babysitter... Or what, do you want to see me covered in my barf?”

As Asura spoke, she turned her head, but someone punched her hard in the abdomen at that exact same moment. What little was left in her stomach spilled out of her mouth and she threw up again. Then someone slammed their fist into her head.

*Ahh, shit, how could I of all people...*

She hadn’t been able to properly recognize the person who approached her, nor had she been able to sense their hostile intent. What a disgrace.

“Tsk, the brat hasn’t fainted yet?”

She heard a man’s voice and then felt a sharp pain in her head again. Then, she lost consciousness.

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“Don’t you think little Asura is taking a long tiiiime? I wonder if she fainted somewhere,” Elna said worriedly. There was a dark flush on her face from all the wine she drank.

“That’s possible,” Jyrki said. “Boss really can’t hold her drink, but she pushed herself and drank too much. No matter how she spins it, I guess she’s real hurt from Lumia leavin’.”

In the real sense of the word, Lumia had been Asura’s only family. Yet Lumia had gone off with her sister without any hesitation.

*If I were in her shoes, I’d pass out for days from the shock,* Marx thought.

“Yeah, I think I’m gonna go look for her!” Iris said. She stood up and then ran out of the bar.

“Boss was so cute while drunk,” Reko said. “I got turned on.”

“Huh?” said Elna.

“He’s got a fetish for Boss,” Jyrki explained. “He gets excited at everything so long as Boss is the one doing it. He can even get it up from her hittin’ him. What a riot, right?”

“When she slapped me, I got so hard. I got so excited.”

“See?” Jyrki said.

“And yet he said he doesn’t get excited about me... It kind of annoys me...”

“I mean, you’re Iina,” Reko said.

“You’re really so funny.” Salume giggled.

“I’m truly worried about Reko’s future,” Marx said with a dry smile. “Especially the fact that you’re so interested in Boss. Your taste in women is terrible.”

For a moment, Elna didn’t say anything before, with a wry smile, she finally said, “What a strange boy!”

“Speaking of which, why were you followin’ us, Elna?” Jyrki asked.

After hearing about what happened, Elna had left Moon Blossom the money and immediately went to the military police. Then she tracked Moon Blossom all the way to the bar. They still hadn’t heard what she wanted from them.

“Didn’t you say that you were going to party it up? I like having fun too, you knoooow?”

“Seriously? I don’t believe that.”

“Hee hee. Little Asura is the only person I need to speak to. It’s not that important, so I can wait until tomorrow.”

“What are the heroes going to do about Jeanne? You *will* do something,

won't you?" Marx asked in a serious tone.

"Yes, of course. I suppose that Axel will hold an emergency meeting with the Great Heroes after I report everything to him. Each region sends a representative for these meetings. I don't like them, so I always pawn it off to Axel."

"I see. If possible, could you share information you learn from the meeting with us as well?" Marx asked. "We plan on destroying the Felmafia."

"Oh? Are you suuuure that's all right?"

"It's fine. I'm the vice captain. I'm putting in this request with the belief that this is the best course of action to complete the mission."

"Then I suppose we'll be working together!" Elna said with a cheery smile.

"Hey, bad news!" Iris yelled as she ran into the bar. "I couldn't find Asura anywhere! But I saw blood mixed in with a puddle of vomit! I think something happened to her!"

"Jyrki, Iina, go."

"Kay."

"All right..."

At Marx's order, both Jyrki and Iina immediately ran outside.

"We're going to go through some possibilities for motive, Reko," Marx continued.

"Someone kidnapped Boss because she's adorable."

"It's possible. Salume?"

"Perhaps one of Jeanne's underlings snatched her?"

"That's impossible. They didn't seem to care about us that much. Iris?"

"Um, er, maybe a gangster attacked her and took her away?"

"That's the same thing Reko said. Elna?"

"You're going to ask me toooo?"

"I need an opinion from an outside party. Is there anything you can think of?"

"Would it be too much of a stretch to guess it's the handiwork of someone from Kotopori?"

"It's possible, but...the chances of that are pretty low. Elna, you explained everything to the military police, right?"

In the Kotopori Kingdom, unfounded rumors about the mercenary group

Moon Blossom recruiting Jeanne were flying around. Since Jeanne had murdered so many people, the citizens were calling for her blood and looking for a target to punish.

Even so, Moon Blossom left the country with their heads held high instead of sneaking out. “We didn’t do anything wrong so if they try to attack us, we won’t show them any mercy” was Asura’s opinion on the matter.

“That’s riiight. I explained everythiiiing to them.” The explanation Elna gave the military police was that Moon Blossom was just as much a victim as the Kotopori Kingdom.

“Um, maybe it was those men from earlier? The people from Flame? They’re not here anymore. Maybe they were using the earlier conversation to figure us out.”

“That’s more than possible, Salume,” Marx agreed. “Since they’re mercenaries, there’s a chance that they received a request to kidnap our boss. If she was drunk and in the middle of vomiting, then it wouldn’t be difficult to grab her.”

“But if it wasn’t Jeanne, then who would ask for someone to kidnap Asura?” Iris asked, her eyes narrowed.

“At this point, there’s no way to know. There’s also the chance that it wasn’t a kidnapping and rather, an impulsive murder. In that case, the culprit took Boss’s corpse away to bury it.”

“Or maybe,” Reko said, “Boss wandered off while drunk.”

“That’s possible.” Salume nodded. “No matter the reason behind her disappearance, should we all go and search the surrounding area?”

“We’ll decide on our next course of action after Iina and Jyrki finish their investigation of the scene. In any case, let’s eat,” Marx said calmly. At his words, Reko and Salume returned to their meals.

Elna was shocked at that. “Um...there’s a chance that little Asura might have been kidnapped, right?”

“That’s right,” Marx replied as he reached for a plate of meat.

Elna tilted her head to the side. “You’re not panicking?”

“Why would we?” Marx said. “It’s not as if we’re absolutely certain she’s been taken away. Let’s say it *is* a kidnapping. There’s no need to worry about a kidnapper, is there?”

“That’s right,” Reko said. “Their deciding to target Boss was the worst

decision they could've made.”

“I agree.” Salume giggled. “I kind of feel sorry for them. *If it really was a kidnapping, of course.*”

“Umm, I’m a little confused.”

“Lady Elna, no one is going to worry about Asura. I mean, it’s Asura we’re talking about,” Iris said. “From the bottom of my heart, I sympathize with the people who took her.”

“I-I see...” Though Elna smiled, she still looked perplexed. But she recovered and drank some wine.

The group ate peacefully for a bit more until Jyrki and Iina returned.

“We found tons of footprints. There were three people other than Boss,” Jyrki reported.

“Considering how much blood there was...she’s not dead...” Iina said.

“There’s a high chance that she passed out, though.”

“It looks like...one of them was moving...while carrying Boss...”

“Then it looks like we’re sure of it now. Boss got kidnapped,” Marx said.

“If the culprits were a group of three people, then I think those people from Flame are the most suspicious,” Salume said.

“Uh-huh. The p’ob’em is—”

“Finish swallowing before you talk, Reko,” Iris said in an exasperated tone.

Jyrki and Iina returned to their seats, and then started to eat.

“Here’s our next course of action,” Marx said with a severe expression. “First, we’ll identify the enemies who took away our boss. Then we’ll ignore any requests they make even if they use her as a hostage. At that point, we’ll assume that Boss died and destroy them with everything we have.”

After Marx finished talking, everyone nodded. Even Iris did. No one was seriously worried since Asura had been the one kidnapped.

“Iris, Elna, I’d like you two to pay the military police a visit and ask about any kidnappings in the area just in case,” Marx continued. “Even in a time like this, I’m sure they’ll give you information if you’re a hero.”

“Heeeeey, I’m not a member of your group, remember?”

“Why don’t you think of your help as a way to repay us for dinner? We footed the bill, you know?”

Elna sighed. “Fiiiine. But that’s all the help I’ll provide you. If you need me for anything after that, I’m going to have to ask you to pay.”

“Of course. Jyrki and Iina, if you find Flame, I want you to interrogate them. If you get some intel, we’ll meet up back at the inn. Salume and Reko, I want you two to ask the people around if they see anything. Even if something seems unimportant, I want you to report it if it bothers you.”

“All riiight.”

“I understand.”

Both Salume and Reko nodded obediently as they replied.

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When Asura regained consciousness, the first thing she realized was that she’d been stuffed inside a barrel with her hands tied behind her back. She could see the outside from the seams in the wood, but only more barrels were in sight.

“What a rare experience, to be inside of a barrel.”

It was kind of fun. From observing her surroundings through gaps in the wood, she could see that her barrel was on a horse-drawn cart. The going was smooth, so they were moving on a large paved road rather than a bad one.

“Ahh, my head is killing me.” Her stomach hurt too, thanks to the punch. She summoned petals from Floral Cure onto her head and her abdomen. “And for some reason, my back hurts... Oh, right. I got slashed by a sword.”

She changed out the Floral Cure petals on her back as well. The effects had worn off already so the pain returned. Since she had a doctor sew up her wounds before she went to the bar, she probably wasn’t bleeding.

“The worst part is the taste of vomit in my mouth.”

If Asura wanted to escape, she could do so with ease. The barrel she was in was a normal one without any alterations or modifications to it. However, she wanted to enjoy the situation a little more. Another reason was...

“Help! Is anyone there?! Help me!”

She could hear a girl screaming. It looked like the kidnappers had snatched up other people besides Asura.

“Hmm, so that means I wasn’t targeted in particular.”

The culprit wasn't a personal enemy of Asura's, nor were they an enemy of Moon Blossom. But Asura chased the thought out of her head. It was still too early for her to reach that conclusion. She hadn't collected enough information yet.

"Shut up! If you don't shut your mouth, I'll kill you, you brat! We have swords here! We'll stab it through the barrel!" A man yelled, followed immediately by the sound of him kicking a barrel.

The girl fell silent.

"This voice... If I recall, it was those people from Flame." Asura chuckled low in her throat. Just where did they plan on taking everyone? "But I'm sure you'll regret that you chose me as one of your targets."

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## **Part Five, Chapter Two: My value? I'm worth a lot, of course. Wait, two hundred thousand? That's too cheap! How rude!**

The next morning, Asura was taken out of the barrel and placed in the back of the wagon with her hands bound. The back was covered by a canopy, and the whole thing was about the same size as the one Moon Blossom used as their base of operations.

The Flame man who had taken Asura out of her barrel then lifted a girl out from another one. He was wearing leather armor dyed a deep crimson. She recognized him as the man who'd talked to her the previous night. There weren't other Flame members inside the wagon, but there was at least one person in charge of steering, and likely one more to relieve him. There were probably three Flame mercenaries at the minimum.

*It's probably the three people we saw at the bar,* Asura guessed.

"Take me back home... Help me..." the girl placed at the back of the carriage said.

She looked about twelve years old, with silver hair. Though she wasn't noticeably cute, she wasn't ugly either. But her clothes looked fairly expensive. Since she didn't have the air of an aristocrat, Asura figured she probably came from an upper middle-class family.

"I'll give you some bread and water," the man with the red leather armor told Asura. "But before I do that, I'm going to put these shackles on you. Don't put up a fight."

"If I was in the mood for a scuffle, I would've done so as soon as you opened up my barrel," Asura replied with a light shrug.

She thought that she would observe how things proceeded for a while. At the very least, she wanted to know what these men wanted. Since they were mercenaries, the easiest answer was that they were in the middle of a job.

“I’m not surprised to see you so calm. I guess you have what it takes to call yourself the leader of a mercenary group, even if you’re just a figurehead. Don’t you agree, Asura Lyona?” The man in the red leather armor chuckled after he finished speaking.

“You’re calling me a figurehead?” Asura replied, miffed. “What do you mean by that?”

She cared more about that than the fact that the mercenary knew her name.

“Exactly what the words mean. It gets people talking, doesn’t it? A mercenary led by a thirteen-year-old girl. Moon Blossom’s pretty famous among the other mercenaries.”

“Oh? So what, are you saying that I’m calling myself the leader because it makes our group popular? Then, let me guess. People say that Marx is the real leader?”

*Maybe I’ll kill this guy right here right now,* Asura thought.

“Marx Redford, formerly from the Knights of the Azure Skies, is obeying the orders of a thirteen-year-old girl. That by itself is more than enough for Moon Blossom to become the center of gossip,” the man in the red leather armor laughed. “I’ve been a mercenary since I was fourteen. I’m not surprised that you’re working as a merc, but it’s impossible for you to be the leader. Right?”

“You sure make it hard to agree with you,” Asura said with a sardonic smile. He was completely off the mark.

“All right, show me your legs. By the way, I’ve taken away all of your equipment.”

“I know. That belt was a custom order, so can you return it to me later?” Asura said as she stretched out her legs towards him.

“No can do,” the man said as he placed wooden shackles around her ankles.

“I see. Well, that’s fine. It’ll be back in my hands in no time.”

She said it with absolute certainty. There was no way it wouldn’t return to her. Asura didn’t even need to lift a single finger and she’d be able to get her belt back. *They* wouldn’t take this lying down. Those insane bloodthirsty freaks wouldn’t simply stand by and watch people kidnap their leader.

“Hey, you too. Legs.” The man in the red leather armor placed shackles

around the other girl's ankles as well.

"By the way, what's your name? You know mine, so it's only fair that I know yours too, right?"

"It's Jakob."

Jakob took out two water bottles from another barrel and handed one to both Asura and the silver-haired girl.

"We can't drink this while our hands are tied up," Asura pointed out.

"Shut up. Stop being so impatient. I'll give it to you."

"Oh? Are you an angel or something? You're awfully kind. So that means this kidnapping must be a job you were hired to do. That means Flame doesn't regard me as an enemy."

If they had done this with a personal grudge or hatred as a motive, they wouldn't treat Asura in such a gentle way.

"Of course. We mercenaries work only when there's money to be made. You're the same, aren't you?"

"What does that girl have to do with me?"

"Our job is to kidnap two silver-haired girls, and they specifically requested that we grab Asura Lyona, the leader of the mercenary group, Moon Blossom."

"Aren't you a talkative one? They didn't make you sign a confidentiality agreement? Or do you think there's no issue in telling me about it?"

"Both. I don't think there's any harm in letting you know about the job, and the client didn't tell me to keep it a secret from you."

"I see."

So Flame's client figured that there's no issue in letting Asura know about the kidnapping, meaning she'd be able to meet them if she waited a little longer. Since meeting Asura was their intention, they didn't mind if Flame revealed their target.

"By the way, how much are you getting paid to kidnap me?" Asura asked. "If I were you, I wouldn't take on a job as risky as kidnapping me unless I got a million dora for it."

"We'll be getting two hundred thousand."

*Me? Two hundred thousand?*

"Are you serious...? You must be joking, right? Your client will only pay you two hundred thousand to kidnap me?"

Asura felt her head spin from sheer shock. *No, calm down*, Asura told

herself. That would be the same price as two high-tier monsters. It wasn't bad. It *shouldn't* be bad.

"Everyone knows about Moon Blossom, and I know you're good. But in the end, you're a new group with only a handful of people. Two hundred thousand is more than enough. It wasn't difficult at all to kidnap you, after all."

"That's because I was drunk and in the middle of throwing up... What else?"

"We've taken away your weapons and we'll watch out for your magic. That's it. A mercenary has to wipe their own ass. I suppose your group will leave you for dead and choose a new leader."

"I see. So Flame ultimately regards Asura Lyona as nothing more than a figurehead for Moon Blossom?"

Jakob and the other Flame mercenaries' mistake wasn't in assuming Asura was a fake leader—it was in their lack of understanding in just who made up Moon Blossom. Asura's mercenaries were, frankly, crazy. By now, the Flame mercenaries likely no longer had a home.

"It's the truth, ain't it?" Jakob said. "I can't believe you're stronger than Marx. I *did* hear that you blew up a Great Hero's arm, but that's a lie, right?"

"I suppose it's time to turn over a new leaf..." Asura said with a dramatic nod. "I've been far too nice for too long. Messed around far too much. Fine. Lumia isn't here anymore, so it's time to start getting serious. I'll show the whole world just what kind of power I have. Two hundred thousand is too cruel."

It wasn't enough. No matter how much Asura tried to convince herself otherwise, the price on her was way too cheap. She also never expected people to so loudly and confidently assume that she was nothing more than a figurehead. Asura hated being underestimated.

*For now, she thought, I'll murder their client. I won't play around or be nice. I'll kill them within seconds. But that's not enough. I'll leave some of their people alive so they can serve as my witnesses. So that they can go around and spread the word of just how terrifying Asura Lyona can be.*

"Oh, who's your client? If it's not a secret, then tell me. Don't worry. No matter who hired you, I won't resist. I'll gladly let you take me to them."

*And then I'll kill them. I'll kill the client so that no other fool can*

*assume they can kidnap me for a price as low as two hundred thousand dora.*

She didn't have to bother with the Flame mercenaries. Everyone involved with Asura's kidnapping, Jakob included, would die anyway. She didn't even have to take care of it herself. They'd die only because they were part of Flame.

*Well, if they apologize, I might consider forgiving them,* Asura thought. Mercenaries were nothing more than hired help, after all.

"She's not the direct client, but you know who Jeanne Autun Lala is, right?"

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The previous night, Jyrki visited one of the branches of Flame. He asked them if they could show him their list of requests, and was immediately turned away. That was a given; no mercenary group would show a stranger their jobs. However, Jyrki didn't care about that.

"There were some people on the second floor. Probably somethin' like a three-person team or a squad at most. There was a receptionist on the first floor, but she ain't a mercenary. She was a pretty lady who didn't reek of blood. To the right of the entrance was this lobby-like place with three mercenaries playing cards."

Jyrki was sharing information on the base's interior with Iina. Flame's current hideout wasn't much different from a normal two-story house. Considering Flame's size, this was a pretty small base for them.

"If they're playin...we can kill them without any special tricks..." Iina said with a small smile.

It was already nighttime. As a business, Flame was always open, so there were several mercenaries inside of the building. But all of them had let their guards down.

"Even if they aren't playin', we can kill them. We're strong, remember?"

"Yeah... We're so strong...I'm surprised at myself..."

"In any case, the guys playin' cards are to the right of the entrance. Don't get it wrong. I'm leavin' them to you. Stairs to the second level are to the right and farther into the building. I'll guard the stairs and kill anyone

who comes down 'em."

"'Kay... Kill everyone?"

Iina was staring at Flame's base. They weren't standing that far away from it. There were around twenty meters between them. Jyrki and Iina weren't hiding themselves and were chatting as usual right on the road. They couldn't sense anyone around them.

"Don't kill the receptionist. We need her to give us their job record."

"And if she doesn't?"

"Make her."

"'Kay." Iina nodded, looking excited.

"All right. Let's go!"

Jyrki and Iina strolled forward, entering Flame's base like they were normal clients. They acted in such a natural and casual manner that nobody could tell they were about to assault the place. That went for the receptionist as well. Though she furrowed her brow for a moment as if irritated at Jyrki's return, that was all she did. The mercenaries to the right were the same. They glanced at Jyrki and Iina, but didn't seem too interested in their presence.

It wasn't surprising that they would all react this way. Who in their right mind would ever guess that a group of only two people would attack a building that belonged to the mercenary group, Flame? It was unthinkable. The pair of them could only be potential clients with a new job. There was no need to view them as a threat.

"We're gonna have a little dance," Jyrki said as he smiled at the receptionist.

At the same time, Iina nocked an arrow in her bow and shot at the mercenaries to the right. The moment her first arrow struck clean through the head of one of the mercenaries, Jyrki ran all the way to the stairs and took up position next to it. Iina released a second arrow and killed another mercenary. That was when the final mercenary finally—*finally*—stood up while unsheathing his sword.

The receptionist screamed. Iina enchanted her third arrow with Accelerate. The final mercenary was unable to dodge it, nor could he deflect it with his sword. It pierced through his chest, essentially ending Iina's job on the mission.

Mercenaries were descending the stairs in a hurry, but as soon as they

made it down to the first floor, Jyrki gracefully stepped out from the shadows and slit one of their throats.

“What a drag. Shall we burn this whole place down?”

Jyrki summoned a Fireball in his hand and threw it at a second mercenary coming down the stairs, who screamed while writhing about, setting fire to the surroundings. As soon as she saw what was happening, Iina pointed her dagger at the receptionist.

“Give me all your recent job records...involving kidnapping. Hurry up or...everyone is going to burn to death...”

A third mercenary ran down the stairs while holding up a shield.

“Oh? Aren’t you a smart one?” Jyrki said with a cheery laugh.

“Cut the bullshit, you bastard! You’ll pay for th—!”

“That’s *my* line.” Jyrki held his dagger before him.

The man with the shield unsheathed his sword. The fire was spreading fast, burning through the wooden walls. Jyrki and Iina had to retreat before the smoke filled the air.

“Jyrki...I got it!”

“What, so the records really *were* with the receptionist?” Granted, Jyrki had a hunch that was the case, which was why he’d set fire to the building without hesitation. “Just as I figured. All right, let’s go back.”

Jyrki turned to Iina and smiled. At the same time, the man with the shield swung his sword, but Jyrki easily sidestepped it.

“Too slow,” Jyrki said. “You ain’t anywhere on Boss’s level. I guess this just proves how strong she is!”

The man with the shield attempted to hit Jyrki with a side slash. Jyrki parried the attack with his left dagger, then stabbed his opponent in the arm with his right. The man screamed as the blade dug into his flesh.

“I’m gonna let you live. I’m Jyrki Kuusela of the mercenary group, Moon Blossom. I got a message for your bosses,” Jyrki said as he pulled the dagger out. “Where’d you get the idea that you’d get off scot-free? That you thought nothing’d happen to you after you kidnapped our boss? You’re all dead meat, you hear me? If you don’t want that to happen, then come apologize to us. I dunno if our boss would pardon you, but there’s always hope.”

Though Jyrki had no solid proof, circumstantial evidence pointed to Flame. Even if the culprits were someone else, it wasn’t a big deal. The

only consequences would be going to war against Flame.

If Asura were here, she'd probably say something like, "Man, what am I going to do with you, Jyrki? Oh well, there's really nothing we can do about it now that we're at war. I'm in." Then she'd laugh it off. If Asura wasn't in the mood for war, they could always settle things with cash. Granted, Jyrki would have to shoulder most of the reparations.

"Jyrki! It's gonna burn!" Lina yelled, clutching the job records to her chest.

The fire was getting bigger, separating the two of them. The receptionist had already evacuated outside.

"Got it. You can go out if you want," Jyrki called back, smiling. "Hey, old man, you'll pass along my message, right?"

"You crazy bastard... Busting in here and killing and setting fires... You're messed up..." The man with the shield glared at Jyrki, cradling his injured right arm with his left.

"I'm perfectly sane compared to my boss. Besides, you're all mercenaries too. You must know about preemptive strikes, right?" Jyrki ended his question with a shrug.

Asura had hammered into Moon Blossom the importance of preemptive strikes. They'd discover the enemy first and hit them before they could retaliate. They'd ambush them while their guards were down, hide behind cover as they moved to the next target, and then start the cycle anew. According to Asura, warfare with soldiers standing in a line and moving forward as a single unit would soon become obsolete.

"All right, then. Old man, you better make your escape too or you'll burn down along with your home."

With those final parting words, Jyrki leaped towards the window, broke through the glass, and then hit the ground with a tight roll.

## **Part Five, Chapter Three: A stinky pretty girl isn't *that* bad, right? It is? I figured. I'm not a fan either.**

"I can finally see the full picture," Marx said with a heavy sigh.

He and the rest of Moon Blossom were gathered in one of the rooms in their inn. It was midnight by the time they finished putting together the information Reko and Salume got, the job records Jyrki and Iina obtained, and the investigation report that Iris and Elna borrowed. That was when they finally saw the truth behind the kidnapping incident.

"I'm gonna summarize everything, all right?" Reko said from his spot on the floor. "For starters, Flame was definitely the group that kidnapped Boss. Her name was in the job records."

"To be more specific, the job was to kidnap two silver-haired girls," Salume added from next to him. "And the client named Boss as one of them. As for compensation, kidnapping Boss was two hundred thousand dora and the other silver-haired girl was twenty thousand since they could kidnap whoever they wanted."

"Boss is going to be so mad..." Iina, sitting on the bed, started to shake. "I'd never work for two hundred thousand... No way I'd kidnap Boss...for spare change like that..."

"Yeah, as soon as Boss learns about it, she's gonna unleash hell." Jyrki, sitting on the chair, slumped his shoulders. "She *really* hates it when people underestimate her. She'll fly into a rage once she learns how much she was worth. Granted, she doesn't show her emotions that much."

"Also, according to the military police's reports, there've been a few cases of two silver-haired girls getting kidnapped in neighboring countries," Iris said. She was leaning against the wall while holding one of said reports in her hand. "The countries have been working together to investigate everything, but they haven't found the culprits yet. Well, if Flame is the one

behind everything, then there definitely won't be any clues to follow."

Even Iris, who had led a peaceful life, knew Flame's name. They were a mercenary group who would do anything for money, no matter how cruel and evil the job. None of them had a single shred of morality.

"In other words, they've been restocking their supply of silver-haired girls on a regular basis," Elna said from her chair. "So that means they're using them up in some way."

"From here, we'll be getting into the rumors." Marx crossed his arms as he leaned against the wall. "The girls might have been getting tortured and murdered by a heretic cult. In other words, they're being treated like sacrifices."

"Yeah, they're used as substitutes for the God of Silver, Zoya," Iris said. "If that rumor is true, then they're absolutely disgusting."

In Central Felsen, they considered Zoya to be the sole god and the one who wrote the Sacred Word. Though no one knew their gender, idols left behind in their image depicted them as a young girl. There were also records stating that Zoya had silver hair.

"I'm going to continue, all right?" Reko said.

"The way you talk kinda reminds me of Boss," Jyrki said.

"Oh? Maybe my love for her is so strong that I'm turning into her."

"You wish," Iris sighed. "Hurry up and continue."

"The client's name is Ada Kuula. I have no idea who she is, but the planned meeting spot for the handover is in the Rasdia Kingdom."

"It's a country famous for its lawlessness," Salume said. "Everything, from gambling to prostitution to drugs, is legal there. So in a way, they're like a normal country."

"They're on the border...of East and Central Felsen... So lots of people fled there...to get away from Central's oppressive laws..."

"I've been there once to sell some shit I stole," Jyrki said. "The black market's just the normal market there. You can get away with basically anythin' so long as you pay your taxes. It was heaven for people like us."

"On the flip side...if you don't pay your taxes...you'll be arrested immediately..."

In the Rasdia Kingdom, the biggest crime you could commit was tax evasion.

"It also serves as a hideout for all sorts of heretics," Reko continued. "In

that case, the client is one of those cults. The kidnappings are to get more sacrifices for a ritual or something. The problem now is why they specified Boss.”

“That’s the only part of this mystery I can’t figure out,” Marx said calmly. “The most plausible answers I can think of are a personal grudge or interest.”

“In any case,” Elna said, “it’s about time for me to take my leeeeave. I sent Axel a letter, but I’d like to report the details to him in person. And since the person I actually had business with isn’t even here, I’ll come by another day.”

“Yes, thank you for your help,” Marx said with a small smile. “We’ll be heading over to the Rasdia Kingdom so you can come to us whenever you have time. You’ll be able to meet with Boss there as well.”

“Do I *look* like I have time?” Elna stood up from the chair and stretched.

“You look like you have all the time in the world,” Jyrki laughed. “It’s not like you have anythin’ to do until the Great Heroes have their meeting to decide how they’re gonna proceed, right?”

“Fine, fine, yes, my schedule is completely free. If you want a Great Hero to lend you her strength, you only need to ask.”

“That’s not it... Marx just wanted to say that if you wanted to see the boss...you can if you go to Rasdia... There’s no guarantee we’ll...go to Arnia as planned afterwards...”

That was right. The situation could always change. This very one, in which Asura had been kidnapped, was an irregular occurrence. In that case, there was no telling whether they could move the way they’d planned to.

“Oh, I see. Thanks for the kiiiind explanation. Then, I’ll be on my way.” Elna lightly waved her hand and then left the room.

“What’s our next move?” Reko asked.

“We’ll rest until morning,” Marx replied. “After that, we’ll have breakfast and then head to Rasdia. There’s no need to panic. Nothing will happen to Boss.”

“Of course,” Jyrki chuckled. “Honestly, if she feels like it, she can easily get away on her own. We’ll probably see her on our way to Rasdia and she’ll say somethin’ like, ‘Hello, everyone, what nice weather we’re having.’”

“The problem would be if she *doesn’t* escape,” Salume said. “We might

get punished if we don't do a good job reading her intentions..."

"That would certainly be terrifying," Marx said with a strained smile. "In case that does happen, let's spend more time planning out our next steps after we enter Rasdia. Instead of immediately rescuing Boss, we'll try to contact her without the enemies noticing us."

"As the vice captain, you'd be the most responsible," Reko said cheerily.

"Should we leave someone behind so that Boss doesn't miss us if she breaks out on her own?" Salume asked.

"Nah, there's no need for that," Jyrki said. "There's only two paths to get to Rasdia from here. We can just split up and if one of us meets Boss on the way to Rasdia, we can reunite in the kingdom."

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Three days later, Asura was still sitting in the carriage. She'd become fairly good friends with the other silver-haired girl, Ilmari. They sat while leaning against each other. Though their hands were no longer bound, they were connected to each other via a chain running between the shackles around their ankles.

"Ilmari, you're kind of stinky," Asura said.

"Asura, you're stinky too," Ilmari replied.

"Hmm. Well, it's been over three days since we got to wash ourselves."

"I wanna go to a hot spring."

In the beginning, Ilmari was always fearful, but Asura managed to break the ice after talking to her. Since they had "being a victim of kidnapping" in common, it didn't take long for them to get close.

"That sounds nice," Asura said. "I'd love to go too."

"We should go together, Asura!"

"Yeah, one day."

It was about time for them to reach their destination, the Rasdia Kingdom. Asura had gotten Jakob to tell her everything about the client and where they were headed. That was when she got fired up. Their client was a cult that worshiped Jeanne as their god. It was easy to guess that the cult was full of fools who had fallen for Jeanne's divinity.

Jeanne herself would never hire people to kidnap Asura. She simply wasn't the type of person to do that. Right now, Jeanne viewed Asura as

nothing more than a pebble on the side of the road, and not even Lumia could change her mind on that. There was a high chance that some of Jeanne's worshippers were unable to abide by Asura's destroying the Felmafia's bases and had hired Flame on their own to kidnap her.

If she was lucky, she might meet someone who knew where Jeanne was hiding. Even if they didn't know anything, things would turn out fine. These were people who moved on Jeanne's behalf anyway, so one could think of them as a part of Jeanne's forces. In that case, destroying them would end up hurting Jeanne. It didn't matter how minimal the damage was. Asura was intent on destroying everyone involved with her.

"We'll...be able to go home, right?" Ilmari asked in a nervous voice.

"Of course," Asura replied softly. "I'm strong. I promised that I'd take you back, remember? I'm the type of person who always keeps her word, so you don't have to worry."

Asura glanced towards the man watching them, but he didn't seem interested in their conversation. There really were only three men from Flame, rotating jobs between each other. One man would watch over the two girls, one would control the carriage, and one would take a break. Right now, it should be Jakob's turn to be the driver.

*Well, it's not like it matters.*

Asura wasn't going to do anything to these three. There was simply no need to. They'd never be able to go back to their base anyway. Even if they miraculously made it back without encountering anyone from Moon Blossom, their headquarters physically didn't exist anymore. Asura knew exactly what her mercenaries would do. Jakob and the other two no longer had a place to call home, and this was a fact.

"Yeah..." Ilmari nodded, but she still looked anxious.

Asura couldn't blame her. At the end of the day, her promise was nothing but words, and Ilmari hadn't seen Asura's strength yet.

"Let's sing, Ilmari. Do you still remember the song I taught you yesterday?"

"Yeah! Scar-brow Fair?"

"That's right, it's *Scarborough Fair*. I'm a big fan of ballads, you see. Let's begin."

Asura began to sing with Ilmari. Ever since she had been reborn in this world, she'd had an interest in song. In her past life, she hadn't disliked

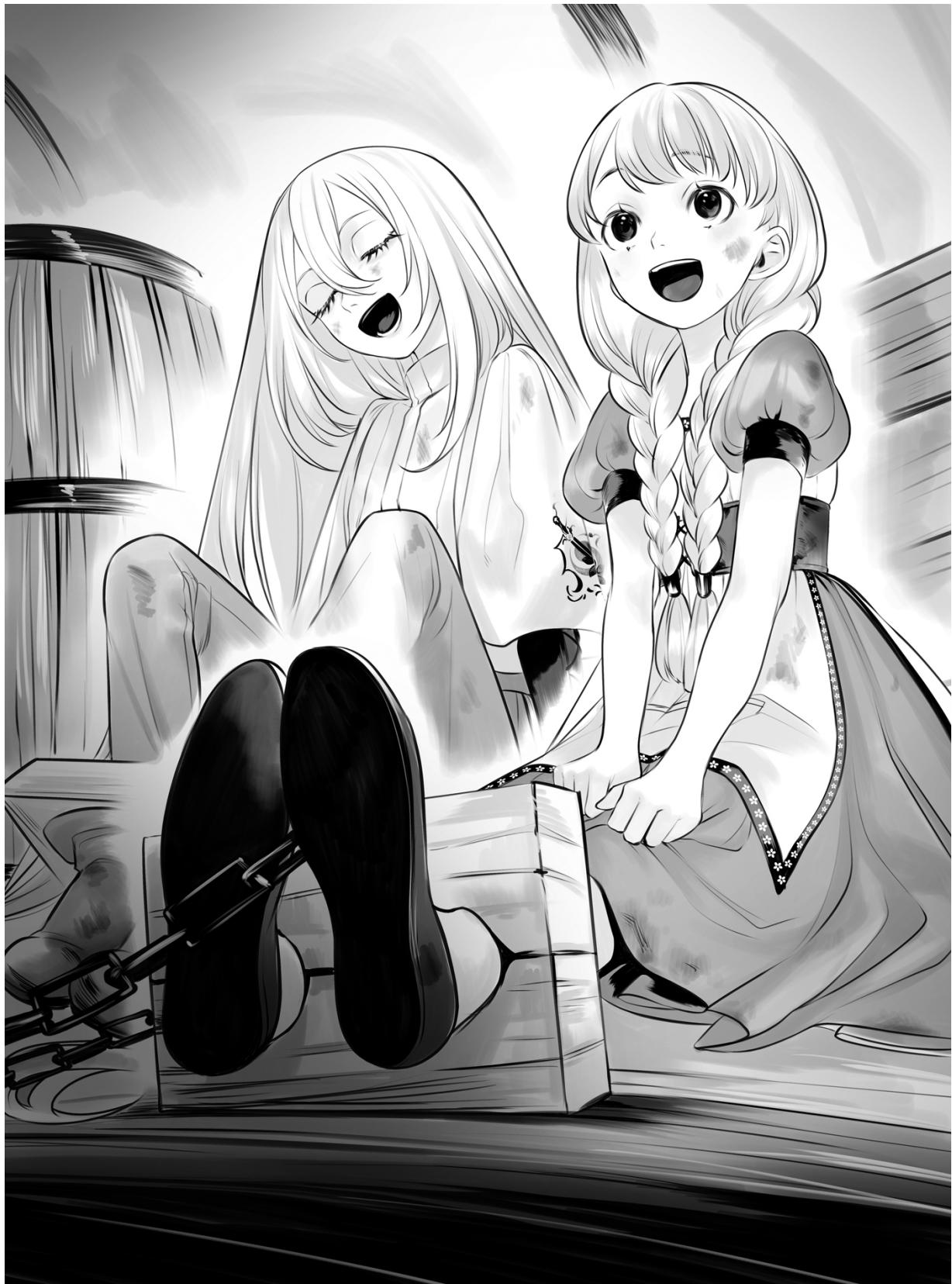
music, of course. However, her favorite sounds had been the shots from an assault rifle.

After they finished singing, she chatted with Ilmari for a while until the wagon came to a stop. The men tied up Asura and Ilmari's wrists again before they removed the shackles around their ankles. The girls then had collars placed around their necks with the chain tying them together. Asura was forced to walk in front with Ilmari following behind her. There was a chain protruding from the front of Asura's collar, and a Flame mercenary held the other end in his hand. The two girls were taken out of the wagon, and after a woman in a nun's habit gave Jakob a purse full of money, she took the chain from the mercenary.

"You'll be going with me for the rest of the way. But please don't think you can run away," the woman said in a stern tone.

Asura could tell that Ilmari was frightened. She smiled slightly and looked around. "Do you seriously think we'll try to escape while we're all tied up like this?"

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They were in the middle of a normal-looking main street with people all around them. However, no one paid them any heed.

*I didn't expect anything less from the Rasdia Kingdom, an anarchist's heaven*, Asura thought, impressed. In any other country, someone would've already reported them to the military police.

The woman stood in front of Asura and suddenly slapped her across the face.

"I'll hit you if you talk back to me. I'll do the same if you disobey. Now, come on."

The woman pulled the chain and started to walk. Asura took the opportunity to observe her. The woman had her red hair tied up in a ponytail and she looked around twenty years old. Her breasts were average, as were her height and weight. However, she was a fighter. It was easy to tell that her body was toned underneath her clothes and she walked beautifully. When she slapped Asura earlier, she had exhibited great form as well.

She didn't hesitate to hurt others and seemed used to it. Asura guessed she hailed from Central Felsen. Because corporal punishment was a daily occurrence there, most of its people grew up used to violence. They grew up on beatings, and because they thought that was normal, they would turn around and flagellate others.

*Lumia used to be like that too*, Asura reminisced. Asura was a brat who didn't listen to Lumia at all, so she used to get many spankings. Back then, Asura had already planned on becoming a mercenary and thus welcomed the pain. She wanted to get used to it and accustom her new child body to agony the same way her old one had been.

She had been so enthusiastic about it that Lumia was the one who ended up backing off. She stopped punishing Asura physically about six months after they met.

"I'm going to ask you to purify your bodies first."

The woman stopped in front of a giant building. It was a bungalow with only a single story, but it was rather spacious. It was clear that the cult had quite a bit of money, though it likely wasn't procured through any legal means.

"Are we stinky?" Asura chuckled.

The woman immediately slapped her across the face. "Please hold your

tongue.”

“What’ll you do if I don’t? You can’t kill me right now, can you?”

This woman wasn’t the leader. No leader would come and personally greet a group of sacrifices. Asura hadn’t reached the conclusion that they were sacrifices because of the intel Jakob gave. Rather, she knew that the only reasons a cult would kidnap a girl were to gang-rape her, sacrifice her, or both.

There was also the possibility that the cult wanted to indoctrinate them into their fold. The chances of that were astronomically low, but technically, that would be a third reason. It would be weird for them to go out of their way to kidnap a potential cultist though. It would be far faster to recruit them through normal means.

The woman smacked Asura again.

“Weak,” Asura said. “Do you think I’d shut up from a slap as pathetic as that? Well, I feel bad for you, so I’ll meekly follow your orders for now.”

“You feel bad for me?” The woman tilted her head to the side. If she continued to hit Asura with her bare hand, her body and spirit would break before Asura ever would.

“Don’t worry about it,” Asura replied. *You’ll be dead in the near future anyway.*

# **Chapter Five, Part Four: Ninety percent of all meetings in the world are useless. Has anything ever changed for the better after one?**

In a small country in the middle of Central Felsenmark, a Great Hero from each region gathered in a meeting room within a castle.

“Man...what a long journey... I wish I never...became a Great Hero...” Gilbert Röhm, a Great Hero from the West, sighed several times in a row.

He was thirty-six years old and had blond hair that he spiked up with product. He wasn’t ugly, but he wasn’t handsome, and he was of average build. However, his fashion sense was crazy. He wore leather pants and was wearing a leather jacket over his bare torso. A golden necklace hung from around his neck.

“You’re as pessimistic as ever, sheesh,” Axel said with a wry smile. “I thought you wanted to change that part of yourself and that’s why you decided to dress like an idiot.”

The three Great Heroes each had their own little round table to sit at.

“Hmph. As if you could change your personality just by changing how you dress. Fools,” Noemi Clapisson, the Great Hero from Central Felsen, scoffed.

She was in her late thirties with long aqua hair, and wore a nun’s habit.

“You two are always...so mean to me... Man...I wanna go back to the West...”

“I know how stupidly strong you are, so why are you such a wimp? I don’t get you at all,” Axel said.

“Gilbert isn’t strong,” Noemi said. “Axel, you’ve just grown weak. Hurry up and retire. Oh, but Matias went and got himself killed, didn’t he? Sorry, but we haven’t gotten any new information on the killer.”

“It’s the same in the West... We don’t know anything... Man...why did

someone go...and kill a Great Hero? I wish I never became a hero..."

Gilbert had no ideals or thoughts of his own. He was simply too strong for his own good, and so took the Hero Selection Examination after succumbing to peer pressure. Though he failed the third test twice, he got pretty far on both attempts. In the end, he lost to his friends' expectations for him and took the test a third time, where he finally scored a pass.

"This ain't about Matias," Axel said with a light shrug. "We discussed this last time, didn't we? That if the criminal organization's boss ended up being Jeanne, we'd be the ones to take care of it?"

"It wasn't her?" Gilbert asked in a faint voice. "That must be it... Please say that's it..." Axel shook his head and Gilbert's shoulders slumped dramatically. "Jeanne's basically a living legend... Ahh, this sucks... This sucks so much..."

"Pull yourself together, Great Hero," Axel said with a wry smile. "You might have only just gotten promoted, but you're a fine Great Hero on your own now. Seriously, get a grip."

"The same goes for you," Noemi said with a small smile. "I heard rumors that a thirteen-year-old girl blew up your left arm. That can't be true, can it? You only put on that artificial arm as a fashion statement, right?"

"Tsk, no, it's true. You knew it was the truth when you teased me about it, huh? Your personality is as shitty as ever."

"Kids these days...sure are scary..." Gilbert said, shaking violently.

"Hmph. It's Asura Lyona, the boss of Moon Blossom, right?" Noemi said. "I heard rumors that she's an extremely beautiful young girl. Well, Axel? Are the rumors true?"

"So you really knew all about it? Tsk, do you really think I can tell if she's pretty or not, you shitbag?"

"Ah, I forgot that you're an old man whose deteriorating brain cells only understand how to punch people. I suppose someone like you would never understand aesthetics."

"Huh? Are you asking for a punch? Do you want me to beat you to a pulp?"

"I advise you not to try it. I don't believe you could win against me in your current state."

"H-Hey, you two... Let's be friends, all right? Let's stop fighting..."

Gilbert raised his hands, showing his palms, at the both of them, gesturing for them to calm down.

“Fine, whatever. We’ll punish Asura Lyona in time. Those in the East are too soft for their own good,” Noemi said.

“There’s no need for that. Our beef with Asura is over.”

“I don’t care. Not only did Matias get killed, but a Great Hero got injured by a civilian? What kind of clownery is this? The people must not think the Great Heroes are a group of pushovers. Of course, I won’t kill her —that’d go against our duties. But if I beat her until she’s *close* to death, then it wouldn’t go against my privileges or my duties, right? This isn’t a personal grudge. It’s for the good of the heroes, after all.”

“Just don’t regret it,” Axel sighed.

“Like I said, I don’t believe you could win—”

“That’s not what I meant.” Axel shook his head. “I ain’t gonna stop you from going to meet Asura. Do what you want. You’ll be the one running home in tears. I just hope an arm’ll be the only thing you lose.”

“Hmm? You seem to hold her in pretty high regard.”

“Asura blew off my arm without hesitation. To tell the truth, I wouldn’t want to face her again, even if you paid me.”

The memory of the fear—that bottomless terror—he felt from the way she smiled made shivers run down Axel’s spine. But if you weren’t her enemy, Asura was surprisingly easy to get along with. At least, that was how Axel viewed her.

“Um,” Gilbert said, “let’s stop talking about Asura... Let’s decide what we’ll do about Jeanne...”

“We could, but we don’t even know where she is,” Noemi said with a light shrug. “There’s not much we can do.”

“Yeah. In any case, we’ll destroy Jeanne’s organization, the Felmafia, with the heroes. She’ll show up eventually if we do, right?”

“Roger... Once I get back...I’ll pass the message along... Ahh, I sure hope Jeanne doesn’t show up... Please don’t show up in the West...”

“How weak-willed can you get?” Axel sighed.

“He has a point. We’re talking about Jeanne here. I don’t believe your average hero can stand up to her. This will be a job for us Great Heroes, no matter how reluctant we are. And even with all of us, it’ll be a tough battle. She can use Divine Retribution.”

“We’ll move in teams of three people and more,” Axel said. “We won’t act on our own either. That’s it. If there’s nothing else you want to bring up, then let’s call it a day.”

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“Look, look, I found two hundred and twenty thousand dora!” Reko said cheerily as he leaped off the horse-drawn wagon.

“Oh, nice. The dead don’t need money, so let’s take it. Ah, let’s split it between the three of us and keep it a secret from the girls,” Jyrki said with a bright smile.

Moon Blossom had split into two groups—a team of men and a team of women—on their way to the Rasdia Kingdom.

“How are we going to split it evenly? Jyrki, just use that money for the group,” Marx sighed.

“Stop joking...around...you jackasses...” Jakob spat from where he was lying on the ground before Marx and the others.

“I’m not joking around,” Marx said. “Giving that money to the group would be a far more peaceful solution.”

“I agree. Iris and Salume might not care, but Iina will if she finds out,” Reko said.

“Tsk, fine, fine,” Jyrki said, putting his hands up in surrender. “All right then, this money will go into Moon Blossom’s coffers. Reko, hold on to it.”

“Kay, I will.”

“More importantly, Reko, do you know why I kept him alive?” Marx asked.

The group had run into the members of Flame close to Rasdia’s borders. It had been a peaceful afternoon, and the two groups were about to wordlessly pass each other when Moon Blossom had suddenly struck. They already killed two of the mercenaries. Only Jakob, who had been inside the cart, survived. Jakob himself had been beaten up half to death by Marx and had his face pressed against the ground, unable to get up.

“Are you going to interrogate him?” Reko asked, tilting his head to the side.

“At this point in time?” Marx asked.

“Um, sorry, I don’t know, then.”

“It’s simple, Reko,” Jyrki said. “They had three people and we have three people. Marx and I aren’t the only ones irritated that Boss got kidnapped, right?”

“Ah...” Reko nodded. “So I can kill him?”

“Yep.”

After Jyrki confirmed it, Reko pocketed the bag of two hundred and twenty thousand dora into his robes. The men’s team hadn’t been in charge of moving the base this time around. Since people could rest up inside the wagon, it was natural that the groups had fought over it. Though they kept it fair and had decided who would get it with a coin toss, the men ended up losing.

But the men got to choose the shorter route. Since the women got to have the base, they didn’t mind letting the men take that one.

“How dare you take Boss from me?” Reko said, holding a dagger in his right hand. “I haven’t seen her in three days now. I’m about to die from how lonely I feel. But you’ll die before me.” Reko grabbed Jakob’s hair in his left hand and made him raise his face. Then, without any hesitation, he slit his throat.

“Ah, I found Boss’s stuff inside, by the way,” Reko said as he swung the dagger through the air to fling the blood off.

“I’ll carry it. We do have spares, but hers was still a custom order,” Marx said. “Actually, if we don’t take it with us, Boss will get mad.”

“Yeah, I agree. ‘Why did you leave my stuff behind? Is this your idea of a joke? I’ll kill you’ is probably what she’d say,” Jyrki sighed.

“Jyrki, you don’t sound like her at all,” Reko laughed.

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Asura and Ilmari had been taken down to the underground prison. They hadn’t been locked up yet, and were merely standing in the hallway.

“I’m impressed there’s even a basement in this place. By the way, I thought you were going to wash us off.”

After Asura said that, the nun with a ponytail smacked her.

“Sister Ada, we’ve finished our preparations.”

Three nuns appeared before them. Two of them were holding a large bucket between them, while the last one had white clothes and towels in her

arms.

“Very well. I shall remove their chains.”

Ada, the nun with the ponytail, unchained Asura’s collar, but only from the back. Asura and Ilmari remained chained by the front of their collars.

“So, Ada’s your name?” Asura said.

“Speaking without permission. I’ve had more than enough of your impudence. I’ll whip you.”

“Go ahead, go ahead. I’d relish it,” Asura chuckled. The whip was likely a small one used for discipline rather than a thick one specifically for torture. It would be of little issue.

“Tsk...” Ada scrunched up her face before she turned her attention to Ilmari. She thought for a moment and then said, “How about this? Asura Lyona, if you cannot refrain from opening your mouth, then I shall whip this child.”

After Ada said that, Ilmari shrunk back.

“I see. So that’s what you’ll resort to? Fine. I’ll shut up.”

After Asura said that, Ada pulled on the chain from Ilmari’s collar.

“Hey, I said I would shut up, didn’t I?” Asura said. “I’ll kill you if you hurt her. If you hit her even once...no, if you even *pretend* like you’re going to whip her, I’ll murder you on the spot.”

Asura had planned on behaving herself until the cult’s boss—in other words, the religious leader—arrived. But that would change if anyone laid a finger on Ilmari. She’d slaughter them in a heartbeat.

“Please do not misunderstand my intentions. I’m simply placing you two in separate cells.”

“Oh. I see. Then I’ll hold my peace.”

“No... No! I wanna be with Asura!” Ilmari wailed before she crouched down on the spot.

“Grr...” Ada’s face twisted. “If you won’t listen, then I’ll—”

“I told you that I would kill you,” Asura said in a terribly frosty voice. “I’m the type of person who keeps my promises. If you slap Mari, then you’ll spend the last moments of your life regretting it. Put her in the same cell as me. That shouldn’t be a problem, right? I promise that as long as you do those two things, I won’t cause any trouble.”

Ada stared at her. “Do you really think you’re capable of doing anything right now?”

“Oh? You should know who I am. At the very least, your leader should have told you about the kind of person I am and what kinds of atrocities I’ve committed until now. I thought you understood that when you kidnapped me.”

“We only heard that we should be mindful of your magic and to always keep you tied up.”

“‘Be mindful of her magic,’ huh?” Asura laughed. “How? Hmm? How will you be mindful of it? I’m willing to bet none of you know the first thing about magic. If I wanted to, I could kill everyone here with nothing more than a thought.”

The leader was underestimating Asura. Whoever they were, they didn’t think she was a threat at all. Not only did they only pay two hundred thousand dora for her kidnapping, but they also didn’t bother to tell their subordinates anything about her. They must have figured this paltry amount of preparation would be enough to abduct her.

*I’m not someone you can just cheap out on like this. I’ll make you pay in time.*

“Then why won’t you escape? It’s because you can’t, isn’t it?” Ada replied calmly.

*I can’t say I’m surprised she thinks that. That’s the conclusion most people would draw. If I haven’t run away up to this point, then it must be because I can’t. They’d believe that I do not have the power to escape.*

“I’d like to find out who invited me here. That’s all.”

“Heh...” For the first time since Asura met Ada, the nun smiled.

“What’s so funny?” Asura asked.

“Very well. I’ll allow the two of you to stay in the same cell. It’s no skin off my back. Neither of you can change what’s about to happen anyway, even if what you say is true. It’s more important to us that you remain cooperative.”

“I can tell from those words and that attitude of yours that whoever invited us here—your leader, I presume—is pretty strong, right?” Asura said.

Even if Asura’s earlier boast was true, it would make no difference in the end, according to Ada. In other words, she was insinuating that no matter how strong Asura was, it wouldn’t matter—the leader would be even stronger. At the very least, that was Ada’s read on the situation.

“The likes of a mercenary could never hope to defeat our great leader, no matter what tricks you pull.”

“You must have a clear indicator of their strength if you’re able to say it with such confidence. Your leader must be a hero.” After Asura said that, Ada’s eyes widened. She was right. “Ha ha, how interesting. I never expected a hero to be a cult leader! Is this who they are in the shadows? Ah ha ha, what a joke!”

“Tsk... We are *not* a cult!” Ada grabbed Asura’s neck with her right hand. “We are the Order of Humanity’s Dusk! Not a cult! Those who would worship the dark god Zoya are the aberrants!”

“Heh... No matter how you slice it, you sound like a cult... I mean, *Jeanne* is your god, isn’t she?”

“I’ll strangle you to death, you hear me?!”

Ada tightened her grip. But Asura knew that she wouldn’t kill her. She doubted that Ada received such an order, and there was little chance of a religious fanatic going against their leader. As Asura predicted, Ada released her. Asura coughed lightly as air filled her lungs again.

“When can I meet your leader?” she asked casually.

“The day after tomorrow...” Ada replied as she glared down at her.

## **Part Five, Chapter Five: A sadist with a broken mind and weird kinks? Sounds like someone I know.**

In an old castle situated in Central Felsen, Lumia lay face down on the bed in the room she'd been given. She wasn't wearing any clothes, but a wet towel had been placed on her swollen buttocks.

"I'm surprised she hasn't gotten bored of spanking me almost every day..." she sighed.

"A-Are you all right?" Tina asked worriedly.

Tina had been the one who placed the towel on Lumia. She was also the person who usually took care of Lumia after Jeanne's punishments.

"Well, yes, I suppose if I had to describe my condition, I'd say I'm all right. I was taken aback by her strength the first time she hit me, but to be frank, Asura would describe it as 'dissatisfying.' The only trying thing about this situation is how I'm not allowed to heal myself with magic."

In truth, Jeanne's actions were lukewarm for a sadist. These past few days, during Lumia's observations of both Jeanne and Tina, she found that Jeanne didn't match up to what Asura had taught her about sadism. To be more precise, parts of her behavior matched the profile while others didn't. Lumia had to figure out the reason behind the discrepancies.

"I'm sorry..." Tina said, looking down at the ground. "I didn't think...she would hit her own blood sister like that... I thought she only treated me like..."

"It's fine. You're not the problem, Tina. *She* is." Lumia knew she was right. No matter the reason, the only person ever at fault in a situation like this was the abuser. "Truthfully, my feelings of guilt are already gone, so I can retaliate if I really wanted to. I had been tethered down by how I felt responsible for what happened to her, but she loosened those chains around my heart."

“P-Please don’t...” Tina crawled up onto the bed and tightly grabbed both of Lumia’s hands as she pleaded.

“I won’t. This doesn’t change the fact that she’s my precious sister. I wish to protect her as well. However, I’m a little sad that she decided to erase my guilt for me.”

“What...do you mean? Everyone likes it when they feel absolved of their sins.”

“But it’s not as if the sins themselves disappear, right? In the end, it’s just an illusion of relief. You may feel better and think it’s all behind you, but you cannot get rid of the crimes you committed. Besides, my guilt belongs to me and me alone.”

“You’re the first person to think that way.” Tina released Lumia’s hands.

“Really? Well, whatever. May I ask you a few questions?”

Up until this point, Lumia had simply remained an observer and never asked Tina any questions. She hadn’t bothered asking anything about the Felmafia either. This was mostly because she’d wanted to gather some information before she had a proper conversation.

“I don’t mind.”

“You’ve been spanked like me, right, Tina?”

“Yes...” Tina looked away.

“Then it really is strange...”

“What is?”

“If she likes to hurt people, then cheeks rather than butt cheeks would... That wasn’t a joke, all right?”

“A...joke?”

“Ah, sorry, it’s nothing. I’m used to defending my statements from Asura.” Lumia sighed before she continued, “In any case, slapping the cheek could result in a ruptured eardrum. You can also tear up someone’s lips or knock out a tooth. Depending on where the blow lands, it could give them a concussion, thus leading to severe aftereffects...”

“Lady Jeanne would never do something like that! She wouldn’t do that to us!”

“Yes. Yes, that’s right. That’s precisely why it’s so strange.”

“I don’t understand what you’re trying to say.”

“One of the things I don’t understand is why she goes out of her way to hit somewhere that’s safe.”

Jeanne could spank people on their butts all she wanted, and the only result would be pain. Granted, if her only goal was to see people hurting, then that would be more than enough.

“Lady Jeanne wants to make the spankings last as long as possible,” Tina explained.

“I see.” Lumia nodded. “So endurance is her main concern.”

Because of how much strength Jeanne put behind her blows, Lumia never came up with the possibility that Jeanne wanted the spankings to last for a long time. It was true that if Jeanne hit someone with the same amount of power she used to spank someone, sessions would more than likely end with one hit.

“It’s also strange that she isn’t employing any tools. The only time when you can properly slap someone on their butt is when the person being spanked is a child. Their skin is soft, so it doesn’t cause too much damage to the palm. But the buttocks of someone who’s received as much training as I have are quite tough. Sure, if you compare me to my prime, I’ve been slacking...I mean...I’m not as muscular as I was back then. But even so, spanking such buttocks should cause a significant amount of pain. I’m sure it does, since I saw tears in her eyes from how much her hand hurt.”

A sadist enjoyed dishing out pain, but they weren’t too keen on receiving it themselves. They couldn’t handle the idea of getting hurt. Lina was a good example of a sadist. That was how one should be. That being said, Lina only bordered on being a sadist. She could control herself and her desires, unlike someone with an actual problem.

“If she uses tools, then she wouldn’t be able to touch the butt,” Tina said, looking confused.

“Yes. But the point is inflicting pain and not touching bu— Huh? Wait, is touching butts the point?”

“Of course?” Tina replied, sounding like she was stating the obvious. “Lady Jeanne loves butts more than anything in the world. She’s enjoying the way the meat bounces back every time she spanks someone.”

*I’ve connected the dots. That answers all my questions.*

“So on top of having lost her mind, she derives pleasure from light sexual sadism and is into butts...”

If she spanked people on their bottoms, she fulfilled all of her needs: dominating others, hurting others, and indulging in her kink. Of course she

wouldn't stop just because her palm started to sting. Her hand was the perfect tool to get everything she wanted. However, Lumia felt conflicted now that she knew her younger sister's sexual preferences.

"Thinking back, there were signs... I was too slow to notice..."

When Lumia accepted the second prince's proposal, Jeanne had grabbed onto her ass cheeks and screamed, "Nooooo, my precious sister's adorable butt will be taken from meeeee!!!!!!!" There were plenty of other signs in Lumia's memory that pointed to Jeanne's budding interest in butts. However, Jeanne had a bright and cheery personality back then. If only her mind hadn't been broken, she surely would've turned out to be a delightful and lovely woman.

"Oh? A broken mind, an interest in butts, and a sadistic streak... That's a familiar lineup of traits..." Lumia pulled a face.

If you simply removed the word "butts" and replaced it with "Asura," then you got Reko! Lumia was seriously worried about the boy's future. Well, at the very least, in Reko's case, it was still unsure as to whether he was truly a sadist or not.

*I pray that he isn't*, Lumia thought.

"Lumia, let me introduce you to the God Hand of Central Felsen," Jeanne said as she suddenly entered the room.

Behind her was a woman dressed in a nun's habit. Even under her robes, her voluptuous curves were obvious, and she had long light blue hair. A smile—albeit a twisted one—was playing on her lips.

For a moment, Lumia's mind ground to a halt. One could say that she froze. There was no way she could ever forget that woman's face, even after the ten years since she last saw it. She'd hated this woman with her entire being, and wanted to kill her more than anything else in the world.

Despite being unarmed, she jumped to her feet and charged at the woman—at Noemi Clapisson.

"Lumia, who ordered you to attack?" Jeanne said as she unsheathed her claymore and blocked Lumia's advance.

"I didn't expect you to run at me naked," Noemi laughed. "Did you want me to embrace you? Hmm? Your face says it all. You never forgot me for even a second, did you? I'm glad that I was able to stay in your heart for all these years."

"My dear older sister Jeanne, *she's* the one who made me go through all

of that! And yet she's a God Hand?! Why?!" Lumia shrieked.

"Yes, I know. But that's all in the past now. I don't care anymore. Lumia, I'd like you to forget about it as well."

"No, don't," Noemi said, a smarmy grin still on her face. "It's an important memory for us. One that's been engraved into our souls. Even now, when I think back on it, shivers run through my body."

"You little..."

Lumia was about to activate Divine Retribution, but faster than she could open her mouth, Jeanne turned and punched Noemi in the face. Noemi spun from the force of the blow until she was facing away from them, holding her hand to her face.

"I told her to forget about it. So why are you telling her that it's all right to remember? You're trying to undermine my authority, aren't you? Do you wish to die? That's all right with me. You were practically begging me to make you my servant, so I'm making use of you even though I don't want to. I could've killed you ten years ago."

Jeanne's voice was as cold as ice. Noemi's eyes welled with fearful tears, and she looked like she was seconds from breaking out into sobs.

"P-Please, forgive me..."

Noemi, her face pale, got onto her hands and knees and then lowered her face until it scraped against the ground. The image that Lumia had of Noemi instantly crumbled.

"Ten years ago, you tried to kill Tina. So I killed all of the heroes who were with you. Back then, you cried and bowed, just like you're doing now, and begged me to spare your life in exchange for your eternal loyalty. Did you forget all of that?" Jeanne said.

*Did Jeanne have that much power ten years ago?* Lumia had no idea. Had Jeanne hid it from her? Or was it after they had separated that, once she awoke to her Fixed Element and learned Dance of Divine Destruction, she had suddenly grown so strong?

"I haven't...I haven't forgotten... Please forgive me... My goddess...please grant me mercy..."

Noemi was shivering uncontrollably. Upon seeing that, Lumia felt her heart rapidly grow cold. At the same time, she came up with an answer for what had happened a decade ago. This was not the first time she'd formed this hypothesis; it was an idea that never left the realm of possibility. And

she had the final piece to her puzzle now.

*Ten years ago, Noemi tried to kill Tina; Jeanne killed all of the other heroes; Tina has incredible combat prowess; and ten years ago, Noemi said something to me when I was tied to that cross—she said that she'd been assembled and that a peak-tier monster had appeared.*

Lumia turned around to stare at Tina, who was watching over the proceedings.

*You... Tina, you're stronger than Jeanne or Noemi or any of the other Great Heroes. In other words, you've broken past the limits of what a human is capable of. But that's because you're not a human, are you? You're a peak-tier monster, right?*

Ten years ago, when Noemi and the other heroes had gone to terminate that monster, Jeanne had been at the scene as well. Jeanne wasn't on the side of the heroes. Rather, she'd been on Tina's side, though the reason as to why she was helping Tina was unclear.

“Very well, then.” Jeanne sheathed her claymore once more. “It looks like there was no need for any introductions. I hope the two of you get along. Also, Lumia, please put on some clothes.”

“R-Right, of course.”

Lumia was used to being stark naked, so she wasn't particularly embarrassed by it. She'd also been trained to fight even when naked. Asura had taught her how in case she was attacked while changing or bathing, or after receiving torture.

“But to think that you're one of the God Hands,” Lumia said.

After Lumia said that, Noemi pushed herself to her feet. There was blood dripping from her nose.

*I see.* Jeanne never hit Lumia or Tina's faces. She was treasuring them in her own way, which was why she didn't want to risk any permanent damage.

“Do you want to make up with a hug? We're technically on the same team,” Noemi said.

“Yeah, sure. I suppose I should give you one before you die,” Lumia replied.

She was no longer as interested in taking revenge. Though she still harbored hatred for Noemi, there was no need for her to dirty her own hands.

“I’ll die?”

“That’s right. You’re a God Hand, aren’t you? Then Asura will kill you sooner or later.”

No matter how many times Lumia tried to convince Jeanne of Asura’s danger, Jeanne refused to listen. Eventually though, a situation would arise when Jeanne would have no choice *but* to heed Lumia’s warnings. By the time that happened, though, things would be far too late.

“Asura Lyona, again?” Noemi said, scrunching up her face.

“What do you mean by that?”

“When I attended the meeting with the other Great Heroes, Axel was quite taken with Asura like you are.”

“I’m not taken with her,” Lumia replied with a light shrug. “I’m terrified. She frightens me more than anything in this world.”

At the same time, though, she wanted to fight against Asura too. She wanted to become Asura’s enemy and face her on the battlefield, with death the only thing awaiting the loser. Despite her fears, she couldn’t deny that desire.

“Please put on your clothes,” Jeanne said as she spanked Lumia.

She didn’t put her full strength behind it, but considering Lumia’s butt had already been swollen from earlier punishment, it hurt quite a bit. *I’m not surprised, considering her kink*, Lumia thought. Jeanne tried to touch people on the butt every chance she got. Now that Lumia knew it was because of her fetish, she found it kind of adorable.

Lumia walked over to her bed and put on the clothes that Jeanne had prepared for her first day there. It was of a similar design to what Tina wore, with a short skirt and a top that cut off above her midriff. Truthfully, wearing this was far more embarrassing than walking around naked. This was *not* an outfit a twenty-eight-year-old woman should have on.

“Lumia,” Noemi said, “soon, Asura Lyona will die. Either that, or she’ll submit to us.”

“That’s not going to happen, especially the second one.”

“Oh, really? If we tie her up so tightly that she can’t even move her fingers, then I think we’re certain to win.”

“If you can tie her up.”

“They should’ve been able to do so. I’ve received reports that my people have managed to chain her up. You should be able to meet her the day after

tomorrow.”

At Noemi’s words, Lumia turned to look at Jeanne.

“I don’t know anything about this. I never ordered such a thing. This must be Noemi’s personal hobby,” Jeanne said quietly. “Well, even if it ends up killing Asura, I don’t particularly care.”

“I see. Noemi, that’s a trap,” Lumia said emotionlessly. “I don’t know how you managed to get your hands on her, but I’m telling you that it’s a trap for sure. Actually, why do you even care about her?”

“I heard that she’s an unparalleled beauty.”

“You heard right. She’s a lovely sight to behold, if you’re only talking about her appearance. On the inside, she’s as rotten as you.”

*So Noemi’s appetite for women is the same as ever,* Lumia thought.

“I have no interest in what’s on the inside,” Noemi said. “As long as she’s pretty, I’m happy.”

Lumia slowly walked forward until she stood in front of Noemi. Then she gently wrapped her arms around her.

“Goodbye, Noemi. Even if it was for a brief period of time, I truly looked up to you.”

They would never meet again. Lumia was absolutely certain that death awaited Noemi, for Noemi was about to meet Asura as an enemy. Unless something completely unexpected happened, Asura would kill her. Surely Jeanne would listen to Lumia if a God Hand died.

“Lumia, your big sister would like a hug too,” Jeanne said, sounding like she was jealous.

“Yes, my dear older sister.” Lumia gave Jeanne a hug as well.

*I’ll protect you from my beloved Asura Lyona, who bears the smile of a Demon Lord and acts like the personification of wickedness itself. From the strongest girl whom I raised with my own hand.*

# **Extra Episode Seven: Days of suppression with the magic I love. Right now, I'm happy.**

Marx Redford had been born in a family of warriors. His father was the vice commander of the kingdom's knights, and his older brother had also joined the knighthood. It had been on a bright and sunny day when Marx, only twelve years old, defeated his opponent with a wooden sword.

"Hmm, good job, Marx. Not even a squire can hope to defeat you," Marx's father said. "You have what it takes to become a hero...so long as you stop wasting your time on magic."

They stood in the training grounds of the Redford mansion. With them were various guests Marx's father had invited in order to show off his son. Though the Redfords were not nobles, they were an influential family due to all of the knights that the bloodline produced. There had even been a Redford who became the leader of the knights, even given the noble title of Lala.

"I've already cut off all ties with magic," Marx lied calmly, his eyes dull and lifeless.

The people gathered in the grounds all praised Marx's talent with the sword. But Marx was the only one who could not join in on their passion.

*If only I were strong enough to kill everyone here*, he thought. If he could do that, then there would be no one around to stop him from learning magic.

At thirteen years old, Marx had said that he wanted to join the Knights of the Azure Skies, and his parents agreed.

"You must become the commander, Marx," his father said. "For generations now, the Knights of the Azure Skies have appointed heroes as their commander. I'm sure that you'll be able to become one."

His father's words rang hollow in Marx's chest. Marx's reason for

wanting to join the Knights of the Azure Skies was simple: to get out of this house. That was it.

The Knights of the Azure Skies were an independent order of knights serving no country. To become one, you needed to graduate from their academy, Rose of the Azure Skies. Since it was a boarding school, Marx wouldn't have to return home.

After becoming a student at Rose, Marx continued to practice magic in between his training. About a year later, the strongest warrior mage, Jeanne Autun Lala, became the talk of the entirety of Felsenmark.

At the time, Marx was filled with conviction. *I wasn't in the wrong!* He had graduated and become a proper knight without any issues and had started to stand out amid the crowd. By the time he was twenty years old, he had been promoted to a platoon leader.

“Sir, your strategies go against the code of chivalry.”

“Sir, if you insist on using such underhanded tactics, I’m going to apply for a transfer.”

However, that had been the limit to Marx’s climb to success. The knights under Marx’s command didn’t approve of his orders. Marx couldn’t understand—all of his suggestions would lead to certain victory, and they were able to destroy the enemy while minimizing their own casualties. Marx had wanted to leave the knights. Until...

“Hey, you. I’ll train you to become the next commander of the knights. I want to retire so I can have more time to hang out with girls.”

Marx had caught the attention of Milka Ramstead, commander of the Knights of the Azure Skies. Marx became one of the knights stationed at headquarters and from then on, his training mostly focused on turning him into a hero.

“Commander Milka,” Marx said. “There’s only a five year difference between us... Wouldn’t it be better to choose a younger knight as your successor?”

“No, no, you’re the only person aside from me with the potential to become a hero. At this point in time, anyway. Come on, Marx. I seriously wanna go on more dates with chicks.”

Milka was an unbearably frivolous man, but he wasn’t a bad person. Eventually, Marx had become a hero candidate and participated in the third test. The first time, nothing in particular happened. He simply lost, then it

was over. The problem came during the second time he took the third test. During that fight, Marx had used magic. Magic in and of itself was not an issue.

However, as soon as the signal to start the battle sounded out, Marx had splashed water onto his enemy and then defeated them while they were still stunned. That caused an internal issue with the Knights of the Azure Skies, with many people in the organization complaining that it went against the code of chivalry and lacked etiquette. Incidentally, it had been a best out-of-three match, and Marx lost the other two afterwards.

“I did what I did in order to win. I don’t understand what the issue is,” Marx said after being called into the knights meeting room for a lecture, his head held high and proud.

The knights, still trapped in the old ways of thinking, were furious, and stared at him with flushed faces. All of them held high-ranking positions within the Knights of the Azure Skies.

“You splashed water on your opponent! How can you still call yourself an Azure Knight?!”

“I’ve never heard of such a barbaric tactic! The commander may spoil you, but there are limits to what you can get away with!”

“A knight who cannot respect his opponent is no knight!”

*Ahh, how troublesome.* Marx couldn’t do anything without someone trying to suppress him. It had been this way ever since he’d been a child.

Maybe he should just kill all of them.

As soon as that thought flashed his head, an unprecedented sense of freedom filled his body.

“That’s enough!” Milka yelled, clapping his hands.

In that moment, the atmosphere of the room changed. Marx returned to himself as well. It was impressive how quickly a Great Hero’s order could influence an entire room.

“I don’t think splashing your opponent is that big a deal. However...” Milka glared at Marx. “Just now, you wanted to kill your allies, didn’t you?” When Marx didn’t say anything, Milka continued, “Even if you weren’t going to go that far, it felt like you were about to draw your sword.”

“I probably would’ve,” Marx replied honestly. He no longer cared what happened to him anymore.

The meeting room became abuzz with murmurs until Milka clapped his

hands again.

“Marx Redford, I commend your honesty. However, it’s an issue that you tried to turn your sword against your allies,” Milka said. “And so, as punishment, I assign you to work as an instructor at Rose of the Azure Skies.”

The punishment was much harsher than expected, and the meeting room filled with whispers once more. The majority of the instructors were knights on the brink of retirement or who had been forced to retire from the front lines due to injury. Most had been turned from the elite path of glory the knights usually walked. In other words, Marx’s career as a knight was over.

“Understood.”

Marx didn’t have any particular thoughts about it, and the next day, he started life as an instructor. Since now he had more time on his hands, he made great progress on his magic, so from his perspective, things weren’t too bad. He’d never been too interested in becoming a knight and rising through the ranks anyway. He would receive letters from home scolding him for what happened, but he ignored them all.

One day, during an outdoor lesson, some of the villagers started to panic about a monster nearby. Marx evacuated the students, then went out to exterminate the creature. According to what he had heard, it was a low-tier monster, so he figured he could handle it himself. Though he’d requested reinforcements on the off chance things went wrong, he had no idea when they would arrive.

By the time he reached the hill the monster had been sighted on, he saw flower petals dancing in the air. The beautiful sight that stopped Marx in his tracks, his eyes wide. However, there was no time to be impressed. The monster was in the middle of attacking a silver-haired girl. He wanted to jump in and help, but there was no way he could reach them in time.

The moment a petal brushed against the monster’s body, the monster exploded. Even more explosions followed after that, until the monster was strewn upon the ground in pieces, its original shape no longer recognizable.

*Ahh, that’s magic, Marx thought. What a beautiful and powerful spell.*

“Oh, what the hell. I came all this way because I heard a monster showed up, but it was just a weakling,” the girl said as she shook her head. “Well, I suppose I’ll still get a reward. Isn’t that right, Azure Knight?” The girl finished her sentence by looking over at Marx.

“Y-Yes, that’s right. But before that, can you show me that spell one more time? It’s a Fixed Element, isn’t it?”

“Hmm? You’re a knight, yet you’re interested in magic?”

Marx showed her his water magic, then confessed, “I always wanted to be a mage.”

“I see. Then hurry up and quit the knights to become one. I don’t mind teaching it to you.”

The girl created countless petals that rained down from the heavens. Once again, Marx found himself at a loss for words, far too impressed at the ephemeral sight before him.

“Well, in my case, magic isn’t the only thing I can teach you,” the girl continued.

“What do you mean?”

“I created a new type of soldier called soldier-mages. They fight primarily with magic. Are you interested, Azure Knight?”

“You say they fight primarily with magic? Really?”

Magic users usually stood at the rear of the troops so that they could provide support. Magic was far too inefficient when it came to killing people, so it was simpler to learn the sword to do so.

“Yes, really. If you wish to join me, then I’ll gladly prove it to you right here, Azure Knight. By the way, do you know someone named Marx Redford?”

“Huh? Yes, I do.”

“He’s an interesting guy who splashed water at his opponent during the Hero Selection Exam. Unfortunately, he’s apparently an instructor now. It looks like the knights are very rigid in their thinking. I came here because I wanted to scout this Marx fellow.”

“I’m Marx.”

“I figured,” the girl chuckled. “I don’t suppose you’d find many other Azure Knights who’d willingly show off their water magic. Well, what do you say, Marx? Will you come with me? I promise you that it’ll be loads of fun.”

The girl reached out with her right hand. Marx, without even a moment’s hesitation, grabbed it. He felt like he had found a beam of light shining through the darkness of his dreary and oppressive days. The girl was still creating a rain of flower petals as if to show off her Fixed Element

and reserves of magic energy.

Though this was the first time Marx had ever met her, he oddly felt like he could trust this girl more than anyone in the world. He had no proof as to why he felt that way. However, perhaps the only reason was that she was a powerful mage. That was more than enough, for Marx had always felt entranced by the romanticism of magic.

“My name is Asura Lyona. I plan on eventually heading a mercenary group. Heh heh, mercenaries do all sorts of jobs, unlike the knights, so it’ll be an exciting life.”

\*\*\*

The night before they were to go investigate the Great Forest, after they had finished all of their preparations, Marx was walking in a park near the inn. That was when he had found Asura sitting on a bench and staring up at the sky.

“Boss? What’s the matter?”

“Marx? I was just on a walk to enjoy this lovely night. Are you doing the same?”

“Yes. May I sit next to you?”

After Marx asked that, Asura smiled and shifted to the right. Marx sat down on the left side of the bench.

“To tell the truth,” Asura said as if sharing a secret, “this morning, I dreamed about my past life.”

“Oh?”

“I dreamed about the time we betrayed our client when we saw the sex slaves. It’s the story I brought up when we were chatting with Uno,” Asura explained delightedly. “Back then, the person who first shot the client was a lady named Marine. She was a crazy woman from the same island country as my mother. She came to me because she wanted to participate in a real war.”

“Between you and her, who’s crazier?”

“What a difficult question. It wasn’t as if Marine ever went through something that had broken her. Hee hee, how nostalgic.”

Asura looked up at the sky as if reminiscing on her past companions.

“Do you prefer us or your old group from back then?” Right as the

question left his mouth, Marx regretted it. He sure asked a weird question.

“I view both groups as my precious friends, Marx.”

“I figured. I apologize for putting you on the spot like that.”

“In saying that, though, the past is the past. I’m living in the present, so my current companions are the best. How about you?”

“I feel the same way. I’m truly happy I met you that day, Boss.”

“That goes the same for me. I’m glad I met you, Marx.”

“Thank you very much, Boss. Let’s enjoy tomorrow’s mission as well.”

After Marx said that, he stood up.

“Yes, let’s enjoy our lives,” Asura said. “Now, make sure you don’t sleep in.”

“Yes. You too, Boss.”

They shared a chuckle and then Marx returned to his walk. Right now, he was free from any pressure to hide himself. He could use as much magic as he wanted, and every day was a new adventure.

“Father, I wasn’t able to cut off my ties with magic. And yet, I was able to so easily break off my ties with you.”

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# Afterword

Hello, it's Sou Hazuki. I wasn't sure what kind of food I wanted to talk about, so today, let's start with when I became fat. My hobby is eating delicious food so if I'm not careful, I gain weight very quickly. That's a very common occurrence, and as soon as I think, "Oof, things are starting to look kind of bad," I go on a diet. Then, after I'm back to my original weight, I start eating as much as I like again.

That's how I've been living all these years but lately, I've been thinking that dieting is so tiresome. So after I finish my next diet, I'm thinking I'll start eating delicious food while controlling myself so I don't get fat. (I never said I can do it.) I mean, the world is full of yummy things.

By the way, I had an unagi kamameshi meal for lunch today. It was good, but there wasn't a lot. I hope that I'll be able to have enough energy to eat good food until the day I grow old and die.

From here on, it's going to be acknowledgments! Thank you to my editor, Fujiwara, for everything! I was really surprised that you started giving me these really great ideas as if you experienced some sort of awakening. However, I think that the process this time around went smoothly and there weren't any issues. (Well, volume 1 went by smoothly as well, outside of when I kept complaining, "I don't wanna do thaaaaat!"')

To my illustrator, Mizutametori, your art was truly amazing again too! The character designs were great, and the cover illustration was fantastic. Everything was perfect! Like last time, my editor, Fujiwara, was jumping with joy and yelling, "Bravo!" You always blow our expectations out of the park with your work, so it was so much fun to see your art.

To the advertising team, the trailer for volume 1 was amazing! The way you marketed the book was awesome too. Thank you very much. Let's keep the ball going! I'm looking forward to your marketing for volume 2. (As of the time I'm writing this afterword, I don't know anything about the marketing for volume 2.)

Thank you to all of the other people who were involved with the

publication of this book!

And finally, I'd like to thank the readers who picked up volume 2! I've been in a bit of a slump lately, and I haven't been able to update the online version at all. I'm sorry about that. I plan on finishing this story, so I hope you'll be patient and wait for me to finish.

I hope to see you again.

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A Moon Blossom mock battle, including hero Iris, is about to begin!

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“I've always respected my mercenaries' opinions  
and I'll continue to do so. This isn't an order.  
This is a plea. Don't go.”  
“I'm sorry, Asura. I'm leaving.”

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Moon Blossom Asura: The Ruthless Reincarnated Mercenary Forms the Ultimate Army: Volume 2

by Sou Hazuki

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Original Japanese edition published in 2023 by Docom Co., Ltd.

This English edition is published in arrangement with Docom Co.,  
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Ebook edition 1.0: November 2023

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