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No One Gets Past This

GATEKEEPER

The Unwanted Warrior Guards His New Post





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Sieg  
B-rank Adventurer

Haruna  
Crimson Fangs – Mage

Nacht  
Crimson Fangs – Leader

Irene  
Crimson Fangs – Archer

“Consider  
today your  
last day in  
the party.  
You’re out.”





Seira  
Fifth Squadron Member - Shortsword user

Fam  
Fifth Squadron Member - Archer

Spinoza  
Fifth Squadron Member - Warhammer user





“Shieg,  
you’re doing  
sho well...!”

“Seira?!  
Are you  
drunk...?”





“Nacht...”

“Sieg...  
I finally  
found  
you.”



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# Chapter 1: Starting a New Line of Work as a Gatekeeper

“Sieg. Consider today your last day in the party. You’re out.”

We had just completed a mission that nobody else in the guild ever had before, without a single scratch on us to boot, and were in the middle of celebrating a job well done at the pub. We were the Crimson Fangs, a party that had made quite the name for itself, and our leader, Nacht, was the one who had just broken the news to me.

“May I ask why...?”

“Our party, the Crimson Fangs, specializes in firepower. There’s not a monster in this world that can stand up to my swordsmanship, Haruna’s magic, and Irene’s archery skills. Our party has the highest attack power in the city, hands down. Except for you, Sieg.”

He snorted, an unabashed, derisive sneer appearing on his face.

“You’re supposed to be a swordsman, right? Then what’s with your lack of firepower? While all the rest of us are fighting, you’re just standing there like an idiot. That just makes you a sitting duck for the monsters. Then, when the attacks start coming, you barely even fight back. And you call yourself a Crimson Fang? We don’t need some limp dick in our party who’s all defense and no attack.”

As he declared this, Nacht brushed back his black hair.

Apparently, he had some long-standing issues with me, and they were all bursting out under the influence of alcohol. He went on to glare at the other companions seated at our table, raising his voice.

“Hey! You two need to give him a piece of your mind too!”

“Huh?”

“You’re fed up with Sieg being incompetent too, aren’t you? Then you might



as well tell him right here in person, yeah? Tell him. Now!”

Our companions shrank back under the pressure of his hawklike stare. However, after a while, Haruna, our mage, finally seemed to give into his goading and spoke up. “Yeah. Sieg’s got a big frame, but it feels kind of like it’s just for show. I do think he should put some more effort into attacking.”

“She’s right. You’re nothing but a mannequin out there,” Nacht said, nodding in satisfaction. Shifting his gaze to Irene, our archer, he commanded, “All right. Your turn to tell him off, Irene.”

“Hm, yeah, I guess I agree too. There’s no real point in having all that strength if you don’t use it, after all. I kind of wish he’d do some actual fighting, maybe.”

“Ha ha ha! Sieg fights so little, you’d think someone chopped his nuts off! He just stands in one spot and stares off into space!”

As Nacht laughed pompously, I calmly rebutted, “I do more than just stand there staring off into space, and I still have my nuts, thank you. I’m just performing my designated role in the party.”

“Oh, come on, you just let yourself get whaled on by monsters. I don’t call that a *role*. Even a scarecrow can do that, can’t they?” Nacht’s expression as he told me off was one of pure glee, as if he were getting drunk off his own verbal abuse.

Haruna and Irene remained huddled in their seats awkwardly, but after a glare from Nacht, they began laughing weakly in acquiescence.

*It wasn’t like this in the beginning.*

Back when we had first formed our party, our shortcomings had complemented each other, and we had functioned well as a team. Unfortunately, as our group gained fame through the completion of numerous missions, Nacht had started getting the wrong idea about things. Fueled by public perception that the Crimson Fangs were a party that excelled in firepower, he had started to focus solely on our attack power. Even worse, his personality had morphed completely, into the kind of guy who looked down on others and degraded them.

“Sieg, there’s no room in the Crimson Fangs for a stationary scarecrow. You’re



not a good fit for us anymore.”

It wouldn't have mattered what I said at that point; they probably wouldn't have even listened. Once you were labeled as useless, it was no easy task to turn that perception around. In this moment, they were only going to see what they wanted to see.

“All right. Well, thanks for everything.”

I gave in and accepted my unceremonious proclamation of dismissal.

“Bye, now. Man, it sure is gonna feel nice to have one less person to pay for at the inn from now on.”

“Right...”

I left the pub, back turned to my party members as they tossed their farewells at me in a way that made it nearly impossible to believe we had actually been together for a decent amount of time.

With the moon in the night sky watching over me, I walked my way over to the Adventurers' Guild. When you left a party, there were procedures you had to follow.

Upon arriving, I headed over to the receptionist. “Great job today, Sieg,” she said. “May I ask why you're here all by yourself?”

“Well... I got let go from the party. So I'm here to take care of that.”

“What?! L-Let go?! You?!” The receptionist's eyes flew open so wide that it looked like they might fall out of her head. “What are your party members thinking?! You're the backbone of the party, Sieg. How could they kick you out?”

“Backbone...? I'm not really *that* important.”

“But you're the one who draws all the aggro from the monsters and protects your party from being attacked, aren't you? It's all because of *you* taking the initiative to be the monsters' target that the others have been able to concentrate on attacking at all.”

“You're about the only one nice enough to put it that way.”



“The only reason they’ve been able to swing those swords is because they had you for a shield, Sieg. The townspeople and your companions have got it all wrong about that.”

Everyone else around us merely heaped praise upon the Crimson Fangs’ attack power, while she had noticed me hiding in the shadow of it all. She was the only one. I was grateful for that.

“So what will you do now? You should join up with another party and show the Crimson Fangs what for!”

“Nah. I doubt any parties would want to pick me up after I was cast off like that. They’d probably be too afraid of getting pressured by Nacht to want anything to do with me.”

“Does that mean...”

“Yeah. I plan on quitting the Guild as of today.”

“Oh no... That’s a shame!”

“I had already been thinking about getting out of the business for a while, anyway. It’s not a very stable line of work. This just gave me a good excuse.”

“I see...” The receptionist seemed to accept that, albeit reluctantly. “Have you already decided what you’re going to do next?”

“No idea, at this point. For starters, I think I’d like to find something with an employment contract. To get some more stability.”

I’d been a wandering plant for so long, it was about time for me to root myself somewhere.

“In that case, may I give you a suggestion?”

“Huh?”

“There’s a job posting that would be perfect for you, Sieg. It’s a career that has monthly paychecks and stable employment.”

“A dream job like that?! What is it...?”

“It’s a job as a gatekeeper.”

The receptionist held up a proud finger as she told me this.



“Gatekeeper...”

“Apparently they’re short-staffed right now, and looking for skilled individuals. With a letter of introduction, I think they would hire you on the spot!”

“Really? Sign me up, then!”

“Great, I’ll go ahead and make the arrangements!”

“By the way, which gate is this job for, anyway?”

“Gatekeeper for the Royal Capital of Astaroth.”

“Oh...”

The receptionist gave me an awkward smile.

*Of course.*

It suddenly all made sense.

*A gatekeeper for that notorious city, huh...*

No wonder they needed all the help they could get.

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The Royal Capital, Astaroth, was a city famous for being the most dangerous in the world. It faced all kinds of threats, coming in from all directions. Monsters, bandits, thieves, you name it—the bad guys just came swooping in one after the other.

Why were they targeted so often? The secret lay in a special treasure that was enshrined within the city: the Orb of Light. It was the lone object in the world with enough power to defeat the Demon King. At the same time, it was also the linchpin that, even today, kept the Demon King sealed.

For that reason, the demons under the command of said Demon King were doing their utmost to steal it away; as for the other bad guys, stealing the Orb of Light had the potential to net them a massive fortune.

Because of that, the Royal Capital of Astaroth was under daily attack from outside forces, and faced with these endless raids, running into a shortage of knights and soldiers to guard the place was inevitable. That being said, they

couldn't just throw in a bunch of random extra guys and call it a day. If they hired people without the proper skill, that would just end up being a recipe for instant corpses.

Being a guard in the royal capital was a job that came with considerable danger, and if you were qualified for that line of work, there were other, more lucrative jobs you could get. Without an affinity for the greater good or a strong sense of responsibility, the job would be a royal pain and not worth the trouble at all.

However, I decided to take it anyway—not because I had an affinity for the greater good or a strong sense of responsibility, but because at that moment, after being booted from my party and forfeiting the path of being an adventurer, I was grateful to have any prospect for employment at all.

I was already midway through my twenties. Rather than starting over from scratch in a completely unrelated line of work, it would be better to get a job where I could put the skills I'd been cultivating for so long as an adventurer to good use.

That was why I had accepted the Guild's letter of introduction and started on my way toward the Royal Capital of Astaroth.

There were no carriages headed in that direction. According to the coachmen, it was because the destination had been deemed too dangerous. I had no other options, so I decided to head there on foot, finally arriving after about a week's journey.

The Royal Capital of Astaroth's city proper seemed tightly secured by the stone walls encircling it; however, everything was in rough shape, likely due to repeated monster assaults. I made my way to the front gate, where two gatekeepers were standing on checkpoint duty.

"Hmph. What's your purpose for coming to this city?"

I pulled the letter of introduction out of my pocket and presented it to him. "The Adventurers' Guild referred me here for a job."

"What's this...a letter of introduction?"

"I'll go check and make sure this thing's real."



“All right.”

*How very diligent of them.* It just went to show how routinely people tried to sneak in using whatever means they could, I supposed.

After a while, the other gatekeeper returned.

“Sorry for the delay. There’s no mistaking this seal. It’s the real deal.”

“In that case, you can head on in.”

*Whew.* At least I could breathe a little easier knowing I hadn’t been summarily turned away.

“You say you’re applying to be a city guard, so I’ll take you to see the guard commander. Follow me.”

“Appreciated.”

With one of the gatekeepers leading the way, I followed behind and we walked into the city.

“So you say the Adventurers’ Guild in Estahl referred you here, right? I hear there’s a famous party there called the Crimson Fangs.”

“Huh? O-Oh, yeah. So you’ve heard of them.”

“I mean, they *are* famous and all, with their super attack-heavy style and firepower that’s in a league of its own. Pretty much everyone recognizes them as the cream of the crop.”

The gatekeeper began grumbling in earnest. “Sure would be nice if one of *them* came to the city to be a guard. Even this current mess would probably take at least a little turn for the better.”

I fell silent for a moment. *I was actually a member of that party.* Even if I did get kicked out.

“Are things really that bad here?”

“Everything’s completely worn out, from the buildings to the people, thanks to the constant monster raids. We rarely manage to get merchants out here either, so there’s always a supply shortage too.”

The gatekeeper let out a sigh. “Things would be so much easier if we just gave

up the Orb of Light...but if we do that, it'd be almost like we're resurrecting the Demon King ourselves. This city's been dealt the worst possible hand."

I said nothing, uncertain of how to respond.

"Ah... I didn't mean to get so depressing there. I know you came to work here for us and all. Sorry about that, forget I said anything," said the gatekeeper, before continuing on. "Though I do hear you're pretty good at what you do."

"Huh...?"

"This letter really lays it on thick. Says you're a 'fantastic talent that's just as good as any Crimson Fang.'"

*Is that what she wrote about me?*

"If that's true, it's promising news for us as well. We'd love to have you working with us to defend the city."

"That's what I'm hoping for too."

With the gatekeeper in the lead, we came to the barracks, where a number of guards were on standby. I was taken to a room in the back.

"Commander Bolton, this is the guard applicant. He has a letter of introduction from the Adventurers' Guild in Estahl, so we let him through."

In the back, I saw the man named Bolton seated at a desk, his feet rested atop it. Upon hearing the gatekeeper's words, the bulky fellow fixed his gaze on me. His hair was slicked back roughly, and faded scars were carved into his forehead and cheeks. He had an air about him that only those who had fought on countless battlefields could possibly possess.

"Hmph. Referred by the Adventurers' Guild, was he? When we get referrals from them, they always end up sending out some worthless loser from who knows where— Hmm?"

Commander Bolton had been skimming over the letter with a scoff when his eyes suddenly went wide.

"Sieg. You're a B-rank adventurer, right?"

"Yes, that's right."



“And you’re applying to be a guard, are ya...? I take it you’re one of those guys driven by some affinity for the greater good or a sense of responsibility? You’d be better off tossing those things to the dogs.”

Smirking self-deprecatingly, the commander went on, “Our job doesn’t pay well, and we live side by side with danger every day—but unlike you adventurers, we’re not allowed to just turn tail and run when things start getting dicey. It’s a work environment from hell, and on top of that, the Knight Corps throws us all of their shittiest jobs, since we’re pretty much their servants. Did you realize that when you came here to volunteer?”

“Yes, but I don’t have any other options. I’m willing to deal with it.”

“Hah... Guess you’ve got some special circumstances, huh? Makes sense, a B-rank adventurer wouldn’t bother coming out to a place like this otherwise.” He stroked the beard on his chin. “It’s true we’re desperate for a few good men, but we can’t just offer a job to any warm body who shows up. If we hire guys who don’t have the skills, they’ll end up dead in no time. We’re a guard company, not a morgue, y’know. Not to mention, when I get attached to a guy who has promise and he ends up dying, it leaves a bad taste in my mouth.”

“So,” Commander Bolton continued, “I’m gonna have you take a little recruitment exam to make sure you’ve got what it takes. Some B-rank adventurers out there just leech off their other party members and don’t have any real skill of their own; we’re gonna find out if that’s what you are too. If you can pass the recruitment exam, you’ve got yourself a job.”

“Understood. Thanks for giving me a chance.”

And that was how I ended up taking the guard recruitment exam.

## Chapter 2: Recruitment Exam

We went out to the training ground for the recruitment exam, which was located in an open clearing.

“All right, then. Let’s go ahead and get this exam started,” Commander Bolton stated lazily, rubbing the back of his neck.

“So what does this exam consist of?” I asked.

“What, you didn’t think it’d be some kind of paper test or interview, did ya?” He gave me a wicked grin. “Guards in this city don’t need book smarts, and they don’t need etiquette. They need *power*. If you’ve got what it takes to protect the townspeople and the Orb, you don’t need anything else.”

“I see. That’s nice and easy to understand.”

If they had been looking for book smarts or etiquette, I would’ve been screwed. As an orphan-turned-adventurer, I was lacking in those areas. It would be way easier for me to live life in a community where things like that didn’t matter and ability was the only thing I needed.

“How about we start with a little sparring? Three guards versus you. Also, Sieg, you’re not allowed to swing your sword.”

“So you want me on defense only, then?”

“You got it. Attack power doesn’t matter; what you really need to be a guard—especially a gate guard—is defense power. If you don’t have what it takes to withstand a few hits from the enemy, you’ll never make it at this job.”

Now *that* I had plenty of confidence in—way more than in my attack power, so it was a good thing that wasn’t what they needed from me.

The three guards stepped forward. One held a sword, one a spear, and one an axe.

“We’re pretending like this is the real thing, got it? If you get hit in the wrong spot, you’re gonna die. If you don’t like the sound of that, you’d better give it all



you've got to dodge or block."

I pulled out the wooden sword hanging at my waist, and took up a stance with my shield in my left hand.

"Hey, now. Did you hear what I said? I said you're not allowed to attack."

"It's supposed to be just like the real thing, right? If so, it wouldn't make any sense to not be holding a sword. Nobody in their right mind would charge out into the middle of a battlefield with just a shield."

"Heh. True enough. You'd better hope that lax attitude doesn't come back and bite you in the ass, though. Your freedom of movement is restricted by the weight of the sword."

At that, the commander took his raised hand and then sliced it down.

"All right, begin!"

The guards all rushed me at the same time, spreading out to the right, the middle, and the left.

*"Hyah!"*

The guard on the right attacked first, thrusting his spear. With a whoosh, the tip flew swiftly at me; I dodged it with a backward twist of the body. As I stepped back, the guard on my left brought his sword down. Pulling up my shield quickly, I blocked the strike.

"Gotcha!" the guard in the middle then shouted as he swung his axe at me. It was a powerful strike with the full weight of his body behind it—not something I could stop with a shield.

That just meant I had to deflect it.

As the axe came hurtling down, I waited until the perfect time and knocked it aside with my shield.

He grunted in shock. The axe-wielding guard's balance was thrown off completely. Stumbling backward, he was left wide open, and I took the opportunity to slam my shield into his face.

"Guh...?"

Completely taken by surprise, the guard collapsed onto his back and fell unconscious.

Commander Bolton began to chastise me again. “Hey, Sieg! Did you even hear what I said?”

“You told me I’m not allowed to swing my sword. All I did was stun him with my shield, which is a basic defensive tactic.”

“You and your technicalities,” the man grumbled, wrinkling his nose in annoyance. “But I’ve gotta admit, you’re doing a good job keeping a level head when you’re up against multiple people. Looks like you’re not a B-rank adventurer for nothing.”

“Thanks.”

“All right, Sieg, next up is this: I’m gonna put this balloon down behind you. Your job is to keep the guards from popping it while they’re fighting you.”

“So I’ll basically be defending it in battle?”

“You got it. Pretend that balloon is the people of the city, and protect it with all you’ve got. If the balloon gets popped, that means you let the citizens get killed.” He fixed his gaze on me and offered words of warning: “Just so you know, no more of those shield stuns like before. I see one attack, and you can forget about this job.”

The other guards began looking at each other in concern.

“Commander Bolton’s asking a bit too much...”

“Pretty sure the requirements weren’t nearly that strict when we joined up. He’s just being super tough on that guy, isn’t he?”

“Well, he does really hate outsiders and adventurers...”

“Hey, you guys better shut the hell up, all of you.”

“Sorry!” yelled the guards, apologizing in unison.

The commander glared at his guardsmen, addressing them in a low, sinister tone. “Just so *you* know, don’t even think about going easy on him. Pretend that balloon is a monster, and if you can’t manage to pop it, the people you love the



most are gonna get hurt.”

The guards gulped, and their expressions became much more serious. As they all charged in at once, I placed myself in front of the balloon and assumed a defensive posture.

I wasn't allowed to attack, and my stun was taken away from me too. If I tried to take them all on at once, eventually one of them would get through.

Which meant I had to both defend and take away their means of attack at the same time.

“*Hyaah!*”

As the spear-wielding guard yelled and unleashed his attack, I used my shield to parry it, deflecting its energy and sending the spear flying from his grip due to the recoil. When the sword and axe attacks came after in quick succession, I deflected those as well with carefully timed parries, sending the guards' weapons hurtling out of their hands.

“Whoa, you've gotta be kidding me! He nailed back-to-back parries?”

“If your timing is off on those by even a little, you get nailed by the attack. I've seen it in street shows, but I've never seen someone use it in actual battle...!”

“I can't believe he managed to pull it off so many times in the middle of all that craziness!”

It was simply the result of my constant training. When I had just started out as an adventurer, I kept practicing that move like my life depended on it. Eventually, I could parry any ordinary attack with my eyes shut.

“Feh. You guys are pathetic,” the Commander grunted, before suddenly barking out an order in a seemingly random direction. “Now! Get him, boys!”

At this, a number of guards who had been observing from the sidelines came running at me, targeting the balloon.

“What the...?”

“Just so you know, you lose if *these* guys pop the balloon too.”

“Th-That's fighting dirty!” Voices of objection rose from around us, but their

commander dismissed them without a second thought.

“Heh. In a real battle, you never know where the enemy’s gonna pop out from. The ability to adjust to irregular situations like this separates the wheat from the chaff.”

No doubt Bolton thought things were in the bag for him at that point. He had a triumphant expression on his face as he shouted at the top of his voice. “You can’t react to that many soldiers when they’re that close, can you, Sieg? Looks like the battle’s over for you!”

“No... Not yet, it isn’t.”

That’s when I activated my skill.

*“Iron Target!”*

The guards who had just stormed in unleashed their attacks at the balloon, but the force behind every strike got twisted and redirected straight toward me. I took every hit.

“What...?!”

“Impossible...!”

The soldiers seemed unable to wrap their minds around what had just happened. From their point of view, their attacks had successfully struck the balloon, yet somehow, it hadn’t popped.

The only ones who understood what exactly had happened were me and the commander. He took in a breath, clearly impressed.

“Oh ho. Is that a skill that draws every attack straight to you? I’ve seen more than my fair share of adventurers before, but I’ve never seen a skill quite like that.” The smirk that had been on his face up to that point had vanished entirely. “Looks like you turned out to be a more interesting guy than I thought you’d be.”

With these words, he drew the sword at his waist and pointed it in my direction.

“All right, Sieg. Next up is a one-on-one fight with me. Time to find out firsthand what you’re really made of.”



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“Am I allowed to attack this time?” I asked.

“Yep. No restrictions at all. Just you against me. The battle keeps going till one of us either gives up or can’t fight anymore.”

“If I win, that means I pass the recruitment exam, right?”

“Heh... You got it. Heck, I’ll bow down before you if you manage to do that. But you’d better not think for a minute that I plan on letting you win.”

“I see. In that case, I’d like to fight while protecting the balloon.”

“Are...you *mocking* me, boy?”

“No, sir. In a defensive battle, you’d need to protect the townspeople while you fight. It’d be pretty rare to have a one-on-one battle without having to be concerned about anything else.”

“So you’re still imagining this is real combat, huh? You’ve got a hell of a good attitude. But all the attitude in the world doesn’t mean a thing if you can’t back it up with ability.”

I could hear the soldiers murmur to each other as they observed the situation.

“That Sieg guy doesn’t look scared at all, even when he’s facing down Commander Bolton...”

“Commander Bolton could hold his own even against the knight commander. He’s just as strong as any A-rank adventurer too. If that guy pisses him off, it might be the last thing he ever does...!”

The commander and I kept our distance while we faced each other. The air fell silent, thick with the tension of imminent war.

I noticed my opponent’s foot inch slightly forward, and the next moment he vanished into thin air like a puff of smoke. Before I realized it, he was already right in front of me.

With a grunt, I blocked his downward sword strike with my shield. It was a heavy blow, and my feet sank into the ground.

Letting out a battle cry, he immediately spun around for a second attack.

However... That second attack would be his undoing.

“There’s not a single guard in this unit who can keep up with my attacks!”

As he shouted, I followed the rotation of his body along with his attack, matching up with his timing.

*Ching!*

“No way...! You parried it...?!” Commander Bolton said.

With his rotation stopped and his center of balance thrown off, the commander was a sitting duck. I followed up with a sword strike that should have been completely unavoidable; however, my opponent’s supernatural reflexes allowed him to take a step back, causing the tip of my sword to just barely graze past his torso.

*That tracks. They didn’t make him a commander for nothing, apparently... This guy’s good.*

“I’m impressed. Didn’t expect you to be able to stand toe-to-toe with me... Honestly, at this point I woulda been fine with just passing you right here and now, but...” He chuckled and gave me a genuine smile. “Now I just kinda want to see how tough you really are. I thought my fighting spirit withered and died a long time ago, but seems like I’ve got something left in me after all.”

The dull look in his eyes from before was completely gone. Now, they were filled with the ferocity of a wild animal.

*Guess I managed to wake up the beast.*

I had a feeling something was coming. Everything up until that point must’ve just been a trial run; he still had an ace hidden up his sleeve.

“You’ve proved how good your defense is... I’m impressed. But—I bet you can’t defend against a thousand blades at once, can ya?”

Bolton planted his foot and leaped into the air, soaring like a wolf. As he pulled his sword up behind his head, its blade began to glow with a whitish light.

*He’s using a skill!*

“See if you can block this—*Thousand Rush!*”

The sword split into copies of itself, like petals of a blossoming flower. These countless swords then all pointed in my direction and came flying at me.

It wasn't just a single sword that looked like a thousand—there were literally a thousand swords at once raining down on me. There was definitely no way to parry it, and no way to escape it either.

Which meant—I just had to take them all head-on.

*“Iron Target.”*

To prevent the balloon from being popped, I activated my skill and forced every attack to focus upon me.

“Fool! You'll skewer yourself!”

The blades, which had been scattered all over the place, converged on my location.

There were no special tricks to it. It was just a matter of which would win out, my opponent's strength or my own defense power.

A rain of swords came piercing down all over my body, gouging holes in the nearby ground one after the other.

However, I remained standing.





“You...weren’t hurt at all...?” Commander Bolton stood there dumbfounded, as if he’d seen the impossible.

“I can’t believe you took that many sword strikes without getting a scratch on you... That’s insane, Sieg, your defense power must be through the roof...!”

“If there’s one thing I’ve always been proud of, it’s my defense power.”

“I was wondering how you could keep pulling off those risky parries without a single ounce of hesitation... I get it now. If you’ve got the defense power for it, who’s afraid of a little scratch or two, right?”

With that, the commander sighed and sheathed his sword at his waist. A wry smile appeared on his face as he scratched the back of his neck. “Heh. Looks like I lose. Wouldn’t matter how long I beat on you, there’s no way I’d be coming out on top.”

“So, does that mean I get the job?”

“You sure do. Can’t think of anything better for morale than having you on our side. Starting today, I’d like you to protect the city with us as a partner-in-arms.”

I took his outstretched leathery palm in mine, and we shook hands.

*Whew.* Well, if nothing else, at least I’d managed to get a job. From that day on, I committed myself to defending the city as a guardsman.

## Chapter 3: Welcome Party, and Developments with Former Party Members

It was the night I got hired as a guardsman. Commander Bolton had just taken me out to the local pub where, according to him, we were going to celebrate me getting hired with a few drinks. I had no reason at all to refuse and decided to spend some time with him.

Considering how packed the pub was, there wasn't a whole lot of energy in the air; the people seemed exhausted. Even among the civilians, there were a lot of people with injuries all over their bodies.

"There's no shortage of fresh wounds in this city, what with all the thieves, bandits, and monster armies—they just keep on comin', one after the other."

"You've got guards at the gate, and there's a barrier that rises above the stone walls, too, isn't there?"

Most cities had magical defensive barriers to fend off monsters, including flying ones.

"Of course. There's just so many of them, we can't always make it in time. And any barrier we put up just ends up getting busted through anyway," the commander said bitterly, then looked at me. "But with you on the team, Sieg, things could start happening a little differently. I'm looking forward to seeing what you can do."

"Understood. I'll do my best not to soil your good name, Commander."

"Cheers to that!"

We lifted the beers we had been brought and shared a toast with one another. As I downed the entirety of my topped-off mug, a pleasant bitterness rushed down my throat.

It had been such a long time since I'd felt like I was actually wanted—probably because my party did nothing but treat me like dirt when I was with them.



They'd just look down on me like I was some kind of insect.

Once the drinks had gotten flowing, Bolton decided to break the ice with a little conversation. "Hey, you used to be a B-rank adventurer, right? You coulda made a lot more money sticking with that, why'd you quit?"

"What can I say? It's a long story..."

Any other time, I might've just evaded the question. But for some reason, and maybe it was the alcohol, I figured I might as well put things out in the open. They'd find out eventually anyway, whether I kept trying to hide it or not.

"You know who the Crimson Fangs are, right?" I asked.

"Sure, I've heard of 'em. Some party that's super proud of their firepower, right? I hear anybody who's anybody in Estahl knows about 'em."

"Well, I was in that party, and they kicked me out. They said I didn't bring enough firepower."

"Huh? For real?"

"Yes, for real."

The commander fell silent for a while. "Hah. Those idiots made a huge mistake," he finally spat out with a harsh chuckle. "I know that 'cause I've dealt with it before myself. They probably wouldn't have gotten anywhere without that crazy defensive power of yours. Having you up there on the front lines taking hits from the monsters let everyone else just unleash their offense as much as they wanted. Can't believe they didn't realize that... Guess those Crimson Fangs weren't all that special to begin with."

I gave a pained smile and chuckled. "I dunno about that..."

"Just so you know, I'm not trying to sweet-talk you either. I'm no good at that kinda stuff."

"I kind of got that impression."

Chugging down his beer, Commander Bolton gave a wide grin. "Still, now that you're out of the party, I bet it's gonna dawn on them how much you were saving their asses, eh?"

“I sure hope so.”

“Well, it’s too late for them to ask for you back, I’m not giving ya up. You’re gonna be right here with the rest of us guards, working like a horse for nothing but peanuts!”

“Huh. Now I’m thinking maybe I should head back after all...”

“Hah! Over my dead body!” he said with a hearty laugh, wrapping an arm over my shoulders.

In the highly unlikely event that my party *had* asked me to come back, I doubt I would’ve agreed to it. My place was here in the capital from this point on—protecting the people of this city with my life, rather than my party members.

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At the bottom levels of a dungeon located on the outskirts of the city of Estahl, the leader of the Crimson Fangs, Nacht, cursed in exasperation at the group of monsters before him.

“Damn it, what the hell?! Did these things get stronger all of a sudden...?! The way we used to fight isn’t working...!”

Their mage, Haruna, voiced her concerns as well, followed by Irene, the archer.

“They’d just leave themselves wide open before, but now they’re actually reacting. What’s with them? They’re like completely different monsters!”

“They’re even dodging my arrows. That never happens...”

Before, the party could’ve taken down a group of monsters like this without even breaking a sweat. However, things were different this time, and those days seemed like a distant dream. Now they were being forced into a fight for their lives.

“Hey, do you think this might be happening because Sieg isn’t here?” Haruna blurted out. “Ever since he left the party, it seems like every single battle’s been way harder for us. I can’t help but think it must be because of him.”

“Right? I thought the monsters were always pounding on him because he was a little slow, but maybe he was actually doing it to protect us all along...?”

“Don’t be stupid! There’s no way in hell! That guy’s just a useless mannequin; he couldn’t possibly have the ability to bail *us* out!”

“Hey, keep your voice down! The monsters’ll—”

“Augh, they’re all over the place now... I don’t see any way to get past them, do you? We should probably head back to town and regroup...”

“Shit...! Fine, let’s get outta here!”

With their leader having made the difficult decision to leave, the party turned away from the approaching monsters and made a mad dash out of the dungeon.

“I can’t believe we’re being forced to retreat before completing our mission. We’re the *Crimson Fangs*! I’ve never been so humiliated in my life...!”

As he fled in defeat, Nacht’s expression brimmed with bitter anguish.



## Chapter 4: First Assignment

It was my first day on the job as a guard. I awakened to my stiff bed in the guard corps dormitory. Outside the window, the sun had yet to rise.

*All right, might as well get in a little preshift workout.*

I left my room and headed outside to start my daily training regimen, clearing my mind of all other thoughts and focusing solely on the swing of my blade. I always made sure never to skip muscle training either. That kind of daily self-improvement was what would give me the power to protect my comrades and the townspeople.

Once my regimen was just about over, the morning sun had finally begun to cast light over the city—though at that hour, most of the people were probably still fast asleep.

After a quick shower to wash away the sweat, I went to report for duty. As I was stepping into the barracks, Bolton was there to greet me.

“Hey, you’re here. No problems waking up, then?”

“No problems at all.”

“Heh, not bad, not bad, considering how much you drank. So you can hold your liquor too, huh? Bet it’d be worth dragging you around to a few different places,” he said with a grin, rubbing his goatee.

My eyes drifted to the guard who was standing at Bolton’s flank.

“Commander, who is that, may I ask?”

“Oh, yeah. Completely slipped my mind to introduce you two,” the commander said, putting his hand on the man’s shoulder. “Sieg, this is your trainer, Lambda. He’ll be hammering the basics of guard duty into that head of yours. Though you, of all people, probably don’t have too much to worry about.”

*I see. As a trainer, he’d be my direct supervisor, huh?*

If I had to guess, he was probably in his midthirties. He had a slender build overall, and his face seemed almost reptilian.

“My name’s Sieg. I’m looking forward to working under you from now on.”

“I’m Lambda. I’ll be acting as your trainer, but if we’re being honest, I have a feeling there isn’t going to be a whole lot I can teach you,” he admitted, letting out a light self-derisive chuckle. “Based on what I hear, you used to be a B-rank adventurer, right?”

“Yes. That’s all in the past, though.”

“That’s amazing, though! You must have way more talent than I did when I was your age—I was so awful back then,” Lambda chuckled, his tone a mixture of honesty and self-deprecation. “Though I’m really not all that much better now either.”

“Oh...”

“Hey, lay off with the feeling sorry for yourself,” Bolton commented. “It’s too early in the morning for that crap, and it’s making Sieg uncomfortable. If you’ve got time to waste on whining, use it for some damn training instead!”

“Oh dear! You’re so right about that, Commander!” Lambda responded with a laugh, his obsequious grin deepening after having been called out.

“All right, I’ll leave him to you, now—and Sieg, if there’s anything you’re having trouble understanding, just ask Lambda. If he can’t figure it out, feel free to come straight to me.”

“Understood.”

“So then, Sieg, shall we head to our post?”

Giving Commander Bolton a bow, Lambda left the office with me in tow. After the door closed behind us, for a brief moment I heard what sounded like a brooding voice mutter something under its breath.

“Feh... What a piece of shit.”

I glanced at Lambda’s face and happened to catch it in profile; his eyes were ferocious and snakelike, and his voice had been tinged with bitter hatred.

*What...?*

“Hm? What’s wrong? Do I have something on my face?”

“O-Oh, no, it’s nothing.”

“Ah, I was worried you might’ve been thinking, ‘This guy thinks he can show me the ropes? He’s got a lot of nerve!’ I’ll have none of that from you, thank you very much!”

Lambda’s original silly smile had returned; I no longer felt any sign of the apparent intense spite that had just shown up.

*Maybe I misheard...?*

With a curious tilt of my head, I followed after Lambda.

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Lambda and I eventually reached our post—the front gate of the city.

“Our job here will be to do inspections. We’ll need to decide whether or not the people coming into the city are suspicious,” Lambda said. “If we accidentally let in any demons or others who are up to no good, we could be putting the townspeople in danger, so this is an extremely important duty for us.”

“Understood.”

“Though I suppose you probably knew that without me having to tell you. You don’t think I’m being all high-and-mighty or anything, do you?”

“No, not at all.”

“Are you sure? I mean, you’re an all-powerful B-rank adventurer; you don’t think low-class jobs like being a guard are beneath you?”

“A job is a job, there’s no high or low class.”

“Huh, you’ve really got yourself together, Sieg! You B-rank adventurers are amazing. You’re so open-minded, a far cry from worthless guards like myself!”

I wasn’t sure how to respond to his groveling, so I remained silent.

After a while, Lambda spoke up. “Oh come on, Sieg, you were supposed to laugh at that! You’re making me look super pathetic here!”



“Sorry... Laughing isn’t exactly my strong suit.”

That reminded me—my party always used to tell me I didn’t have much of a sense of humor. I never even laughed during our mission wrap-up parties. Be that as it may, I was having fun—it just wasn’t showing on my face.

“You shouldn’t be antisocial. When it comes to getting ahead in the world, you don’t need *ability*, you need *sociability*! Use that to get yourself some connections, and you’ll be invincible!” Lambda opined. “But I digress. Let’s get back to talking about inspections. First of all, anybody coming to the city needs to be checked for a permit. Any merchants who show up will no doubt have one, though occasionally we’ll get people who counterfeit their travel permits and show up with those.”

*Sounds like a pretty sophisticated operation.* I surmised that meant the benefits of entry outweighed the risks of getting caught.

“If they don’t have a permit, that doesn’t mean we turn them away immediately, by the way. If we determine they aren’t a danger to anyone, we’re allowed to admit them in. However, we have to scrutinize them extra carefully, since there’s always the possibility that demons or outlaws have hidden themselves among the commoners. That would involve asking them the reason for their visit, checking any wanted notices from nearby cities, and so on and so forth. So: What do you think? Is there anything you haven’t been clear on so far?”

“I’m good. No problems so far.”

“Well, aren’t you a fast learner! Still, trying it out for yourself would be even quicker than me explaining it in words. Shall we go through an inspection together?”

“Sure.”

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Lambda and I assumed standing positions on either side of the gate. It was a big milestone for me: my very first assignment. I was appropriately psyched up, determined not to let any suspicious characters into the city. However...

“There are a lot fewer people showing up than I thought there’d be...”

Despite the fact that about two hours had already passed since we had started standing at the gate, not a single person had come to visit the city. At that point, we had just been standing there in front of the gate staring off into space the entire time.

“Well, this city is famous for being one of the most dangerous in the world. Even merchants don’t make their way out here too often—the cost of hiring an escort is too high to make it worth the trip. For ordinary visitors, it’d be even worse. About the most we typically get is the occasional adventurer looking for work.”

“So that’s how it is, huh...”

“Didn’t you have a rough time making your way here, Sieg? Weren’t there packs of monsters chasing you or something?”

“Yes, I was definitely attacked a few times on the way...but I wouldn’t call any of those battles a particularly rough time.”

An abnormal number of monsters had attacked me on my way to the city, but fortunately for me, they weren’t too big of a deal in the strength department; they were just annoying to deal with, since I kept having to stop to fight them.

That reminded me, though—I had actually considered heading from Estahl to Astaroth by carriage, but every single coachman had refused me. They’d told me it was incredibly risky to go to the Royal Capital, and that, if I was that intent on going there, I’d have to pay an extra fee to hire an escort. The prices they quoted were nothing short of highway robbery—definitely not something I could afford, considering I had just lost my party job. So I went ahead and traveled the whole long way on foot.

“Not rough...? I thought the monsters around here were pretty strong. But I guess they’re no match for a former B-rank adventurer!” Lambda’s smile looked forced. “My, my! Though I’m curious, why would someone as strong as you want to become a guard, anyway? Did something bad happen, maybe?”

He asked his question in a probing tone, as if trying to poke at a fresh wound. Though I didn’t really consider it fresh at all; to me, the wound had already scabbed over. I’d already told Commander Bolton all about what happened, and I had nothing to hide, so I decided to go ahead and explain everything.

“I got kicked out of the party I was in. It was a famous party, so being abandoned by them meant nobody else was interested in picking me up. That’s when someone in the Adventurers’ Guild recommended this guard job to me. They really helped me out of a tight spot.”

“Oh my! You were kicked out of your party, were you?” Lambda’s eyes lit up with glee, and he vaguely appeared to be grinning. “So you worked your way all the way up to a B-rank adventurer, just to fall right back down to rock bottom. You never can quite tell what life has in store, can you?”

*What on earth is so funny...? Or has that smile just been on his face the entire time?*

Maybe I just had some kind of hidden knack for humor—if so, I couldn’t think of a more unexpected talent for me to end up with.

“Ah, look alive. Someone’s coming,” Lambda murmured, and I looked up to see a carriage approaching from up ahead. A driver was managing the horses’ reins; he was surrounded by three other men who appeared to be security escorts, for a total of four visitors arriving at the gate.

“What business do you have here today?”

“I’ve come to deliver some goods.”

“Would you present your permit, please?”

“Sure.”

The man in the driver’s seat pulled back the hooded robe that had been covering him and pulled out a permit from the cargo area, handing it to Lambda, who began examining the document.

“Hmm. I see you do have a valid travel permit. So you are Geese from the Pulse Trading Company?” Lambda asked the driver.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Very well, then. For safety purposes, we’ll need to inspect the cargo area.”

“Go ahead.”

Lambda circled around toward the cargo area and opened the flap as I peered

in from behind him. The space was piled high with cargo: food, water, and all kinds of other daily necessities.

“Well, there doesn’t seem to be anything suspicious back here,” he said, and after scuffling around a while longer, he seemed satisfied. “Very well, then. You are cleared to go ahead and enter the city.”

“Right.” Nodding, the driver pulled his hood back up, lifted the reins, and started to head in.

“Hold on just a moment, please.”

As I spoke, his hands froze.

“What...?”

“I’m sorry, but you can’t be allowed to enter the city.”

“Didn’t...your friend here just give us permission?”

“Wait, wait, wait. What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” Lambda said, rushing over to me in a panic. “Sieg, these men are merchants. They even provided advance notice of their visit. And this is most definitely a genuine permit.”

“Yes, the permit may well be genuine. Same with the advance notice of their arrival. But there’s no guarantee that these people are the merchants in question.”

“What do you mean...?”

“It’s possible that they switched places with the actual merchants somewhere along the way here...but these are *not* the people who were originally coming here.”

“Switched places...?” Lambda asked. “What on earth? Then where did the real merchants run off to?”

“They were probably killed, to make sure nobody would ever find out.”

Lambda’s eyes went wide as I spoke. “Why... Why, that’s preposterous!”

“I’m not just saying that for no good reason. There’s a faint smell of blood coming from them. Same with the cargo area—they did a thorough job cleaning



it up, but there's still a thick smell of blood. It's a smell I've encountered over and over again as an adventurer... I'm absolutely certain of it."

They couldn't fool my sense of smell. I turned my gaze toward the driver's men.

"These men ambushed the merchants on their way here and switched places with them. If they had the merchants' clothing and their permit, they could enter the city. Let's have someone draw up some portraits or sketches of them and send an inquiry to the trading company to confirm their employment; that way we'll know for sure."

The driver clicked his tongue in annoyance. "Shit... And things were going so well too," he said, placing his hand on the handle of the sword hanging at his waist.

At this, the rest of his escort unsheathed their swords in concert.

"You've got it exactly right. We're no merchants. We killed them and took their places. We put in a lot of work to get rid of the blood...but oh well. Since we're busted anyway, we'll just hafta kill you and force our way in!"

Their eyes were filled with something merchants simply didn't possess: pure bloodlust.

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I couldn't have imagined I'd be getting into a battle quite so soon. The City of Astaroth was certainly living up to its reputation as a dangerous place.

"So who are you *really*...?" I asked them. "What were you hoping to accomplish by sneaking into the city after murdering those merchants and posing as them?"

"Do you actually expect us to just tell you?" one of the men in disguise said, his face contorted. "What's the point in talking to a dead man walking?"

"I see. In that case, we'll have plenty of time to talk after you've been taken in."

"Try it, ya little punk!"

"S-Sieg, I'm going to call for backup! Do your best to hold your own until I get

back! I know you can do it; you're a B-rank adventurer! Byeee!"

With these words, Lambda turned on his heels and took off running toward the city like a bat out of hell.

*Wow... He's fast. Who knew he had that kind of speed in him?*

Watching this unfold, the men all burst into laughter.

"Well, would ya look at that!"

"That was your boss, right? The guy who just ran away and left you all by your lonesome? Never seen a guy so heartless!"

"If you mean Lambda, he just went to call for backup."

"You honestly think that? Man, never seen a guy so gullible!"

"It's not that big of a deal," I insisted.

"What, your boss running away? That's awful noble of you, considering it's *your* life on the line."

"No, I meant it wasn't a big enough deal to be worth calling the other guards over. I can handle guys like you perfectly fine on my own."

Hearing this, my opponents glared at me.

"You really have a talent for getting on people's nerves... You realize that guys like that usually die young, right?"

"I'm just telling it like it is."

I could see the veins pop up on all four sets of temples.

"You asked for it! When that good-for-nothing heartless boss of yours comes back with the guards, all they're gonna find is your miserable corpse on the ground!"

In a fit of anger, the man disguised as the driver thrust his sword at me. I parried it with no trouble at all, deflecting the force behind it and throwing off his center of balance, leaving him wide open for me to deliver my own sword strike.

"Gah...?!"

My thrust pierced his unguarded torso, and the man crumpled helplessly to the ground. Seeing this, his bodyguard companions grew unsettled.

“He took down Yang like he was nothing...”

“He must be some kind of pro!”

“Fine, let’s all jump him at once!”

They surrounded me on three sides and then lunged. I stepped backward, dodging the tip of the first blade. The other two assailants, wary of my sword attacks, quickly assumed defensive postures; in response to that, I slammed my shield into the face of one, stunning him and eliciting a muffled grunt.

The guy probably didn’t have the faintest inkling that a shield could be used for attacking like that, but after taking it directly to the face, he must have been seeing stars.

The second man on defense immediately slipped into range and tried to slash at me. Before his sword could come down, I delivered a slice of my own across his wide-open front from shoulder to waist, causing him to shout in pain.

That’s when the remaining man finally leaped in—he had been waiting for the precise moment I swung my blade. There was no possible way for me to react to something so instantaneous.

“Got ya!” he yelled with a smirk, all but certain of his victory. But at that moment—

*Ching!*

The bodyguard’s sword, which he was undoubtedly certain had just sliced straight through me, suddenly snapped off at the base. After a brief delay, the broken blade clattered to the ground with a clink.

“Wh... What just...?” The man couldn’t believe his eyes, and stood staring in utter confusion. “That should’ve cut his head clean off...! Why is my sword broken instead...?” He looked at me in alarm. “You didn’t cast some kind of enchantment, did you...?!”

“No. I don’t have anything on me besides my light armor. No enchantments whatsoever.”

“That’s impossible! Are you saying you just tanked that hit with your *body*?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying.”

The man went pale and began mumbling quietly. “How could anyone possibly have a body that solid...? You’re like a walking fortress...”

I slammed my shield into the now-disarmed man’s face, and he let out a tiny defeated yelp, collapsing onto his back and passing out.

After casting a quick glare around the vicinity, I sheathed my sword. “Whew. That took longer than I thought it would.”

That was when I heard footsteps approaching from behind. I turned around to see Lambda and a number of other guards, Commander Bolton among them, rushing toward me.

“Sieg! I brought backup! Wait—where did those people go? I don’t see them anymore...”

“They’re on the ground over there.”

“What?! You beat them all on your own?” A shocked expression came over Lambda as he saw the collapsed men.

“Should I not have?”

“No, no, it’s not that. I’m just surprised you managed to do that alone... How exhausting.” He sighed and gave a helpless, pained smile. “Let’s just bring these fellows in, then.”

The guards headed over to restrain the attackers, binding their hands and feet. The bound men continued to cast biting glares in my direction.

“So who are these guys?” I asked.

“Couldn’t tell ya. But I can guarantee they still have buddies out there somewhere,” Commander Bolton responded. “Guess we’ll just have to toss ’em in a cell and find a way to make ’em spill the beans, huh?”

He looked down at the captives, a bold smirk on his face. “We’re gonna have tons of fun. You’re gonna cough up every last drop of info you’re hiding.”

“Bah... You’re daft if you think we’d tell you a damn thing,” one of them said,

as the lot of them glared defiantly at the commander. “Actually—we’d rather die!”

Grinning, each man opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue, which had magic glyphs inscribed on them.

A din rose from the guards. “Oh no! Those are explosion magic glyphs! They’re gonna blow themselves up and take us all with them!”

“Shit! There’s no time to stop them—”

“You’re outta luck! See you in hell!”

Laughing maniacally, the men waited for the moment everything would be blown to smithereens—us, them, and all their information with them—but that moment never came.

“What...?!”

The explosions that were supposed to occur never manifested, and the glyphs began to fade from their tongues. They, the guards, and Lambda stood there dumbfounded at the strange phenomenon; only Commander Bolton and I understood what had happened.

“Another one of your skills, huh, Sieg?”

“If I take all damage meant for them, that includes any damage they try to do to themselves too.”

“So you ‘defended’ them, huh? Hell of a way to use that ability,” the commander said with a grin. “All right, boys! Take ’em away!”

“Yes, sir!”

With the prisoners’ last means of resistance gone, the guardsmen dragged them off to the brig, leaving only Bolton, Lambda, and me.

The commander turned to Lambda. “You were right to go get backup, Lambda, but you shouldn’t have left Sieg behind. What if something had happened to him?”

“My apologies,” Lambda responded abjectly.

“Cripes. You’re lucky he’s the type who can handle bandits with his eyes



closed. But you'd better keep in mind that as his supervisor, you're the one who has to take responsibility for whatever happens."

"Yes, you're absolutely correct."

"Don't forget it," Commander Bolton said, putting a hand on Lambda's shoulder before turning and leaving.

After his bowing and scraping was over with, the color suddenly drained out of Lambda's face, and he glared coldly at the commander's back, muttering to himself.

"You can go ahead and stuff it, you stupid piece of shit."

*I guess I heard right after all—he was flinging curses.*

He followed this up with another murmur, not realizing I could hear every word: "Same goes for you, newbie."

*Guess I managed to earn his ire as well.* I was used to taking hate from monsters, but I sure didn't expect to aggro my supervisor-slash-trainer, on the very first day of work, no less. I could see that turning into a problem moving forward.

## Chapter 5: A Female Colleague

It was my lunch break, and I was having a meal in the barracks cafeteria: a modest menu of bean soup, bread, and dried meat.

That was when I started hearing whispers among the other guards.

“How are we supposed to feel motivated when this is all we get to eat?”

“The nobles and the Knight Corps get way better food than this. Not only do we get paid almost nothing, but our meals aren’t even close to filling.”

There seemed to be some dissatisfaction in the ranks when it came to working conditions, and with those comments as the catalyst, more complaints came welling up from all over the place.

“Those knights have the nerve to order us around, but they don’t even work *half* the amount that we do. About the only thing they have their fair share of is *pride*.”

“Food is already scarce, but the guys at the top take everything anyway. Commoners like us always get the shit end of the stick.”

“It’s absolute torture knowing that we’re supposed to put our lives on the line to protect *them*. Maybe we should transfer to another city.”

“If it were that easy for any of us, we’d have already done it. The only people stuck here are the ones who can’t make it in any other city anyway.”

The floodgates had broken, and the numerous complaints that had built up inside them kept flowing. I had a feeling that if I stayed in the area, their aura of negativity would rub off on me, so since I had already finished eating, I decided I might as well go on a walk.

I picked up my empty dishes and took them to the drop-off area. “Thanks for the meal.”

“You’re quite welcome,” responded the cafeteria lady with a smile. “You’re such a polite young man.”

“It’s the least I could do.”

“Oh, I do love the polite ones like you,” she said with a giggle. “Maybe I’ll make your portions just a little bit bigger than the others from now on...”

Giving her a nod of gratitude, I had just started to exit the cafeteria when another guard noticed me:

“Hey, new guy. Where are you going?”

“Just going outside for a little walk.”

“You youngsters these days can just do whatever you want, huh? Back in my day, nobody was allowed to just stand up and leave the moment they finished eating.”

“Times sure have changed,” another guard chimed in.

I shrugged off their complaints and exited the barracks. Considering I had only ever been an adventurer, this whole thing was a new experience for me—I was starting to realize that being a part of an organization came with its own set of various annoying limitations.

After walking a while, I found myself at the town square. The ground was paved with cobblestones, and there was a fountain in the center with some children frolicking around it. Taking a seat on a nearby bench, I took in the scene, letting my mind wander.

*It sure is nice out today.*

As I found myself staring up into the cloudless blue, a voice suddenly called out to me.

“Excuse me. You’re Sieg, right?”

I turned to see a beautiful woman standing before me. She had a gentle look about her, one that gave off an aura of kindness. Her lustrous hair reached down to her waist; she was quite tall for a woman, with an excellent figure to boot.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“I knew it! I’ve heard people talking about you for a while now. They say you

beat Commander Bolton in a one-on-one fight, even.”

“Well, there’s no way for me to know if he was holding back or not.”

“That’s still amazing! Nobody else in the squadron would ever stand a chance against him. You must be really strong, Sieg! I could learn a thing or two by watching you!”

“Pardon me, but you are...?”

“Oh! I’m so sorry, I forgot to introduce myself! My name is Seira Tiana. I’m a guard, just like you!”

*Ah, that makes sense. She’s a colleague of mine.*

*...Wait a sec. Am I seeing things?*

I rubbed my eyes, thinking I might have been dreaming it up, but no matter how many times I rubbed them or pinched my cheek, the sight before me remained.

The woman was clad in bikini armor. Only her most intimate parts were protected, while the majority of her body was exposed to the open air. Her overflowing cleavage, slender hips, and toned buttocks and thighs were all on full display; it was more than a little stimulating, almost too much so.

“Um, Miss Seira, was it? Do you usually like to go sunbathing on your lunch breaks?”

“No, not really?”

“Uh, does that mean you’re wearing your normal work outfit right now?”

“Why yes, yes I am!” Seira nodded, flashing a huge smile that didn’t contain a single ounce of embarrassment.

“...You’re not an exhibitionist, are you?”

“What?! Definitely not! I wouldn’t do anything immoral like that! I’m wearing this armor because it’s easy to move around in!”





Though it certainly wasn't as heavy as your average suit of armor and allowed for quicker movement, I'd have been lying if I said I was completely convinced.

"But aren't you worried that you might not have enough defense power?"

*I mean, you're nearly naked. If you took a hit to an exposed area, it'd be over in a second.*

"Not at all. I can just get out of the way! If they don't hit me, I take zero damage, which means zero problems!"

*No, I can think of a few problems. Like how to look at you without feeling awkward.*

"Does it, uh, not bother you when people stare at you, then?"

"Sure, it was a bit embarrassing at first, but now that I'm used to it, it's no big deal!" she explained, though I doubted I'd be getting used to it anytime soon.

It seemed like that was the case for the townspeople as well; the boys who were passing by kept ogling Seira and her outfit. I couldn't say I didn't understand how they felt.

"Anyway, Sieg, there's no need to call me 'Miss.' You look like you're probably older than me, after all."

"How old are you, Seira?"

"I'll be twenty this year!"

"All right, you win. No 'Miss' for you."

"Great! I'm looking forward to working with you!"

Just as she said this, one of the boys playing in the square tripped over a cobblestone. He didn't fall over completely, but he lost his grip on the balloon string he had been holding on to.

"Ah! My balloon!"

The boy reached out for it in a panic, but it was too far already. As he stared at the balloon sailing farther away, he looked as if he was about to cry.

Before I realized what was happening, Seira, who had been right next to me,

dashed into action. Leaping off of the cobblestones with a shout of effort, she sailed into the air, grabbed the escaping balloon's string, then landed as gracefully as a bird.

With a smile, she walked over to the boy and gave him the balloon back. "Here you go! Be careful not to let go of the string again."

"Thanks, lady..."

Seira giggled. "You're welcome!"

As the boy gave her a little wave, she came back over to me.

"When I'm dressed like this, any time the townspeople are in trouble, I can come running to help in no time at all. That's why I like it so much!"

Her heart was in the right place, but the boy with the balloon was blushing bright red. She probably didn't realize that she might be corrupting the minds of innocent children.

At that moment, I noticed some townspeople passing by. As they approached, they called out to her warmly in turn.

"Hey, it's Seira!"

"Putting in work as usual, huh?"

She politely responded to each person in kind. Apparently, she was pretty popular with the civilian population.

"Seira, is there any particular reason you became a guard?"

"What kind of reason do you mean?"

"From what I understand, a lot of the current guards only ended up here as a last resort because other cities wouldn't have them, right?"

*That wasn't too far off for me either.*

"No, there's no particular special circumstances for me, really. I just want to be able to help people. And protect the treasure, of course!"

"You mean the Orb of Light?"

"It's the sacred treasure that the Great Hero used to seal the Demon King so

long ago. Now, it's the key to keeping the Demon King sealed. We can't let it fall into the hands of monsters. That's why I enlisted to become a guard: to protect the people of the world."

I fell silent.

"Sieg...? What's wrong?"

"Oh, I'm just kind of impressed. I thought all the guards here were jaded beyond repair. Seeing your high aspirations is a breath of fresh air."

"Don't be silly, I still have a long way to go! I'm not strong enough to live up to those aspirations yet. I need to work my way up to your level, Sieg!" She puffed out her chest enthusiastically. It was huge.

"That reminds me, you have Lambda as your instructor, right?" she continued.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Um...I think you should be careful around him. I've heard some really bad rumors."

"Bad rumors...?"

"Apparently Lambda has made quite a few new hires quit."

"Does Commander Bolton know about this?"

"Lambda never lets his superiors see him do anything bad. Also, it's not really unusual at all for new hires to quit this job."

"That sounds like a problem in itself..." *Maybe they should work on improving their working conditions*, I thought. "At any rate, I appreciate the warning."

"If you run into any problems, don't hesitate to ask; I'll do my best to help. Let's work together to protect the city!" Seira said emphatically, taking both my hands in hers.

The girl had the personality of an angel, but she seemed so vulnerable too. In more ways than one.

## Chapter 6: Harassment

After lunch, it was back to gatekeeper duty and doing inspections. A few merchants approached the gate during that time, as did a traveler. The merchants all had permits, and we checked on the identity of the traveler, finding nothing suspicious. He had a harp, so he was most likely a bard.

Over the course of all that, the sun had set, and soon a bell rang out, signaling the end of the day's work.

"All right, it's about time to pack it up," Lambda said, turning around, but when I started to follow him, he clarified, "Oh, no, you don't understand. *You* need to stay here. We can't leave the gate unguarded at night."

"Isn't that when the night watch team takes over?" I asked.

"They had something very important they needed to take care of today, so I swapped shifts with them. We'll be handling the night watch tonight."

"So where are you going?"

"I have some other duties I can't get out of, sadly. But hey, you used to be a B-rank adventurer, right? I'm sure you can handle things just fine without me."

"Won't you get in trouble for skipping your shift?"

"Oh, I'll be fine, as long as you don't tell on me! Though even if you did, it'd be easy enough to sweep things under the rug," Lambda explained, then pointed at me with a smile. "Just a warning, though, make sure you don't slack off! If you let any monsters or bad guys in, it'll be both of our heads rolling!"

"I see..."

"Hey! I see that look on your face, Sieg. You're thinking, 'What a garbage supervisor, I can't believe he's pushing all the work onto me while he goes off somewhere to play,' aren't you?"

"That's not what I'm thinking at all."

"Really? Don't lie to me, now."

“If you believe that’s what I’m thinking, that means you have some level of self-awareness about it, doesn’t it?” I pointed out.

His smile vanished. “Now, now. You might have some skills, but you still shouldn’t act like that. You’ve got to turn on the charm a bit more, or you’ll never get along well here!”

“Thanks for the warning,” I said flatly. “Though, with all due respect, when it comes to this job, I think having the power to protect the people of the city is far more important than having charm.”

Lambda sighed. “Talking back to your supervisor...unbelievable. Have you never been out in normal society?” He stared at me and continued in a low tone, “This is just part of the experience of being a new hire, okay? I’ll have you know they worked me *way* harder than this back when I was new.”

*Maybe this is his way of paying it forward?*

At any rate, I wasn’t about to let him force onto me his own biased notions of how the world around him worked. “Common sense” wasn’t a set of absolute truths; it was just a collection of biases held by the majority of those in a group. When something was wrong, it needed to be pointed out.

“I’ll be coming to check up on you now and then. Make sure you don’t slack off or sneak any breaks, or you’ll get quite the earful from me!” Lambda warned with a wide grin, then left me to my own devices.

I didn’t learn this until later, but Lambda had apparently been accepting payoffs from the night watch in exchange for taking over their shifts. That meant he had been planning on making me handle things alone from the very start.

*Does he actually think that making me work an overnight gatekeeper shift is some kind of harassment? Does he think my spirit or my legs will give out or something?*

*Seriously.*

There was no way that would’ve happened. A single night was nothing to me. He could’ve told me to stand there for an entire week and it wouldn’t have been an issue.

Having been left alone, I continued to guard the gate as I had been doing. It was actually a bit easier for me when I didn't have someone else to be concerned with, and the time passed quietly.

There were several times over the night when Lambda came to check on me. "You weren't slacking off just now, were you, Sieg? You didn't have to rush to make yourself look busy when you heard me coming?"

"No, everything's fine."

"I know when people are doing things like that. You'd better watch yourself, I've got my eye on you."

I had no idea what he thought he knew, since I had never let my guard down for a moment. Not only that, he said he had his eye on me, but after midnight, he never poked his head in again, nor did I feel his presence anywhere nearby.

After a long while of manning the gate, I saw the sun begin to rise above the mountainous horizon. It was quite a bright sight for someone who had been up all night. Before long, the city awakened, and I could see people begin their daily activities.

A while later, I heard footsteps approaching from behind, then Lambda called out to me in a cheery voice. "Morning, Sieg!"

"Good morning."

"You didn't use my absence as an excuse to slack off, did you? I—" The man interrupted himself with a yelp as he noticed the swarm of defeated monsters strewn across the ground. "What on earth happened here?!"

"Well, some monsters attacked overnight. I managed to stave them off."

"Th-That many of them? All by yourself...?" Lambda gasped, but quickly recovered his composure. "Wh-What's wrong with you? You're supposed to warn the other guards when there's an attack! Everyone knows that good communication is a fundamental part of being in the workforce!"

"Right."

"You may be good, but you've still got a long way to go if you haven't grasped that part yet. We can't help but call this a failure in a social sense," he said in a



stinging voice, then, as if on purpose, suddenly returned to his normal cheery self. “All right, shall we begin today’s duties?”

I suspected that, in his mind, he was undoubtedly certain that I was at my physical and mental limits, and that all he would need to do to break me after I’d been “put through the wringer like this” was give me one final push.

After that, I began my daily duties with Lambda just like we had the day before. In addition to gatekeeper duty, we performed other tasks, such as walking the castle walls and patrolling the city. He seemed disconcerted by the fact that no matter how long I had been on my feet, I hadn’t lost even the slightest bit of composure.

“You look awfully energetic for having just come off the night shift, Sieg,” he said, a confused look on his face. “Are you sure you’re not actually on the brink of collapse right now?”

“No, not at all. I’d probably be good for another week or so, if I had to guess.”

“Wh-What the hell...”

Having realized his harassment campaign was having no effect at all, Lambda’s face twitched in anger.

*This guy sure is a piece of work, I thought.*

I was disgusted with his behavior at the time, but never in my wildest dreams would I have imagined he had something far grander in the works.

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A little more than a week passed like this. Lambda kept up his minor harassment campaign, but nothing he could come up with was particularly intolerable for me. The treatment they gave me back when I was still in my party felt much more severe. The other guards were surprised by me too, apparently. They said things like “He’s lasted a whole week? I think that puts him in first place, compared to the other new recruits lately. Everyone else has run off with their tails between their legs within a day or three.”

*Wow, this job has a hideous retention rate. That’s something we’ll have to work on fixing.*

By that time, I was able to handle the vast majority of tasks on my own, which earned Commander Bolton's praise: "Cripes, it blows my mind how fast you're able to pick this stuff up."

It was all an unexpected by-product of the amount of work Lambda had been foisting off onto me: the gatekeeper inspections, the castle wall guard duty, and the city night watchman patrols.

"You know, with you here, we might be able to take down that gang of robbers," the commander said.

"A gang of robbers?"

"Yeah. There's been a rash of robberies here at the capital. Started back before you showed up. I know we're short on men, but they always manage to pull it off right under the noses of our security. If things keep up like this, it's only a matter of time before the people of the city start wanting to string us up for stealing their tax money."

"That sounds pretty bad."

"Yeah, but with you around, Sieg, we might be able to catch 'em. I may not show it, but I think pretty highly of you, y'know?"

I wanted to live up to his expectations, but without any leads on the perpetrators, there was nothing anyone could do. Yet we couldn't just sit there and ignore them either.

I was on gatekeeper duty again that day, checking the identities of visitors who came by. As the sun was setting, a party of travelers arrived, and to my surprise, Lambda suddenly spoke up.

"Sieg, I'll go ahead and handle this one," he said, and headed out ahead of me.

"Hm? All right," I responded, leaving him to take care of the inspection. Within a few minutes, it was already over, and the party of travelers began to head toward the city.

"That sure was quick," I said in passing.

"Oh? Was it?"

“They didn’t have permits, right? Doesn’t that normally mean we’re supposed to check the wanted notices from other cities?”

“Oh, don’t worry, those guys were fine. They’ve already come by multiple times in the past, and they never caused any trouble then either.”

“But we can never be too careful, can we?”

“It’s fine. If anything happens, it’ll be my responsibility, okay? Besides, as a junior guard, you shouldn’t be criticizing how your supervisor does things!”

What Lambda was saying was about as far away from “responsibility” as one could get, which made me quite uncomfortable, but I doubted pressing him on it would do any good, so I decided to let it go.

Once the sun had fully set, a bell rang out, signaling the end of the day’s work. That day, however, our work wasn’t over yet; we had consecutive duties again, no doubt due to Lambda agreeing to pick up a shift from the night watch guards.

“All right, time to start the night watch! Shall we, Sieg?”

“Oh, will you be joining me today?”

“That’s not very nice. You make it sound almost like I skip out every time! I’m doing all of this to help you learn, you know?”

*Well, that sure is a way of putting it, I thought. There’s no “almost” involved; you skip out quite literally every time.*

For our night watch duties, we started by making the rounds around the city. Holding torches in our hands, we wandered the streets on foot, keeping our eyes open for anyone suspicious. There had been a string of robberies recently, so we had to be highly vigilant.

“Sieg, we should check this alley next,” Lambda instructed, leading me into an alleyway. The entire area was shrouded in darkness, with scant illumination coming from the moonlight and our torches. There was an unfathomable silence, as if we were at the bottom of the ocean.

As I started to head in deeper, I sensed the presence of others nearby.

*Huh...? Is...there someone here besides us?*

In the next instant, a shadow suddenly burst out from hiding, and there was a dull flash of light in the dark of the night.

*A dagger?!*

Weapon in hand, the figure thrust at me. The blade tip darted through the darkness, glinting in the moonlight. Just as it was about to land, though, I pulled back, and the blow grazed my cheek as it passed by.

My assailant's eyes went wide at my reaction speed. "He dodged it...?"

I was just about to pull out the sword at my waist to confront him, when suddenly, I felt a powerful jolt against my back. It took me a moment to realize I had just been slashed from behind.

*I didn't sense anyone else showing up at all. Did they teleport in? No, even then, I should've at least been able to react a little bit. No, hold on a sec...*

That was when I realized: I hadn't been attacked by someone who had just appeared out of nowhere. I had been attacked by someone who had been behind me the entire time.

When I turned around, Lambda was standing there, a grin plastered on his face.

"What's the meaning of this?!"

"Oh, Sieg, I'm just trying to kill you!" he said with a twisted smirk.

Behind him stood three shadowy figures, and as the moonlight cast over them, I had the realization that I had seen their faces before. They were the party of travelers Lambda had let in earlier in the day.

"Those are the guys from before...!"

"You know the rash of robberies that's been happening in the city recently? Well, these are your perpetrators. I've been the mastermind behind it all along," Lambda explained grandiloquently, opening his hands with a flourish. There was a giddiness in his tone, perhaps influenced by the dark cloak of the night.

"In exchange for helping them, they give me a portion of the proceeds from their haul. We have a mutually beneficial working arrangement."

*Of course.* That explained why nobody was able to land any leads on the culprits. With the help of Lambda, who was a guard himself, they could identify gaps in security and even have guards purposefully guided away from certain places.

“Do you realize what you’ve done?” I asked plainly.

“Of course I do, Sieg. You can’t get by in this world on mere platitudes. You’ve got to become a predator, or else you’ll just end up as prey instead,” the man sneered, as if drunk on his own words. “You’re too full of yourself, and that’s why you’re going to end up dead. I’ll just tell the commander you couldn’t handle the pressure of the job anymore and deserted.”

That’s when another thought crept over me: *What if all the new hires who supposedly ran off have actually been eliminated? Could he have sent multiple people to their deaths just because he didn’t like them?*

It certainly didn’t seem outside the realm of possibility.

“Lambda...there’s one thing you’re mistaken about,” I said quietly, looking up at him.

The man let out a snort of contempt. “Mistaken? What could I possibly be mistaken about?”

“I’m not the one who will be meeting his end here. That honor belongs to you,” I proclaimed, my gaze fixed on Lambda.

A look of shock appeared on his face. “Wh-What...? How?! My blade cut into your back, you shouldn’t even be able to move...!”

“You can’t even do a single bad deed without relying on help from someone else, yet you think your pathetic, dull blade can hurt me? You really don’t get it, do you?”

This time, I had no trouble drawing the sword hanging from my waist.





“You’ve been my supervisor up until now, and I’ve obeyed your orders willingly, but now that I know you’re stooping to criminal activity, that changes things.” Raising my sword and pointing it at his face, I declared, “You are aiding and abetting criminals who are threatening our city. As a guard charged with defending this city, it is my duty to take you down. I hope you’re ready, because I won’t be letting you off easy.”

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Lambda let out a grunt of frustration. Seeing my sword pointed at him, his eyes were filled with fear, but at that moment, voices began to ring out from behind him.

“Lambda, let’s just kill him already,” said one, accompanied by a little giggle.

“We’re not gonna have any problems with one measly little guard,” another voice stated.

“What he said. Let’s sink him to the bottom of the channel,” the third agreed.

Influenced by these voices, Lambda gradually began to regain his composure. “Th-They’re absolutely right, there’s no reason to hesitate. I’ve got specialists in nighttime combat on my side, there’s no way they could lose...!” he mumbled, as if trying to talk himself into it, then finally pointed at me, a snide grin on his face. “Sieg, it’ll definitely be you who meets his end here. Being a B-rank adventurer inflated your ego, and that’s going to be your death sentence!”

He seemed to be under a misconception: not once did I let my former job title get to my head. The man’s thought processes were clearly fundamentally different from mine.

“I’ll make sure you’ll never be able to spout your smart-ass back talk ever again!” he said with a sinister snicker. “I can’t wait to see your face twisted in terror!”

“Why not do it yourself? Why rely on these guys?”

“People at the top don’t need to get their hands dirty. You’d best keep that in mind...not that you’ll be alive long enough to make any use of it,” Lambda quipped in a knowing fashion, then finally sicced his bandits on me. “Now, finish

the guardsman off!”

“Took you long enough,” the smallest of the three men said with a giggle. “My poor little knife here has been begging me for a taste of blood this whole time.” He was rat-faced, his eyes narrow slits, and he licked his knife dementedly. The indelible scent of blood clung to his entire body.

“Don’t worry, I’ll take my sweet time killing you. First, I’ll cut your fingers off...then I’ll move on to your arms and your legs...before finally finishing off with your head. You’ll be trembling in fear awaiting an ever so gradual death!”

He leaped high into the air off one foot, then began bouncing back and forth like a spring between the buildings lining the narrow alleyway.

“You can’t keep up with me at all, can you?” he giggled. “Don’t worry, you won’t even understand what’s happening until it’s already over and you’re on your way to hell!”

After jumping back and forth randomly for a while, he abruptly changed direction and flew straight toward where I was standing. As he got into range and started to swing his dagger, I carefully matched up with his timing and parried the blow with my shield.

*Ching!*

“Wha...?!”

The small man’s center of balance was completely thrown off, leaving him wide open, and I immediately delivered a slash to his leg with my sword. He let out a pained scream and collapsed to the ground, clutching his leg and rolling around on the cobblestones, his tendon having been severed.

“You seemed proud of your leg movements, but it looks like you won’t be using them like that ever again,” I declared, then turned to face my remaining opponents, who stood speechless. “All right, who’s next?”

The other bandits, seeing how easily I was able to dispatch one of their own, began trembling; the relaxed smiles on their faces had vanished completely. Perhaps they realized that, at the rate things were going, they might be overwhelmed.

The largest of the men finally let out a scream and charged me with his giant hammer. The weapon was about the size of a person, and he swung it down at me, aiming to smash my brains out.

I brought his blow to a stop with only my left hand. No matter how hard he pushed, his weapon would go no further.

“Wha...?!”

“What’s wrong? It’ll take a lot more force than that to squash me.”

The large man grunted loudly as he struggled. Letting out a quick breath, I focused my strength and twisted the hammer around, causing the arms holding it to twist along with it in an unnatural direction. He let out a scream, doubling over in sheer pain; no doubt his bones were shattered.

*And that is how you deal with brute strength.*

The last man, having seen that display, shrieked in terror, turned on his heels, and tried to flee.

“You came after *me* first, you know. You think you can do that and just run away?”

I picked up the dagger that was at my feet, took aim, and hurled it at the man. It flew straight and true, piercing his right leg with great force, and he yelped in pain, collapsing face down onto the cobblestone path. For good measure, I hurled the giant hammer as well, which spun through the air in an arc, clocking him right in the skull.

“Nailed it,” I whispered. “Nice control.” The man was still breathing at least, even as his body twitched like a dying insect.

Having finished off the bandits, I turned to face the only remaining person. “Looks like it’s just you and me now, Lambda.”

Lambda went pale and fell onto his rear. As I slowly approached him, he began scooting backward but eventually found his back pressing up against a wall, rendering him unable to retreat any further.

At that point, he abruptly prostrated himself before me, forehead to the ground, wailing. “I-I give up! You win! Please forgive my insolence!”

*I wonder where all that feistiness from earlier went.*

Clinging desperately to my leg, he kept talking. “They were forcing me to do this, I swear it’s true! I’m just another victim! I owe you my life, Sieg!”

“The moment you realize you can’t win, you shift the blame over to the bandits and beg for your life, huh? You’re absolutely unbelievable, Lambda,” I stated with a sigh. “Sorry to disappoint you, but even if you somehow manage to weasel your way out of your current situation, you’re in so deep now that not even that silver tongue of yours can talk its way out. You and the bandits were only connected by a mutual interest; all we’d honestly have to do is offer them a lighter punishment, and they’d gladly spill the beans about how exactly you guys are connected. Since you were complicit in it all, you’d be behind bars for the rest of your life; in the worst case, you might even be executed. There’s no way out of this for you now.”

“P-Please, Sieg, look the other way, just this once! I don’t want to be stuck in a jail cell my whole life! I beg of you! I’ll do anything within my power, I swear!”

“Anything...? You did just say ‘anything,’ right?”

“O-Of course! What is it you want? Money? Women? Maybe you want me to lick your boots? I’d do it with a smile on my face, if it would prove my loyalty to you!”

“Well, then, in that case...”

I put my hand to my chin in thought, and saw Lambda’s face light up with excitement—then, with a single sentence, I cut the line of hope I had just dangled in front of his nose:

“I want you to swallow your pride and face the crimes you’ve committed.”

His expression went blank with shock, but soon, he was so angry that he looked like he was going to burst a blood vessel.

“Y-You... How dare you make a fool out of me! I’ll kill you!” Losing control of himself in anger, Lambda drew his sword and tried to swing it at me, but I made a fist with my left hand and slugged him right in the face.

I could feel the sensation of his nose breaking against my knuckles.

He slammed into the wall of the building behind him, then collapsed to the ground and stopped moving, his eyes rolling up into the back of his head and his mouth frothing up with foam.

I had one last set of words for him as I looked down upon him: “A small man like you isn’t even worth drawing my blade for. You can sit back in a cold prison cell for a while and reflect on how foolish you’ve been.”

## Chapter 7: Getting a Promotion

Lambda and his bandits were arrested. At first, Lambda wouldn't admit to what he'd done and insisted there was some kind of mistake, but the bandits confessed to their relationship with him without a second thought. With that, the string of robberies finally came to an end.

When the commander learned the full story behind what had happened, he was shocked. "Can't believe Lambda was pulling the strings the whole time...! I knew he was a sly and shady guy, but I didn't think he was gutsy or stupid enough to cross that line. It was right in front of my face and I couldn't see it. I wonder what the hell pushed him that far..."

I had no idea what his motive could have been for getting buddy-buddy with a gang of bandits. He did seem to be a bit obsessed with things like status and power. It was possible that he had some kind of complex that had been smoldering inside him all along, and he had been using the bandits as a means of getting that out of his system. Either way, at this point, it was useless to speculate.

"He was an idiot, but considering I didn't notice a damn thing, part of the responsibility for this is mine. I failed him as his commanding officer," Commander Bolton muttered, his voice tinged with both disgust and regret.

Lambda might have been harboring some dark thoughts deep inside him, but in the end, it was his own conscious decision to participate in the evil deeds that had been plaguing the city. In my opinion, there was no reason at all for the commander to blame himself.

"Either way, we can't afford to make it public that one of our guards was cooperating with a group of bandits. There'd be pandemonium in the city streets."

He probably wasn't wrong about that. Not to mention, the townspeople's trust in the guards would no doubt hit rock bottom. That made it absolutely imperative that we conceal Lambda's cooperation with the bandits, not just for



our own sake but for the sake of everyone in the city. It might have felt wrong, but we just had to accept it.

“Sieg, you did a great thing out there. Without you, we would’ve had a hell of a time catching these guys.”

“I doubt that. I was just at the right place at the right time.”

The original reason all this had happened was because Lambda took me out on a night patrol and lured me into a back alley to kill me. I had ended up foiling that plan, and as a result, the bandits were arrested. It barely even registered to me that some big incident had been resolved thanks to that.

“Still, if it had been some other new hire, he’d probably be face down at the bottom of a channel right about now,” Bolton said. “You’ve got some serious skills, and that’s the reason the truth came to light.”

He might have been right. If I had lost that battle, I doubt I’d be around anymore, and Lambda and his bandit friends would’ve been able to keep up their schemes unchecked. However, their defeat at my hands eliminated a threat to the people of the city, and I thought that was something to be genuinely happy about.

“On that note, I’ve been thinking. Considering your performance this time around, I’m planning to appoint you as a squad sergeant.”

“What?!”

I said this in unison with the other guardsmen in the barracks.

“There just so happens to be an opening in a particular squadron. I’d like to put you into that empty spot.”

Squad sergeant... Which meant I’d be getting a promotion. I appreciated the thought itself, but I couldn’t help but speak up. “But it hasn’t even been a month since I first enrolled!”

Voices chimed in from the ranks as well. “He’s right, Commander! No matter how far back you look, nobody has ever been promoted to squad sergeant within a month of enrolling!”

“Normally it takes at least three years to make it to squad sergeant! Taking a

new hire who hasn't even been here for a month and throwing them into the job is completely unheard of!"

Despite their objections, the commander was not deterred at all. "What's the big deal? He's definitely got the ability for it. Guys who know what they're doing should get the recognition they deserve."

However, the voices of protest from the guards continued:

"But it sets a bad example for others!"

"Also, it makes no sense at all for a simple guardsman who's still in training to suddenly be appointed as a squad sergeant! It's too much responsibility for a newcomer to handle!"

As the chorus of angry roars swirled through the barracks, the commander interrupted them in a booming, resonant voice. "You bastards got a problem with my decision, huh?"

Everyone was left speechless by his vigorous outburst, and the room fell silent.

"If anyone's got a problem, step forward right now and you can fight Sieg. If you win, I'll make you squad sergeant instead. Not that any one of you would stand a chance—you 'simple guardsmen' wouldn't be able to handle him even if you all ganged up on him at once."

The guards looked blankly at each other. Not a single one came forward to challenge me.

"That's what I thought. Now listen, this guy's gonna be taking over the Fifth Squadron. Unless any of you punks want the job instead?"

As the commander said this, his troops began to let out sighs of understanding.

"Oh, so it was the Fifth Squadron that didn't have a squad sergeant..."

"Yeah, there's no way I could stand to be sergeant of *that* squadron. I'd burn out within a day if I had to deal with those troublemakers..."

"He calls it a promotion, but he's really just giving him a job nobody wants, huh? The commander's pulling a pretty nasty one here."

The guards had been giving me judgmental looks up until then, but suddenly, for some reason, I was getting sympathetic stares instead.

“Hey, good luck, newbie.”

“Be strong.”

“We didn’t know you for very long, but we had some fun times.”

Everyone was talking to me as if I was marching to my death.

*What on earth is going on?*

“I’m gonna give Sieg a shot at handling the Fifth Squadron, and if it turns out it’s too much for him, maybe I’ll rethink things at that point. For now, though, he’s gonna be the squad sergeant. Got it?”

The rest of the guards seemed to be all right with that.

After we had dispersed, Seira suddenly came rushing over to me. “You’re going to be the sergeant of our squad from now on, Sieg!”

“So...that means you’re in the Fifth Squadron, Seira?”

“That’s right! Though I can hardly believe how suddenly you became my commanding officer. I had a feeling you were pretty amazing, but it turns out you’re *way* more amazing than I imagined!”

I couldn’t detect an ounce of dissatisfaction on her face as she spoke. On the contrary, she seemed genuinely delighted that I was appointed to be her commanding officer.

“I’m so happy that I’ll get to work under you, Sieg! We can protect the city together—as the Sieg Squad!”

“You got it. I’ll do my best to be a good squad sergeant,” I said, then posed a question to Seira. “So how many members are in the Fifth Squadron, anyway?”

“Counting you, we have four people in total. There’s me, Spinoza, and Fam. That’s about the right number of members in a squadron, normally.”

“I see...so where are the other members, anyway?”

She struggled to find the words, but finally responded: “You and I are the only ones here today.”

“Really? Do the others have today off?”

“I suppose you could say that. Though I guess it’s more of a ‘voluntary absence’...”

“In other words, they didn’t feel like showing up,” Commander Bolton said, finishing Seira’s sentence for her. “The Fifth Squadron is one of the most problematic groups we have here in the guard corps. They’ve got some serious skills, but they all have some major quirks too. It’s so bad that every other squad sergeant so far has thrown in the towel. I think one of ’em even had a nervous breakdown from the stress.”

He went on, “The others might not have been able to handle the Fifth, but I bet you of all people would be able to break ’em in. You got this!”

With that, he gave me a pat on the shoulder, then walked off.

*Wait...is he actually just trying to off-load a bunch of troublemakers onto me?*

By the time I realized that, it was already too late.

*One of the most problematic groups, huh...sounds like I’m going to have my work cut out for me from now on.*

## Chapter 8: Troublemakers

*Today is a new dawn for the Fifth Squadron!*

Or so I thought, but unfortunately, the only members present were Seira and myself. According to the other guards, this wasn't a particularly rare occurrence. Apparently, the rarity would have been seeing the other members actually show up.

"I'm amazed they just get left to their own devices instead of getting fired..."

"Well, their behavior may be a bit problematic, but they are unquestionably quite skilled as well, making them indispensable personnel for the defense of the city."

The most important quality a guard could have was strength. Naturally, it would've been ideal if these women were also cooperative on top of being strong, but apparently, they had enough raw skill to make up for that inadequacy.

"First things first, we've got to find a way to make them show up to work..."

If I left things the way they were, my ability to manage them as their commanding officer would be called into question. *Sheesh... They sure unloaded one heck of a squad onto me.*

"Seira, do you know where I can find the others?"

"Hmm, well, I think Spinoza is usually over at the pub around this time of day."

"Huh? The pub? It's still morning!"

"Spinoza usually hits the drinks hard all night. She'll keep going until morning, go to sleep, then wake up in the evening for more drinking. That's her typical routine."

"The true essence of a troublemaker, huh." *An essence strong enough to choke someone.* "Well, if we know where she is, at least it should be easy

enough to make contact. Would you mind showing me where that particular pub is?”

“Sure thing, leave it to me!”

Seira and I headed over to the city pub, which was located on the corner of one of the main streets. Upon opening the door, the scene before us was like the aftermath of a storm; empty mugs and liquor bottles were strewn about across the tables, and passed-out drunk customers were lying limp on the floor all over the place.

“Wow, what a mess...” *What the hell kind of drinking leads to a disaster scene like this?*

Seira pointed over to a table in the back, where a woman lay slumped over the table, dead to the world. “There she is.”

“Spinoza, wake up, please.”

“Mmuh...?” the woman grunted drowsily in response to her name. With vivid golden hair and eyes as piercing as daggers, she was jaw-droppingly beautiful, but her personality was rough enough to cancel that effect out.

There were dark circles under her eyes, and her pallid complexion screamed of a hangover. She also smelled exceedingly of alcohol. *Exactly how much did she drink, anyway?*

“Oh, ’s you, Seira...eesh, the hell’re my coworkers doin’ showin’ up in my dreams? Gotta go and ruin my good mood...”

“You aren’t dreaming! This is real life, and I’m a real person!”

Spinoza stared blankly at Seira for a while, then, with a *hmm*, abruptly reached her hands out and fondled the other woman’s chest.





“H-Hey! Wh-What are you doing?!”

“Oh, just wanted to make sure I was actually awake. My sense of touch doesn’t lie, though—this here’s the real Seira!”

“Could you please find some other way to make sure?!” Seira objected, face red with embarrassment as she wrapped her arms around her shoulders in defense.

Spinoza grinned with delight at her victim’s reaction.

*Apparently her language of communication is “perverted old man,”* I thought.

That was when she noticed me standing next to Seira. “Hm? Who’re you?”

“My name’s Sieg. I just started working here about a month ago.”

“Huh. Makes sense why I’ve never seen ya ’round before, wouldn’ta had the chance. Haven’t really been comin’ to work since then,” she said, letting out a big guffaw.

*That’s not something you’re supposed to brag about!*

“Sieg has barely been here for a month, and he’s already been promoted to squad sergeant! From today on, he’s going to be our boss!”

“Huh? So what happened to the last guy?”

“He, uh...he resigned.”

“Ohh. Well, no big deal, couldn’t give a rat’s ass about losers like him, anyway,” Spinoza said as she picked at her ear with her pinkie finger. She turned to look at me. “And so? What do you want from me, Mr. Squad Sergeant? Don’t suppose you came here to have a drinking party so we could get to know each other better or somethin’?”

“It’s way too early for drinking!”

“You don’t get it, man. The best time for drinking is whenever you damn well please!”

*The words of a true alcoholic.*

“I’m here to bring you in to work.”

“No way,” she said, cutting me off immediately.

“This isn’t something you can just refuse... You have an employment contract, so you’re obligated to come into work to receive your wages.”

“Don’t give me that logic bullshit, it makes me sick to my stomach,” Spinoza replied with a dismissive frown. “I’m never gonna take orders from someone weaker than me.”

“Then how about I prove I’m stronger than you? Would that make you follow orders? And show up for work every day?”

“Heh. Maybe I would...but do you actually think you can beat me? You don’t really look all that tough, y’know.”

“If I didn’t think I could, I wouldn’t have suggested it.”

At this, she flashed me a smirk of amusement, and her eyes lit up with the thrill of prospective battle. “Heh, fine by me, then. Let’s see what you’re made of—if you’ve got the right stuff to bring me into line.”

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Spinoza and I were going to fight. I had to make her acknowledge that I was strong enough to be worth obeying as her superior, and for that to happen, I was going to have to win.

“So, what kind of fight did you have in mind?”

“An all-out brawl would be fun—but I wouldn’t wanna get in trouble for killin’ ya. How about a good old-fashioned test of strength?” she suggested, placing one arm on an empty barrel. “Let’s settle this with an arm wrestling match.”

“That makes sense, using a nonviolent way of handling things.”

“Nonviolent? Heh, I guess you could call it that, at least compared to getting smashed by a hammer. Fair warning, though—after this, you might never be able to use your arm again,” she quipped.

“That’s some serious confidence you’ve got. You really know what you’re doing, I take it?”

In response to that, Seira spoke up. “Spinoza is the top guard when it comes

to sheer strength. Her war hammer is as big as a person, and she swings it around like it's nothing!" She then held up one finger pointedly. "And actually, I heard one of the reasons our last sergeant resigned was because of the trauma that came from having his arm broken by her in an arm wrestling match..."

"There's no way I could've known he'd be such a huge wimp! It's not like I went all out on him or anything. I gave him like twenty percent effort, tops, and it still snapped him like a twig!" the woman responded with a snort. "Son of a bitch got what was comin' to him, anyhow, blowin' all that hot air about how there'd be no way he'd lose to a woman in a contest of strength."

With that proud declaration, she removed her war hammer from its spot on the wall and took it in her hand. The thing must've weighed over a ton at least, but she lifted it and began to twirl it around effortlessly. The wind pressure caused a roaring sound to fill the air, producing an intense atmosphere.



After spinning her hammer for some time, Spinoza gave a wicked, taunting smirk. “There’s not a soul in this world who can measure up to me when it comes to pure strength. An’ I’ve never been beaten once at arm wrestling in my whole life.”

She truly did seem to be a woman of extraordinary strength. Perhaps even enough to forgive her bad behavior. But even so—

“Would you let me try holding that war hammer?”

“Hunh? If you plan on tryin’ to swing it like I did, I’d think twice. Most people can’t even pick it up.”

“Just let me give it a shot.”

“Man, you’re stubborn. Better not come cryin’ to me afterward, okay?” she said, sliding the hammer off her shoulder and presenting the handle to me. “Here.”

I took the weapon in my hand and, without letting it touch the floor, I lifted it above my head and began to spin it around just as she had done.

A roaring sound, like that of a wild animal, echoed through the air.

“W-Wow! You’re whirling it around like it’s nothing, and with just one hand...!” Seira said in awe.

“Well, well. Maybe you’re not that bad after all,” agreed Spinoza. At that point, her sardonic smirk from before had disappeared, replaced with a grin of delight. “It takes a special kinda person to twirl that hammer around so easily... Looks like you didn’t just waltz your way into being a squad sergeant on a stroke of luck.”

“Thanks for noticing.”

“At least that means I probably won’t break your arm in half. I can’t remember how long it’s been since I’ve found someone who might be able to handle more than twenty percent of what I’ve got.” She placed her elbow on the barrel and stared directly at me. “Come get some, then. Prepare to be wrecked.”

“Bring it on,” I responded, putting my own elbow down on the barrel and

gripping her hand.

“Seira, could you be the referee?”

“O-Of course!” she replied nervously, tense from having to stand between the two of us. After a brief pause, she cleared her throat and spoke.

“Ready, set—and—*begin!*”

As soon as Seira lowered her raised right hand, the two of us started pushing.

“Let’s get this over with!” Spinoza proclaimed, pouring all of her strength into her arm from the get-go in hopes of putting a quick end to the contest. However...her arm didn’t budge a single inch from our starting point. She let out a concerned grunt of effort.

“Something wrong? Where’s that brute strength you’re so proud of?” I taunted, and the expression on her face changed drastically.

“Oh, getting mouthy now, are we?” she responded, veins popping from her forehead and a burning glare of anger in her eyes. “Don’t you worry, I’m not givin’ you everything I’ve got yet—we’re still only at fifty percent. Looks like I get to break your arm after all!”

With that, the amount of power she had been putting in suddenly increased dramatically. She hadn’t been kidding—that actually wasn’t her full strength after all. I felt the back of my clenched fist gradually fall backward.

“Hah! You’re really something, y’know. Can’t believe you actually gave me a run for my money. But that run’s over now!”

“I wouldn’t be so sure,” I said, and poured in some energy of my own. My arm, which had nearly been pinned by her, immediately started making its way back to our starting point, until we were once again exactly neck and neck.

“Whoa, come on, you’ve gotta be kiddin’ me. How can you recover from that...?” Spinoza’s composure had all but vanished, leaving only a clenched jaw and beads of sweat dripping down her forehead and neck. “Hey, you got some kind of metabolism problem? Haven’t seen a drop of sweat on ya. Otherwise, that’s one hell of a poker face.”

“None of the above, really. I just haven’t felt pressured yet.”

“What?!”

“All right, now it’s my turn to attack,” I told her, and increased the pressure on her fist, pressing it backward. At this, Spinoza let out a pained yowl, gritting her teeth as she pushed back desperately, but my hand refused to give up the ground it had earned.

“The hell...! It won’t budge... It’s like a damn boulder! Shit... I can’t keep this up...!”

A lone drop of sweat fell from the back of her neck, splattering on the ground—and at that exact moment, I increased my force even more to finish things off. She resisted with all her might, emitting an extended shout of concerted effort, but it was all in vain, and the back of her hand was slammed onto the top of the barrel, leaving a deep indentation in the wood from the excessive force.

“Looks like we’re finished.”

“S-Sieg wins!” announced Seira, and hurriedly lifted my hand in victory.

Spinoza just sat there, stunned into silence.

“You must not have been at your best with that hangover, huh?”

“Nah... I doubt I coulda pulled that one off even if I’d been stone-cold sober. That power of yours is the real deal after all,” she admitted with a deep sigh. But then she smiled. “You trounced me. You’re a strong guy. Unbelievably strong.”

“So you’ll abide by the deal and come into work, right?”

“You got it—but don’t you dare think this is over. I *will* get you back in a rematch someday. It’s not in my nature to take a loss lying down.”

“Any time you want to take me on, you know where to find me.”

And with that, we had our first success story: managing to drag Spinoza out.



## Chapter 9: The Silver-Haired Beauty

With Spinoza added to our ranks, the Fifth Squadron now had three active members. There was only one member left to deal with: Fam.

As we left the pub, Spinoza took a huge stretch. “Whew... Damn, I’m tired. Hey, can we get outta here and go to bed? I just don’t feel right unless I sleep till evening, y’know?”

“No, you can’t. We’re within normal working hours right now; you can sleep when it’s night. Also, starting tomorrow, we’re gonna work on adjusting your lifestyle.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Spinoza muttered half-heartedly. “I promised I’d do whatever you say an’ all that.”

Next to her, Seira forced a smile.

“Sounds like the only one left is Fam, then, right?” I asked.

“About her... She tends to just appear and disappear at will, so we can’t really lock down her position... I honestly have no idea where she might be,” she responded.

“Can you describe her to me?”

“Well, she has lovely silver hair that’s cut short, she’s smaller than me, and overall she’s very calm and collected,” she explained, then let out a tiny gasp as if she remembered something. “Oh! I’d also say she’s an adorable, beautiful young lady!”

*That last bit of info wasn’t particularly helpful, but so be it.* “I see. In that case, it looks like there won’t be any need to go searching for her.”

“What? But why?”

“Someone’s been watching us this whole time, and their appearance is an exact match with the description you just gave me,” I said, then turned around and called out into the air: “I know you’re there. Why don’t you come out and

show yourself?”

Barely a moment had passed before something came whizzing through the air at me from afar.

*That’s...an arrow!*

Just as it was about to pierce straight through my forehead, I deftly caught it between two fingers—if I had messed that up, I would’ve been headed straight to the afterlife.

That was when a human form suddenly loomed out of the shadows of the alley; it was a young woman, shrouded in an outfit so black that it seemed to be made from concentrated darkness. Her hair was an otherworldly silver color, and the aloof, whimsical expression on her face reminded me of a cat. The bits of skin peeking out from her outfit were so pale they were almost translucent. Her slender, small frame bore no resemblance to what one would expect of a guard. However, the fact that she was able to accurately fire an arrow directly at my forehead from such a great distance proved that she definitely knew her stuff.



“You’re Fam, aren’t you?”

“Yes, that’s right. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sergeant Sieg,” Fam said in an aloof manner, then asked, “How did you know, though? I don’t think I did anything that would’ve attracted your attention. Do you have some kind of sixth sense, maybe?”

“No, you did a great job of shadowing me. I didn’t hear any footsteps or rustling of clothing, and I couldn’t sense your presence at all. What gave you away were the others around you.”

“The others around me?”

“That’s right. You didn’t happen to see any cats pass by in the alley where you were hiding, did you?” I asked.

“I sure did. When he saw me, I put my finger up to my lips and motioned for him to stay quiet, and he did exactly as he was told.”

“Well, I picked up on that cat letting out a gasp—I guess he walked into the alley thinking nobody was around, then was surprised to see you hidden. I hadn’t sensed any human presence in the area, but because the cat showed a shocked reaction, I knew someone had to be hiding there—someone who was being very careful not to make their presence known.”

“But I’m certain you didn’t see any trace of me, right? So how did you know it was me who was hiding?”

“The thing about your appearance was a bluff, actually. I had no definitive proof you were the one hiding there—I just figured it was the most likely option.”

“I can hardly believe you managed to suss me out with so little information,” said Fam, shrugging her shoulders in admiration. “When I heard a new hire who had only barely started working here had gotten promoted to Squad Sergeant, it piqued my interest, but you’re much more than I expected.”

“Is that why you decided to shadow me, then?”

“When someone interests me, I want to learn every little thing about them. I’m very persistent about tailing them and keeping an eye on them—that’s the

only way to understand them completely.”

“That’s the mindset of a stalker.”

“You could say that, perhaps,” Fam replied, giggling lightly. “Though I daresay I find you quite entertaining, Sieg.”

“What? I didn’t think I said anything particularly amusing...”

“I don’t mean in a humorous sense—you entertain me because you’re *interesting*. Because you intrigue me. Which is a far cry from our old sergeant.”

“Did you shadow the previous sergeant too?” I inquired.

“I did, but not for very long. It didn’t take much time to figure out what he was made of. I value the time remaining in my life too much to waste it shadowing worthless people.”

I had thought this with Spinoza as well, but this woman definitely had her quirks. Perhaps people with extreme power always came with some kind of awkward flaw.

“At any rate, I’d like you to start coming in to work from now on.”

“I’m afraid that’s out of the question,” she said, curtly rejecting my request. “I still haven’t managed to gauge you, so I need to keep observing you. It’s the only way to make sure whether you’re worth spending my time on.”

This was yet another thing I had thought about with Spinoza, but why did it seem like my subordinates were always testing *me* to see if I lived up to *their* expectations? Normally, it should’ve been the other way around...

*Ah well.* I was pretty sure that she wouldn’t follow my orders even if I had tried to force her to. My best course of action would be to convince her on her own terms.

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The next day, we went about our guard duties as usual. Minus Fam, the three members of the Fifth Squadron began making our rounds along the castle walls and patrolling the city.

During our tour, Spinoza let out a huge yawn. “Damn, I’m tired...” she

muttered. “Normally I’d be sleepin’ like a baby right about now. It’s been forever since I’ve gone with zero alcohol in my system like this.”

“I’d understand if you were saying that at night, but it’s broad daylight, so cut it out.” I could scarcely believe how terrible of a lifestyle she had let herself fall into.

“But patrols are a pain in the ass. How can you stand doing this?”

“Because the city is unsafe. Altercations are happening all over the place, and it’s our duty as guards to intervene,” I said, adding: “It’s always possible something like that bandit gang from before will show up again too. We’ve got to keep a close eye on the city at all times.”

“Can’t we just beat the hell out of anybody who looks suspicious? No need to think about all those other things if we do that.”

“Absolutely not. What if it turned out they were innocent?”

“Then we can just apologize. Give ‘em a quick ‘my bad!’”

I sighed at her meat-headed thought process. “I don’t think that’d work too well on someone you just beat the hell out of.”

“Ugh, work *sucks*. I wanna go home. For real.”

Seira turned to the woman and gave a saintly smile. “I’m just happy I get to work together with you again, Spinoza!”

“Oh, Seira, you say such nice things to me! I guess that means you’ll let me get in a good squeeze, right?” Spinoza asked with a grin, and immediately proceeded to fondle the poor girl’s chest.

“Hey, what are you doing?!”

“I just get so worked up lookin’ at you, y’know? And I even asked permission first!”

“That was barely even asking! And I didn’t say ‘yes,’ either, did I?!”

“Aw, c’mon, it’s no big deal, right?”

*If this woman had been born a man, she’d have long since been sued for sexual harassment...*

Seira was the only saving grace among our squad of misfits—though, strictly speaking, there was still a bit of an issue with her clothing. She was wearing bikini armor, after all. Still, that matter was almost cute compared to what the others had going on.

“That makes me curious, though—Fam said yesterday that she’d be observing you, Sieg. Does that mean she’s watching this happen too?” Seira wondered aloud.

“She said she would be, so she probably is, yeah,” I responded.

“But I don’t sense anyone watching us, or anyone around at all, really.”

“She’s suppressing her presence completely. It’s quite impressive, honestly.”

“But yesterday you picked up on her anyway! That was amazing! I’m going to make it my goal to learn to be as perceptive as you are!” She clenched her fist in front of her chest with resolve.

At that moment, a *whoosh* sounded out and an arrow suddenly came flying directly at my forehead. Just like I had the day before, I caught it in midair with my hand. When I looked ahead, I saw Fam poised on top of a distant building, holding her bow. She let out a breath and grinned, then jumped down, landing with the grace of a bird before approaching us.

“Fam, what do you think you’re doing?” I asked as I snapped her arrow in half.

“Oh, nothing. I was sitting there watching, then I just got the sudden urge to play around with you a bit. Your reaction speed is something else, though.”

“One false move and that ‘playing around’ could’ve killed me.”

“Don’t be silly. You’re not fragile enough to let something like that kill you, right?” she responded. “You see, I’m one of those people who crave constant attention. When I like someone, I want them to think about me *all* day long,” she added with a grin, then went on, “So I plan on playing with you from time to time, to make sure you remember that I’m here.”

“Do people ever tell you that you’re overbearing?”

“No, I’ve never heard anyone say that,” said Fam. “But that may be because I don’t have any friends to talk to me.”



*Don't say things like that. I have no idea how to react...*

"You realize you don't have to hide to play with someone—you can do that while you're working with us."

"I'm shy, though. I take great pains to keep my distance from people. You can't expect me to just suddenly start working alongside them."

*Someone who fires arrows at other people's heads without a word of warning isn't allowed to call herself "shy."*

"Well, I should head out. See you." Leaving us with those words, Fam vanished from view like a shadow.

Seira cast me a sympathetic gaze. "I really feel for you, Sieg..."

"Shooting at you like that while she sneaks around in the shadows..." Spinoza spat out, muttering. "If she wants a fight, she should damn well do it head-on."

*It's not a matter of fighting me head-on... She shouldn't fire arrows at her coworkers to begin with.*

From that point on, Fam came to "play around" with me at various times. Sometimes it was while we were patrolling the city, sometimes when we were at the gate doing inspections, and sometimes even when we were eating at the cafeteria in the barracks, trying to strike when it was most likely I would have my guard down. I dealt with her shenanigans each time, though, which meant that nobody ended up taking any hits from her bow and arrow. In the end, it kept on happening all the way through the end of the day's work.

"Yeah! It's over, finally! All right, time to get drinkin'!"

"It's been a long day, Sieg. Um...will you be all right? Did you want me to stay with you just in case?"

"No, I'll be fine. You go ahead and get yourself some rest, Seira," I said, then turned to the other woman. "Spinoza, don't overdo it with the drinking. I'll be checking your alcohol level in the morning."

Sending off a concerned-looking Seira, I returned to my dormitory in the barracks. I thought Fam's antics might let up once work was over, but the arrows kept flying at me regardless: during dinner, in the showers, even while I

was in the bathroom. I warded off every one.

Once I was finally ready to go to sleep and had lain down onto my bed, I heard Fam's voice coming down from the ceiling. "You're really something," she said with a soft giggle. "Every single time I made myself known, you blocked my attack. I'm starting to see why you became a squad sergeant faster than anyone else ever has."

*Somehow I had a feeling she'd be sneaking into my room. There's no point in complaining about it anymore; it's a waste of effort.*

I called out to Fam, who was probably hiding somewhere up in the ceiling. "I should tell you as well, your persistence in tailing me constantly for the entire day is definitely praiseworthy. You've got some amazing talent as an archer."

Normally, people would lose concentration to some extent and end up exposing their presence. Not once did that happen with her—she stuck to me like a shadow all day long. Her ability to concentrate and persevere in that was nothing short of amazing.

"May I ask you something?" her voice wondered.

"What?"

"I was observing you all day today, and I realized something: with how high your defense power is, you didn't even need to go out of your way to block those arrows, did you?" she remarked. "You could've ignored every arrow I fired without getting a scratch on you. Yet you took the time to carefully deal with each one."

"That's right."

"Was it a matter of pride for you?"

"You said you were 'playing,' didn't you? I thought it would've been a rather dismissive response to just disregard that," I explained. "I figured if I didn't deal with things seriously, it'd be no fun for you, so I made a concerted effort to block every arrow."

"I see," Fam said, and it almost felt like she smiled down at me from her hiding spot. "You really are an entertaining person, just as I thought."

With those words, a form silently descended from the ceiling. When I looked over, Fam was right there next to the bed I was lying on.

“I’ve decided something: I think you’re worth devoting a portion of my life to. And I think I’d like to observe you from a closer vantage point.”

Declaring this, she slipped into my bed.

“What are you doing?”

“Consider this a proof of trust,” she said. “For archers, being this close to someone is a massive risk. This is my gesture of good faith to you.”

“Don’t you think huddling up against me is a little *too* close, though?”

“I, uh, don’t have a very good grasp on measuring how far apart people are supposed to be, so I might have gotten a bit too close,” she whispered in embarrassment. “It may take me a while, but I’ll work on learning to measure the appropriate distance.”

At any rate, she had apparently decided to go ahead and trust me.

“Does that mean you’ll be showing up to work from now on?”

“Yeah. I look forward to working with you... Sergeant Sieg.”

At long last, all of the members of the Fifth Squadron were finally assembled.

## Chapter 10: Disquiet

When we showed up for work the next morning, it caused a huge commotion among the guardsmen.

“Whoa, check it out...! The entire Fifth reported in...!”

“Both Spinoza *and* Fam? I’ve never seen either of ’em listen to a word their superiors had to say!”

“How the hell did Sieg manage to pull that off...?!”

It was plain to see how much they were considered the problem children of the unit, considering how shocked everyone was by simply seeing them show up to work on time.

“Ugh, my aching head... I feel like total shit,” Spinoza grumbled, then turned to a random guard. “Hey, you! Get me a glass of water!”

“Y-Yes ma’am!” the man blubbered, then ran off in a panic, no doubt spurred into action by the sheer terror of what might happen to him if he refused.

“Spinoza, you’re hungover, aren’t you?” I asked.

“I wasn’t plannin’ on drinkin’ that much yesterday, but before I knew it, time got away from me, then I looked out the window and there was the sun risin’!” she said, stifling a sickened burp.

“I thought I told you to go easy on the drinking when you have work the next day.”

“I knooow, sheesh. I’ll do better starting tomorrow, I swear.”

“Starting today. From this very second.”

“All right, all right...”

Utter disbelief washed across the faces of the guards as they watched the exchange of me reprimanding Spinoza, and her begrudgingly accepting it.

“I can’t believe Sieg is just openly reprimanding her... Does he not value his

own life...?”

“And Spinoza’s just sitting there taking it...! When the last squad sergeant called her out, she beat him within an inch of his life...!”

“She refuses to follow orders from anybody who’s weaker than her. Does that mean she’s admitting that Sieg is stronger than her?”

At that moment, a blade suddenly whizzed toward me.

Fam had pulled a hidden dagger out of her clothing and plunged it in my direction, but I managed to notice in time and grabbed her by the arm.

“There’s no need for violence so early in the morning,” I stated.

She responded with a giggle. “It was just a little display of affection. Spinoza was hogging all of your attention, and I wanted some of it too.”

“You realize that type of affection could kill someone, right?”

“Don’t worry, I won’t give it to anyone else. You’ll be the sole recipient any time I decide to play around. I’m going to have you in my sights at every waking moment.”

“That could easily be taken as a death threat, you know.” Not that an attack like that would’ve injured me in the first place, but Fam undoubtedly knew that as well and was doing it regardless.

The guards started chattering among themselves again. “That’s the first time I’ve ever seen Fam get so close to someone!”

“Yeah, but what was with that scary-ass exchange they had?! I dunno how Sieg could handle that with a straight face—*he’s* starting to freak me out too!”

“I guess it takes a troublemaker to handle a squad full of troublemakers, huh...”

*Now I’m getting lumped in with them. Why must I suffer so?*

Seira let out a little giggle. “It really is more fun and exciting when all of us are here,” she said with a huge smile. “It makes me so happy to think that we all get to work together from now on!”

It almost felt like heresy that such a pure, innocent maiden had to be a part of

this squadron of delinquents. Then again, her bikini armor was rather heretical from a visual standpoint... So, maybe it was fair to call all of them delinquents, after all.

“Hey there, soldiers. Looks like you all showed up,” Commander Bolton said as he approached us. “Can’t believe you’ve already got everyone twisted around your little finger. You sure you aren’t some kind of genius at leading people, too, Sieg?”

“No need for such high praise—it wasn’t anything special.”

“Ah, now’s not the time for that, anyway. Big trouble’s brewing.”

“What’s going on?”

“Well...apparently an army of monsters is gonna be attacking the Royal Capital here soon. It’s a bunch of undead who’ve made their base at the Tombs of Lament.”

A chorus of shocked cries echoed out from the ranks.

“A-Are you sure?!”

“I got word from some of our scouts. Sounds like they’re making preparations for war, and at the rate things are going, they could be launching an attack on us sometime tonight.”

Silence fell upon the room, and the guardsmen went pale.

“This is terrible...!”

“The city’s finally doomed...!”

There didn’t seem to be an ounce of optimism in the room.

“Are the monsters from the Tombs of Lament really that strong?” I asked.

“Yep. A lot of monsters make their homes near the capital so they can go after the Orb of Light. We’ve been keeping them in check so far, but the undead who are occupying the Tombs are a cut above the rest, and they’re a real troublesome bunch. When they attack humans or any other races, they can bring the corpses back from the dead to be a part of their own armies. With the size of their army right now, they might even be able to hold their own against

the army of an entire nation. They actually attacked us once, too, about a year ago. We managed to ward 'em off that time, but they dealt us some serious damage.”

Foes who could take their slain enemies and turn them into allies—you couldn't get much more troublesome than that. It was also interesting to learn that monsters weren't all part of a single, unified front either.

“That battle cut down a good number of our guard forces. And all of the guys we lost are probably playing for the other team now,” Commander Bolton muttered, his expression pained with bitter memories.

“What about the Knight Corps? Will they be providing backup?!” one guard asked.

“The Knight Corps said they're committed to protecting the royal family and the nobles, and that the duty of being the first line of defense for the city falls to the Guard Corps, not to them,” the commander explained, letting out a self-deprecating sigh.

To elaborate: the Royal Capital of Astaroth was protected by two perimeter walls. One surrounded the entirety of the city, which the Guard Corps was tasked with defending, and a second lay within the city, surrounding the castle and its immediate vicinity, where the nobles lived. Apparently, the Knight Corps was in charge of the latter, and that meant they had no intention whatsoever of protecting the commoners of the city, much less the Guard Corps.

“They said the best we can hope to do is become a wall for them and halt the monsters' advance. They also said they'll pick up where we leave off so our efforts won't have been in vain.”

The guards were infuriated. “What the hell! So we're their sacrificial pawns?”

“You've got to be kidding me, and *they* get paid more than *we* do? It's always the commoners that get the shit end of the stick!”

“No point in moaning about it. It is what it is,” said the Commander. “Right now, it's time to decide who's gonna be defending where. Guarding the outer wall's front gate into the city will definitely be the most dangerous...”

“Being at the front gate would mean putting ourselves at the very front lines



of the attack! That's like marching straight to our deaths! There's no way we're going up there!"

"Don't be a moron. It doesn't matter who wants to go and who doesn't, we've got no choice. We've got to protect the people of the city!"

"But—!"

The inside of the barracks was filled with chaos and frustration, and the atmosphere was tense, as if a riot could've broken out at any moment.

"In that case, allow me to handle it," I said.

"Sieg... Are you out of your mind?"

"Do you have any idea how dangerous that'll be?!"

"I do. However, we can't let the front gate stay unguarded. If we did, the undead would invade the city and put the people in danger. Somebody has to fill that role—that's why I'm volunteering to do it myself."

Commander Bolton stared at me, an intense expression on his face. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Of course," I responded with a nod. "Though I can only speak for myself; my other squadron members are another story. If they don't want to go, I won't force them."

"Don't make me laugh with that bullshit. Bring 'em all on. I'll pound those pathetic undead bastards into bone dust."

"No complaints from me either. I think they'd make excellent arrow fodder."

"I'll give it my all to protect the people of the city!"

Apparently the entire Fifth was going to come with me; not a single one of them showed any hesitation. I guess that also made them "heretical" in another sense: they didn't conform to the popular opinion.

"I see. If there's anyone I could entrust this job to, it'd be the lot of you. Just...don't bite off more than you can chew. If things look bad, you'd better fall back right away," the commander told us, then turned to address the rest of the company. "The battle will take place at night. That's the only time when the

undead can harness their full power. In other words, if we can defend this place till morning, then victory is ours!”

His powerful voice seemed to drown out the guards’ fear, and the battle-ready spark returned to their eyes.

“All right, maggots. Strap yourselves in and get good and ready for the ride of your life. You’ve gotta fight like hell out there to protect the Orb of Light and the city folk alike. You do that, and we *will* win this!”

At that, the Commander’s men shouted a battle cry in unison.

The battle against the undead army was about to begin.

## Chapter 11: Don't Tell Me It's Actually...?

That night, at the Tombs of Lament on a hilltop located to the north of the Royal Capital of Astaroth, the commander in chief of the undead army, a lich, stood among the rows of headstones beneath the icy full moon, looking down upon the city with a cocky smile upon his face.

“The day has come at last... The day when the Orb of Light finally falls into my grasp.”

A lich was a powerful mage who had become undead in order to gain immortality. They were once human, and they retained all knowledge and experience from their previous life.

This particular lich had once been a magician so powerful that the people proclaimed him a sage, though that was several hundred years in the past. Driven by a desire to obtain mastery over magic, he became enamored by the power of the Demon King and turned himself into one of the undead.

However, the Demon King ended up being sealed by the Hero. The lich was certain that the Demon King would someday be resurrected into the world once again, and the only thing hindering that was the Orb of Light.

The Demon King was sealed inside the Orb of Light, which was being held inside the Royal Capital of Astaroth. If he could manage to destroy that treasure, the Demon King would be reborn upon this earth. A certain key would be required to break the seal that kept the Demon King within the orb; however, that part would fall into place naturally if the capital fell, so the first item of business was to focus solely on making that happen.

“My undead army will be the ones to resurrect our King. He will no doubt show favor to our people for this service, and I shall become his right-hand man. Hah, just imagining it fills me with unending joy!” The lich’s lips curled into the shape of a crescent. “We might not have been able to break them entirely in our last raid, but this time will be different. We have been lying in wait underground and expanding our forces even further...”

In their last raid, they had shown up with an army one hundred strong. However, this time, they were able to muster twice that—two hundred troops in total—by taking the corpses of the Capital troops and other races in the area and adding them to the undead ranks.

“Our opponents have not been able to replenish their lost forces. Unlike the undead, they cannot simply replace their numbers at the snap of a finger.”

*Being human is nothing more than an inconvenience. Life is so much easier this way. My preparations are perfect—the undead army will be victorious.*

An undead soldier approached the lich and addressed him. “We’re ready to move out, sir.”

“I see. How do things look on their end? What are they doing?”

“About that... They only have three people stationed at the front gate. I haven’t seen any additional guards.”

“Hm? *Three*? Did you just say *three*?”

“Yes, sir, that’s right. A large man, a vulgar woman with blonde hair, and a woman wearing extremely revealing armor. Those are the only three we’ve seen.”

The lich fell silent, and, after several moments, let out a raucous laugh.

“This is a fine piece of work, indeed! They wish to confront our hundreds-strong army with only three combatants? Have they given up all hope already?”

“It’s always possible that it’s a trap...”

“Hmph. Even if it is a trap, it will be of no import with such paltry numbers. Our forces will overwhelm them in an instant.” The lich then extended his arm in a grand gesture and proclaimed loudly: “Since they’ve gone out of their way to leave security lax, let us respond in kind with our attack. We shall break through the Royal Capital’s defenses from the front!”

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The commander of the Knights, Gregor, had been tasked with securing the second perimeter wall that surrounded the castle and nobles’ ward. He cast his gaze above to the highest tower of the castle, where the Orb of Light lay

enshrined in the treasure vault. Losing the Orb would mean losing the entire battle; if the demons got ahold of it, the Demon King would be born anew unto the world. That meant the Orb had to be protected at all costs.

“Commander! The undead army is attacking the Capital! There are about two hundred troops, and they’re all pushing straight toward the front gate!”

“So the bastards decided to try and break through from the front. They must be awfully confident. And? How many guards have been stationed there?”

Gregor estimated there would be about fifty. The Capital was surrounded by a stone wall, which was set up with barriers and weapons to intercept attackers. Even an army of undead would have difficulty penetrating via that route—which meant they would attack the main gate. The Guard Corps would’ve anticipated that, and they had no doubt allocated most of their manpower toward defending that location. They would use every fiber of their beings to hold their position and defend it to the last man.

However...

“About that—I’m told there are only four.”

“Hm...?” Gregor raised an eyebrow. “I might have misheard you; it sounded like you said ‘four.’ But that’s impossible, right...?”

“I did say four! According to our information, the four members of the Guard Corps’ Fifth Squadron are the only ones stationed there—all other personnel have been stationed either along the outer wall or inside the city.”

The commander’s eyes shot open wide with shock. “Wh-What are they thinking?! Do they plan to just let the enemy march right in? Four soldiers wouldn’t stand a chance of holding off an army of two hundred!”

“Commander Bolton just kept telling us it’d be fine to let those four handle things. He wouldn’t let us get a word in edgewise!”

“Damn it! This is exactly why the Guard Corps is completely useless. Tell the knights to prepare to intercept immediately!” With this outburst, the man punched a nearby wall in anger.

*What did they think they could do with just four guardsmen? At this rate, the*

*army will break through and start filtering into the Capital!*

It didn't matter if the city was destroyed, nor did it matter if the commoners died. There were three things that had to be protected at all costs: the royal family, the nobles, and the treasure vault where the Orb of Light was housed.

Fortunately, meticulous preparations had already been made: a giant magic circle had been set up across the city by mages in the employ of the knights, and if the enemy invaded, the entire city could be burned down. Then it would just be a matter of deciding exactly *when*.

Gregor waited for his subordinates to report to him that the undead army had breached the gates and started invading the city. However, time passed, and no such report ever came; the minutes merely continued to tick away.

"I don't understand. What is going on out there...?"

*Could the Knight Corps have been wiped out as well?* he thought. *Either way, I cannot move from this very spot. The second wall is our last line of defense in this battle, and we cannot allow them to get through. That's why we've taken our position here.*

He decided to send out one of his knights who had been on standby to check on things. After some time, the knight returned, and his expression had changed dramatically.

"What is it? What happened?"

"W-Well..." the knight began to speak in bewilderment. "The undead army has yet to penetrate into the city. Apparently they're still engaged with the Guard Corps' Fifth Squadron at the front gate!"

"Wha—?!" The knight commander lurched in shock, as though he had just been hit over the head with a blunt object. That was just how unbelievable this man's report was. It had already easily been several hours since the battle had begun, and they were saying the guards were still blocking the enemy's advance? An enemy two hundred strong, with only four people?

*Impossible! Inconceivable!*

Had Bolton given him a false report? Perhaps he had to deceive his allies first in order to deceive his enemies...?

*No, wait, what possible reason could he have for doing something like that?!*

Thinking he might have fallen under a spell of an illusion, Gregor knocked his forehead against the wall he was protecting—but all it did was make his head ache. Which meant only one thing—

“Don’t tell me it’s actually just the four of them fighting...?!”



## Chapter 12: My Comrades' Inner Thoughts

*Holy hell, this is crazy...*

As she swung her beloved war hammer, Spinoza's thoughts were filled with amazement. *Thanks to him taking point and drawing in all of the enemies' attention and attacks, we can just go absolutely buck wild in battle.*

As soon as the battle with the undead army began, Sieg had dashed out to the front lines and activated his skill that gathered all aggro on himself and shielded his fellow guards. All of the undead began focusing their attacks on Sieg as though they were possessed, their sword strikes and spells raining down upon him in torrents—but he did not so much as flinch. He merely stood there, unmoving, at the forefront.

*I can just keep pounding the shit out of these guys!*

Spinoza kept swinging her hammer and smashing the brains out of every undead soldier that stood in her way.

*Oh, man. With Sieg here, I can maneuver as freely as I want—if I'm not careful, I might get the wrong impression that I suddenly got a whole lot stronger or somethin'!*

"Sieg! How's your stamina holdin' up?!"

"No problems here."

*No problems, he says, she thought with a grin of disbelief. He'd been on the receiving end of attacks from an army of two hundred undead—the fact that he could say "no problem" after all that was downright insane to her.*

*Unbelievable. This is the guy I tried to pick a fight with? How the hell could I have ever hoped to beat him? He's in an entirely different league.*

Never before had she considered another human being to be out of her league, but that was how she then felt about Sieg. People who hated losing often tended to get lost in anger and jealousy, and she thought she'd feel that

way too, but deep within, she was surprisingly refreshed, and she ended up able to appreciate his strength from the very bottom of her heart.

“I’ve never felt as powerful as I have with him on our side. We can deal with these guys with just the four of us, easy!”

Dashing into the midst of the undead, Spinoza lifted her hammer and began crushing her opponents one after the other—and since they were all distracted by Sieg, they could do nothing to stop her.

“C’mon, who’s next?!”

—\*—

*Wow...! Sieg, you’re amazing...!*

Seira whispered this deep within her heart as she watched him taking attacks from the enemy forces. Truth be told, when she heard they’d be trying to fight off an army with only four people, she didn’t think the odds were in their favor, and had every intention to place her life on the line in battle. However, no sooner had they started than she realized their squad was completely overwhelming their opponents.

*His presence alone is completely controlling the flow of the battle...*

She had already known he was strong—he had beaten Commander Bolton in a one-on-one fight—but she had no idea that he was *this* strong.

*I can’t even begin to explain how reassured I feel to have him as an ally...!  
With Sieg protecting us, we’re free to fight at full strength!*

Letting out a battle cry, Seira continued to cut down undead soldiers left and right. The bikini armor she had equipped was specialized to increase attack power—it allowed for much more rapid movement than normal armor, at the risk of suffering grave injury should she take a hit from her opponents. It had been enchanted with a divine protection spell just in case, but that was more for peace of mind rather than a big defense power upgrade, so she always exercised extreme caution around enemy attacks.

However, now that Sieg was drawing in every single attack from the enemy, Seira didn’t need to think about blocking or dodging anything—she could focus

entirely on attacking. And thanks to that, her firepower shot through the roof.

“Since Sieg is acting as our absolute shield, I will fight as his sword!”

Throwing all caution to the wind, Seira took off through the battlefield. Having devoted herself to attacking, she sliced through undead troops at incredible speed.

—\*—

As she observed Sieg’s battle from the top of one of the towers that rose above the gate, Fam whispered to herself: “I see. So this is the power you command, then.”

All of the undead soldiers were targeting Sieg, as if they had called a signal to do so. Almost nobody paid the slightest attention to the others—and he had probably arranged for it to happen that way.

There were a few enemies who did try to target the others, but every attack was drawn straight to Sieg instead. It must have been some skill that allowed him to redirect any damage done to his allies to himself instead.

“I thought the only thing all these ‘adventurers’ cared about was their own lives, but here you are, using your skill specifically to protect others.”

*You’re a strange person...but that’s what makes you so entertaining.*

As she curled her lips into a smile, Fam’s hawklike eyes darted across the battlefield from one undead soldier to the next. She raised her bow, pulled back the string, and released it sharply; her arrow cut through the air and pierced one undead soldier right between the eyes as he was about to attack Sieg.

“I’m the only one who’s allowed to play around with him,” she said softly as she nocked another arrow.

*Your enemies, your allies, every single one of them is fixated on you—including me, of course. Now I want to learn even more about you—that’s why we need to end this battle as quickly as possible.*

—\*—

Commander Bolton found himself stunned by the scene that unfolded before him.

*You're kidding me, right...?*

He had decided he couldn't leave Sieg and the Fifth all by themselves on the front line of the battlefield. Pulling together a group of volunteer guards, he dashed with them to the front gate, where they were greeted by a spectacle: the undead army, stopped in its tracks by just four soldiers. All of the enemy attacks were being drawn to Sieg, while Spinoza, Seira, and Fam were overwhelming the enemy, letting loose their firepower with reckless abandon. It was an example of perfect teamwork.

The guards, overwhelmed by the energy coming from the Fifth Squadron, spoke up.

"Commander, I don't see any way to jump in..."

"Even if we did try to help, we'd only be in their way!"

Commander Bolton paused. "You're probably not wrong about that," he eventually muttered, a bitterness in his voice. *The battle going on out there is on a whole other level—there sure as hell isn't any room for us in it.*

The man let out a *tsk* of disappointment, just quietly enough so nobody else could hear it.

No matter how you looked at it, there was no denying that the Fifth Squadron was an embarrassing group of troublemakers. However, when it came to their ability, they were second to none—every last one of them had what it took to reach the top of the Guard Corps, without a doubt.

"You're something else too, Sieg, for managing to wrangle all those maniacs together," the commander murmured, as he watched the squad sergeant use his body to stop every attack the enemy dealt.

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The leader of the undead army, the lich, thought he must have been having a bad dream, or perhaps he was under the effects of some kind of illusion magic. That was the only way to explain what was happening.

He had mustered an army of two hundred soldiers and marched them to the Royal Capital of Astaroth. Upon arrival, it was confirmed that just as the scouts

had reported, only a few guards were waiting for them at the front gate.

At first he was worried they might have moved the Orb of Light to another location, but he could definitely still sense the effect of the treasure emanating from the city.

*Did the humans realize that they had no chance of winning and decide to give up early?* Whatever the case, the battle was going to be a complete and utter victory. The undead army would smash their way through the front gate and the guards protecting it, and then two hundred soldiers would assault the Capital at once.

At least, that was how it was supposed to have happened.

Instead, even though it had been over an hour since the battle had begun, they had still been unable to break through the gate. Not only that, but they were losing soldiers at an alarming rate.

*Impossible! Our forces number nearly two hundred; how are they being defeated so quickly? They're only up against a few guards—why do they struggle so?!*

Their opponents were strong. The blonde woman—the lich had heard her comrades call her Spinoza—wielded a war hammer the size of a man and had no trouble swinging it around like a feather to drive the undead soldiers back. She smashed the skeletal swordsmen into smithereens small enough to render their regeneration useless, all while shouting battle cries like some kind of savage beast: “That’s right, keep ’em comin’! I’ll obliterate every last one of ya!”

There was also a woman who was clad in a bizarre suit of revealing armor—her name was Seira, apparently—who sliced through undead soldiers one after the other with polished, efficient swordsmanship. She was quite a skilled sword fighter, but being so lightly armored, a single blow could be fatal to her. Battling so many soldiers at once, she would undoubtedly leave an opening in her defenses at some point—and that was exactly what happened.

“Now! Run her through!”

The undead soldier attacking Seira laughed and shouted victoriously as he struck—only to let out a choked cry as an arrow pierced straight through his

brain. His weak spot destroyed, he crumpled to his knees and collapsed on the ground, motionless.

*Where did that come from?!*

They had thought there were only three guards, but apparently there was one more hidden somewhere, loosing arrows to back up their comrades. Considering not only the distance but the heated movements of the soldiers during battle, the fact that they could take down their target with a single shot was reflective of absolutely terrifying marksmanship.

But the most terrifying of all was that man—the one they called Sieg. He was sturdy and well-built, and he stood at the forefront beyond all others, bearing the full brunt of the soldiers' attacks. By all rights, he should have been long since dead, but in spite of this, he gave no indication of having taken damage. His stamina and defense power were so abnormally high that it made one consider the frightening possibility that he was actually invincible.

The lich shouted orders to the undead soldiers. "Everyone stop attacking him; he's too outlandishly resilient! Destroy the other guards first!"

"We— We can't! I don't know what's going on, but every time we try to attack the others, suddenly we're attacking him instead...!"

"It's almost like he's forcing us to target him!"

"What...?!"

*Now that they mention it...* thought the lich, and began looking back on what he had seen so far.

From the very beginning, all of his soldiers had been focusing solely on the one named Sieg. If they were being forced to do so, that meant he had used a skill to focus the aggro of all the undead onto himself. Not only that, but all attacks aimed at the other guards, swords and sorcery alike, were also drawn to him. And even upon taking the attacks of all two hundred soldiers, he showed no sign of damage.

If every single attack was being stopped, there was nothing that could be done. They would just keep getting slaughtered by the other guards' vicious attacks.

*This isn't how it was supposed to happen.* The undead army led by the lich were supposed to be able to overwhelm the humans, who were still suffering the scars from their past battle. However, the presence of one man—one lone guard—had thrown everything into chaos. The man was a monster, beyond a doubt—an unbreakable shield. It was even possible that he could've stopped an attack from the Demon King himself—one that could destroy an entire nation.

By the time the lich was done with his thought process, his army of undead had been completely annihilated, and he was left standing alone on the battlefield. That's when the man called Sieg began to approach him.

"Get away from me! Get away!" screamed the lich, firing off high-level spells one after another, every one of which struck the man full-force—but he did not halt his advance.

When the man finally stood in front of him, the lich, knowing he was defeated, fell to his knees helplessly. Pausing among the countless bodies of his undead soldiers, he hung his head in a daze as Sieg stared coldly down at him.

"Damn it all... *You*... If only *you* hadn't been there, the Orb of Light would have fallen into my grasp...!"

*"No one* gets past this gatekeeper," came the response.

With a flash of his blade, the man called Sieg beheaded the lich.

At that moment, the last of the army of two hundred undead had been completely eradicated.

## Chapter 13: After the Battle

The long night was finally over. The morning sun rose over the mountain ridge, its light enveloping the city. As the bright glow flooded across the field in front of the gate, the scattered corpses of the undead army crumbled to ash and vanished.

Having vanquished the opposing forces, we received a hero's welcome upon returning to the city proper—the other guards immediately came rushing over.

“We heard that the four of you routed the undead army all by yourselves! We thought you were crazy for going out there...but we couldn't have been more wrong!”

“Thanks to you, they weren't able to lay a finger on the Capital whatsoever—this is the first time we've ever gotten through something like this without any losses!”

“If I'm being honest, I wasn't a big fan of you at first...but you're a true guardsman. With you on our side, we've got nothing to be afraid of.”

Everyone showered me with words of praise, even the people who had only given me cold glares in the past. Perhaps they were all just that jubilant over the fact that they had managed to weather the attack safely; at the rate things were going, I thought they might start tossing me up in the air in celebration.

Commander Bolton called out to us. “You did one hell of a job out there, all of you. I had a feeling you could handle being on the front lines at the main gate, but damn, ‘handling’ it was an understatement! I couldn't have even imagined things playing out this way.” He rubbed his chin, a wry grin on his face.

“I credit everyone in the squadron for giving it their all,” I replied.

Hearing this, Spinoza snorted. “Gimme a break. You did most of the work out there, takin' every single damn attack from that army.”

The commander suppressed a laugh.



“What the hell’s so funny, huh?”

“It’s just that this is the first time I’ve ever seen a compliment come out of you, Spinoza. Wondering if it might start snowing outta nowhere, tomorrow...”

“Y-You shut up! That wasn’t even a compliment!” Spinoza spat out brusquely, blushing in apparent embarrassment at being called out like that.

Seira smiled like some kind of goddess. “With Sieg by our side, I feel safe when I fight—like we’d be victorious no matter what decides to attack us!” she said. “He is our pillar of strength.”

“Hey, now, don’t overdo it,” I responded out of reflex.

“It looks like you get uncomfortable when people praise you,” Fam chimed in with a giggle. “I don’t suppose you have much experience with people doing that, then?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

She hit the nail on the head. When I had still been in my adventuring party, they had done nothing but bad-mouth me; praise was nonexistent. Being so accustomed to their constant abuse, hearing kind words left me ill at ease.

“In that case, I’ll take it upon myself to shower you with praise. *Wow, you’re so amazing, Master Sieg. You’re so wonderful, hold me. You’re just so cool.*”

“That was the most stilted acting I’ve ever heard... Are you enjoying giving me a hard time?”

“Was it that obvious?” Fam responded with a snicker. “Well, I *have* taken a great interest in you, so I also have a vested interest in observing how you react to things.” A faint smile rested on her lips.

*She sure is having the time of her life teasing me...*

Suddenly, a strong, regal voice rang out, shattering the lively atmosphere:

“You! What is the meaning of this?”

Before us stood a long-haired man clad in shining silver armor, whom I presumed to be a member of the Knight Corps. He appeared to be roughly in his thirties and wore a prideful expression; everything about him exuded the

pretension of someone who considered themselves a member of the elite.

“Well if it isn’t Sir Gregor, commander of the Knights,” Commander Bolton shot back, words rife with undisguised sarcasm. “What could possibly have brought you out to our little guard get-together, considering how little respect you have for us normally? Don’t tell me you actually came to apologize for leaving the responsibility of defending the front line to us?”

*Commander of the Knights. The leader of the Knight Corps, who work under the order of the royal family and other nobles to protect their sacred treasure, the Orb of Light. So that’s who he is.*

“Apologize? What need have we of apologizing to the likes of you? Defending the front line from monster assaults is your job to begin with,” responded Sir Gregor without so much as an ounce of remorse.

“The same can be said for you and your tin cans, I’m pretty sure.”

“Our only obligation is to protect the royal family, the nobles, and the Orb. It is not our duty to protect the people of the city,” responded the knight dismissively. He quickly moved on to business: “I understand you routed the undead army. Our expectations were that you would at least end up whittling their forces down slightly, but instead you wiped them out entirely. Just what manner of trickery did you employ?” he asked in a probing tone, arms crossed. “Have you secretly developed some sort of weapon you’ve been hiding from us? Well?”

“And just where the hell would we get the budget for that? They barely give us two coins to rub together, unlike you knights. All we did was engage them head-on. The Fifth Squadron over there fought them off right in front of the gate.”

“That’s nonsense! Four men couldn’t hold a candle to such an army. What kind of fool do you take me for?”

“Hey, I’m just telling the truth here,” Commander Bolton said with a snort of contempt. “If you don’t wanna believe me, that’s no skin off my back. There’s absolutely zero need for you to know what happened in the first place.”

Sir Gregor gritted his teeth in anger. “How dare you mock me...! Listen here,

you lowly guards, whatever your secrets are, I'm going to expose them. Mark my words!" he spat out, then promptly strode away, out of the area.

Being made a fool of by the guards he had such disdain for must have really touched a nerve.

"Ugh, that's why I hate dealing with the knights. They're too damn prideful to see anything but what they want to see," the commander said with a roll of his eyes, then turned to us. "Anyway, you guys did great. Now that the fighting's over, how about we have ourselves a big ol' party tonight?"

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That night, we went to the pub to celebrate our victory over the undead army. The location was reserved for private use by the Guard Corps, and what's more, they refused to accept any payment from us. In the words of the barkeep: "You guys did such a great job fighting, nobody in the town suffered any losses of any kind. This is our gift back to you."

"The ones who actually fought the undead in person are the ones who did such a great job fighting—this group right here. The rest of us were just waiting there on standby, myself included," Commander Bolton said with a wry grin.

The barkeep was taken aback upon hearing this. "This group...? You're saying just these four guards fought them off?! Wow, you're all so strong! The city's in good hands with you around!" He smiled widely, putting his arms around our shoulders. "Those knights, on the other hand...all they care about protecting are the royals, the nobles, and the Orb. They couldn't care less about us normal citizens," he spat out in aggravation. "Well, they've got egg all over their face now thanks to how the guards handled things this time around. Serves them right. Makes us townsfolk feel pretty darn good too."

"Yeah. Though they'll probably be keeping an even closer eye on us now," Commander Bolton muttered in annoyance as he rested his chin on his hand and puffed on a cigar. Gregor's wrath was nothing to be sneezed at.

The barkeep then turned to us. "For today, all of you can just sit back and replenish your energy with as much food and drink as you want."

Spinoza, our resident drinker, was overjoyed. "Awright, my man! Now we're

talkin'! The best-tastin' drinks in the world are the kind you don't have to worry about your wallet over!"

Seira, who was sitting across from me, began speaking quietly as she recalled a scene from earlier in the afternoon. "When I was on patrol today, so many people kept coming up to me and thanking me for saving the city. I felt so much gratitude coming from them all."

"Yeah, definitely," I agreed. Plenty of people had come up to me with words of thanks as well.

*"Your team saved us all!"*

*"Thank you for protecting us!"*

*"You looked so cool when you were fighting for us!"*

"The whole reason we guards exist is to protect the people. It was a fierce battle, but it made me so glad to hear the voices of the people thanking us," Seira said.

"That's right, you couldn't stop crying the whole time, if I remember right," I replied.

"Y-You don't have to remind me about that part!" she stammered. "It just made me so emotional, even though I barely helped out at all!"

"That's not true. From my point of view, it seemed like you were helping out a lot."

"Huh...?"

"If you hadn't been there, Seira, there's no way we would've been able to defeat them in such a short time. I definitely couldn't have managed that all by myself. You should let yourself feel some confidence about that."

"Th-Thank you so much..." Seira responded quietly, and her cheeks began to turn red as she averted her eyes downward.

"What's wrong? You're acting awfully modest."

"I-I've just never been complimented much before... Especially not by someone I admire so much, like you, Sieg."

A giggle rang out. “In other words, she’s getting all embarrassed.” Looking down, I suddenly saw Fam’s face peeking out from between my legs.

“Fam, what on earth are you doing down there, of all places...?” I asked.

“I’m shy, remember? I have a natural aversion to places that are out in the sun. That’s why I always prefer to hide in the shadows and crevices.”

“Shy people don’t normally pop out from between people’s legs,” I deadpanned pointedly.

“Anyway, I couldn’t help but notice that you’re not afraid to compliment your subordinates. Our last squad sergeant would normally just steal all the credit for himself.”

“It’s not like I was fighting alone out there. It also took you, Seira, and Spinoza to finish off our enemies.” That was an undeniable fact. We couldn’t have achieved victory against the undead army just by me absorbing all of their attacks—the others needed to be there to deliver counterattacks. No matter how sturdy the shield, it couldn’t deliver victory all by itself. For the shield to be effective, you also needed a well-honed blade.

“Emphasizing the contributions of your allies and downplaying your own... It’s amazing how good of a person you are. It doesn’t fit the image of a former adventurer at all.”

She wasn’t wrong—there were a lot of adventurers out there who prioritized themselves above all else.

Fam continued her thought: “A personality like that must’ve come with a lot of downsides for you. For example, I bet there were times your party members didn’t understand how much you were contributing.”

Naturally, I immediately recalled my time with the Crimson Fangs. Not a single member in the party realized how much effort it took to deal with every single attack from every single enemy. I didn’t dare tell them myself either—it would’ve seemed like bragging, which I always found to be tasteless.

“If I’m reading your expression right, you have a pretty good idea of what I’m talking about,” she said, as if she had been staring right into my soul. “I’m sure whatever party you left will come to realize all too well how much work you

were putting in.”

I wondered about that—but it didn’t really matter. It was all in the past.

“Now, then. You praised me too, but it feels a bit empty just saying it. I sort of feel like I should get a reward of some kind.”

“A reward...?”

“That’s right. Something directly from you, Sergeant,” Fam said.

*What on earth is she going to ask me for...?*

“I can’t afford anything too expensive—I haven’t gotten paid yet.”

She giggled. “Oh, don’t worry about that; it won’t cost you much at all. I just want you to pat me on the head while you praise me.”

“Huh...?” I responded. “What? You just want a pat on the head?”

“I told you before, I crave attention. I want to be acknowledged. That’s why I want you to pat me on the head and praise me,” she said with a completely straight face.

“Well, if that’s all you want...” I consented and gently placed my hand onto her silver hair. “How’s that...?”

“Nope. You need to say something positive while you do it.”

I paused for only a moment. “You helped us out a whole lot out there. If you hadn’t been backing us up with precision shots from your bow, they might well have gotten us.”

“Heh. Getting acknowledged by someone you like... What a true moment of bliss,” Fam said, looking satisfied.

It might have seemed perverse, but at the same time, surprisingly straightforward, almost?

Well, to be fair, she also might’ve just wanted to see what I look like when I’m embarrassed.



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That was when I heard a loud *thunk*.

Lifting my gaze, I saw a mug had been slammed down onto the table, and holding it was Spinoza, glaring intently at me.

“Fight me, Sieg. This time I’m gonna win.”

Suddenly I was being challenged again. “What, do you want another arm wrestling match?”

“Nope. This time it’ll be something else,” Spinoza stated, then raised her empty mug up in the air. “Let’s have ourselves a little drinking contest!”

“Drinking contest...?”

“You got it. We keep drinkin’ the same things, and whoever collapses first loses. There’s no way you can’t handle your liquor, right?”

“I do have the occasional drink, I guess.”

“Just to warn ya, I’m crazy good at drinking—I’ve emptied every barrel in the bar before. Never lost a drinking contest in my life!”

“You said that about arm wrestling, too, didn’t you?”

“That’s just how confident I am,” Spinoza said with a grin. “I might’ve dropped the ball when it comes to arm wrestling, but I’m even more confident when it comes to this. It’s how I always get my drinks for free, after all!” she continued, openly admitting what should’ve been a shameful secret.

Upon her mentioning that, I recalled that when I first met Spinoza, she was surrounded by a bunch of people scattered on the floor. She must have drunk them all under the table in a drinking contest, then.

“The problem is, now everybody knows about me, and nobody really wants to take me on anymore.”

“Sounds like a field you have a huge advantage in, huh?”

“Exactly. I hate losin’ more than anything else, so if I wanna play to win, I gotta stick to playin’ to my strengths!” She propped her legs up on a chair and looked up at me from her seat. “You’re not gonna chicken out, though, right?”



“All right, I’m in,” I responded.

The guards around us who were watching started to get excited.

“Whoa, two of the Fifth Squadron members are gonna have a drinking contest!”

“That sounds like fun! Maybe we should join in!”

As more of them began to join our drinking contest circle, Spinoza called out to the other squadron members. “Seira, Fam, you want in on this too?”

“No, I’ll pass, thank you. Alcohol doesn’t really agree with me...”

“I’ll sit this one out too. I do enjoy watching drunk people, but letting people see *me* drunk would be way too embarrassing.”

“What a couple of spoilsports. Ah well, no big deal—let’s get this show on the road. I *will* be the last one standing!”

All of the contest participants toasted, then started chugging the contents of their mugs. However, the moment the liquid touched the back of their throats, almost half of them spat it out and started to cough violently.

“Wh-What the hell is this stuff?! It’s crazy strong!”

“It’s high ale—alcohol content, ninety percent! If you can’t hold your liquor, it’ll have you flat on the floor in one mug!”

“There’s no way I can drink this!”

“Nobody could enjoy drinking something this strong!”

“Oh yeah? Well, I think it’s great, since I can drink it for cheap when I’m outta money!” Spinoza replied, speaking right out of an alcoholic’s playbook.

Most of the guards dropped out after the first round, collapsing to the floor in a drunken stupor.

“Ugh, what a bunch of lightweights,” she muttered, rolling her eyes.

Just then, though, I slammed my mug down on the table next to her with a *thud*.

“Hey, you’ve got a stomach on ya after all, huh, Sieg?”

“So far, at least.”

“Heh. Well, I’m damn pleased you’ve got some fight in you. Though you better keep in mind, this stuff’s like water to me!” Spinoza asserted, then chugged down her second mug of a 180-proof like it was nothing.

“You drink like a pro,” I said. It was actually refreshing just to watch.

“So how about it—think you can keep up?” she responded, eyeing me in challenge.

The guards, worried for my safety, did their best to stop me.

“Stop! Don’t do it, Sieg!”

“Your liver won’t survive!”

“There’s no way you’ll beat that alcoholic!”

“You shouldn’t underestimate my liver’s endurance,” I declared, then downed my entire second mug of high ale as well.

Spinoza returned my stare, and a smile crept onto her lips. “I like that. I knew you were top-notch,” she said. “Hey, bartender, bring out the next drinks and keep ’em coming!”

We emptied our third, fourth, and fifth mugs. Spinoza’s face had the slightest tinge of red; I couldn’t see my own face, but I could feel the effects of the alcohol on my system, slightly.

“You all right?” I asked. “Your face is starting to turn red.”

“Heh. I’m just getting started.”

Just as the sparks started to fly between our stares, suddenly someone grabbed onto me from behind.

*What the—?!*

When I turned my head, there was Seira, her face a deep shade of red.

“Shieg, you’re doing sho well...!”

“Seira?! Are you drunk...? But why? You just said earlier you weren’t planning on drinking since you’re not good with alcohol, right?”

“Somehow she mistook a mug of high ale for water and took a drink of it. She spit it out right away, but well, as you can see, it was too little, too late,” Fam explained.

“Shieg...mmnmrrm...” Seira began to mumble, then promptly fell asleep right there on my back.

*Her chest is pressed up against me! Why does she have to leave herself so exposed? What would she have done if I had been the type of man who was more driven by earthly desires?*

Freeing myself from Seira’s limp embrace, I tried to hand the poor girl off to our diminutive archer.

“Sorry to ask, Fam, but could you take care of Seira for me...huh?” As I turned to look, Fam was swaying back and forth as if she was about to fall asleep. “Wait, don’t tell me you made the same mistake she did...?”

Fam giggled. “I wouldn’t make a silly mistake like that. The only reason I’m so sleepy is because I’m not good at staying up late,” she said, then suddenly flopped down onto the table like a puppet whose strings had been cut, snoring lightly.

*Oh, come on. What is she, a little kid?*

“Looks like it’s just you and me now,” Spinoza said with a wide grin.

After that, we continued to pour high ales down our throats. The taste didn’t matter—we were running on sheer willpower at that point. We were emptying so much alcohol into ourselves we thought the pub might run out entirely—until finally, at the end of our staggeringly fierce drinking competition, the victor was decided.

“Ugh... I’m done...” Spinoza mumbled, her face growing pale. “Damn... I was sure I could beat ya at drinking, if anything. Your alcohol tolerance is out of this world too, huh...”

“You’re no slouch yourself.”

“Hah. Either way, I sure had fun drinking with ya...” she trailed off, before collapsing backward onto the ground and passing out.

Victory was mine. Unfortunately, nobody was left standing to witness my moment of triumph—every other person was passed out drunk on the pub floor, asleep. The entire place had turned into some kind of hellscape.

At that point, I suddenly realized something.

“Wait... Does this mean I have to take care of this whole mess?”

I felt a sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach and, for a moment, considered drinking myself to sleep instead.

## Chapter 14: The Crimson Fangs

*Something's not right—this wasn't supposed to happen.*

Nacht repeated this to himself in his head as he fled the dungeon cave.

*We're the Crimson Fangs, the strongest party of all. We obliterate any monsters we encounter with our overwhelming firepower. Our attacks are unstoppable, to the point where some people even call us invincible. It's unthinkable that we'd ever struggle in battle, much less be forced to retreat.*

But they did indeed have to turn tail and run from the enemy once again. A pack of monsters chased after them—giant earthworm creatures called “deathworms” which had sharp fangs and tough armor plates, and also spat out venom strong enough to melt through both armor and bone.

The mage, Haruna, who was running alongside him, yelled. “Nacht! They're gonna catch up to us! You're a swordsman; slow them down for us here in the rear! As soon as you do, we'll counterattack!”

“Thanks in advance!” came a voice of agreement from Irene, the archer.

“Screw you! How the hell am I supposed to slow down that many by myself?! Don't throw all the responsibility on me just because you don't want to do it yourselves!”

“Whoa, he's running faster!”

“Unbelievable. And he calls himself our leader...”

“Shut up! You only pull the leader card at times like this! And why the hell are these things so fixated on us, anyway?!”

They had faced off against packs of monsters like this plenty of times before—some of them far more powerful than deathworms. Those times, though, they'd been able to overwhelm the monsters without much difficulty at all, since they always left themselves wide open to attacks. Nacht had always thought it was because his party was just that strong—that the monsters

seemed to move so slow because they were that far out of his league.

However, he was starting to have his doubts. He remembered one time when all the enemies seemed preoccupied with something—as if they were all being forced to attack a specific target. *What was it they were aiming at...?*

As he was trying to remember that bit of information, he finally escaped the dungeon. Nacht stood there gasping, trying to catch his breath. *That was close*, he thought, knowing that if they had been just a moment later getting out, the enemy would've caught up, and the whole lot of them would've been deathworm food.

With heavy footsteps, Nacht and his companions headed back to the Adventurers' Guild, having barely managed to escape with their lives.

Upon hearing that they hadn't completed their objective, the receptionist looked at them with dull surprise, a clear look of disappointment in her eyes. Nacht simply glared back at her—since they had failed their mission, there was nothing else he could do. Clicking his tongue in frustration, he turned around and headed to the pub once again.

The party sat themselves down around a table. The atmosphere was not one of celebration, considering they had ended up retreating—but they no longer had the presence of mind to hold an honest conversation about what had gone wrong either. All they could do was try to pin the blame on each other.

“This wouldn't have happened if you had been firing off more spells, Haruna. Have you been running out of mana or something?”

“Huh?! You're blaming me?! I'll have you know, the reason I don't feel safe finishing my incantations is because you're not staying up there at the front line!”

“What she said. When the rear guard doesn't feel secure, that's the fault of the vanguard.”

The other adventurers seated in the vicinity, upon seeing this spectacle, began to grin and gossip among themselves.

“Did you hear? The Crimson Fangs failed yet another mission, apparently.”

“Again? How many times has it been, now? Lately all they can seem to do is fail. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.”

“They started going downhill as soon as they lost one of their members, didn’t they? That big guy... What was his name again? Sieg, was it?”

“Yeah, I think the other Crimson Fangs kicked him out, right? How much do you wanna bet that Sieg guy was actually the one keeping things together for them?”

“You punks better stop spouting your bullshit! Unless you wanna die!” Nacht shouted threateningly, and all of them quickly looked away. Silence fell over the area, and the angered man once again clicked his tongue loudly.

That was when a scene flashed into his mind. It was a scene of a large group of monsters headed toward Sieg, and Sieg alone. He had originally thought it happened because Sieg was a slow-moving dullard, but looking back, it almost seemed like he might have been *doing* something to draw their attention.

“No way. All he did was stand there like a scarecrow. It just happened to vaguely look like something else,” he said out loud, dismissing the thoughts that had come to mind. “Hey. We’re picking up an A-rank mission next,” he suddenly announced unilaterally to his teammates.

“Huh? What are you talking about? We just failed a B-rank mission; we’d be crazy to try an even harder one!”

“Yeah, wouldn’t that be completely out of our league?”

“Shut up! There’s no way I’m gonna let people keep mocking us like this! We’re gonna prove that Sieg and his abilities meant nothing to us!”

“But...if we botch another one, we’re totally done for, right? They’ll stop giving us work, and we might never be able to take on a mission ever again!”

“So we’ll just have to succeed, and it won’t be an issue,” Nacht roared. “It’s not over for us...! Not yet...! Next time we’re gonna complete our mission, and it’ll make up for every single failure we’ve had!”

He clenched his fists so hard that his nails nearly broke his own skin. He, for one, still burned with fighting spirit, despite the reservations of his party

members.



## Chapter 15: Guarding the Execution Grounds

After successfully weathering the attack by the undead army, our everyday lives returned to normal—albeit with a few changes thrown in as well.

For example, our Fifth Squadron was still labeled as a bunch of troublemakers, but our recent performance had led to a drastic change in how we were perceived.

When I got to work, Commander Bolton called out to me. “Hey there, if it isn’t our ace guardsman!”

“Are you making fun of me or something...?”

“Oh, no, not at all. Everyone sees you in a completely different light now. I doubt there’s a single guy here who’d still complain about you being made squad sergeant.”

Up until then, a lot of people had given me cold stares or talked about me behind my back, probably because nobody had ever been promoted to squad sergeant so quickly before. However, after our battle with the undead, that stopped happening entirely. Even the people who had been bad-mouthing me ended up doing a complete about-face and praised me instead: *“I always knew you had it in you!” “There’s a reason you became squad sergeant faster than anyone else!”*

*It’s quite easy to turn people’s opinions around if you can prove yourself by producing results.* That was my takeaway from the events that had just occurred.

“On that note, there’s a little job I want to entrust to your team.”

“Are you giving us one of the hard jobs again?”

“Oh, come on. You know damn well that pretty much every job we get is a hard one. And yes, that includes the thing I want to put you guys on.”

It actually felt rather refreshing to have him turn things around on me like

that.

“So what’s it all about?” I asked, having partially resigned myself.

“I want you to guard an execution site.”

“Execution site...?”

“That’s right. We have the leader of a ring of bandits being held here in the Capital, and his execution just got scheduled for tomorrow,” the commander explained. “These bandits are a particularly nasty bunch. They don’t stop at just theft; they’ve killed several people too. They’ve even been known to sell women and children into slavery, apparently.”

*In other words, the worst possible kind of people.*

“This guy’s their leader. There’s a very high chance his men will try to stage an ambush to break him free at the time of the execution.”

“I see. That’s why we’ll need guards.”

As Commander Bolton nodded, Seira, who had been there next to me, spoke up. “Um...in that case, why not just carry out the execution in secret? Wouldn’t that eliminate the possibility of being attacked?” she asked meekly.

“Maybe. But then we wouldn’t be able to take out the bandits once and for all,” the commander responded. “I hear rumors that they’re hiding here in the city somewhere. If we take out just the boss and let the rest roam free, eventually someone’s gonna get hurt again. That’s why we need to get rid of every last one of them—and to make that happen, we’re gonna make a grand spectacle out of this guy’s execution.”

“To lure out the rest of them, you mean,” said Fam.

“Exactly. He’s really well-liked by his underlings, apparently, so no doubt they’ll come at us with everyone they’ve got to rescue him—and that’s when we’ll take ’em all out in one fell swoop.”

He was right—rather than hunting down the bandits one by one, it would be more effective to draw them out from their hiding places and strike them all down at the same time.

“The problem is, these bandits are a crafty bunch. If we don’t hit ’em with

everything we've got, we might be the ones who end up getting taken out."

"And that's where we come in, huh?" Spinoza said with a snort. She pulled her war hammer off her back and started swinging it around like it was nothing; her expression was just begging for a fight. "Sounds like fun. I'll tear up the whole damn gang at once."

"I worry about what will happen to the people if we let the bandits roam free... Rounding them all up at the same time sounds like a good idea!" Seira agreed.

"No objections from me either," Fam chimed in.

It sounded like we were all in agreement.

"All right, that's that, then," I said with a nod, then turned to Commander Bolton. "We'll go ahead and take the job of guarding the execution site. I promise we won't let the bandits get within an inch of their leader."

"I'll be there with you on the day of the execution too. I'm sure you'll do a great job."

It was a job we couldn't afford to mess up. Not only did we have to keep the bandits from getting close to their leader, we had to round up every last one of them at the same time. The coming execution needed to be the end of the entire bandit gang.

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The next day, we made our way to Astaroth Prison, located within the city proper. A wide variety of criminals made their home in the Royal Capital of Astaroth, so a massive prison complex had been erected deep within to house all those who had been caught.

We passed through the entrance checkpoint and were let in. Isolated from the everyday world, the prison complex was surrounded by a dense atmosphere suffocating enough to strike fear into the heart of any ordinary citizen careless enough to step foot into the area.

Following Commander Bolton through the stone-lined corridors, we made our way to a section of the fourth floor that had a number of prison cells set up in a

circle.

“Here we are,” he said, stopping in front of one of the cells. Inside was a large man sitting cross-legged, an arrogant sneer on his face. “Gazel. It’s time to go.”

The man slowly lifted his head. He was well-built, and the glare he cast back at us told me that being locked up in the dungeon had not crushed his spirit.

“Oh, is it that time already...?” muttered the bandit leader, lifting himself heavily from the floor. He stretched his shackled hands, letting out a huge yawn as he walked out of the cell of his own accord.

“You seem awfully relaxed for a guy who’s about to be executed,” the commander said.

“What, did you think I’d be scared or something?” the prisoner responded with a smirk. “That I’d start crying that ‘I don’t wanna die,’ or maybe throw myself at your feet and beg for my life? Heh, maybe I would’ve, if I was actually gonna die.”

“Don’t tell me you think you’re gonna live through this...?”

“I have so many lovely little lackeys out there, and I have faith in them to get me out of this. No, it’ll be the lot of you who are gonna die, not me,” he said in an admonishing tone. “You should do yourselves a favor and let me walk free right now. Do that, and I’ll spare your lives. Risking death for the sake of a low-paying, dead-end job is just plain foolish, don’t you think?”

“It may well be,” I replied. “But if you go free, more innocent people will suffer. There’s no way we would just smile, nod, and set you loose into the world.”

“Oh really,” Gazel muttered in disappointment. “In that case, you can take your smug sense of justice and follow it straight to hell.”

“What was that...?” Spinoza growled at the taunt. “Y’know, I could just carry out your execution in person, right here, right now.”

“Go ahead and try it, if you think you can.”

“Sounds good to me—I’ll smash your head open like a watermelon!”

“Hey, Spinoza, stop it!” Before the infuriated woman could attack, I locked my

arms around hers from behind.

“My, my. This is what happens when people have muscles for brains,” Fam murmured in annoyance.

“Huh?! You want me to bust you up first, then?”

“Please, you two, we mustn’t fight among ourselves!” Seira interjected. Once she and I had finished admonishing our other teammates, we began leading the prisoner toward the execution site, following the Commander.

The site was located on the outskirts of the city. Normally the area was mostly deserted, but since Gazel’s execution had been highly publicized, a large number of townspeople had gathered there. His group’s bad reputation was already infamous, and all the people whose ire they had earned had likely come running to watch the sentence be carried out. The area swirled with a dark, simmering hatred, and the people’s shouts of anger reflected as such.

“You sick bastard, you’ll pay for your crimes with your life!”

“Do you have any idea how many people you’ve made suffer?”

In response to this, Gazel shouted right back: “Quit your pathetic whining! I bet you scumbags feel all tough, bitching at me from way out there!” He glared at them with a taunting sneer. “By the way, I don’t regret a single damn thing I’ve done! People like you only exist to feed our enjoyment in life. Hope you enjoy getting toyed with like slaves—there’s plenty more where that came from!”

As the bandit leader laughed boisterously, Commander Bolton led him toward the execution stand. My team was standing guard surrounding the two of them—if the bandit remnants were going to strike, it would’ve been right around then. They would’ve been unlikely to just sit there watching and twiddling their thumbs while their boss walked to the gallows.

Then—right on cue, as Gazel finished climbing the final set of stairs up to the execution stand—shadows began to emerge suddenly from the throng of onlookers below. At a glance, one might’ve thought they were just ordinary citizens—but their movements were too agile, too polished.

“Now! Get the boss!” I heard, as I saw sunlight glint off daggers.

*I knew it—they're here!*

Confused shouts came from the crowd. "Whoa! Who are these guys?!"

"Run! It's the rest of the bandit gang!"

The onlookers panicked at the sudden attack and began to scatter away like so many spiderlings. There were some who were moving toward us, though, against the flow of people—and every one of them was a member of the bandits.

"See, I told ya my lovely little lackeys would get me out of this!" Gazel shouted victoriously with a smirk. "It's game over for you guys."

The bandits made a beeline toward their boss, but I stood firm, blocking their path.

"Anyone who gets in our way dies!" shouted the first one and, without a moment's hesitation, lashed out at me with his knife—but I deflected it with a parry. The man let out a grunt of surprise, and I delivered a swift slash with my unsheathed blade, eliciting a scream from him as he was cut down.

*That's one down, but it looks like there are plenty to go. Ten...twelve...maybe around thirteen?* I could tell just by looking at them that they were all decently skilled. For us, though, that wasn't going to be a big deal.

"Don't get all cocky just because you took down one guy," taunted another bandit, cracking his neck. "Every last member of our bandit gang is right here, and you're about to learn what happens when you cross us!"

"I see—thanks for that little piece of info," I responded. "So every last one of you is here today, then. That means once we take care of everyone, it'll be the last anyone ever sees of your gang."

"Shut it!" the angered bandit shouted as he attacked me—but before I could counter, a war hammer flew in from the side and smashed into his head, sending him bouncing over the cobblestones like a rock skipping across water.

"Hah! Nailed him!" Spinoza crowed with a grin, placing her hammer on her shoulder. "You guys better not forget about me. So how about it—who wants their brains smashed in next?"

“Don’t mess with us—we’ll shut that sassy mouth of yours for good!” came the response.

Suddenly, a sharp gust of wind cut into the bandits’ midst, and the next moment they started falling to the ground like so many dominoes. Standing above them, wielding her blade, was Seira.

“I can’t let myself fall behind everyone else!” she proclaimed.

“What’s with that crazy outfit? Is she some kind of exhibitionist?! Everyone, gang up on her! She’ll be the first one we chop to pieces!”

As the bandits turned on Seira, several *whish* sounds rang out, and suddenly, arrows pierced the assailants’ foreheads one by one.

Fam giggled. “You left yourselves wide open,” she said, peeking out from her hiding spot on the roof of a distant house. The arrows she’d loosed had ended the bandits’ lives with unparalleled accuracy.

In the blink of an eye, the gang of bandits was no more.

I climbed the stairs up to the execution stand and approached Gazel. “Looks like your lovely little lackeys aren’t around anymore.”

“Ah... Aah...” The bandit leader fell to his knees and started clinging to my leg; he must have finally felt his death approaching. “W-Wait. Please, don’t kill me.”

I looked down upon the man who was begging me for his life in desperation. “Tell me, did you ever listen to the pleas of the people who begged for their lives before you killed them? Did you ever offer a lifeline to the people you sold off into slavery?”

*There’s no way he did.*

“Don’t you think it’s a bit selfish to try and save your own life when you’ve never shown mercy to those who’ve pleaded with you to spare theirs?” I continued. “It looks like you’ll be the one who dies today after all, not us.”

As his head was affixed to the block, Gazel screamed in desperation and tried his best to escape, flailing his limbs about violently like some kind of insect, in a display that could only be called comical.

“Stop it! Stop! No! I don’t wanna die! Don’t kill me! Aaaaagh!”

“What a disgraceful sight. This is what happens when you don’t make peace with your death ahead of time,” I said in disgust, looking down coldly upon the doomed man. “You end up crying and screaming about how you don’t want to die and groveling as death approaches. A villain like you can expect no better end.”

And thus, the sentence was carried out. The bandit leader was executed and all of his underlings were rounded up. The bandit gang was completely eradicated, and the people of the capital could live their lives in peace.



## Chapter 16: Out on Patrol

It was a normal afternoon, and I was out on city patrol duty with Seira.

“The weather sure is lovely today, isn’t it, Sieg?” Seira said quietly, tilting her head skyward as she walked next to me. There was not a single cloud to be seen in the clear blue above us.

“Yeah, it is,” I agreed, nodding. “Nice days like this tend to make me drowsy, especially when nothing at all is happening on patrol.”

We always kept our eyes open for abnormalities as we walked around the Capital. If there were arguments between citizens, we’d step in and mediate; if someone was in a difficult situation, sometimes we’d lend them a hand in resolving the issue.

That day, though, nothing occurred at all; it was the very picture of peace and quiet.

“It’s fantastic that everything is so peaceful,” Seira said.

*It certainly is. Sleepy guards are proof of peaceful times.*

As we walked around the city, some of the citizens turned their gazes to Seira. The women would shriek with excitement when they saw her:

*“Miss Seira has such an outstanding figure! And that chest—what do I need to eat for mine to look like that, I wonder?”*

*“She’s so wonderful! I want to be just like Miss Seira someday!”*

On the other hand, the men would all stare at her with lecherous looks on their faces:

*“Oh, it’s Miss Seira! Always a lovely sight to see...”*

*“She’s so nice, and her boobs are so massive! She’s perfect!”*

Since I was standing right next to her, I always noticed their piercing gazes, so naturally I assumed Seira did too, but that was not the case—she would just

cluelessly go about her merry way. *Just how oblivious is she to her own appearance...?*

“Anyway, I’m a bit worried about Spinoza and Fam being paired up. They’re the two troublemakers in the squad, after all,” I said. Our patrols were always conducted in pairs: Seira and I made up one pair, and Spinoza and Fam another. Since Seira and I were the only ones in the squad who took our job seriously, it would’ve been better for each of us to take care of one of the problem children, but...

“If I teamed up with either of them, I’d just end up spoiling them,” Seira said.

She wasn’t wrong. One time, she and Spinoza had been paired up for a patrol:

“Man, patrols are a drag. I sure could go for a drink,” Spinoza had complained, and Seira had responded by actually giving her permission: “I suppose a break now and then might be a good idea... All right! You can have a drink, as long as it’s not too much.”

“Whoa! Now that’s what I’m talkin’ about!” the hammer-wielder had responded with great glee, her lethargy from before having all but vanished. She had then dashed off to the bar, and drunk practically every last barrel of ale dry.

When they’d gotten back to the barracks, Seira had been carrying an absolutely plastered Spinoza on her back. Commander Bolton had really delivered an earful about that—to me, their squad sergeant, that is.

The same kind of thing had happened when Seira and Fam were paired up.

“Seira, I have something I really need to do—something I can’t take my eyes off of, even for a moment. Any chance I could leave the patrol up to you?” Fam had asked.

Normally, if someone took that approach, the response would be to ask what was so important, then confirm whether it was something that should be prioritized over their actual job. However, Seira had just up and given her permission once again: “It must be something incredibly important for you to bring it up like that... All right! Go ahead and focus on that, don’t worry about me!”

Incidentally, the thing Fam had “really needed to do” was *stalk me*—definitely not something she should’ve blown off her patrol for.

Not only did Seira tend to take everything people told her at face value, she also tended to accede to their requests even when they were at her own expense. Therefore, everyone who got paired up with her always ended up doing their best to see how much they could get away with.

*Seira really does give off an abundant aura of motherly love and compassion... I’m worried she might get taken advantage of by some terrible man in the future. I can picture her having some guy mooching off her, while she says something like “He just can’t function without me...!”*

“Sieg, you’re normally a very kind person, but when you reprimand someone, you can be quite stern. I’m amazed every time I see it happen.”

“If you don’t crack down on the things that need it, people will just take advantage. Especially people like Spinoza—you need to know when to give her the carrot and when to give her the stick.”

“I want to learn how to reprimand people properly too.”

“Is that so? Do you want to practice, then?”

“Practice...?”

“Yeah. Pretend I’m a guard who’s slacking on the job and give me a warning. That’d probably be more practical than jumping right into reprimanding people for real.”

“O-Okay, I’ll try!” Seira said, her expression stiffening as she nodded. She rolled her shoulders to loosen the tension and lightly slapped herself on the cheeks before jumping into rehearsal:

“What are you doing there, Sieg? Your orders today were to patrol the city, weren’t they?”

“Don’t be such a stick-in-the-mud. We’ve got to take it easy every once in a while, or we’ll burn out.”

“O-Oh, I suppose that’s true—I mean, no, that’s not right! We have to do our jobs to protect the lives of the citizens!” Seira insisted, showing me a forced

look of anger, then pointed a finger directly at my face. “That’s a *Very Bad* Sieg!”



*Whuh...?*

“How was that? Did I do a good job? Do you think that would scare someone into doing their job properly next time?”

“Not really... I think it might have the opposite effect, actually.”

“What?!”

I could see right through her anger to the compassion that was underlying it—so the moment I saw her get angry, I couldn’t help but want to anger her again. She was like some kind of machine that turned men into the worst versions of themselves.

*There may be a rather tough road ahead of us.*

## Chapter 17: The Knights' Oppression

While out on patrol in the city, we came to the plaza, which was located not too far inside the main gate. A fountain stood at the plaza's center, the area around it lined with cobblestones. It was a place of recreation for city residents, a place where housewives shared the latest gossip and children ran around playing—overall, a calm, peaceful scene.

As Seira and I stopped for a moment to take a stretch break, we saw Spinoza and Fam walking toward us from across the street.

"Fancy meeting you here," I quipped.

"It's not that big a city; we're bound to bump into each other on patrols every once in a while," Spinoza responded. "Saw some of the other guards earlier too, actually."

"Oh, it's not that. I'm just surprised to see you actually doing your rounds. Thought you might've been doing some rounds at the pub instead."

"Come on, I'm workin'. I wouldn't do that!"

"You have before." *She drank enough to get absolutely plastered.*

"Yeah, that's nonsense," Fam chimed in. "You even tried to go to the pub earlier today—the only reason you stopped was because your tab was already so huge they wouldn't let you in the building."

"Dammit, Fam, why you gotta tell on me like that?!"

"I'm just doing my job as a subordinate by giving Sieg a situation report," she replied. "By the way, she already did skip out on patrolling earlier, despite me trying to stop her. She hung out at the casino and went flat broke."

"What the hell! You don't gotta tell him every single damn thing!" Spinoza exclaimed and tried to grab Fam, but the smaller woman twisted out of the way to avoid her and hid behind me, peeking just her head out and giggling. "Your attacks can't hit me, silly."

“Ugh. That’s why I hate you shadowy types, with all your sneakin’ around. If you’ve got a problem, take me on face-to-face!” Spinoza complained, then turned her gaze to me. “Hand her over, Sieg. She’s really pissed me off this time, I’m gonna teach that brat a lesson.”

“About what?” I asked.

“About which of us is better!”

“I would never fight face-to-face with a person as violent as you. Besides, don’t you know that those kinds of face-offs only happen between people on the same level?” Fam taunted.

“Why, you...!”

“Hey, knock it off. We’re all on the same team,” I said, hurriedly intervening between the two of them. At the rate they were going, it would’ve turned into an all-out war—which would’ve been a bad look for us. The very guards who were supposed to protect the city shouldn’t be causing massive disturbances.

“Looks like the two of them don’t have very good chemistry,” Seira muttered.

“Sure looks that way.”

Spinoza was bright and powerful, while Fam was shadowy and delicate. If the two of them had been magnets, then they might’ve attracted each other as opposites, but when it came to interpersonal relationships, they were much more likely to repel each other.

“I sure wish they would get along. We’re all members of the same squadron...”

I was absolutely with her on that one, but there was simply nothing to be done about it.

That’s when we heard a townspeople shout out: “The knights are back!”

Everyone in the plaza turned their eyes to the road leading up to the gate, where a group of knights clad in silver armor were walking toward us, leading the procession of a horse-drawn carriage. The residents lined up on either side of the route the knights were taking and knelt on the spot. Sometimes the Knight Corps would head out on expeditions to exterminate monsters; when



they returned, the people of the city would greet them in that fashion. The four of us stepped aside as well, so we wouldn't obstruct the knights' route.

The knights themselves strode down the stone path as if they owned the place, every chin held high; they were like confidence personified.

"A bunch of smug bastards, as always," Spinoza said quietly in disgust. "They really piss me off."

"That's one point I agree with you on," Fam responded, her voice tinged with loathing. "There's nothing more disgusting than people who throw around their authority like that. Even this far away from them, I feel like I'm gonna gag."

Suddenly, a ball crossed the line of people alongside the road and rolled right into the middle of the knights' path. It seemed some children in the alley had been playing with it, and one of them had failed to catch the ball after the other threw it.

"I-I'm sorry!" the boy said, and ran out into the road to pick it up. When the knight walking in front saw that, his eyes flashed. The two of them stared at each other in silence for a while—then, in an instant, the knight delivered a swift kick to the boy's stomach. A painful-sounding *thump* rang out, and the boy let out a loud groan of pain, falling to his knees.

I felt Seira gasp next to me, and the townspeople all did the same. An icy chill instantly fell over the air in the area.

"What a terrible little brat you are, interrupting our march! I'll have to beat that insolent, rotten attitude out of you, since obviously your parents never did!"

With those words, the knight began to kick the kneeling boy multiple times. Protecting his head with his arms, the boy apologized through his tears again and again, but the harassment continued; the rest of the knights simply grinned, doing nothing to try and stop it.

"That's horrible...!" Seira said, a stunned expression on her face—but before she could take action, I had already made my move.

As the knight was trying to deliver another kick to the boy, I kicked the man's other leg in a sweeping motion. He was knocked off-balance and, with a

shocked gasp, fell onto his rear end.

He looked up at me, glaring. “Who do you think you are...?”

“That’s what I should say to you. Did you not hear the child apologizing?”

As I met his glare with my own, the knight responded menacingly. “That outfit... You’re a guard, aren’t you? Do you have any idea what you’ve just done?”

“I sure do. I’m part of the Guard Corps, and my job is to protect the city. That means I can’t turn a blind eye when people like you endanger my citizens.”

Upon hearing my response, a twisted, sadistic smile appeared on the knight’s face. “Well, well... It looks like the Guard Corps has got a lively one, now,” he said, drawing the sword at his side. “It’s an outrageous offense for a guard to turn against a knight. It seems I’ll have to show you your place—by carving it into your foolish body!”

“One word of warning: if you’re going to draw your sword, make sure you’re prepared for the consequences.”

“I’ll cut you in two!” the knight announced, and raised his sword to attack.

*Wow, he’s slow.*

I grabbed him by the face, put my body weight into it, and slammed him down into the cobblestones, eliciting a shocked grunt. He kissed the pavement with enough force to knock him unconscious and shatter his teeth, and he then simply lay there face down, unmoving.

I spoke down to the silent knight in disgust. “Have you been neglecting your training? You were wide open to attack—though I guess it doesn’t do much good to tell you when you probably can’t even hear me.”

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The knight whose face I introduced to the cobblestones had been completely knocked out. His eyes were rolled into the back of his head, his teeth were busted, and his rear end was sticking awkwardly up into the air where he had fallen.

I turned my gaze away from him and toward the kneeling boy. Seira was

already by his side, tending to his wounds.

“Hey, are you all right?” I asked the kid.

“Y-Yeah...” he mumbled.

“Fam gave him some healing herbs. The pain seems to have subsided for now,” Seira explained.

“I see. Good thing she had those.”

“You just never know what’s going to happen—you can never be too prepared,” Fam said. “I’ve got all kinds of things at the ready: herbs, torches, tongs, you name it.”

“What on earth do you need that last one for...?”

Just as I had finished letting out that quip, I was interrupted by the boy speaking.

“Um... Thanks for saving me, mister guardsman.”

“No problem. Actually, I should apologize—I should’ve stopped him sooner. You shouldn’t have had to experience that kind of pain.”

“Oh, no, I’m fine!”

“Is that so... You’re a strong kid,” I said, ruffling the boy’s hair, and he let out a little embarrassed laugh.

“Hey!” came an angry voice, shattering the peaceful atmosphere. The knights were all looking at me with expressions of absolute fury. I felt the chill of their bloodlust emanating from all sides; at some point they had surrounded me.

“You pulled quite the stunt there, didn’t you? Did you really think you could attack a member of the Knights and get away with it?” one of them said.

“Who exactly do you think protects this world? The only reason you’re alive is because we guard the Orb of Light,” another continued.

“Oh, so that’s how it is,” I responded. “I guess it really is true that there’s no cure for idiocy.”

“What?”

“You need to stop getting carried away. Just because you’re protecting the Orb of Light, that doesn’t give you people a free pass to just do whatever the hell you want.”

Being in a position of authority can quite easily distort a person’s personality. Those who fall under delusions of grandeur based on the cause they’ve taken up are nothing but fools.

“Your opinion is duly noted,” responded one of the knights. “But it’s getting too wordy and we don’t really feel like listening. You can keep talking once you get to hell!” With that, the knights all drew their swords.

*Apparently, they’re dead serious.*

Seira hurriedly tried to intervene. “Everyone, please put away your weapons! All of us are supposed to protect the city, right? It won’t do anyone any good if we fight among ourselves!” The knights, however, had no intention of listening to her, and seemed ready to simply cut down anyone who interfered.

“It doesn’t matter what you say to these jerks, Seira,” Spinoza opined, putting her war hammer on her shoulder and glaring at the knights. “Nothing’ll get through to them unless we beat the crap out of ’em and let ’em cool their heads for a while.”

“I’ll back you up,” Fam said, ready to take part. “Their oppressive behavior lately is something I just can’t tolerate. Teaching them a quick lesson right here and now isn’t too bad of an idea.”

*Oh boy... I can’t believe this is happening. How will I explain this to Commander Bolton?*

As I was grumbling internally, a voice rang out from the Knight Corps’ carriage:

“You’ve been making quite the ruckus for a while now. Why are you all still stopped here in the middle of the road?”

Behind the coachman’s seat, the curtain that had been covering the seating area opened, and a woman clad in silver armor stepped out. Her glossy hair fell to her waist, and her gaze was as frigid as the coldest winter night. She had an elegant, fine-featured face and long, slender limbs, and it felt as though if

anyone made the mistake of getting too close to her, they risked being cut down.

“Vice-Commander Eleanor...” I heard the knights whisper.

*Vice-Commander. That means this woman is the number two in the Knight Corps.*

That made total sense to me. I could tell at a glance she was quite strong—on a completely different level from the regular knights. She had a dignity about her that only those who had devoted themselves wholeheartedly to the sword could possess.

The vice-commander, Eleanor, stood in front of one of the knights and spoke. “You there. Do you know what I hate more than anything else?”

“Yes, ma’am—a dirty room!”

“I do hate that. However, that’s my seventh most hated thing,” she said quietly. “What I hate more than anything else is people who succumb to their emotions and start yelling in anger.”

Silence fell over the knights, and they all turned pale under her icy stare. All their bravado from earlier had withered so severely, it was like it had never been there.

“Will someone give me a report of what happened?”

“W-Well, these guards dared to attack us! We were just about to punish them for their insolence.”

This time, Eleanor’s cold gaze was directed at us. As she did so, the boy from earlier must have realized that we were in danger, and he started pleading to her directly. “U-Um, what happened was we were playing with our ball, and it rolled out into the street in front of the knights. The knights started kicking me, and the guardsman guy there saved me... It wasn’t his fault, it was all mine!”

The vice-commander remained silent.

“Foolish boy! All of these guards became guilty of the same crime the moment they turned their blades against us!”

“Vice Commander! Turning a blade against the Knight Corps is an act of

treason! Traitors like them must be punished!”

Eleanor nodded. “You’re right. Punishment is definitely in order.”

Hearing this, the knights began to laugh triumphantly. “Hah! Did you hear that, scum? With the vice-commander on our side, it’s over. Death is the only future you have left—”

With a *fwip*, suddenly the tip of a sword was pointing directly at the guffawing knight’s throat, and his smile faded entirely. “Huh...?”

The one who held the knight at swordpoint...was Eleanor.

## Chapter 18: Vice-Commander of the Knight Corps

“V-Vice-Commander Eleanor...? What are you doing...?” asked the knight with the sword tip held up to his throat, his face stiffening. A cold sweat trickled down his neck.

“Can you tell me what it is I hate more than anything else?”

“Uh, p-people who succumb to their emotions and start yelling in anger...?”

“Wrong. That’s second place.”

“But just earlier you said it was first...?”

“A maiden’s heart is a fickle thing,” Eleanor stated simply, then moved on. “What I hate more than anything else are people who forget their pride as knights and start behaving arrogantly. A knight must always maintain a noble heart, don’t you agree?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am...”

“It seems all of you have forgotten that and have been exhibiting outrageous conduct...and for that, punishment is in order. I’ll see to it that you receive an attitude adjustment.”

“P-Punishment from the vice-commander...?!?”

“They say that once she punishes someone, they’re never the same again...!”

“P-Please, anything but that!”

“There’s no running away from it. I shall make sure the chivalric code is drilled properly into your heads. I cannot have you continue to embarrass yourselves.”

Eleanor then turned her gaze from the stunned knights, looking instead to the civilian boy. “I understand you were assaulted by these knights?”

“Huh? Uh, yeah...”

What happened next surprised not only him, but us as well: the vice-commander of the Knights bowed deeply in front of the child.

"I am truly sorry. All of this happened due to my lack of supervision. I ask not for your forgiveness, but please accept this gesture of good faith."

A knight of such stature apologizing so thoroughly to a common child was almost unthinkable.

"O-Oh, I'm fine! The guards gave me some herbs," he explained nervously. "So you don't really need to bow to me or anything like that."

"Is that so... Thank you," Eleanor said quietly, and at last brought her head back up.

"She seems to be different from the other knights," I said as I watched this scene from a distance.

"She is," Seira explained. "Vice-Commander Eleanor has a great respect for the chivalric code of knighthood. Her graceful appearance and mastery of the sword have earned her the nickname 'Ice Princess.'"

*"Ice Princess," huh... That might actually be rather fitting.*

"But if they have someone like her, how did the knights end up the way they are?" I asked.

"Because Commander Gregor's ideology holds the greatest influence among the Knight Corps. I hear that Vice-Commander Eleanor has her supporters as well, but they're not in the majority."

"Which means that her image of what makes an ideal knight isn't generally supported within the Corps itself," Fam tried to explain. "Too bad; she seems to have a good head on her shoulders."

"I should apologize to the rest of you as well," Eleanor said to us, bowing her head. "My men have caused you some trouble."

"Oh, no, it's not something you should need to apologize for personally..." Seira responded.

"That's not true. These men are my subordinates, and any disgraceful act they commit is something I must take full responsibility for as their commanding officer."

"Whoa, now. You say that, but this isn't somethin' you can just sweep under



the rug with an apology,” Spinoza cut in boldly. “If saying ‘sorry’ solved everything, we wouldn’t need guards or security officers. If you wanna prove you’re sincere, you gotta make us a reasonable offering to make up for it.”

Fam let out a light giggle. “That’s just like you, Spinoza—the moment you see an opportunity to take advantage of, you immediately jump in for the plundering. You’d put hyenas to shame.”

“Aw, you don’t gotta compliment me.”

*I’m pretty sure that wasn’t a compliment.*

“In other words, you’re asking for money, then?” Eleanor asked.

“Yeah, pretty much,” Spinoza replied with a smile. “For starters, just give us all your cash. Let’s hear that wallet jingle, eh?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t do that. The best I can do is apologize from the bottom of my heart. If I give you money, that would just invite a host of other problems.”

She expressed her appreciation, yet refused to make any further concessions. If Eleanor had one thing going for her, it was her firm, levelheaded attitude.

“Tch. Fine, fine. Man, you’re a pain.” Spinoza gave up quicker than expected; she must have sensed that the vice-commander wasn’t going to just give in to her demands.

“I’m pleased you understand. Now, moving on, the four of you are in the Guard Corps, are you not? I’d like to ask you something.”

“What would you like to know?” Seira queried.

“It’s about the defensive battle you fought against the undead army the other day. I was out on an expedition at the time, but I understand you secured victory without a single casualty—and did so by yourselves, without the knights having to mobilize at all. Could I prevail upon you to teach me the tactics you employed?”

“Didn’t your commander tell you? He thinks we used some kind of secret weapon.”

“Highly unlikely. If you had something like that, the knights would know about

it already. Besides, the guards don't have the budget to manufacture a secret weapon, correct?"

She was indeed correct. The vice-commander seemed to be much more reasonable than the commander was.

"We didn't use any kind of special tricks or tactics. We—all of us in the Fifth Squadron here—met our enemies at the gate and defeated them. That's it."

"Is that so...?" Eleanor glared coldly at me. "Tell me... Do you know what I hate more than anything else?"

"People who forget their pride as knights and start behaving arrogantly, right?"

"No, that was earlier. Right now, the answer is 'bad jokes.' Four people cannot destroy an army of undead all on their own, now can they?"

"I don't know what to tell you. It's the truth."

"I see. So you're going to hold firm to that claim, then," Eleanor said quietly, seemingly satisfied, then addressed me directly. "I'd like to challenge you to a sparring match. That would give me the opportunity to confirm firsthand whether you and yours are telling the truth."

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We arrived at the Guard Corps' training grounds.

"First, I would like to thank you for sparing me some of your valuable time," Eleanor told me as we stood facing each other. The other knights stood waiting around us.

"From our perspective, it's problematic to have people harboring unfounded suspicions about us. If we can clear those up with a sparring match, we'll be better off," I responded.

"It's in both of our best interests, then."

"So, who do you want to fight?"

"That should go without saying: whoever is the most skilled. Who was the key player in your rout of the undead army?"

“It wasn’t a one-person job. It took everyone’s strengths for us to come out victorious, so asking who the key player was is a dead-end question.”

“You say that, but the others are all looking in your direction, are they not?”

“Huh?” I turned to look at my companions; Seira, Spinoza, and Fam were all staring at me.

“If we had to pick a key player, it would be Sieg, wouldn’t it?”

“Heh, you won’t hear me sayin’ otherwise.”

“I doubt she’d be satisfied fighting any of us, honestly. I think the only way for her to really ‘get it’ would be to fight you specifically.”

“So what will you do?” Eleanor asked.

“Since everyone seems to insist, it looks like I have no choice,” I murmured, then stepped forward from among my comrades. “I accept your challenge.”

“Then it’s settled. Let us begin, then. Would you like to use wooden swords to make it less dangerous?”

“Real swords are fine with me. My training isn’t so lax that something like that would kill me. Though if you would prefer it the other way, that’s fine too.”

“I’m of the same mind as you. Let us use real swords. Though you may come to regret it,” the vice-commander said, and drew her sword from her waist, the exposed blade glinting coldly. I felt the air in the area instantly grow tense; I then drew my own sword and took up a stance at the center line, shield in my left hand.

The knights, who were watching from a distance, began talking among themselves.

“That guardsman is so dead...”

“He has no idea how powerful the vice-commander is...”

“She may be relegated to the vice-commander position since she’s so young, but they say she could even surpass the commander in terms of raw ability.”

“No mere squad sergeant of the guards could ever hope to measure up to her.”

One thing they were right about: Vice-Commander Eleanor was no ordinary opponent. Just as her “Ice Princess” nickname implied, I could sense her cold dedication to the way of the sword. However, there was one thing they were overlooking, as well: if I didn’t think I could fight with her on equal footing, I wouldn’t have accepted the challenge to begin with. And that wasn’t my ego talking either—I truly did have confidence that I could compete with her.

“I am Eleanor Reinbold, vice-commander of the Knights of Astaroth. Prepare yourself!”

As soon as she spoke her name, she immediately took off straight toward me.

*So fast...! Even with her armor on, her agility is on par with Seira’s.*

With a high-pitched shout, she delivered a strike which I blocked with my shield. The blow was both forceful and rapid—if I had tried to parry it, I would’ve been skewered.

She unleashed a flurry of close-range blade strikes which flew at me with pinpoint accuracy. The form of her swordplay was absolutely beautiful, more so than any other sword fighter I had ever encountered; it was absolutely mesmerizing. However, that very quality also allowed me to predict the trajectory of her strikes.

I deliberately took up a defensive posture that left me with an opening—one that someone of Eleanor’s caliber wouldn’t pass up the opportunity to take advantage of.

Sure enough, she went for it.

“You’re mine!” she shouted, thrusting her sword toward my flank. I had left it defenseless as bait, and I easily parried her blow.

With a flash of surprise on her face, her center of balance was thrown off, and her body started to bend backward. For the first time in our battle, there was an opening in her defenses.

“Got you...!” I shouted, and swung my blade down at her unguarded torso, certain of victory. However, the vice-commander was not ready to give up the battle so readily, and she quickly held up the palm of her free hand.

I had a bad feeling about what was about to happen. My sixth sense was raising all kinds of alarm bells—and the intuition I felt at times like these tended to be accurate.

*“Ice Shot!”*

As she spoke the magic words, a ball of ice fired out of her left hand—a shot released from nearly point-blank range. I just barely managed to pull my shield up and block it, but the ice began spreading through my shield and nearly reached my wrist before I hurriedly threw it to the ground.

*That was close... If my reaction speed had been a tiny bit slower, I'd be an ice statue right now.*

“You surprise me... I was sure I had you there. You have excellent reflexes—you certainly don’t appear to be a run-of-the-mill guardsman.”

“Ice magic—so you’re a spellsword, then?”

“Correct. A rarity, is it not?”

“Swordsmanship and sorcery are two completely different fields. Understanding both, much less mastering them, is certainly no ordinary feat.” Eleanor was a first-class sword fighter, of that there was no doubt—and the ice magic she had just cast was that of a first-class mage, as well.

“It’s quite simple. You merely need to put your blood, sweat, and tears into your efforts.”

“I see—that means I could do it too, if I wanted to.”

The vice-commander’s lips curled into a smile. The other knights, seeing this, went abuzz with shock.

“The vice-commander is smiling...”

“Normally her face is just an expressionless mask!”

“Is she enjoying her fight against that guard?”

“You know, I don’t believe I ever asked your name,” Eleanor said.  
“Considering how skilled you are, it’s something I would really like to know.”

“It’s Sieg.”

“Sieg, then... It’s been a long time since I’ve been able to fight someone using the full extent of my power. But this ends now—I shall defeat you using everything I have!”

With those words, Eleanor raised her left hand and activated her ice magic. The next moment, a pillar of ice came shooting up out of the ground at my feet. I gritted my teeth and dodged.

“You won’t get away!”

The ice pillar attacks kept coming one after the other, and I continued dashing to and fro while dodging them, until I suddenly realized—I was surrounded. Before I knew what was happening, the entire area around me had been blocked off by columns of ice.

*So that’s what she was doing. She wasn’t using her ice spells to attack me directly—her true aim was to seal off my means of escape.*

I looked above me and saw Eleanor at the height of the circular ice formation, descending upon me with her blade raised to finish me off. I had nowhere to run, and I couldn’t dodge—nor could I block, having lost my shield.

“Time to put an end to this!” the Vice Commander shouted, and unleashed a full-force attack on me. The air itself trembled, and the shock wave of the blow caused the pillars of ice surrounding us to shatter to bits.

“What...?!”

The expression on Eleanor’s face was that of pure disbelief. She was certain her sword had cleaved my body, but instead, the blade had simply snapped in half.

“But how...?! My strike definitely landed...!”

“It did...but my defense power exceeds your attack power.”

It was as simple as that.

“I...I see,” she responded, her expression bitter. “I finally understand now. The reason your squadron was able to completely wipe out the undead army was because of your absurdly high defense power.”

“Pretty much,” I responded, then brought my sword up to the unarmed

woman's neck.

Eleanor sighed and smiled. "I lose. I have no means left to defeat you," she declared, raising her hands in surrender.

A jumble of perturbed voices rose up from knights surrounding us.

"Know that I've never been defeated so decisively. I will forever remember you, Sieg," she said with a bold smile.

Something about her words were unsettling. I just hoped it wouldn't turn into something troublesome down the line...

## Chapter 19: The Ice Princess Thaws

It was the following night after I had managed to successfully get the Knight Corps reprimanded for their misbehavior. I was eating at the guard cafeteria, and the other guards couldn't stop talking about what had happened with the knights.

"Those oppressive knights sure did calm down all of a sudden."

"They used to come at me with every snide comment and insult in the book when I'd run into them on patrol—sometimes they'd even throw hands."

"Maybe the Ice Princess's rehabilitation is actually working on them?"

"Watching the battle yesterday probably had a big effect too. Maybe they look at us guards in a different light after seeing Sieg fight like that?"

I had also felt some changes from the knights I'd encountered while on my rounds that day.

*"Hey, look, it's Sieg...!"*

*"Sieg—you mean the guy who defeated Vice-Commander Eleanor yesterday...?!"*

*"You weren't there, were you? It was terrifying—he thoroughly trounced her. He was like some kind of crazy devil."*

*"Th-That bad, huh..."*

*"If we ruin his good mood, he might lop our heads clean off."*

*"Hello, Sieg, sir! Great to see you out on your patrols today!" the two knights said in unison.*

And thus, they had begun treating me in an overly respectful manner. Before I had realized it, the overblown tales about me had taken on a life of their own.

*No, I'm not actually that violent of a guy, so I really wish the people I run into would stop with their exaggerated greetings. It's painful the way everybody else*



*stares when that happens.*

*Though honestly, if it means that the Knight Corps is behaving, it isn't a bad thing. That would also mean less undue suffering for the townspeople.*

While these thoughts were going through my head, I heard a startled cry and saw a guard practically leap up in shock. Chatter began to rise up from the suddenly disturbed crowd.

"Hm...? What's all the fuss about?" I said, wondering if perhaps someone found a fly in their soup—but that's when I noticed all the guards staring directly behind me. As I followed their gaze, I couldn't help but let out my own similar grunt of surprise.

Standing at the cafeteria entrance was Vice-Commander Eleanor. She was clad in her silver armor, her features elegant and lustrous as moonlight.

The guards were in a furor at the sudden visit by the Knight Corps' second-in-command.

"Wh-Why is she here...?!"

"A knight coming into the guard barracks is absolutely unheard of!"

Disregarding the perturbed guards, Eleanor spoke. "Where can I find Sieg?"

They must have been overwhelmed by her shimmering visage, because the guards all responded simultaneously and pointed to me: "He's right over there!"

*Jerks... They didn't even think twice about selling out their own colleague.*

I locked eyes with Eleanor as she approached me. I remained seated, while she stood next to me as we faced each other, staring.

Watching us from a distance, the guards were chatting up a storm. "She must be back to take revenge for her loss in yesterday's match. A massive blood feud is about to begin...!"

"What do you want with me?" I finally asked.

"I came here...because there is something I wish to tell you," Eleanor responded.

“Tell me...?”

“Yes,” she said with a nod, then went silent for a while, fidgeting with her bangs for some reason.

Seeing this, I cocked my head to the side. “Is something wrong? You have something to tell me, right?”

“Well...” Eleanor’s cheeks flushed red, and after some hesitation, she finally spoke. “I...seem to have fallen in love with you. Therefore, I was wondering if you might be willing to officially exchange vows with me.”

“Oh, I see. Exchange vows—huh?” I felt a strong sense of unease as I repeated it back to her, and I couldn’t help but ask: “I’m sorry... Did I hear that correctly? It almost sounded like you were asking me to marry you. Did you say ‘exchange blows’ and I misheard it as ‘exchange vows?’”

“No, you heard correctly. I do not wish to exchange blows with you, I wish to marry you—to become your lifelong partner.”

I froze in place and fell silent for a while. Eventually, I was able to muster enough courage to say one word: “Why...?”

“Just as I said, I seem to have fallen in love with you. Do you know what it is I like more than anything else, Sieg...?”

“Well, I definitely know a few things you hate.”

She let out a chuckle. “Well, I am honored. Perhaps you have a fair amount of interest in me after all?”

*No, that knowledge was forced upon me by you insisting on asking people that question... But now is probably not the wisest time to slip in a wisecrack like that.*

“What I like more than anything else are people who are stronger than me. Ever since you beat me, Sieg, I haven’t been able to get you out of my head,” Eleanor said, placing a hand against her chest, her expression earnest. “When I think about you, my heart starts beating faster, and I no longer feel like myself. At first I was concerned a spell had been cast on me, so I tried consulting with my subordinates—without mentioning you by name, of course. They told me

that feeling was love, and that is how I realized I was in love with you.”

The cold demeanor of Eleanor’s “Ice Princess” persona had vanished; her eyes were filled with a burning passion and her cheeks tinged with red. Her ice had melted, and beneath all that, she was a maiden through and through.

“May I have your answer, then?”

“I really don’t know what to say.” The situation was completely unforeseen.

“Very well. I won’t ask you to make an immediate decision—it is not something to be answered lightly, as it will affect both of our futures.”

*Whew... Looks like I’m off the hook for the time being.*

“By the way...it looks like you brought a lot of stuff with you,” I remarked, noting the huge pack Eleanor had carried with her. *Is she going on some kind of trip after this?*

“Oh, this. I was thinking I would quit the Knight Corps and join the Guard Corps instead.”

“Huh?”

I was taken completely aback.

“Wait, but what about your pride as a knight?”

“Of course I still have my pride as a knight. However, you are the man I admire most, and you belong to the Guard Corps. Therefore, my preference is to be with you.”

I sat in silence. *Apparently she’s serious about this. Not good—at this rate she’ll end up quitting the Knights because of me.*

“Hold on a sec. You really should reconsider,” I said, placing my hands on the vice-commander’s shoulders.

“Y-You’re quite close to me...” Eleanor said, averting her eyes shyly.

“You really need to stay in the Knight Corps, Eleanor. I can protect the city as a guard while you protect it as a knight.”

“And why do you say that...?”

“Because current relations between the guards and the knights aren’t exactly what I would call satisfactory. I think you and I could form a bridge between the two groups.”

“So, you’re saying you find me trustworthy?”

“That’s right.”

“Very well, then,” she said in agreement. “I cannot ignore a request from you, of all people. I shall remain a member of the Knight Corps, though I truly wish I could join the Guard Corps this very instant.”

*Oh, thank goodness. I managed to convince her, sort of.*

If we could patch up our relationship with the knights, our jobs as guards would be that much easier. Having the two organizations cooperate with each other would make protecting the city a much simpler task.

There was just one problem—

“I shall return, Sieg,” Eleanor said to me with a smile, then turned around and left the barracks with a spring in her step, her spirits high.

*This was not how I expected things would turn out...*

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“I heard what happened, Sarge!”

It was the next morning, and I had been eating my meal at the barracks cafeteria when Seira called out to me proudly, her eyes twinkling with curiosity.

“You sure are energetic for so early in the morning. What’s up?”

“The vice-commander confessed her love to you, didn’t she?”

“Oh, *that’s* what this is about.”

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner? I might’ve been able to help!”

“‘Help’...? What would you have even done?”

Seira snickered proudly. “I may not look it, but I actually love matchmaking! The women of the city come to me for romantic advice pretty often!”

“Oh, really?”

“So I was thinking I could’ve played Cupid and helped the two of you in your relationship!”

“How did you hear about this so quickly, anyway? Did one of the other guards tell you?”

“I heard it from Fam, actually.”

“Fam? I don’t remember her being there...”

A light giggle sounded out. “Oh, I was definitely there,” came Fam’s voice, and her face suddenly poked out of the shadows between my legs as I sat in my cafeteria chair. Anyone without nerves of steel would’ve fallen right backward.

“You need to stop popping out of places like that.”

“I’m always watching you, like a shadow. When Eleanor confessed her feelings of love to you, I was so close I could almost taste it.”

*I had a feeling she had been there—she never lets her guard down for a moment.*

“So what did you do, Sieg?” Seira continued. “Did you accept her feelings?” she asked, leaning in toward me.

“Fam didn’t tell you that part?”

“That’s right—she said I should ask you in person. I was so curious about what happened, I could barely sleep at all last night!”

Looking more closely, there were indeed faint bags under Seira’s eyes.

“You could’ve just come and asked me at the time, you know.”

“Oh, no, it was already pretty late at night. I wouldn’t have wanted to interrupt your rest time.”

She was the type to respect boundaries like that. It was nice having someone so considerate in the Fifth Squadron—she had the most common sense out of any of them. If Spinoza wanted to ask me something, she probably would’ve kicked my door right down, and there was no point in considering Fam, since she was already constantly trespassing into my room anyway.

“No, I did not accept her feelings.”

“What?! Really?!”

“Really.”

“But Eleanor is so pretty, and she’s such a sensible woman! Don’t tell me...you’re already together with someone?”

“No, nothing like that.”

“Then why?”

“I don’t have much interest in romance. I’d rather dedicate myself fully to the protection of the city, instead of worrying about whether or not I should date someone.”

“Whoa... That’s such a professional mindset,” Seira whispered in admiration, a pained smile appearing on her face. “Now I almost feel like an idiot for getting so caught up in the ups and downs of people’s romance stories...”

“There’s nothing wrong with that, though, is there? Everyone has their own set of priorities—I wouldn’t think less of anyone for being heavily invested in matters of love.” What mattered was whether the person themselves valued it.

“So that means you don’t have any intention of getting involved with anyone, Sieg?” Seira asked.

“For now, yeah.”

“I’m relieved to hear that,” Fam piped up.

“Why?” I asked.

“If you got involved with someone, then I’d end up observing you going on dates with each other, flirting with each other, and the like. I worry it might awaken something in me where I’d enjoy watching you cheat on me. I would hate to have my brain broken like that.”

“Watching me cheat...? What am I, your wife?” Fam and I had never been anything besides colleagues to begin with. Though when I thought about how she was watching me at all times, the thought of dating anyone somehow became even less attractive.

“Anyway, what about the two of you?”

Seira and Fam looked at me questioningly.

“Do either of you have anybody you’re interested in?”

The two of them looked at each other, and Seira forced a little laugh. “Well, um... I really enjoy hearing about other people’s journeys in love, but there isn’t really much to talk about when it comes to my own...”

It seemed Seira herself was completely clueless in the realm of romance. She might have been the type who put her all into helping others with affairs of the heart by being a reliable ally for their relationships, but was shy when it came to her own feelings.

“I don’t like meeting strangers, and I don’t get many opportunities to speak with men in the first place,” Fam continued. “So naturally, I’m completely disconnected from the concept of romantic involvement.”

It was definitely true that she had never really fit in with normal society to begin with.

“In that case, I guess our entire squadron is disconnected from that concept.”

“We haven’t asked Spinoza yet, have we?” Seira commented.

“I don’t think there’s any need, really,” I murmured in response, gesturing with my head toward the cafeteria entrance. Seira turned to look where I had indicated, and there stood a hungover Spinoza, backing up along a wall as she held herself against it with her hands. The look on her face was like that of a prisoner who had just been given a three-hundred-year jail sentence.

“Eww...! That’s disgusting...!”

“Ugh! She threw up!”

“This is the worst! She had to do it in the cafeteria, of all places!”

The guards around her cringed in a disgusted furor. By the way, the scene she was making wasn’t something that only happened in the barracks either—she would do the same thing in various places all over the city.

“You’re right. Spinoza is probably in the same boat as the rest of us,” Seira said.

“If we ever feel insecure, we can just look down at her and know that everything is going to be all right,” Fam agreed.

Seeing Spinoza like that seemed to give them both a measure of relief.

“I’m so glad to be friends with everyone in the Fifth,” Seira declared softly. She had an awfully bizarre sense of solidarity.



## Chapter 20: Joining the Dark Side

At a different time and location...

The Crimson Fangs had descended to the bottom level of a certain cave located a fair distance to the north of the city of Estahl, where they were facing off against a red ogre. They were there because Nacht had accepted an A-rank mission to exterminate the beast: it had twin horns that towered into the air; golden eyes that shimmered mysteriously; and a solid, muscular body with a hue that made it seem like it was coated in blood. The Crimson Fangs could do nothing against the onslaught of attacks coming from the A-rank monster, and they were on the verge of total defeat.

With a vicious roar, the red ogre charged at the group's mage, Haruna.

"Ugh! Crap!" She had gone into a casting stance so she could start firing off spells, which meant she didn't have the ability to dodge. The attack was going to be a direct hit, and if that happened, it would be a mortal blow.

"Agh, you idiot!" Nacht growled, then suddenly stepped into the way of the ogre's charge.

Both Haruna and Irene the archer gasped in shock.

"Huh?!"

"No way...?!"

Up until that point, Nacht making a move to protect someone other than himself would've been utterly impossible; at that point, the two of them realized exactly how desperate he had become.

Ever since Sieg had left their party, the Crimson Fangs had done nothing but rack up a string of mission failures. They would get nothing but skeptical stares from both the Guild and other adventurers, who all wondered if perhaps it was Sieg who had essentially been the anchor of the party's strength. Sieg had recently taken up post as a gatekeeper for the Royal Capital of Astaroth, and the rumor that he had played an active part in the battle against the undead

army also added fuel to that theory.

Due to all of that, Nacht and his companions made the unreasonable demand that they be allowed to take on an A-rank mission in order to prove their strength. If they failed, all confidence in them would be completely lost—their status, their reputation, and everything they had built for themselves up to that point was on the line. That was what made Nacht so desperate; he would do whatever it took, no matter how it looked to others—even crude things that he would never normally consider doing. That thought process was what led him to take action to protect Haruna.

However—whether or not that would be enough was another matter altogether.

Nacht attempted to block the ogre's charge with his shield, but the moment its huge frame barreled into him, a shock wave ran through him that was so fierce, it felt as though every bone in his body was breaking. His feet were lifted from the ground and he slammed into the rocky surface behind him, causing him to let out a scream of pain. A heat rose up through his chest that he convulsively spat out—blood.

The red ogre once again changed its target to Haruna.

“Take this!” the mage yelled; she had not yet managed to fully charge her magic, but she decided she couldn't delay any longer and released a fireball. It was nowhere near full power, and it dissipated the moment it touched the ogre's body, leaving no hint of injury on it.

“This isn't working... There's not nearly enough time to charge my magic. If I could just get off some fully charged fire spells, I could burn that thing to a crisp.”

Complaining about it wasn't going to do any good—they had to find a way to get through their current situation. At the rate things were going, the red ogre was going to wipe them out completely.

Making up her mind, Haruna spoke up: “I'm gonna start prepping a teleportation spell to get us out of here. Cover me, Irene!”

After a brief pause, Irene nodded. “Roger that,” she said, nocking an arrow

into her bow. She released the string and fired once to attract the ogre's attention, then began firing shots into its body in rapid succession, but none pierced its flesh and they all dropped to the ground.

However, that didn't matter; their objective had already changed from extermination to escape. That whole time, Haruna had been working on her teleportation spell to get them out; a magic circle had already been drawn at the entrance to the cavern.

"Hey, what the hell, why are you casting teleportation?! Don't make decisions like that on your own! Are you just gonna abandon the mission?!"

"We don't have a choice! We're all gonna die otherwise!"

"You two might've given up, but like hell am I gonna do the same! If we turn tail here and run home, we'll never hear the end of it from the Guild and the townspeople!" Nacht shouted in a frantic effort to try and stop Haruna. "Do you want the Crimson Fangs to disappear forever?! Stop casting right now and fight this ogre with me! That's an order!"

"Shut up! Our lives are something that can't be replaced, you know!" Haruna shouted, drowning out Nacht's voice. "Besides, it's become all too clear now that the Crimson Fangs were finished a long time ago—ever since the moment *he* quit!"

"Wha...?!"

"What she said," Irene muttered bitterly. "I realize it too, now—the only reason we could unleash such crazy firepower was because Sieg was protecting us."

"H-How dare you...!"

"Okay, it's done—time to teleport!"

"Hey, stop it! Didn't you hear me?!"

Ignoring her leader's commands, Haruna activated the teleportation spell, and the bright glow of the magic circle at their feet enveloped the Crimson Fangs. The red ogre unleashed a vicious claw attack aimed at Irene, but the only thing it cut into was empty space.

“Damn it... This is *bullshit*...!”

Nacht was wandering down a back alley in the night like some sort of ghost. His eyes were ablaze like those of a wild beast, his face was horribly pale, and a dark aura emanated from his entire body.

After failing their A-rank mission, the Crimson Fangs were disbanded; however, it was not the Adventurers’ Guild that disbanded them. Haruna and Irene asked if it wasn’t too late to just apologize to Sieg and get him to come back—and when Nacht heard this, he went ballistic and kicked both of them out of the party.

*“It turned out he was the one keeping our party together after all. The only reason we were able to fight was because he was tanking the enemies’ attacks.”*

*“What she said—I think so too. There was just no way to know that until he left.”*

He could never forgive those words—nor the women themselves, after they’d asserted that Sieg was better than him.

Now that the Crimson Fangs had been disbanded, Nacht was alone. Rumor had already spread that they had failed their mission, and there would likely never be a party willing to accept him, considering he had always behaved badly anyway.

“This is all his fault. *Everything* is...!”

As he walked down the dark alley spouting obscenities, a voice suddenly fell upon him; it was dark and cold, as if it were emanating from the very depths of the earth.

*“Does it vex you, losing everything like that?”*

Before he knew it, a black shadow was standing before him, its shape not entirely discernible. It was ominous and intimidating to the point that it felt almost otherworldly.

“Who are you...?!”

“Worry not. I am your ally,” the shadow spoke to Nacht, as if pressing a finger

right into his weakened heart. “Wouldn’t you like to take revenge on all those who have ridiculed you? Allow me to grant you the power to do so.”

## Chapter 21: Devastation

After waking up and getting out of bed that morning, I left my room to do my daily training. By the time the sun rose, my muscles felt nice and awake as well.

*All right! Another day of feeling in top shape.*

When I came to a good stopping point, I got into the shower and rinsed off the sweat to prep my body for the day. Once I was nice and clean, I headed over to the cafeteria.

The other guards were already in the cafeteria eating. However, something felt off—there was a strangely ominous atmosphere cast across the place.

“Sarge! Terrible news!” As I cocked my head slightly to the side, Seira came dashing over to me at full speed, seemingly panicked. When she finally got to me, she went on, “U-Um, uh... T-T-Terrible news!” She was gesticulating and speaking nonsense rapid-fire—she must have been terribly anxious.

“Calm down. First, take a deep breath.”

“R-Right!”

She put a hand to her chest and breathed in deeply several times. Her voluptuous bikini-armor-clad breasts heaved with each breath she took.

“Whew...” she said with an exhale.

“You seem calmer now. So, what happened?”

“Oh, right—please, take a look at this!” She held out that morning’s newspaper to me. It had been delivered by carrier bird, and it contained information on current events both worldwide and from local cities.

The moment I saw the article on the front page, my heart started racing intensely.

“Wha...?!” I repeated the headline out loud in disbelief: “‘Estahl City Devastated by Unknown Assailant: Did a Demon Do This’?!”

“Estahl is the city you were in before you came here, right, Sarge? As soon as I saw this, I knew I had to let you know...”

“Yeah... That’s definitely where I was.” It was the city where I had gotten all my experience as an adventurer, a city marked by memories of joining the Crimson Fangs, fighting alongside them as my allies, growing as a person, and eventually breaking things off with them.

“It says here it got completely destroyed over a single night...?” I continued.

“That’s right... It sounded quite horrific. It said something about the entire city being burnt down and most of the inhabitants perishing...”

“But...Estahl has lots of adventurers, not to mention the Crimson Fangs. Does that mean they were all killed...?” I wondered aloud.

“I don’t know. But it said it was completely destroyed, so that probably means...”

I lifted my hand from the table and pressed it against my forehead, shutting my eyes tightly. I could see images pop up of Nacht, Haruna, and Irene. Becoming famous had changed them all, but to me, they were still comrades with whom I had spent a significant amount of time. *Does this mean they’re all dead now...?*

“Are you okay, Sieg...?”

I opened my eyes again and looked at Seira. “Yeah. I’m fine.” It had already happened; there was nothing that could be done. All I could do at that point was face the facts in front of me. “Whatever did that must’ve been extremely powerful to be able to take down every adventurer there. I’d imagine it’d have to be classified as A-rank, considering it destroyed an entire city in one night.”

“Probably so. Maybe it was a dragon or a wyvern? Or, no, maybe not—that would be out of the ordinary for them to suddenly show up without anyone reporting any sightings, right?”

Regions that are home to dragons or wyverns also have observation teams positioned in them. If the creatures started to emerge, the teams would’ve sent advance warning to the city. If Estahl City fell to ruin in a single night, the enemy must have appeared suddenly, without any warning.

“I’m not entirely sure what could’ve done this. If it was a monster, though, Astaroth might be in danger as well, considering we have the Orb of Light here.”

The Orb housed in the Royal Capital was the demons’ and monsters’ worst enemy, considering it kept their master the Demon King sealed. They wouldn’t think of just leaving it be.

“At any rate, we should definitely be as vigilant as possible. As guards, we need to do whatever we can.”

The news about Estahl spread quickly among the guards. Commander Bolton mobilized every guard and ordered them to be on maximum alert, so they would be ready to intercept any attack by monsters no matter when it might occur. All of us in the Fifth Squadron were tasked with guarding the front lines at the main gate.

“A monster that completely obliterated a city in one night, huh... Musta been something crazy,” Spinoza mumbled, yawning. “Not that I’d mind it showing up today, even. I don’t have a drop of alcohol in me—maybe I’ve got a sixth sense for things that’ll give me a good fight or somethin’.”

Fam gave Spinoza a sidelong glance and snickered. “I’m pretty sure the only reason you couldn’t drink is because you don’t have any money, right?”

“In any case, we’ll need to be on our guard. We can’t allow such a powerful monster into the capital!” Seira said, a serious look on her face.

“You’re right,” I agreed.

“Oh—someone’s coming!” Seira shouted, pointing straight ahead.

All of the members of the Fifth Squadron, including myself, took up defensive stances—however, our wariness quickly dissipated.

“Looks like they’re travelers,” she continued. There were indeed two figures approaching slowly, walking with an occasional stumble. As they got closer, I was eventually able to discern them clearly.

“That’s...Haruna and Irene...?!”

There was no mistaking it—they were the two people coming toward the



gate.

“Do you know them, Sergeant?”

“They’re former comrades of mine. We were in a party together when I was in Estahl. So they managed to survive after all...”

“They don’t look like they’re in very good shape, though. We need to hurry and tend to their injuries!”

“Hey, Haruna, Irene!” I shouted, leaving my post and rushing over to them. When the two of them saw me, their eyes went wide, as if a lifeline of hope had been dropped down to pull them out of hell.

“Sieg...?”

“I-It’s been a long time. Glad to see you.”

“I already heard that Estahl got completely devastated...but I’m glad to see the two of you made it out alive.” I noticed a feeling of relief welling in my chest—I truly was happy they were all right.

I moved on to asking them about our remaining companion who wasn’t with us. “Where’s Nacht?”

“U-Um, about that...” Irene hesitated uncomfortably.

I suddenly had a bad feeling. “Don’t tell me he ended up getting killed...?”

Irene shook her head in response; apparently that wasn’t the case. *I wonder why he isn’t here, then?*

Eventually, with a distressed expression on her face, Haruna finally gave a response, one which I was loathe to believe:

“Sieg...the one who destroyed Estahl City...was Nacht.”

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We let Haruna and Irene into the city. Normally, we wouldn’t have admitted any outsiders at a time like this, but when I told Commander Bolton they were my former comrades, he gave his blessing. The two of them were injured and in rough shape, so we brought them to the barracks’ infirmary. It was nothing short of a miracle that they had made it all the way to the city without expiring.

Thanks to the Guard Corps' healers and recovery herbs, we were able to seal their wounds. As soon as they had their wits about them again, I began to ask about what they had told me.

"Earlier, you said that Nacht destroyed Estahl City. Is that true?"

"Yes, it is. We saw him. He was burning down the city, laughing like a maniac the whole time."

"And the townspeople were getting killed one after the other—" Irene, looking pale, held a hand to her mouth as if she were about to throw up.

"You don't have to force yourself to think about it," I told her in an attempt to put a stop to her recollections—apparently the things she'd seen in Estahl were just that traumatic. "I just wonder, though, why would he do such a thing...?"

"Maybe it was because the Crimson Fangs had disbanded," Haruna offered.

"The Crimson Fangs disbanded...? Why?"

"After you left, the party just stopped working as well as it used to. We started failing missions that we could've finished off in a snap before—the Guild and the other adventurers treated us as a laughingstock."

"Our losing streak started the moment you left, Sieg," Irene added. "Everyone started saying you were probably the one carrying our party, and Nacht got so fed up with it that he insisted on, like, taking an A-rank mission. It was gonna be totally impossible for us, so we were gonna refuse, but he wouldn't even listen. He said he was gonna prove the townspeople wrong."

"So we accepted the mission and, as expected, we were in way over our heads," Haruna explained. "When it looked like we were about to get killed, we just barely managed to escape with our lives. We failed the mission, and our party's reputation hit rock bottom. After that, we got into a fight with Nacht, and then we ended up disbanding."

"So that's how it went..." I had no idea that was how things had turned out after I left—that Nacht and the team had struggled so much. Ever since I had become a guard, I was much less informed about the realm of adventurers.

"He had a lot of pride in himself as a Crimson Fang. Losing that might've

driven him to desperation and made him go on a rampage..." Haruna murmured.

"I see. Though, despite everything you said, considering Nacht's abilities, I feel like it would be impossible for him to lay waste to Estahl in a single night." He was certainly a skilled individual, but if someone had asked me if he could destroy Estahl single-handedly, I definitely would've said no.

"When we saw him, it looked like he was possessed by something. He had horns coming out of his head, and he looked really sinister. Also...he had monsters with him."

"It's just a hunch, but, like...I think he might've turned into a demon."

"So you're saying he was drawn over to the dark side?" I responded. Sometimes there were humans who would defect over to the side of the demons, like the lich we had faced previously. Maybe Nacht had been tempted in the same way.

Incidentally, monsters and demons were similar, but not identical, beings. The ones that controlled powerful magic, such as the Demon King and his followers, were classified as demons. An easy way to think about it was to consider demons as a higher tier of monsters.

"While he was burning down the city...he kept shouting that he'd never forgive you, Sieg, for making him suffer so much."

"His grudge was, like, pretty insane."

"I...I think Nacht will come here to Astaroth pretty soon. He knows you're here."

"Is that so... I appreciate you letting me know." Knowing the enemy's background made it easier to come up with a strategy. "What do the two of you plan to do, anyway?"

"We haven't thought that far ahead. Back when the party disbanded, I thought about making it a goal to be an instructor at the magic academy but, well, there's no city anymore..."

"I see. In that case, you should stay here for a while. I'll put in a request. Once

things calm down, I can help you look for work too.”

After I said this, silence descended. When I looked to Haruna and Irene, they seemed completely stunned.

“Why, though...?” Haruna asked.

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“I mean...we treated you pretty horribly in the past, didn’t we?” she went on. “There’s no way you just forgot about all that, right?”

“Normally I’d think people would, like, get angry and not bother helping us, y’know.”

It seemed to me that there was a sense of guilt visible behind their troubled expressions. *Ah... So they did feel somewhat bad about it, after all.*

“Yes... I know. I didn’t forget,” I explained. “You were plenty abusive and insulting toward me. You said I was holding you back, called me a scarecrow who just stood there, and all that.”

“Then why—”

“But that doesn’t mean I forgot the good things you did either.”

“What...?” the two of them asked in unison.

“Back when I first joined the party, I had a tough time fitting in. I think it was you, Haruna, who tried talking to me first, wasn’t it?”

I had been the last one to join the Crimson Fangs. I wasn’t very good at socializing, so even when we celebrated after completing a mission, I just sort of sat in a corner. Haruna was the one who decided to reach out to me.

*“What are you doing way over there, Sieg? Come join us! You realize this is also doubling as your welcome party, right?”*

*“C’mon, the star of the show sits in the middle!”*

Thanks to her openness in reaching out to me, the others were able to overcome their reservations as well, and I managed to become friends with them all.

“And Irene, back when Nacht and I would get into arguments over things, you

used to sneak over to him afterward and put in a good word for me to try and smooth things over, didn't you?"

When the party was first getting things going, Nacht and I would have fights over the direction we wanted to take—arguments that came up precisely because we had both set our sights so high. Irene wanted to see to it that the two of us didn't have a total breakdown in negotiations.

"Now that you mention it... I do remember something like that happening," Haruna added quietly.

"Man, that feels so long ago," Irene responded.

We had actually been a bona fide party starting out. We respected each other and strove together for a common goal. The times when we didn't have anything at all were the most fulfilling—far more so than after we started making gains. As our fortune and fame rose, our relationships became more strained along with them...until the Crimson Fangs were no more.

Despite that, though...

"I might have left the party, but you're still my friends. At least, I consider you as such. When my friends are in trouble, I help them. That's what friends do."

Haruna and Irene stared at me for a while in disbelief, then both did the exact same thing: bowed their heads deeply to me and apologized. "We're so sorry!"

"Wh-What about?" I asked. "About us having to heal your wounds? Don't worry about it."

Haruna shook her head emphatically. "No, not that. We just really want to apologize for everything we did to you. You were the one holding the party together, but we didn't realize that and said all those terrible things to you... I know it's pretty awful to notice so far after the fact, and we don't expect you to forgive us or anything, but we just wanted to apologize anyway."

"I forgive you, though."

"Huh?"

"Everybody makes mistakes," I said. "I wouldn't consider the bond between us so shallow that a single mistake would end everything entirely. Besides," I

added, “I’m not so righteous as to believe I can tell others the right way to do things. And neither is anyone else—everyone has things they’re wrong about.”

“Sieg...”

“You can lift your heads back up. I’m just happy both of you are alive.”

Neither of them said anything.

“Is something wrong?”

“No. I was just thinking you’re really still the same old Sieg.”

“You’ve always been a super nice person. Even when we were, like, super mean to you, you never shot any snappy comebacks back at us—not even once.”

“That just comes from a lack of vocabulary,” I muttered, trying to hide my embarrassment.

Haruna and Irene saw that and grinned slightly. Their expressions were genuine—reminiscent of when I’d first met them.

It made me realize just how long it had been since we’d last been able to speak freely together.

## Chapter 22: Request for Cooperation with the Knights

The first thing we needed to do was gather intel about the enemy forces: the group of monsters led by Nacht. I asked Haruna and Irene for detailed information, and thanks to them, we were able to get a good idea of their numbers and makeup.

The enemy ranks comprised a large number of monsters that could attack from any direction, including flying monsters and spellcasters. That meant it wasn't likely that my team could handle everything alone just by defending the front gate.

"That means we should probably try to coordinate something with the knights." As things were, we clearly didn't have enough numbers. Not to mention, most guards specialized in close-quarters combat; pitting them against flying monsters or spellcasters would be a bad matchup. The knights were used to dealing with those types of monsters; they simply had more combat prowess overall than the guards. There was no other choice but to turn to them.

I told Commander Bolton that Nacht had fallen to the demon side and was preparing to attack, and that confronting him would require coordinating with the knights.

"All right. I'll reach out to Commander Gregor, then." He agreed to deliver a request to the knights; however, when he returned later that afternoon, his expression was somber.

"How did it go?" I asked.

"It didn't go at all," he replied. "He blew me off. Said that he had 'no intention of assisting lowly guards,' and the knights had their own areas to protect." The commander slammed his fist loudly against the table in frustration, causing the other nearby guards to jump in their seats.

"How did you respond to that, Commander?"

“Heh, I told him to eat shit. Son of a bitch looked so pissed off he could’ve popped a vein or three.”

“Oh...” I cast my eyes upward and cupped a hand against my forehead in frustration. Apparently negotiations had broken down spectacularly. *We’re all protecting the same city—why do these things always end up so complicated?*

“What do you think we should do, Sarge?” Seira asked.

“Meh, can’t we just handle ’em all ourselves?” Spinoza wondered aloud.

“I’d prefer that as well, honestly. I may not look it, but I get awfully uncomfortable when I’m around so many strangers,” Fam chimed in.

“I’m aware of that,” I responded. She very much *did* look uncomfortable around strangers.

I continued: “We have a fighting force here; we’d be foolish not to make use of them. If we could coordinate something with the knights, it would make it far easier to maintain our defenses.”

“But Commander Gregor refused to help, didn’t he?” Seira reminded me.

“The commander himself did, yes—which means we’ll have to ask someone under him, instead. And we happen to have just the right contact for that.”

“Contact...?”

“Yeah—his second-in-command, who also happens to be more popular than he is. She should be out on patrol right now—let’s go.”

I took everyone in the Fifth with me and left the barracks. We walked around the city for a while before we found our target.

Vice Commander Eleanor was kneeling down on the cobblestones, smiling serenely as she watched a kitten lapping noisily at the milk she had set down in front of it.

She let out a gentle laugh. “No need for you to hurry so—nobody is going to take it from you. Relax and drink up, I shall keep watch.”

“There you are, Eleanor.”

With an oddly feline-sounding shriek, the startled armor-clad woman jumped



to her feet and turned around. Seeing us, her face went pale.

“Did... Did you see that?”

“See what?”

“Me...speaking to that kitten.”

“You had a very kind expression on your face—as if you were the kitten’s mother. It was nothing at all like when you’re holding a sword.”

Eleanor’s eyes shot open wide as she let out a nearly inaudible whimper. Her face flushed red all the way to her ears.

“I cannot believe you, of all people, ended up witnessing that,” she said, letting out a subdued laugh of resignation. “My life is over. I cannot go on.”

“Come on, it’s not something to be embarrassed about. I thought the way you looked at the kitten was quite adorable, actually.”

“A-Adorable...?!”

“Yeah.”

“O-Oh. Well, I am not so simple a woman as to take words such as those seriously. I shall have to replay them multiple times in my head before I go to sleep,” she responded, then cleared her throat.

She seemed to be taking them *quite* seriously.

“So, you said just a moment ago that you had been searching for me...?”

“That’s right. We have a favor to ask of you.”

“A favor...?”

I explained the situation to Eleanor—how the city would soon be attacked by demons, how we asked the knights for assistance, and how Commander Gregor summarily shot us down.

“I see. So you came to ask me, the vice-commander, instead,” she replied. “It’s true that I have the discretionary authority to mobilize a fairly large force, even if the entire Knight Corps would be out of the question.”

“In that case—”

“However, that would only apply if my personal discretion was the sole thing to consider. Commander Gregor would not stay silent if he learned I had accepted a request from the Guard Corps.” Eleanor glared straight at me. “My position within the Knight Corps may be put in jeopardy. Would you still request my assistance, knowing this...?”

“Yes. I would,” I responded, and put my hands on the vice-commander’s shoulders. “You’re the only one we can count on, Eleanor.”

“Th-The only one...?”

“There is no one else. You’re the only one we can ask.”

Eleanor seemed to shrink back, averting her eyes and wrapping her arms around herself in discomfort. Her normal bravery was nowhere to be found.

“If...if you are that insistent, then very well; I shall assist you.”

“Really?!”

“Yes...on one condition. If I am forced to leave the Knight Corps, then be prepared to take full responsibility for it.”

“That’s fine—I won’t let that happen.”

“O-Oh... For my part, though, I wouldn’t mind having you take responsibility for me leaving the Knights by just taking my hand in marr...” She trailed off and started mumbling a few incoherent words.

“Wow, how much of a pushover can that lady be?”

“I’ve never seen such a submissive woman. So much for the Ice Princess.”

As Spinoza and Fam whispered to each other, Seira held a finger up to her lips insistently to try to silence them. “Shh!”

At any rate, we had managed to secure the assistance of the Knight Corps, which meant we would be in ideal shape to take on Nacht’s army.

## Chapter 23: The Battle

Two days had passed. It was afternoon, and the sky was so blue it could only be described as perfect—to the point that it almost felt surreal. There was not a single cloud to be seen.

After we had finished our morning rounds, my squad and I had returned to the barracks for a short break. Time was passing slowly there, like the calm before a storm.

Suddenly, the quiet was unceremoniously shattered by the shrill sound of an alarm—a tone that almost made me feel sick to my stomach.

“They’re here! The demons are attacking!” came an angry shout from outside—it sounded like a guard. They must have been keeping watch from one of the guard towers rising up along the stone wall surrounding the city.

A feeling of tension engulfed the area in an instant, and Commander Bolton began shouting orders to the guards in the barracks. “All right, all hands, get to your positions!”

The guards scattered in compliance with their orders. My team’s position was the same as when we’d fought the undead army: standing at the front lines guarding the gate. It was the place that was most imperative to defend in any battle—and this particular battle would no doubt be both fierce and fraught with danger.

Last time, the four of us in the Fifth Squadron had handled defense all by ourselves. This time, however, the other guard squadrons were taking part as well.

*“Are you sure?”* I had asked them. *“You might not make it out alive.”*

They had responded like this:

*“Your team fought like hell last time and won. When we saw you do that, well, we thought it was really cool.”*

*“Back when we first joined the Guard Corps, we did it with ideals in mind: we wanted to protect the sacred treasure and the townspeople. We wanted to fight for the sake of the world.”*

*“But, after we had been working for a while, we ended up forgetting how that felt... After watching you, those feelings we had lost have started coming back to us.”*

*“Let us fight with you—to protect what’s important to us!”*

That was how they felt, apparently. They all had earnest looks on their faces—as if they were completely different people from when I had first met them. These were people who were ready to fight.

“We’re counting on you, Sieg,” Commander Bolton called out to me. “Though it might be rough on you to fight a former ally.”

“Don’t worry. I’m prepared.” I was a guard of Astaroth; if an enemy endangered the people of the Royal Capital, I would strike them down without hesitation...even if that enemy happened to be a former ally.

“Sieg, we’re coming with you.”

“I think we might be able to help at least a little, y’know.”

“Haruna... Irene...”

Both of them expressed a desire to fight as well. With rather melancholy looks on their faces, they both spoke in turn:

“He might’ve been a jerk, but he was also a friend who fought alongside us for a long time. We’ve got to help you stop him.”

“It’d be, like, totally irresponsible to just ignore him.”

“You know it’ll be dangerous,” I warned.

“We know, and we’re ready for it. How many times do you think we’ve toed the line between life and death? A little bit of death here and there isn’t gonna kill us.”

“Besides, you’ll totally protect us if things get out of hand, right, Sieg?”

The two former Crimson Fangs smiled slightly. Even as they steeled their

resolve to face potential death, I could feel the trust in their eyes as they looked at me. *We're going to be fine*, I thought to myself. *The two of you, the Fifth Squadron, all of my fellow guards... All of you are my comrades, and you all mean a lot to me. I swear I will protect every one of you.*

“Awright. Let’s hurry up and tear every last one of these suckers apart so we can have a victory party. I’m ready to start chuggin’ free drinks, all on the townspeople’s tab!” Spinoza said with a grin, punching her palm eagerly. Her whole body brimmed with energy; she seemed ready and raring to go.

Fam giggled lightly. “Sorry, but the reward for most valuable participant will go to me. I plan on making a spectacular showing in this battle, and then Sieg will pet my head again,” she explained. She was using the carrot dangling in front of her face as motivation—a carrot which, by the way, had never been offered nor even once mentioned by yours truly.

“Let’s go, Sarge!” Seira said, reaching a hand out to me.

“Yeah.”

I nodded to my companions and took a step forward. We hurried to the front gate to stop our former comrade.

When we arrived, we could see the shadows of countless monsters in the distance. Leading them at the forefront was a man with two large horns growing out of his head and symbols engraved across his bulging, muscular body. He was bursting with magical energy, and it rose up from him faintly like a mirage.

He might have been barely recognizable, but there was no doubt about it: he was our former companion, Nacht.

“Nacht...”

“Sieg... I finally found you.”

Nacht stared at Sieg with his golden eyes, mouth twisting into a malevolent, crescent-shaped grin. That aggressive smile, though, vanished the moment he saw two particular people among the crowd of guards who were gathered behind Sieg.

*Is that...Haruna and Irene? I was pretty sure I didn't kill them, but I didn't realize they fled all the way to Astaroth. There were plenty of other places to run to—why here of all places? I can only think of one reason...because this is where Sieg is.*

After failing the A-rank mission, the two of them had said something:

*“Hey... I wonder if it isn't too late to just apologize to Sieg and get him to come back? I mean, I honestly don't expect him to forgive us...but, well, he was the backbone of the Crimson Fangs, after all. We just can't do this on our own.”*

After they had barely escaped from Nacht with their lives, the two of them had made their way to Astaroth to turn to Sieg for help. The fact that they were there together with him could only mean...

*So Sieg took them back? And they were both satisfied with that too?*

“You bitches...! You both took Sieg's side in the end, huh? You chose him over me, didn't you?!”

Nacht had been confident that he was superior to Sieg in every way. Sieg was supposed to just be a stepping stone—someone to be ridiculed. So when Nacht had grown tired of playing around with him, he had tossed Sieg out.

When he had kicked Sieg out of the party, Nacht had felt no emotion whatsoever—aside from having a good laugh that Sieg would be all on his own. That was why it was unforgivable to him that Haruna and Irene were by his side—that they had chosen Sieg over him.

“I'll never forgive you. And I don't just mean you, Sieg... Haruna and Irene too. I'm going to kill every damn person in this city!”

## Chapter 24: The Difference between Him and Me

*“Worry not. I am your ally.”*

The day after the Crimson Fangs disbanded, a certain man had said those words to Nacht.

*“Wouldn’t you like to take revenge on all those who have ridiculed you? Allow me to grant you the power to do so.”*

*Who is this man in front of me? Can he be trusted? If I get involved with him, will there be no turning back?*

All of those thoughts had floated through his mind, then burst like bubbles, vanishing.

Overcome by dark emotion, Nacht had surrendered to those words, and something that had felt like a black shadow began to take control of his heart. However, he did not resist it; the fetters that might have caused him to hesitate were already gone. All that was left was his intense desire to destroy the entire world around him for refusing to acknowledge him.

The power he had been given was far beyond his expectations. He felt as if he had been reborn as an omniscient, omnipotent being—as if his previous self had only been a temporary body, and he had at last regained his true form.

Then, he had given in to the infernal black rage in his heart and attacked the city. Everything that he despised, he burned to the ground: the Adventurers’ Guild, the trash adventurers who had talked about him behind his back, and the townspeople who had been blathering on about the fall of the Crimson Fangs. Anything that displeased him, he erased from existence, and it had brought him immeasurable joy to do so.

Seeing all the people who had refused to acknowledge him brought to their knees before his overwhelming strength had made the decay inside him feel as if it was just melting away. However, it wasn’t enough—to fully quell his anger, he needed to kill *them*: Haruna and Irene, who had turned their backs on him;

and, more than anyone else, Sieg, the one who had forced him into his current situation. Nacht could never have peace of mind until every last one of them had been slaughtered.

After Nacht had destroyed Estahl, the man who had given him this power had reappeared before him and requested that he attack Astaroth, the city that housed the Orb of Light, which in turn was keeping the Demon King sealed. He had wanted Nacht to destroy the Orb so they could resurrect their king.

Nacht didn't need to be asked, though; he had planned on attacking Astaroth anyway. And it wasn't because he had a newly awakened pride as a demon or anything so noble—it was because that was where he could find Sieg. He had heard the talk on the street—that Sieg had found work in Astaroth as a guard, and that he and a select few other gatekeepers had repelled an assault by an undead army all by themselves.

*I'll raze the city Sieg protects to nothing...not a single building or person will be left standing. Then, once I've taught him how powerless he really is and he falls into the pits of despair, I'll kill him.*

With that singular purpose in mind, he had gathered a group of monsters and attacked Astaroth.

*There's not a single person on this earth who would stand a chance against me as I am now. I'm gonna take every last thing that asshole is trying to protect and smash it all to pieces under my feet.*

Prior to the assault, he had been under the impression that the city would be absolutely overwhelmed—that he would just be making a spectacle out of tormenting Sieg and his companions.

However, a short while after the battle had actually begun, he had started to notice that things were not going as planned. The monsters he had dispatched were completely unable to penetrate into the city proper; none of them could get past the guards at the front gate or the knights manning the stone wall surrounding the city.

*"Reporting in, Lord Nacht! Our forces in the west attempted an aerial assault, but it failed—there were soldiers lying in ambush there to counter them!"*



*“My squadron was completely wiped out as well! I’m gonna— AAARGH?!”*

*“It’s like they’re anticipating our every move!”*

Every single magical communication he received from the monsters under his command seemed to be bad news—the exact opposite of what he had expected. When he tried to reestablish communication with them, many never responded—they had probably already been slain.

*“Damn it...! What the hell is going on...?!”*

All Nacht’s orders were being predicted by the enemy. It was as if his mind were being read.

*Is one of the monsters leaking information to the other side? No, that can’t be it—I’d know right away if that were the case. No, someone is definitely reading my moves...but who? Haruna and Irene wouldn’t know the first thing about commanding an army. Which means...*

*“It’s Sieg...!”*

He had fought together with Sieg countless times; it wouldn’t be odd at all for Sieg to have a solid grasp of Nacht’s way of thinking and his style of command. However, his hated rival staying one step ahead of him like that was unbearably humiliating.

“You idiots! Don’t back down—kill them! Kill them all!” he ordered his subordinates—but every attack dealt out by the monsters on the front line was being systematically shut down by Sieg. “You morons! Stop concentrating on Sieg; focus on the others first! Start by killing the rear guard!”

*“We can’t! He’s the only one we’re able to focus on!”*

*“Even when we try to aim at someone else, the attacks get drawn straight to him instead!”*

*“Ugh...!”*

*Why? Why would that happen?*

Upon hearing the reports, a memory came back to him—one from back when Sieg was in the Crimson Fangs. They had been fighting in a dungeon, and it had seemed like every single monster had been focusing their attacks on Sieg. They

had been completely ignoring everyone who was actually attacking them, and only going after the one guy who was just standing there doing nothing.

*I guess he was using one of his skills...? Then he hadn't just been standing there like an idiot, he had actually been taking every hit from every enemy by himself?*

*With Sieg stopping all of our attacks, the guards in the rear can bring out their full strength against us without having to worry about anything else.*

Seeing him like that brought back memories of the Crimson Fangs. The things other adventurers had said flashed through his mind:

*"They started going downhill as soon as they lost one of their members, didn't they? That big guy... What was his name again? Sieg, was it?"*

*"Yeah, I think the other Crimson Fangs kicked him out, right? How much do you wanna bet that Sieg guy was actually the one keeping things together for them?"*

Haruna and Irene's words flashed through his mind as well:

*"It turned out he was the one keeping our party together after all. The only reason we were able to fight was because he was tanking the enemies' attacks."*

*"What she said—I think so too. There was just no way to know that until he left."*

*Like hell. There's just no way that's true.*

However, his current disadvantage, along with his monsters' reports, seemed to point to the truth.

*The reason we made such huge strides as the Crimson Fangs...was it his doing all along? Was I just some random clown this whole time...?*

*Thinking about it, though, it has always been like that, hasn't it? Haruna, Irene, and I, along with the townspeople, had assumed Sieg was just incompetent—a useless mannequin who did nothing but hold us back. But there have always been certain people who've thought highly of him too.*

Every last one of those people was the type Nacht wanted recognition from: the Guildmaster; people who were in parties ranked higher than the Crimson

Fangs; anybody with master-level skills who countless other adventurers would come to see in hopes of learning from.

Yet, privately, all of them held *Sieg* in high respect.

It was from truly talented people such as these that Nacht actually desired respect, not from the utterly clueless public. However, his idols wouldn't even glance at him; they would only acknowledge Sieg. He hated that beyond belief; he found it unforgivable.

So he had taken his frustrations out on Sieg. If doing that had caused Sieg to suffer or made him grovel before Nacht, maybe the fire within him would've been quelled; but Sieg never once fought back, verbally or otherwise. There was no groveling whatsoever—he just calmly accepted whatever Nacht did to him. Those were not the actions of a weak man, but a strong one, and all that did was irritate Nacht even further.

“How is your strength holding up, Sarge?” Seira asked.

“No problems here.”

“Heh, not bad. Hang in there just a little longer and we'll have every last one of these monster creeps rounded up for ya.”

“Sounds good, Spinoza.”

“The enemies are all leaving themselves wide open, since every last one is staring straight at you. I'm having fun watching my arrows hit them between the eyes.”

“Keep up the good support, Fam.”

“With Vice-Commander Eleanor leading the knights, the castle walls are well protected too. Not a single monster has gotten in!” Seira reported.

“I'll have to thank her later,” I said.

“I think she'd be very happy with that!”

“We can't let everyone else take all the fun! Let's hit them hard, Irene!” Haruna shouted.

“You got it!” she responded.

“All right, we can’t let ourselves get completely shown up by the Fifth!” shouted Commander Bolton. “Keep pushing! We’re gonna make sure the Capital stays safe by wiping out every single last one of these monsters!”

A ferocious battle cry erupted from the ranks of the guards.

The scene that unfolded in front of Nacht was infuriating to no end; everyone was so full of passion, and on top of that, they all looked to Sieg with eyes full of unmitigated trust.

*I feel like I’m gonna puke, Nacht thought. These dark emotions inside me are throbbing so hard they might explode.*

“Hey, morons! Put some damn effort into it! Fight like you’re ready to die! Show me that you can at least take them down with you!”

“We can’t! Victory is already out of our reach!”

“I refuse to die for nothing! This is where I back out!”

“You can deal with the rest on your own, if you want it so badly!”

“Hey! Hold it right there, you bastards!”

One after the other, the monsters began retreating in defiance of Nacht’s orders. He called out to stop them, but their minds were already completely made up. Everyone around him was leaving, and soon he would be completely alone; meanwhile, Sieg had a huge number of people around him—people who trusted him.

When he had kicked Sieg out of the party, he had thought he was thoroughly putting the man in his place, but in his current situation, the one being completely put in his place was Nacht himself.

“This isn’t over... No way in hell...! If I can just kill *him*...then the monsters will come back, and we can win this...!”

## Chapter 25: Final Battle

As I watched the scene before me unfold, one thought came to my mind: *it looks like this battle is already pretty much over.*

Most of the monsters had already been destroyed, and the few that remained, seeing no path to victory, had disobeyed Nacht's orders and retreated. Only their commander himself remained on the battlefield.

"*Sieg...!*" Nacht shouted, glaring straight at me with his bloodshot eyes. His feelings of resentment were overflowing, and he had been completely taken over by rage.

*How much hatred did he harbor to end up with that expression on his face...? Right now, he probably has no regard for his current situation whatsoever; the only thing on his mind is his desire to kill me.*

"I think we're in serious trouble..." Haruna whispered fearfully. "He's completely lost his mind."

"Everyone...stay back," I said, extending my arm to stop the others. "I'm the one he's after. There's no need for you to involve yourselves."

As my comrades watched with trepidation, I stepped forward to confront Nacht, facing him at a distance.

"*Sieg...!*"

"You want to kill me, right, Nacht? Then face me one-on-one. That way, there won't be any unnecessary interference."

Nacht laughed. "Wouldn't have it any other way," he said, smirking so wide it threatened to split his face in half. His eyes were ablaze with bloodlust.

It was already obvious how things were going to turn out overall; even if he somehow managed to defeat me, it wouldn't change the outcome of the battle. Nothing else mattered to him at that moment, though—not the fervent desire harbored by the demons to destroy the Orb of Light and resurrect the Demon

King, and not the way the battle had progressed. He just wanted to kill me—that lone thought was the only thing driving him.

*“Graaagh!”*

With a fierce roar, Nacht charged at me. His speed was incomparable to when he was human; the instant after he took off, he had already plunged unceremoniously into my range and struck out at me with his muscular, log-like arms.

I ducked down to evade him, and a roaring sound rang out as the space where my head had been was swiped clear. If an average person had taken that hit, their head would have been knocked clean off.

*Seems like his physical abilities have been enhanced to an extraordinary degree. If I take a direct hit, my whole body might be sent flying.*

Nacht continued to unleash attacks one after the other, each blow potentially fatal. I used my shield to deflect them all.

“You can’t beat me by just standing there like an idiot, Sieg!” Nacht shouted, laughing vigorously as he continued his violent assault. “I was right, you’re nothing more than a pathetic scarecrow!”

Thinking about it, we had known each other a long time, but not once had we ever actually fought against each other. This was the first time we had been on opposing ends of a battle with our lives on the line.

*I haven’t been focusing solely on defense the whole time—I’ve been gauging your timing. Now I have a perfect grasp of your attacks!*

As Nacht lunged with his left arm, I matched up with his timing and knocked it aside with my shield—a perfect parry.

“Guh...?!” Nacht grunted as his body recoiled backward, his center of balance thrown off completely. In that moment, I slashed my blade across his torso, and he unleashed a pained howl.

Normally an attack like that would’ve been the final blow—but, instead of just collapsing to the ground, Nacht managed to withstand the attack.

“Turning into a demon sure did give you an incredibly sturdy body—I couldn’t

take you down in one hit.”

Even so, I seemed to have managed to injure him pretty severely. Purple blood began to ooze out from his wound.

*I see... So Nacht really did turn completely into a demon.*

A sadness struck me upon seeing the color of his blood. He had changed so much—not only since I had first met him, but since his time as a human being.

“It’s true that your physical abilities have seen a huge increase compared to when you were human. At the same time, though, the way you move when you rely on brute force like that is really predictable.”

When Nacht was a swordsman, he had technique—signs of his training were clearly present. Once he had lost that, though, his movements became incredibly simple to read.

“So all I need is an attack strong enough that you can’t defend against it even if you see it coming...!”

With those words, he began to focus magical energy into both of his palms. There he formed densely packed spheres of magic, filled to the brim with mana, which he fired at me with a furious shout. “I’ll turn you to charcoal!”

The magic spheres roared as they hurtled through the air. A single hit from one of them could have been fatal, and Nacht released one after the other in rapid succession—he seemed ready to keep firing with every last bit of energy he had.

There was no time for me to dodge, and my body was showered with the projectiles. The force of the attacks created a massive explosion which blasted away everything in the area.

Nacht cackled madly. “Did you see that? That was my true power! Nobody can stop me—I’m far stronger than you could ever hope to be!”

Assured of victory, the demonic man threw his head back and bellowed out a massive laugh.

As the smoke evaporated, though, so too did the smile on his face.

“Wha—?!”

In his field of vision, I reappeared within the vanishing smoke, standing there completely unharmed. His eyes went wide with sheer disbelief.

“Who is stronger than whom, again?”

“Y-You’re not even scratched...?! Impossible! There’s no way! What kind of tricks are you using, Sieg?!”

“I’m not using any tricks at all. I’m just taking the hits.”

“D-Damn it...! You’re bluffing! You have to be!” he shouted as if trying to convince himself, and hurled another magic sphere at me. It flew through the air, and I caught it in the palm of my outstretched right hand. With a sizzling sound, the projectile evaporated.

“Nacht... Your attacks can’t get past me.”

*“Nghaaaaaa!”*

With a crazed scream, Nacht came running toward me. He had concentrated all of his magical energy into his right arm and pulled it back dramatically for a strike.

I decided to meet his challenge head-on. I raised my sword, ready to engage him.

Our bodies crossed paths.

The scream stopped, and silence fell upon the battlefield.

As I shook the blood from my sword, Nacht’s body shuddered. He crumpled to the ground with a muffled groan.

I came over to him and stood over his huddled form. I held him there at sword-point. “Looks like I win,” I declared quietly.

“Ugh...!” He glared up at me, eyes full of resentment and regret. “No...! It’s not over yet...! If I accept defeat here, that means I’m accepting what the townspeople said...!”

“What did they say?”

“That the only reason things went so well for us was because of you...! That you were carrying the Crimson Fangs all by yourself...!”



By all rights, he should have been long dead by that point. However, Nacht kept crawling along the ground, trying to drag his shattered body back up into a standing position—his tenacity was truly frightening. The words of the townspeople must have caused him to hold quite the grudge; however, he was mistaken about something.

“They were wrong, Nacht,” I said. “It wasn’t me alone who made things go well for the Crimson Fangs. It was because the rest of you were there. Haruna...Irene...and you as well. We succeeded because you put your all into fighting as the swords of our party.”

“Because you all put so much effort in, I ended up wanting to protect you. That’s why I was able to train so hard every day.”

I never would have advanced so far all by myself.

Haruna... Irene... Nacht... The thought of wanting to protect my comrades with my life, of not wanting to lose them, was exactly what had given me the strength to withstand such grueling training.

“Shut up... Just shut the hell up...!” Nacht howled, slamming his fist against the ground. “You’re supposed to mock me! Just like I did to you! But...you’re trying to talk to me like we’re equals or something...! Just stop it!”

“But we *are* equals,” I told him. “No matter how far you’ve fallen, you were once my friend. Nothing will change that fact.”

“*Stop it...!* Don’t look at me like that! I’ve always hated that about you!”

Just then, Nacht’s body started turning to ash—his magical energy must have been completely exhausted. But the whole time, he continued spewing his grievances at me.

“The way you never talked back to me, no matter how much I insulted you! The way you never took credit for anything you did! The way you just accepted everything that happened! I hated it all so much, I just wanted to kill you!”

I merely stood there in silence, listening to Nacht’s words as his body dispersed. As he had been spouting abuse at me with all his might, he had continued to evaporate, and everything below his shoulders had already vanished.

“Sieg...!”

When he only had enough time left to say one or two more things, he abruptly stopped speaking, cast his eyes downward, and forced out the following words:

“I’m sorry...for everything.”

“I know,” I said with a nod. “I forgive you.”

Hearing that, Nacht managed a tiny smile. “And that...is exactly what I hate most about you.”

“I know.”

In his very last moments, he seemed more human than demon; he reminded me of the Nacht I had met so long ago.

Once his body had vanished entirely, not a trace was left behind.

I slowly turned around to see my Fifth Squadron comrades, our fellow guards, and everyone else waiting there to welcome me: Seira, Spinoza, Fam, and the guards; Haruna and Irene; I even saw the knights and Eleanor atop the city wall.

After engraving the memory of my past comrade into my heart, I took a step toward my current comrades.

## Extra Chapter: Lost Child

We were on guard duty in the middle of patrol.

“Ugh, work sucks today!” complained Spinoza as she walked next to me, looking utterly exhausted. “It’s so damn hot!”

Sunlight shone down onto the city from high up in the sky; it felt like a blazing inferno outside.

“We don’t get paid enough, it’s unrewarding, and the knights look down on us. Nobody could stand doing this without at least an afternoon drink or two.”

“You just want an excuse to drink,” I said. Her ulterior motive couldn’t have been more obvious.

As we walked along the path, we saw Seira and Fam coming from the opposite direction, with a young boy walking alongside them. Seira noticed us and waved.

“Perfect timing, Sarge!”

“What’s going on, Seira?”

“Well, we’re taking care of this child we found crying in the street.” The boy looked to be about five years of age and was sobbing slowly.

“Is he lost?”

“We’re not sure. We think that’s probably the case, but he’s just been crying like this the whole time.”

“So we have to get him to stop crying first?”

“That’s right.”

I put my hand to my chin, thinking. “That’s a tough one, though. I’m better at dealing with monsters than I am with children. I have absolutely no idea how to get one to stop crying.”

“I don’t doubt that, considering you’re comparing children to monsters,” Fam

quipped.

“Oh, fine. I’ll handle this, then,” Spinoza said.

“Do you have an idea?” I asked her.

“Sure do. I’ve got something a hundred-percent guaranteed to make him stop cryin’. Watch this!” she announced, then crouched down in front of the child.

Just as I started to wonder what she was doing, I heard the high-pitched jingle of coins falling out of her hand.

“Whaddya think?”

The boy continued to cry.

“Huh? Well, that’s weird...” Spinoza said, tilting her head in confusion at his reaction.

“What exactly were you trying to do?”

“Oh, I just figured that anybody’d stop crying if they heard the sound of change hitting the ground. Hmm... Maybe I need to up the numbers a little?”

“I think *you’re* the only one that would work for,” Fam muttered in annoyance. “Good grief, a cheapskate like you won’t be able to handle this. I may as well take one for the team. We just want to make him stop crying, right?”

“Yeah.”

“That’s simple, then,” she said, and in the next instant, she whipped a knife out of her pocket with a flash and pointed the business end toward the crying boy’s neck. “Stop making noise this instant, or I’ll slice your throat.”

This elicited a yelp from the boy, and he fell silent momentarily, his face frozen with fear. However, the dam quickly burst, and his emotions came pouring back out with a shriek, his crying even louder than before.

“That’s odd... I was sure that would make him stop.”

“Fam, you’re even worse with kids than I am.”

“What are you doing, Fam?! This poor child!” Seira chastised as she hugged the sobbing boy gently. “I’m so sorry she scared you like that, sweetie. It’ll be all

right now,” she said, stroking his head affectionately. Her overwhelming patience must have reassured the boy, and eventually his tears and sobs came to a halt.

“Oh, wow. He stopped crying!”

“That’s Seira for you. Her mommy power is second to none,” Fam said.

“What the heck is ‘mommy power’...?”

Ignoring our remarks, Seira asked the boy a question: “If you don’t mind, could you please tell us why you’re crying? We might be able to help you somehow.”

“Um, well... I can’t find my mommy...”

*So he’s a lost child after all.*

“Is that so? I’m sorry to hear that,” Seira responded, patting the boy’s head. “Don’t worry, we’ll help you find your mommy!”

“Really...?”

“Of course! Leave it to us!” She put a hand to her chest with a smile, then turned suddenly to us. “And there you have it—let’s look for this boy’s mother!”

“What? Do we *have* to?”

“Spinoza, it’s an important part of our job to help the townspeople out! Fighting isn’t the only thing guards are supposed to do.”

“Yeah, yeah. Ya big softie.”

“What do we do, though?” I asked. “The Royal Capital is quite a large city. Even with an exhaustive search, I doubt we’ll have an easy time finding her.”

“Hmm, let’s see...”

“What if we just start yellin’ really loud? I’m pretty good at that, if I do say so myself—that kid’s name’ll echo across the entire capital.”

“That’s just disturbing the peace,” I commented.

“I’ve got an idea. Let me take care of this.”

“What’s the idea, Fam?” I asked.

She giggled softly. “Just sit back and watch.”

With those words, Fam walked over to the boy and, putting her face next to him, started to sniff his clothing.

“Uh, what exactly are you doing? Do I even want to know?”

“How rude. You don’t need to treat me like some kind of weirdo—I’m just picking up the scent of his clothes, so I can seek out a similar scent elsewhere.” Dropping down on all fours, Fam then started to sniff the surrounding area, making her nose twitch. “This way,” she whispered, then zoomed off.

We followed her for a while, until suddenly, the boy, who had been holding Seira’s hand, cried out: “Ah! There’s mommy!”

In the direction he was pointing stood a woman.

“Oh, Ren! Thank goodness!”

The boy ran over to the woman and she hugged him. After that scene played out for a while, the boy’s mother finally seemed to notice us. “You brought my boy back to me, didn’t you? How can I ever repay you? Thank you so much!”

“Thanks, ladies!” the boy repeated.

“No worries—we’re just happy to help!” Seira responded, matching the boy’s wide grin with a soft smile of her own.

After she had parted ways with the boy and his mother, Seira turned to Spinoza. “See? Being a guard isn’t all that bad, is it?”

“Well... I guess it’s all right,” Spinoza muttered reluctantly.

*A guard’s job might typically be pretty mundane when they’re fighting monsters—but I certainly wouldn’t call it unrewarding.*

“Though we weren’t really much help, were we?” I chimed in.

“You’re always a huge help when we’re fighting, though, Sieg. The rest of us need to be useful sometimes too!”

“That’s right. I’d like for you to depend on *us* for some things,” Fam added.

“Well, that’s very reassuring,” I said, casting a smile at my companions. And thus did the sun set once again over our city.





















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No One Gets Past This Gatekeeper: The Unwanted Warrior Guards His New Post: Volume 1

by Kametsu Tomobashi

Translated by A. V. N. Wilson Edited by Thalia Sutton

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